

## QUESTIONING A PENAL VIEW OF HISTORY

### QUESTIONANDO UMA VISÃO PENAL DA HISTÓRIA

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**Abstract:** If, as St. Augustine suggests, the poetic conception of time as *distentio animi* that we find in the famous passage from book XI of *Confessions* (*I will sing a song that I have learned by heart... / dicturus sum canticum, quod novi*) can be amplified and applied to the entire history of the sons of men, as Augustine himself immediately suggests to us — “[... ] And what happens in the canticle in its entirety, happens in each of its parts and in each of its syllables; it also happens in a longer action, of which, perhaps, that canticle is a small part; it also happens in the life of man, in its entirety, of which all his actions are parts; this very thing happens in all the generations of mankind, of which all the lives of men are a part.” — such a change and widening of scale has serious consequences as far as the constitution of a Theology of History is concerned.

**Keywords:** Augustine. History. Penal View.

**Resumo:** Se, como Santo Agostinho sugere, a concepção poemática de tempo como *distentio animi* que encontramos na célebre passagem do livro XI de *Confissões* (“*Vou cantar um cântico que aprendi de cor... / dicturus sum canticum, quod novi*”) puder ser amplificada e aplicada a toda a *história dos filhos dos homens*, como o próprio Agostinho nos sugere de imediato — “[... ] E o que sucede no cântico na sua totalidade, sucede em cada uma das suas partes e em cada uma das suas sílabas; sucede igualmente numa acção mais longa, da qual, talvez, aquele cântico seja uma pequena parte; sucede ainda na vida do homem, na sua totalidade, da qual são partes todas as suas acções; isto mesmo sucede em todas as gerações da humanidade, de que são parte todas as vidas dos homens.” (*Confessiones* XI, 28, 38) — tal mudança e alargamento de escala tem sérias consequências no que tange à constituição de uma Teologia da História.

**Palavras-chave:** Agostinho. História. Visão Penal.

## Introductory Note

If, as St. Augustine suggests, the poetic conception of time as *distentio animi* that we find in the famous passage from book XI of *Confessions* (*I will sing a song that I have learned by heart... / dicturus sum canticum, quod novi*) can be amplified and applied to the entire *history of the sons of men*, as Augustine himself immediately suggests to us – “[...] And what happens in the canticle in its entirety, happens in each of its parts and in each of its syllables; it also happens in a longer action, of which, perhaps, that canticle is a small part; it also happens in the life of man, in its entirety, of which all his actions are parts; this very thing happens in all the generations of mankind, of which all the lives of men are a part.”<sup>1</sup> — such a change and widening of scale has serious consequences as far as the constitution of a *Theology of History* is concerned.

In fact, if we are faithful to the sense of analogy, just as each one of us can sing a song that we have fixed and know by heart according to the operations of *memory/memoria*, *attention/ attentio-contuitus*, and *expectation/expectatio*, so also the *God Creator omnium*, absolute Poet who created, by singing Thus Creation, including *in* it the events of human history, can be seen, *secundum nos*, as a distension of the memory of God / *distentio memoriae Dei*. It is important to question the meaning and scope of this analogy between *Confessions* XI and the twenty-two books of *De Civitate Dei*. For this we will concentrate on the preparatory writings where Augustine, as it were, rehearsed and sketched the plan of the work, that is, the period from September 410 to 413, when Augustine effectively began the writing of *The City of God*. We can say that, significantly, the conception of time that we find here is not as poetic as that. The vision of history that is presented here no longer has that melodious harmony of book XI of the *Confessions*. What we find here is a rather bleak conception, not only full of dissonances and thunders (which would always enter the order, even if *ordo occultus*, according to the optimism of *De ordine* and *De Civitate Dei*), but a penal vision of History in which the God-Poet gave way to the God-Judge, and in which Augustine, in light of the biblical prophecies, “burning with zeal for the house of God”<sup>2</sup>, as if he himself “sees” or “foresees” History through the eyes of God, an *excess* and penal conception that, in our opinion, should be questioned at its roots.

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<sup>1</sup> *Confessiones* XI, 28, 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Retractationes* II, 43; Jn 2, 17; 5168, 5.

## “O si taceat de Roma!”

Any historical reading, even if it privileges structural permanence (as is the case of Augustine’s providentialist interpretation of the relations between the Church and the Roman Empire) can never ignore the facts. This is a truism, but it is enough to read P. Ricoeur’s *La mémoire, l’histoire et l’oubli*, to understand that readings are not always linear and that there are many pathologies that affect historical memory, both that of the victors and that of the vanquished, both that of the executioners and that of the victims (those who did not die, of course), although there is an immeasurable dissymmetry between them. Thus, against *l’effacement des traits*, the excesses and shortcomings of memory, we must, as Ricoeur tells us, make critical use of it.

On the factual level, the proximate circumstance that triggered Augustine’s reflection was the sacking of Rome, by Alaric and his hordes, on August 24, 25 and 26, 410. Not that Rome and other cities of the Empire had not been besieged before. Less than ten years earlier, the same Alaric had sacked Venice; five years earlier, in 405, the Ostrogoth Radagaisus had besieged the Urbs, although he was defeated by another Romanized semi-barbarian, Stilicão<sup>3</sup>. Rome, therefore, had been under siege for some time. But after this sharp stab in the heart — the emperor’s own daughter, Galla Placidia, was kidnapped — criticism began to mount of the *religio christiana* which, in the *Codex Theodosianum* in 391, had been elevated to the sole and official religion of the Empire, while pagan cults, tolerated/allowed in Constantine’s *Edict of Milan* in 313, were now proscribed outright. Even in the Capitol, the cult of the tutelary gods of the City had been strictly forbidden.

In this context, the murmurings and criticisms which had been going on for many years (remember the revenge paid by Julian the Apostate in 361-363) now rise to new heights. They are heard *urbi et orbe*, in every city of the Empire, as in Carthage and Hippo. The thinking elite of paganism and the representatives of the traditional religions take the opportunity to take up again and deepen the accusations; it is the Christians who are guilty, because they have forbidden the cult of the protective divinities; the Christian religion is

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<sup>3</sup> In the same year, he had the *Sibylline Oracles* burned. His death three years later, in 308, led St. Jerome to exaggerate: “Where is salvation if Rome perishes?” (*Epistula* 123, 16; cf. Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustin*, Paris, Fayard, 1999, p. 549).

the cause of the devastation of Rome because it has weakened the spirit of the Romans<sup>4</sup>: “Behold, in Christian times nothing stands!”<sup>5</sup> Faced with this accusation, we can almost see Augustine’s frenzy, pacing hither and thither squinting, thinking aloud and dictating to his secretaries; we almost picture him fuming with indignation, burning with zeal, eager to pick up the quill himself and immediately refute *such an ungodly* charge.<sup>6</sup>

Such incriminations were to be insistent and insidious, also provoking the persistent rejection of guilt by Christians, especially their thinking scholastic, the bishops, who had to encourage and remind their faithful, many of them recent converts from paganism. At a certain point, however, it is the Christians themselves, arriving in Africa, weary, fleeing from Rome in whose plunder they had lost possessions and loved ones, who ask for a truce to the excess of remembrance, even if only to reject the charge. In *Sermon* 105, preached in Carthage in 411, Augustine himself becomes aware in person that his excesses as a preacher were beginning to bother some Christians who had come to take refuge there. So much so that, in the sermon recorded by the stenographer, we find the comment of a listener (an aside that Augustine wanted to keep) who, not containing himself, retorted from the middle of the assembly: “If only you would shut up about Rome and leave her in Peace!”<sup>7</sup> / “O si taceat de Roma...”.

The whole passage is worth quoting. Augustine is commenting on Jesus’ lament about Jerusalem (Mt 23:37): “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I wanted to gather your children together like the hen to her chicks, and you were unwilling!” And then he says in the follow-up, “Perhaps you have seen how the hen [divine wisdom] kills the scorpion. O that the hen would destroy and devour these blasphemers that crawl across the earth, that come out of caves and sting mortally! May she eat them and turn them into an egg.” [*At this point, there must have been some agitation and voices in the assembly here, including the one recorded by the stenographer*]. “Don’t get angry! [*Non irascantur!*] We are agitated, but we do not return the curses to the damned. They curse us, but we bless ourselves and pray for those who revile us. And you say to me “Let me not speak of Rome! Oh! if you would leave Rome alone!” [*“Sed non dicat de Roma; O si taceat de Roma!”*], as if I insult Rome and do not ask the Lord for

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<sup>4</sup> The Christian maxims ‘*if they strike you on one cheek, give them the other also*’; ‘*love your enemies, pray for those who hate and persecute you*’; ‘*if they take away your cloak, give them also your cloak*’, etc., as well as the refusal of military service are incompatible with what the preservation of the Empire requires.

<sup>5</sup> *Sermo* 105, 8: “*Ecce pereunt omnia christianis temporibus.*”

<sup>6</sup> In this debate, the work of Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, New York, Washington Square Press, 1962, remains current.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Sermo* 105, 12.

her, while I ask you to do the same. Far be it from me to insult! God keep the insult away from my heart and my troubled conscience.”<sup>8</sup>

This passage is very enlightening about the conflicting feelings, reasons, and states of mind that clashed in the Christian community of Hippo Regius. Augustine, like many of the Christians who listen to him, among them the aforementioned fugitives from Rome, who, as they arrived, were welcomed by the Christian communities of the cities bordering North Africa<sup>9</sup>, v.g., Carthage and Hippo, he remembers Rome very well, a city that had fascinated him like a magnet for some thirty years, to which, unlike them, he had fled by boat one night from Carthage, leaving behind his ungrateful students, his mother Monica weeping on the beach, his concubine whose name is unknown, and his son Adeodato. Rome, that city where he came to teach and where he stayed for many months after his return from Milan in 387-388, before returning to Tagaste.

It is certain that his former provincial and pagan fascination with the rhetoricians and theaters of Rome, before his baptism, was later extirpated. Augustine thus judges as greatly exaggerated the words of St. Jerome: “The torch that illuminated humanity has fallen!”<sup>10</sup> Augustine, for his turn, does not lament the fall of the stones, the theaters (*Sermo* 113 A, 13) and the timbers of a Rome that the poet Virgil, in a grandiloquent *hybris*, had declared “eternal”, “endless empire”, and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Faced with the immense pride of being Roman, which could only continue to be shared by pagans converted to Christianity, Augustine insists, reading the Gospel: “The heavens and the earth will pass away.” (Mt 24:35; Lk 21:33) What is the wonder? “What is strange about the end of the city?”; “Why do you shudder if earthly kingdoms perish?”<sup>12</sup>

But these believers there, in front of him, in the Basilica of Peace, don’t want to remember or be reminded of the terrors they went through. They prefer to try to forget what they have suffered and lost. Maybe they have internalized some of the accusations they have been accused of, maybe they hesitate and feel guilty inside too. It is known that most of them refused military service and some, amidst the dreadful news of the barbarian ravages, do not fail to feel the accusation personally: there could be some basis for them, the Christians, being singled out as the occasion of the disaster. Let Augustine, therefore,

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<sup>8</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Sermo* 81, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Epistula* 127, a Principia (cf. *In Ezechielem Prophetam* I, praef.).

<sup>11</sup> *Sermo* 105, 121; cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* I, 279.

<sup>12</sup> *Sermo* 81, 9: “Quid mirum si aliquando finis est civitati?”; *Sermo* 105, 9.

not further avenge their wounds, even if it is to almost curse the accusers. Augustine, a good crowd psychologist, feels that he has gone too far. He realizes this immediately, and then he sincerely repents in public before them. It is noteworthy that in the later revision, Augustine kept his *mea culpa* recorded by the stenographers.

A few months earlier, when the roar of the fall could still be heard in the reports of the successive waves of refugees arriving in Hippo, we find Augustine's first writing expressly dedicated to the problem of the fall of Rome and its significance in the face of these accusations. In this text everything is still very much alive; there are no retreats, rejoinders, or counter-replies. The sermon *De Excidio Urbis Romae* was preached in the Basilica of Peace in Hippo in late September, less than a month after the sacking of Alaric, so almost "live". We can consider this sermon as a kind of programmatic and preparatory text in which are *in nuce* some of the lines of the future work *De Civitate Dei*, ideas that we also find present in other Sermons of this phase: *Sermo* 81, *Sermo* 105, *Sermo* 113 A, and *Sermo* 296.

### Questioning a penal view of history

Let us dwell on the text *De Excidio Urbis Romae*. Let us pay attention to the fundamental anthropological presupposition that informs it from the very first line. Invoking the prophet Daniel (9:20) we have Augustine's decisive word on the human condition: we are all sinners! "Who can claim to be without sin, when Daniel himself confesses his own?"<sup>13</sup> There is no one without sin, even if he does not know it and is not personally aware of it. Such radical knowing (a kind of *moral gnosis* with scriptural support) about human nature as such is the presupposition so that the devastation of Rome (where the tombs of Peter and Paul are; where the tombs of so many martyrs and saints, so many virgins, so many Christians and so many consecrated people live are) can have some justification. How could it be otherwise?<sup>14</sup>

But it is not only the word of the prophet that is called upon in this authentic criminal trial. Immediately afterwards, Augustine also brings Noah and Job to the trial. These three biblical figures represent three kinds of men linked together by a common

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<sup>13</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* I, 1.

<sup>14</sup> In *De Civitate Dei* XVI, 27, the scriptural statement is understood in the doctrine of the *original sin* of all children in Adam (*peccatum naturae*). But in this step the conclusion is drawn by *reductio ad absurdum*.

element: they are those who have been tested and have gone through the great tribulation. The figures of Noah, Job and Daniel bring us suddenly to the heart of a penal theology and a moral vision of the world and of history. In the light of these *typoi* of Scripture, it is as if Augustine took the essence of Greek tragedy patent in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: "One learns by suffering", as a motif for meditation in biblical terms. Except that in tragedy many of the victims were personally innocent. Here, however, it is said that there are no innocents. In Adam "all have sinned," *ergo...* (Rom 5:12).

It is only in the clarity of this antignostic gnosis — *knowing that we* are all contaminated by original sin — that Augustine can strange the strangeness of those who wonder; those for whom it is a scandal that God (contrary to the parable of the wheat and the tares) already punishes the human race with scourges and wars<sup>15</sup>, exercising discipline before the Last Judgment (*exercens ante iudicium disciplinam*), often without selecting who he punishes, and seeming not even to want to find out who is guilty — punishing at the same time the just and the unjust (*et plerumque non eligens quem flagellet, nolens in venire quem damnet*<sup>16</sup>). *Just?*, Augustine asks us, raising an eyebrow. *But is there even one righteous person in the City?*

For pagans it makes no sense that Christians hesitate when it comes to answering the question whether there were righteous people in Rome. Aren't they themselves, Christians, who claim to have saints, martyrs, virgins, etc.? *But*, they insist, *not even for them has God forgiven the city*. Hence the disjunctive either "God found righteous there and forgave the city" or "God did not find righteous there and did not forgive the city" is settled in the face of real and effective devastation. Or better, but from the pagan point of view, it should be said: the gods abandoned and unforgave the city and the *christiana religio* is, after all, nothing but a *vana religio*. Augustine can only frown, now even more strongly. It is true that what happened in Rome, he is told, was a horrifying destruction: mass exterminations, murders, massacres, torture, rapes, plundering, fires..., atrocities that cause shivers<sup>17</sup>. But are we therefore to say that there were not *even ten righteous persons* in the City (cf. Gen 18:23-32, the "bargain" between Abraham and God) and that, for this reason, God did not spare it? For Augustine it is not immediately evident that God did not spare Rome. Why? Because

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *De Civitate Dei*, the end of book VII, where God appears as the manager of wars.

<sup>16</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* II, 1: "et mirantur homines, et utinam mirentur et non etiam blasphemant, quando corripit deus genus humanum et flagellis pia castigationis exagitat, exercens ante iudicium disciplinam et plerumque non eligens quem flagellet, nolens in venire quem damnet. Flagellat enim simul et iustos et iniustos, quamquam quis iustus si Daniel peccata propria confitetur?"

<sup>17</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* II, 3: "Horrenda nobis nuntiata sunt: strages factae, incendia, rapinae, interfectiones, excruciationes hominum. Verum est, multa audiimus, omnia gemimus, saepe fleuimus, uix consolati sumus; non abnuo, non nego multa nos audisse, multa in illa urbe esse commissa."

the city is its citizens. Rome is the Roman citizens<sup>18</sup> and many of them have survived, some refugees in the churches of Peter and Paul, spared by the Arian Goths, others taken captive, others fleeing the city<sup>19</sup>. The comparison between Rome and Sodom shows that there were righteous in Rome, even if before the measure of perfection no one can be called truly righteous<sup>20</sup>. The devastation of the city was not like that of Sodom and Gomorrah: these burned completely under fire and brimstone<sup>21</sup>. Nothing remained. Not a man, not a beast, not a house; only ashes. Now, this is not what was seen in Rome.

In the construction of his penal vision of history, let us say that Augustine took the first decisive step here: he made a comparative accounting of the sufferings of some and others. A strict logic that he will develop around the logic of *crime-punishment*, or better, *sin-punishment*, will lead him to excesses in the attempt to rationally explain the evil suffered, excesses that we must seriously question. Even because it was Augustine himself who asked for critical readers of his texts. In *De Dono Perseverantiae*, 21, 55, he says: “let no one follow my opinions, except when he is certain of their truth.” Well, we are convinced that, in its essence, this penal theology of history is erroneous, although we understand well the reasons that originate and justify it.

Let’s take the example of Job, which Augustine gives us in this regard.<sup>22</sup> On the level of the narrative, and without knowing the reasons for what was happening to him, when he receives a visit from his friends Eliphaz of Teman, Baldad of Suan, and Sofar of Naaman, Job vehemently refuses the moral vision of the world that they make themselves spokesmen for in order to reassure themselves. If he rejects his wife’s solution (Job 2:9: “rebel against God and die”; commit suicide?), he also refuses that he might be paying for a sin committed by his ancestors, despite the fact that every day he himself offers sacrifices for the possible sins of his children. Job also refuses to carry with him any *original* or personal *sin*, which he knows nothing about. “Am I a monster?” insists Job (7:12). He refuses the vision of a God who rewards and punishes according to the *theology of retribution*, exclusively temporal, because in his case it doesn’t fit. And in the name of the intimate testimony of his conscience that Job refuses the “wise” advice and consolations of such

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Sermo* 81, 9.

<sup>19</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* VII, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* V, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* II, 3: “Sed respondetur mihi manifestum esse quod deus non pepercerit ciuitati. Respondeo ego: immo mihi non est manifestum. Perditio enim ciuitatis ibi facta non est sicut in Sodomis facta est.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Sermo* 81, 2; *De Civitate Dei* I, 5.



'friends' (false friends) after all. And in the final theophany (42:7), when God addresses Eliphaz of Teman, and to tell him the unexpected: "I am angry against you and your two friends, because you have not spoken rightly of me, as my servant Job has done." Augustine, an expert connoisseur of the Bible, is of course not unaware of this final outcome. But his reading here seems much more like Job's friends, bent on advocating God or the image of a God they had constructed for themselves, than on heeding his words at the end of the book.

But there is another question that this book raises that seems to us to be the most determining of all. It concerns the first sons and daughters of Job, *i.e.*, those who died right from the start because of the bet between God and Satan, or, if we want to widen the hermeneutic circle: it concerns all the innocent victims of history who die because of the bets of others. To Job everything was multiplied and repaid in the end: "fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand asses. He also had seven sons and three daughters. [...] And he died old and full of days." (42, 12-17). But where are Job's first sons and daughters? Where are those who died young? What about the innocent victims of Rome and all 'the Romas' of history? Augustine answers in *Sermon 296*, 7-8, preached on June 29, 411, in Carthage: "You lament and weep because of the falling of wood and stones and because those who had to die died? (*quia mortui sunt morituri?*) Are we to suppose that any of these monks were destined to live forever? [...] Do not go against God because he willed it (*noli tu deo irasci quia volebat*). [...] Be patient; the Lord wants it. He wants you to suffer what he wants. Suffer what he wants you to suffer and he will grant you what you want." [...] "Would that we could see the souls of the saints who died in that war! See then how God spared the city. Thousands of holy souls are now in Heaven and jubilant..."<sup>23</sup>

We are not anachronistic. We understand Augustine's context. But if we go to the principle that underpins this *divinum refrigerium*, there is in these words an intolerable unreasonableness of someone who, in order to get his accounts right, seems to put himself from the point of view of God himself. The *ratio fidei* proclines here to a kind of quasi-gnosticism. We can fully understand the literary genre and pastoral context of the sermon; we can understand, on Augustine's personal level, what the experience of the death of his mother Monica in Ostia, and almost immediately that of his dearly beloved son Adeodatus,

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<sup>23</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* VI, 6: "Utinam uidere possemus animas sanctorum qui in illo bello mortui sunt; tunc uideretis quomodo deus pepercerit ciuitati. Milia enim sanctorum in refrigerio sunt, laetantes."

will have been like. Each person finds whatever meaning he can for the disasters of his life. But there is an intolerable penal and judicial view of history that cannot be accepted, precisely because of *Augustine's son* (Adeodatus: “*given by God, but fruit of my sin*”) and the sons and daughters of all the Jobs of this world.

We could apply here the biblical pun *malum de malo, i.e., evil comes from evil* in this sense: once a certain deductive logic is set in motion, we are naturally led to draw other and other conclusions that are rationally imposed. Thus, and to make up the picture in *De Excidio Urbis Romae*, Augustine goes on to compare and confer the evils and sufferings of other biblical figures, such as Abel, the prophets, the apostles, etc., and finally with the sufferings of Jesus. “Who suffered more?” Of course, there are theological presuppositions in this question, namely the belief that Jesus is the Word, the sinless, incarnate Son of God, immediately after comparing Him with sinful human beings. That is, such comparisons compare, after all, the incomparable. And if this is so, the very idea of comparison is unacceptable. It is important, therefore, to destroy the myth of punishment, which is tributary of the irresolvable *crime-punishment* equation<sup>24</sup>. The accounting between crimes and punishments, between guilt and punishment in order to balance them is, in its essence, an archaic juridical and penal vision of history inherited from mythology, from the later law of Talion, later appropriated by the rationality of juridical and penal systems that unthinkingly extend the magical-mythical bond. How, for example, does legally executing a murderer balance and compensate the victim? It does not compensate at all. An *untaken eye* is never worth the same as an *eye already taken*, even though this goes against all the Talion's.

Now, in our view, in the case at hand, the comparison implies assuming, in some way, a view of history *sub specie aeternitatis*. In other words: assuming to see the entire development of historical events from the viewpoint of God himself, just as Job's friends assumed and defended the alleged view that God had of him. How does Augustine do this? He does it by continually invoking Sacred Scripture, always open, always present as “*os Dei*” (*God's mouth*) to tell us, at every moment, His will. The Bible functions, after all, as the omnipresent voice of a *Deus ex machina* — or *Deus ex scriptura* — so that His will, through the prophecies, is no longer unknown or unfathomable to us, especially in relation to the meaning of what is happening and will happen. Is there not here a subtle immanentization of the *eschaton* against which Augustine had so strongly objected in *The City of God*? He who

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Enrico Castelli (editeur), *Le mythe de la peine*, Paris, Aubier, 1967; Paul Ricoeur, «Interprétation du mythe de la peine», in: *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique*, Seuil, Paris, 1969, pp. 348-369.

so concretely affirms the unfathomable designs of the divinity has at least already fathomed such unfathomability... In *Sermon 296*, 10: “We have shown that God is true (*nos deum nostrum ostendimus veracem*); all these things He foretold (*praedixit ista omnia*). You have just read it; you have just listened to it (*legistis, audistis*).” Through the Scriptures, God intervenes, diagnoses, counsels, precepts, forbids, heals, punishes, condemns. In a word: through them, “I *know that God provides everything.*” The Bible functions here as a kind of open line, continuously at the believer’s disposal. But this kind of reading takes away a certain degree of obscurity necessary for us to live as human beings. Does it do justice to the darkness and the night of the Garden of Olives? Not without some reason, some of Augustine’s most suspicious readers, coming from Psychoanalysis, will even say that such a form of reading resembles a kind of “SOS child”<sup>25</sup>. Only in light of the *disproportion* of such a use of the Bible can one understand why Augustine gives *wise* advice to all the Jobs of the world: “Let no one fixate on what he suffers, but on what he does. What you suffer is not in your power. But in what you do, and your will that is guilty or innocent.”<sup>26</sup> There is, however, an immense, abyssal difference between, on the one hand, suffering in the first person and finding a/possible meaning for one’s own suffering; and, on the other hand, having a ready-made, prior doctrine about the suffering of others, giving them advice, even being able to justify them with the best of intentions. Except that *Rachel may not want to be comforted....* (cf. Jer 31:15).

Nevertheless, let us go a little further and see where the judicial logic that Augustine mobilizes takes us. The comparison with the sufferings of Abel, the prophets, Job, Daniel, Zechariah and the apostles with the sufferings of Christ is not enough. It is not enough to look back to the past, to the fallen, to the terror in history. Faced with the “apocalypse” of Rome, Augustine needs to construct an even more radical and frightening frame of comparison, now from an eschatological future. Thus, in chapter IV of *De Excidio Urbis* he compares all conceivable human sufferings and penalties in this life with the sufferings of Hell, and thus logically concludes that whatever sufferings in this world, they will always be insignificant and incomparable with those.

“Think of any torment that is, imagine any human torture; compare it to Hell and all that you can suffer is mild. Here everything is temporal; but there, both what makes [the

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Philippe Kaepelin, “Saint Augustin. Les mises en scène dans les *Confessions*,” in: *Dieu* (prés. Jean Greisch), Institut Catholique de Paris, Paris, Beauchesne, 1985, pp. 129-147; Franz Kafka, *Méditations*, Alma Azul, Coimbra / Castelo Branco, 2007, p. 29: “Everyone who believe, can no longer experience miracles.”

<sup>26</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* III, 3: “Non ergo quisquam attendat quid patiatur sed quid faciat.”

fire] suffer and what suffers [the condemned] is eternal. Will those who suffered at the time when Rome was devastated still suffer? The rich man<sup>27</sup>, however, still suffers in Hell. He has burned and burned and will burn; he will come to [the day of] judgment and receive his flesh, not for his benefit, but for his torment.”<sup>28</sup>

Rome’s sufferings were enormous, but transient. Those who suffered when it was devastated no longer suffer; but those condemned to Hell still suffer... So “let us fear the eternal penalties, if we fear God. [...] With this example [Job], let every Christian, when he suffers some bodily ailment, think of Hell and see how light is what he suffers.”<sup>29</sup> A single expression comes to mind to qualify such a comparison between temporal sufferings and eternal punishments in a sea of flames, to try to rationally demonstrate the mythical equation of the fall of Rome: pure pastoral terrorism. Any serious believer in a Hell of eternally burning fire lives in terror, terrified, appalled, and in comparison can only minimize all his sufferings in this life.

We find here, in a pure state, that pedagogy of conversion through fear that Jean Delumeau described and denounced so well in his magnificent work *La peur et L’Occident*, presenting its metamorphoses at the end of the Middle Ages and in the reformed and counter-reformed Modernity, until the 18th century. The general principle is clear: it is better to suffer and atone in this life, so as not to experience the eternal penalties of Hell. But is any conversion based on fear possible? When Jesus appeared to his disciples at the Easter Vigil, did he not say to them, “Do not be afraid” (Mt 14:27)?

The example of an event that Augustine mentions happened in Constantinople<sup>30</sup> when Flavius Arcadius was emperor<sup>31</sup> is along the same lines: “God wanted *to terrify* the city (*volens Deus terrere civitatem*) and revealed to a soldier that they should do penance; he told the bishop, the bishop invited the people, etc., and they did penance as in Nineveh. On the appointed day, a cloud of fire from the east hovered ominously over the city, but finally, after God had confirmed the truthfulness of the warning, the cloud began to dissipate and disappeared.” With this example, “who will doubt that the Father of mercy wished to

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<sup>27</sup> Lc 16,19-26

<sup>28</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* IV, 1: “Cogita quoslibet cruciatus, extende animum in quoslibet poenas humanas; campara ad gehennam et leue est omne quod pateris. Hic temporalis, ibi aeternus est, et qui torquet et qui torquetur. Numquid adhuc patiuntur qui illo tempore passi sunt quo Roma uastata est? Diues autem ille adhuc apud inferos patitur. Arsit, ardet, ardebit; ueniet ad iudicium, recipiet carnem, non ad beneficium, sed ad supplicium.”

<sup>29</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* IV, 4: “Illas poenas timeamus, si deum timeamus.”; cf. *De Civitate Dei*, XXI.

<sup>30</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* VI, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Emperor of the East from 395-408.

correct and chasten by means of terror (*patrem misericordissimum corrigere voluisse, et terrendo*), and not with destruction?”<sup>32</sup>

And all the subsequent examples go in the same direction: confirming a legal and penal vision of human history. And to finish without undervaluing the gloomy picture already drawn, here is Augustine, a good connoisseur of the techniques of extraction of oil, wine and other agricultural tasks, gives us some famous images and then, in *Sermon* 81, the great fresco of the world by means of the significant image: that of the *whirlpool*, *i.e.*, that of the winepress (*torcular*) that grinds, squeezes, and separates the oil from the lees and pomace, an image also dear to Manichaeism (deepening the adjuvant “techniques” of the separation between Light and Darkness, e.g., through digestion in the stomach of a chosen one) for which the inquisitors and torturers of yesterday and today have always found and will always find the most refined and perfect techniques.

“Once only, the threshing harrow goes to the threshing floor so that the straw is cut and the grain is freed from it; once only, the gold suffers the fire in the furnace so that the straw is turned to ashes and the gold is cleansed of impurities.”<sup>33</sup> “Right now, the world faces suffering, as if in a winepress (*torcular*). If you are dregs you go into the sewer, if you are oil you stay in the wine press. There are bound to be afflictions (*pressurae*). [...] Look at the dregs and look at the oil. Sometimes sufferings arise in the world, such as famine, war, misery, poverty, shortage of goods, death, robbery, greed. These are the sufferings of the poor, the tribulations of the cities; and we see these things. It was foretold that they would come to pass, and we see them coming. [...] But if this world is like a winepress, yet another image can be drawn from it. *As silver and gold are tested in a furnace, so is the righteous man in the trial of suffering* (Pr 17:3). Another similarity can be drawn from the goldsmith’s furnace. In a small crucible there are three things: fire, gold and straw. Here is the image of the whole world: there is the straw, there is the gold, there is the fire. The straw becomes ashes, the fire burns, and the gold comes out purified. In the same way, in the whole world there are the unjust, there are the wicked, and there is tribulation. The world is like the goldsmith’s furnace, the righteous are like gold, the wicked like straw, and the tribulation like fire.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* VIII, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* VIII, 9: “Unam tribulam sentit area ut stipula concidarur, granum autem mundetur; unum ignem patitur fornax aurificis ut palea in cinerem pergat, aurum sordibus careat.”

<sup>34</sup> *Sermo* 113 A; *Sermo* Denis, 24, 13: “Modo mundus sic est quomodo et torcular, in pressuris est: sed, si amurca es, per cloacas uadis; si oleum, in gemellario manes. Nam necesse est pressurae sint. Attendite amurcar: attendite oleum. Pressura fit aliquando in mundo: uerbi gratia, fames, bellum, inopia, caritas, egestas, mortalitas, rapina, auaritia; pressurae pauperum, labores ciuitatum sunt: ista uidemus. praedicta sunt futura, et

May such examples frighten us, Augustine concludes, “and may the tribulation of the good not make us waver, for it is a trial, not a condemnation.”<sup>35</sup>

### (In)Conclusive Note

In an interesting article, written in 1992, in open polemic with Jacques Duquesne (*Le Dieu de Jésus*), G. Madec asked himself if St. Augustine was really “le malin génie” of Europe<sup>36</sup>. And he concluded, in a later text, “that Augustine is not responsible for all the nonsense that has been attributed to him, nor for that which has been said on his authority. He has his share of responsibility; the others also have theirs.”<sup>37</sup> As far as we are concerned, we take responsibility for what we say. In this re-reading of some texts that are situated in the troubled period following the sack of Rome and up to the beginning of the writing of *De Civitate Dei*, in 413, we have tried to read, avoid anachronisms, and keep close to the *Sermons* and other booklets of Augustine. There is no doubt that these texts resent the lively, polemical, improvisational, rhetorical, and even theatrical genre proper to the *Sermons*. In *De Civitate Dei* the style changes, but the penal vision of history, which is already found in the Bible and in Plato’s eschatological myths, is essentially maintained. Augustine, of course, cannot be held responsible for the use that both political theology and the ecclesiastical and inquisitorial apparatus will later make of his texts in order to create and maintain a project of power and even *absolute power* — *plenitudo postestatis papalis* that so fascinated certain Popes of the Late Middle Ages, as well as many emperors and princes, medieval and modern. There is no doubt today that the infamous *political augustinism*<sup>38</sup> was never Augustine’s. But such a doctrine instrumentalized the fear of eternal damnation and the desire for the eternal salvation of the soul, so vividly painted by the Bishop of Hippo, to keep many kings and emperors under the yoke of the Pope, appropriating political

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uidemus quia sunt. [...] Tamen quia torcular est totus iste mundus, unde etiam dicitur alia similitudo, ‘sicut in fornace probatur aurum et argentum’, ‘sic probat iustos temptatio tribulationis’, et de fornace aurificis similitudo ponitur. In angusta caccabo tres res sunt: ignis, aurum, et palea. Et ibi uides imaginem totius mundi: est ibi palea, est ibi aurum, est ibi ignis; palea comburitur, ignis ardet, aurum probatur. Sic et in isto toto mundo sunt iusti, sunt impii, est tribulatio: mundus tanquam fornax est aurificis, iusti tanquam aurum, impii tanquam palea, tribulatio sicut ignis.”

<sup>35</sup> *De Excidio Urbis Romae* VIII, 9: “Non ergo non moueat labor piorum; exercitatio est, non damnatio.”

<sup>36</sup> Goulven Madec, “Saint Augustin est-il le malin génie de l’Europe?”, in : *Imaginer l’Europe. Le marché intérieur européen, tâche culturel et économique* (sous dir. Peter Koslowski), Paris, Cerf, 1992, pp. 279-290.

<sup>37</sup> Goulven Madec, *Le Dieu d’Augustin*, Paris, Cerf, 1998, pp. 21-22.

<sup>38</sup> Henri-Xavier Arquillière, *L’augustinisme politique. Essai sur la formation des théories politiques du Moyen Âge*, Paris, Vrin, 1934.

functions<sup>39</sup> and betraying Jesus' declaration that "my kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). Under the guise of salvation, the *Catholic* Church has often done politics only, i.e., vying for power. Furthermore, we take it upon ourselves to reaffirm that one cannot exempt St. Augustine from all his responsibilities either. In him there is not only phenomenology; from description, one passes too quickly to prescription, to therapy, to the alleged remedy. Often, Augustine is also a politician; nor could he be otherwise. But it is one thing to praise the sufferings of the martyrs, the holiness of the saints, the courage of the virgins, *ex post facto*, for pastoral consolation. It is quite another to have, or to pretend to have, a justifying doctrine on the figures of evil in the world, legitimizing by anticipation the sufferings of others, of the fallen, which is unacceptable. This is more than diagnosis; it is quasi-gnosis, even if it pretends to be anti-gnostic (as is the case with the doctrine on original sin). The way he reads the Bible, the forensic rhetoric, the sermonizing, and the tight legal reasoning sometimes took Augustine too far and to strange accounts. As an attentive reader of Augustine, the Calvinist P. Ricoeur, rightly notes in *Le scandale du mal*, and, above all, in *Le mal. Un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie*, there is always a *hybris* in wanting to think about sin and rationally account for evil in history. We always end up inscribing ourselves *volens nolens* under the interrogations of the Gnostics and the Manicheans, ending up giving them justificatory pertinence. It is always the victims, those who died silently or not, in the "ovens" and "mills" of history, the eternal problem of providentialist, expiatory, and penal visions, in the manner of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, Leibniz's *Theodicy*, or Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.

Against this type of exacerbated and totalizing discourse, there rises the lament, the weeping, the clamor, and the blood of all the innocents — yes, because there are innocents and without sin, it must be said against Augustine's *naturalizing* reading of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* — before whom justifications and invitations to patience are an insult and an intolerable affront. Here legal, calculating, and accounting reason must fall silent and give way only to consolation, compassion, *caritas activa* (which Augustine, by the way, in the pulpit, asked his faithful to have for the fugitives from Rome), to the testimony and silence of those who cannot and do not want to have the last word on history, even if it is through a *détourné* device, such as that of an unfathomable divine providence that allows evils in order to draw good from them.

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. José Maria Silva Rosa, "De Canossa (1077) a Anagni (1303): da humilhação imperial ao atentado papal", in: *Da Autonomia do Político, entre Idade Média e Modernidade*, Documenta, Lisboa, 2012, pp. 7-35.

Such a doctrine and such a lesson about the evils we suffer, to be withdrawn *a posteriori*, have validity only in the sphere of each one's self-interpretation and testimony, always and only in the first person; it can never be valid in advance, *a priori*, as a doctrine to understand and justify the existence of the suffering of others and the presence of evil in the world. As Abbé Pierre stated, a phrase that impresses us very much, "God never terrifies the human conscience." Therefore, let all *Job's friends be silent!*

Very significantly, later in the *City of God* (XII, 7), and facing the unfathomable mystery of iniquity (*mysterium iniquitatis*), Augustine will be much more cautious than in these *Sermons* delivered in the heat of the moment. Here, after struggling, he finally recognizes like the psalmist that evil, sin, the *libido dominandi* of the proud and Luciferian will cannot enter into any rational equation nor into tribunean calculations. There are things our spirit knows only by ignoring them: "Who can understand sin?"; "Delicta enim quis intellegit?"<sup>40</sup>

This Augustine who is interrogatively silent because he has many things to say, dubitative in the face of his precarious speculative solutions is philosophically much more fruitful and stimulating than the author of *De Excidio Urbis Romae*.

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<sup>40</sup> *De Civitate Dei* XII, 7: "Sic species intellegibiles mens quidem nostra intellegendo conspicit; sed ubi deficiunt, nesciendo condiscit. 'Delicta' enim 'quis intellegit?'" (PsI8, 13).