

ON THE CITY OF MAN

The differing views of St. Augustine and John XXIII

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St. Augustine wrote the *City of God* at a time of trouble for the Roman Empire. Pope John XXIII issued his *Pacem in Terris* "to all men of good will" in an age of universal conflict. While Augustine's philosophy of history includes a conception of an ideal Christian commonwealth, the predominant theme in his great book is pessimism regarding the City of Man. The strongest *motif* in the late Pope's encyclical, on the other hand, is optimism concerning the power of responsible men to shape the future in a favorable way.

Pacem in Terris was widely hailed, if variously interpreted, in Communist and neutralist as well as Western circles. The hopeful tone and constructive suggestions, particularly the injunction to statesmen to work unceasingly to avoid another holocaust in this century, evoked a deep response from a war-weary and fearful world. It can safely be said that the message of John is far more acceptable to twentieth-century man than the counsel of Augustine about secular affairs. But this does not mean that the widely loved Pontiff's views are necessarily more valid than those of the fifth-century Bishop regarding the prospects for the City of Man.

The issue is both intellectually intriguing and politically significant. The late President Kennedy said of the encyclical: "As an American I have learned from it, and as a Catholic I am proud of it." It is possible that the President's efforts during the last months of his life to achieve a *détente* with Russia, while continuing to foster the defense and development of the West and the free world, stemmed in part from his interpretation of *Pacem in Terris*. Papal wisdom and Presidential power perhaps were joined. After sketching the basic ideas on the City of Man to be found in Augustine's book and John's encyclical, I shall attempt to indicate their immediate relevance to American foreign policy and the current world scene.

At the outset of his famous apology, Augustine observes that despite the bond of a common human nature, mankind the world over is divided against

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itself. All men seek life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But their competitive appetites and differing ideas and interests lead them to seek these ends in ways which frustrate their realization. The basic cause of the perpetual turmoil in the City of Man is the fall of mankind's first parents. In the Bishop's words:

That the whole human race has been condemned in its first origin, this life itself, if life it is to be called, bears witness by the host of cruel ills with which it is filled. Is not this proved by the profound and dreadful ignorance which produces all the errors that enfold the children of Adam, and from which no man can be delivered without toil, pain, and fear? Is it not proved by his love of so many vain and hurtful things, which produces gnawing cares, disquiet, griefs, fears, wild joys, quarrels (etc., etc.) and innumerable other crimes that do not come easily to mind, but that never absent themselves from the actuality of human existence?

Men, and therefore the City of Man, are moved by *Eros*, not by ethics. A few in each generation live after the spirit. Most live after the flesh. Only the minority, the elect, who inhabit the City of God, can achieve a relative peace, an internal tranquillity. But even they are subject to all the external and collective ills which afflict their fellow citizens in the City of Man. Hegel asserts, in words which could be mistaken for Augustine: "Passions, private aims, and the satisfaction of selfish desires are most effective springs of action because they respect none of the limitations which justice and morality would impose."

Commenting on the repeated dashing of human hopes throughout the ages, on the "slaughterbench of history," the Prussian court philosopher suggests that when we reflect

on the miseries that have overwhelmed the noblest of nations and politics, and the finest examples of private virtue, we experience a mental torture, allowing no defense or escape but the consideration that what has happened could not be otherwise, that it is a fatality which no intervention could alter.

So several historians have commented upon the Great War of 1914, and the Greater War of 1939. So perhaps some Americans felt in the aftermath of the

tragic and senseless assassination of President Kennedy. Augustine does not speak of fatality, rather of Providence. Nevertheless, he too finds consolation in the consideration that, given the condition of man, things couldn't be otherwise. The Bishop's explanation was unacceptable to those Romans who, like Gibbon centuries later, attributed the decline and fall of their Empire to Christianity.

But Augustine does not of course end his reply at this point. He also argues that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was for the salvation of individual souls, not of political regimes. Moreover, he warns against confounding the recently "Christianized" Roman Empire with a genuine Christian commonwealth. Rome is not God's Empire, he might have said. Its late, officially Christian rule was and could only be nominal. For coercive power is the basic instrument of politics, and of the City of Man. He points out that Rome, like earlier empires, was founded on might and aggression, not on right and cooperation. There must at some time be an end to all earthly kingdoms. And in any event, there is no basis for expecting justice in this world. Look to Providence and to Eternity, not to a weighing of happiness and misery here below.

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So Augustine counselled both Christians and critics of the Church in the fifth century. The contrast with John's view is striking. The latter's encyclical stresses hope, courage, and confidence regarding the prospects for the City of Man in the 1960's and beyond. Applauding the genuine progress made by modern man, John calls for a linking together of "scientific competence, technical capacity and professional experience," with the basic principles of Christianity. The dignity, rights and duties of men must be reaffirmed; there must be cooperation among classes, races, and nations; and an organized international community founded on freedom, justice, and diversity must be established. The times are woefully out of joint, and the labourers in the secular vineyard are all too few. But the burdens must be borne, the challenges must be met. In John's words:

There is an immense task incumbent on all men of good will, namely, the task of restoring the relations of the human family in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom—the relations between individual human beings; between citizens and their respective political communities; between political communities themselves; between individuals, families, intermediate associations and political communities on the one hand, and the world community on the other. This is a most exalted task, all will agree, for it is the task of

bringing about true peace in the order established by God.

Citing Augustine, John goes on to say that "there can be no peace between men unless there is peace within each one of them, unless, that is, each one builds up within himself the order wished by God."

The Pontiff does not speak of fatality in human events. To the contrary, after noting the character of the present so-called peace based on fear and the balance of terror, he says "the true and solid peace of nations can consist, not in equality, but in mutual trust alone. We believe that this can be brought to pass." He then exhorts statesmen "to spare no labor in order to insure that world events follow a reasonable and human course." As John Courtney Murray has pointed out, John was clearly attempting to counter the widespread feeling that "history today is surely and certainly carrying man toward catastrophe with an inevitability against which man is helpless." While recognizing the role of Providence in human affairs, John nevertheless asserts the freedom and responsibility of men for the fate of their secular City, and argues the feasibility as well as the necessity of avoiding the calamity of a third world war. Pius XII's plea to European statesmen on August 24, 1939, is cited by his successor: "Nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war".

John was not content just to reassert traditional Catholic principles, and to counsel statesmen on the need to avoid a nuclear Armageddon. He specifically speaks of the need to end the arms race, to ban nuclear weapons, and to attain "progressive disarmament and an effective method of control." He repeats the admonition to the wealthier nations to help the developing countries which he had stressed in *Mater et Magistra*. And he comments favorably on the efforts of the United Nations, and remarks that "it is our earnest prayer that the United Nations—in its structure and in its means—may become ever more equal to the magnitude and nobility of its tasks." Finally, in perhaps the most widely noted and applauded section of the entire encyclical, John draws a distinction between "error and the person who errs," and goes on to say:

It must be borne in mind, furthermore, that neither can false philosophical teachings regarding the nature, origin and destiny of the universe and of man be identified with historical movements that have economic, social, cultural or political ends, not even when these movements have originated from those teachings and have drawn and still draw inspiration therefrom.

This is so because the teachings, once they are drawn up and defined, remain always the same while the movements, working in constantly evolving historical

situations, cannot but be subject to changes, even of a profound nature. Besides, who can deny that those movements, insofar as they conform to the dictates of right reason and are interpreters of the lawful aspirations of the human person, contain elements that are positive and deserving of approval?

It can happen, then, that meetings for the attainment of some practical end, which formerly were deemed inopportune or unproductive, might now or in the future be considered opportune and useful.

The New York Times editorialized, in atypical emotional fashion, that the Vatican had in effect endorsed "Peaceful Coexistence." Others thought that the Pope was referring not to communism, but to West European democratic Socialism, and perhaps specifically to the "opening to the Left" in Italy. William Buckley apparently believed that whatever the Holy Father had in mind, it was irrelevant to the problems confronted by statesmen in the real world. Despite these varying interpretations, there could be no mistaking the Pope's injunction to responsible leaders to "give serious thought to the problem of a peaceful adjustment of relations between political communities on a world level," and to travel the last mile in order to avoid another military "solution." On the other hand, it is impossible to overlook in this connection the very first sentence in the encyclical: "Peace on earth, which men of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God is dutifully observed." On this point there is no quarrel between the fifth century intellectual Bishop and the twentieth century pastoral Pope.

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But that there are differences between Augustine and John is apparent. Perhaps the greatest contrast lies in their attitudes toward the possibilities of progress in the City of Man. Around 1500 years separated the lives of the two men, and it would be surprising in view of modern history if there were not some variance in their views on this issue. Many today, Christian and non-Christian, feel that ethics not *Eros* is the most significant, although not the only, human motivating force, and that it is potentially capable of becoming the predominant influence in human affairs. For example, Professor Johannes Messner of the University of Vienna suggests in his *Social Ethics*:

Of all the moral forces contributing to the dynamics of the state, morality reveals itself as the strongest. This assertion may surprise many. Were it not true, mankind could not continue to exist. But for this primacy of morality mankind would long ago have fallen prey to the irrational elements operating in political dynamics and could never have reached the

heights of civilization which it has attained in spite of all. . . . The moral impulses, in fact, avert the war of all against all; thus far we can find a core of truth in Hobbes' theory of the state. But the dynamics of the moral forces go farther; there is to be observed in the history of mankind a gradual elevation of the minimum standard of morality. Even if the course of development from the society whose keynote is slavery to that which we describe today as the free society is by no means an unbroken one and is not secure against renewed reactions, there reveals itself a movement evidently sustained by unfolding and increasingly effective moral ideals and forces and operating not least through the institution of the state.

Some critics argue that there has been a decline in individual standards of conduct in the West. But it does seem apparent that, whatever the gap between principle and practice, there has also been an improvement in popular attitudes toward such matters as racial discrimination, social justice, and nationalism. On the other hand, Herbert Butterfield has commented in his *Christianity and History*:

In some of the aspects of it which the world most prizes today, our respect for personality has grown with the growth of civilization, even while the power of religion in society seems to be declining; though it is possible that the development of a more thorough-going paganism may turn all the tendencies of the twentieth century in the opposite direction.

There has after all been the "reaction" of Nazism in this era, and of communism as well many would say. Several times in this century we have witnessed what Peter Viereck once called the end result of the transition from "humanity to nationality and bestiality." Moreover, numerous observers and artists have pointed out the pernicious effects of the various dehumanizing influences in American and Western culture today.

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But all this does not formidably challenge the thesis of Messner, who does not entertain any Christian version of the secular idea of progress championed by the thirteenth-century Gnostics, the eighteenth-century *Philosophes*, and their various twentieth-century descendants. Indeed, Messner does not expect any final victory of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the City of Man, much less of Christianity and the City of God here below. Moreover, "the mission of Christianity lies primarily in the field of the struggle between the kingdom of God and the 'world.' . . ." Nevertheless, as Martin D'Arcy suggests in *The Meaning and Matter of History*, human history cannot just be dismissed as a story of un-mixed and unending evil and conflict, as a "slaughter-bench." Nor can the Cities of God and Man be

rigidly separated. The citizens of the former live and work in and leaven the latter. Christian faith is on this view not an escape from, but a hope for human history and its ultimate meaning. In D'Arcy's words: "It is time that brings the flower, eternity fruit."

This may or may not be an age "without clear convictions and without great men," as George Santayana wrote in 1913. However that may be, Santayana went too far when he said that the world is simply "the sport of cruder powers, vested interests, tribal passions, stock sentiments, and chance majorities." He overlooks the fact that morality also plays a role in the City of Man. If it were not so, there would be no City, only a jungle. If there is no inevitable progress in history, neither is there only insensible conflict and chaos. John may have exaggerated the possibility of achieving mutual trust and good will between the various contending camps on the contemporary scene. And the encyclical doubtless needs to be interpreted to those who think he sounds a clarion call for immediate dismantling of the many walls which divide mankind, or for the early establishment of *World Peace Through World Law*.

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Nevertheless, all Catholics, and all men of good will, have received a manifesto which calls on them, not to try to realize a narrowly Christian commonwealth, but to try to conceive rational, moral, and practical responses to the threatening problems which confront all mankind, and to build a better City of Man. If Etienne Gilson is right and Friedrich Meinecke wrong, and Augustine is a prophetic utopian rather than a pessimistic "precursor" of Machiavelli, it can even be suggested that John was less an idealist than Augustine. For the Bishop, not the Pope, indicates a belief in the possibility of making the City of God and the City of Man one in a Christianized world. Augustine may in fact be the "precursor" not of Machiavelli, but of Teilhard de Chardin.

The intellectual agreements and differences between Augustine and John cannot be clearly or finally stated. It is perhaps easier to indicate the broad implications of *Pacem in Terris*, and of the classic-Judaic-Christian-humanist tradition, for American foreign policy today. Since on this view nations ought to attempt to foster the international common good, the United States, as a great, indeed a super power, must put its strength at the service of fundamental moral ideas and ideals. Pursuit of America's "enlightened self-interest" is not enough. Relations among nations should be characterized by

devotion to the principles of truth, justice, solidarity and freedom. This country's "national interest" must be followed in a fashion which takes into account not only America's general welfare and security, but also that of other nations.

If the first principles of the grand tradition are clear and obligatory, their proper application to concrete circumstances of time and place is far less apparent. And John reminds Christ's followers as well as all men of good will that choosing particular means to deal with specific problems of our age requires "the virtue of prudence, which is the guiding light of the virtues that regulate the moral life, both individual and social." Elaborating, John writes:

We deem it opportune to point out how difficult it is to understand clearly the relation between the objective requirements of justice and concrete situations, that is, to perceive the degrees and forms in which doctrinal principles and directives ought to be applied to current human affairs.

And the perception of those degrees and forms is all the more difficult in our times, which require everyone to have regard for the universal common good and which are marked by a pronounced dynamism. For this reason, the problem of bringing social reality into line with the objective requirements of justice is one which will never admit of a definitive solution.

James Reston wrote the day after Kennedy's death that the young President, who had learned the limits of the power of the White House, and the difficulty of making decisions, had grown fond of quoting Lord Morley's dictum: "Politics is one long second-best, where the choice often lies between two blunders." Kennedy came to realize what those of us who are observers and critics need to be reminded of from time to time, namely, in H. B. Sharabi's words, "the intellectual's failure to grasp the limits that action always sets upon thought. . . . In political life what is necessary is not always inevitable, and what is logical is not necessarily valid."

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Bearing these things in mind, it would seem that today and for the foreseeable future America will be compelled to concentrate primarily upon defense and development of the West and the free world, and will not be able, if indeed it were willing, to increase significantly the authority of international law and the United Nations. Beyond these efforts, it is commonplace to say that the United States must also seek to find "overlapping areas of interest" with Russia. But here the recent remarks of Professor Merle Fainsod of Harvard should be cited:

The first duty of responsible Western statesmanship is to ensure that the balance of power and the dy-

namics of growth remain favorable to the West. In a world where a thermonuclear holocaust is an ever-present danger, every effort should, of course, be exerted to bring the arms race under control and to reduce the possibility of war. For that reason the recent test ban pact is to be warmly welcomed. But unless further agreements can be reached which safeguard both Western and Soviet interests, there would appear to be no real alternative except to continue to maintain a capacity for instant and full retaliation against thermonuclear attack, to rely on a policy of balanced deterrence to prevent a nuclear war from breaking out, and to develop sub-nuclear capacities and paramilitary capabilities to deal with the contingencies and actualities of local and guerrilla wars.

America and the West cannot afford to relax at a time of relative easing of dangers and tensions. The cold war is not over, despite the difficulties within the Communist camp. And we would do well to remember, regarding the outcome of the struggle, that America is not God's country, and the West is not God's civilization. Eventually victory in the cold

war, that is to say, successful containment of Moscow and Peking and avoidance of a thermonuclear war, is not a self-evident truth ordained by Providence or history.

We should be neither blindly pessimistic, as most say Augustine was, nor blandly optimistic, as some say John was. Neither preoccupied with Heaven nor with Earth, with the City of God nor the City of Man. Perhaps we should try to emulate Pushkin and Chekhov, who, as Pasternak had Zhivago say of them, had a "modest reticence in such high-sounding matters as the ultimate purpose of mankind (and) their own salvation." We don't know the meaning of history, and Christ's kingdom is not of this world. But we do know what is expected of us as citizens of the Cities of God and Man. We are to struggle with and try to improve the earthly home of all men, while recognizing that the will of God, the Master of history, and not the will of man will prevail.

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