

# A SUMMARY OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S DOCTRINE ON ORIGINAL SIN: AN ORTHODOX CRITIQUE

By  
Rev. STEPHEN AVRAMIDES

---

Latin Christianity, since its inception in the Ninth Century, has held a doctrine of original sin, atonement and justification based on certain philosophical presuppositions and quite legalistic in character. This doctrine has its roots in Aurelius Augustine (354--420). Indeed, one could even say that it was Augustine who sired Roman Catholic theology. Prior to his teachings concerning God, creation, man, fall and salvation, West-Roman Christian theology, although using different theological terminology, was essentially the theology of the East Roman Fathers, that is, it was in complete accord with the dogmatic beliefs of the early Church. With Augustine, however, a new «theological mentality», heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy, comes into being and has prevailed ever since. It should be pointed out, however, that Augustine's doctrine of sin and grace was originally opposed in the West and never accepted in the East. It was, however, accepted as definitive by the Frankish tradition which for several centuries knew and read Augustine alone. It became part of Latin Christianity as opposed to Latin- and Greek-speaking Roman Christianity.

Laboring mainly under Neo-Platonic presuppositions, Augustine produced a doctrine of original sin which differs quite radically from the teaching of the Fathers of the early Church. The Fathers taught a doctrine of inherited weakness of human nature with a disposition towards sin; Augustine taught a doctrine of inherited guilt. The Fathers taught that salvation was the result of the destruction of death; Augustine believed that we are saved through the appeasement of God's wrath, salvation being for him a matter of predestination. Indeed, Augustine's doctrine of original sin is unique for its time. Let us then in this essay of ours examine it more closely.

In order to understand Augustine's doctrine of original sin, however it is necessary to examine some of his philosophical presuppositions which influence his doctrine. We know that Augustine came

to Christ «through the Platonists;»<sup>1</sup> thus he accepts, as Appolinarius had done before him, the Neo-platonic definition of man as «a soul that uses a body»<sup>2</sup> «λόγος (νοῦς) ἐν σαρκί». However, Augustine does not fall into the Appolinarian heresy, but rather accepts this definition as expressing the transcendental superiority of soul over body.

The soul is incorporeal and thus immortal, having no dimensions, «and knows this by immediate self-knowledge», that it, it is cognizent of its existence. «It knows that it lives the life of an intelligence».<sup>3</sup> It is a thinking being. It is life in itself: «A substance which like the body, receives its life from without, ceases to be as soon as it becomes unable to receive it: a substance which, like the soul, is life in virtue of its own nature, *cannot possibly lose it*. The soul then, is a spiritual and living substance which is immortal by the very fact it is a soul».<sup>4</sup>

The soul controls the body in that it is superior to it and cannot be acted upon by it. Sensations therefore are actions by the soul and not passions undergone by it. All sense impressions conveyed to the soul by the senses are acted upon by the soul, which produces spiritual images or «sensations».<sup>5</sup> These sensations have certain durations and depend on memory. One must remember the beginning to understand the end. Thus what happens in matter and time is redeemed by memory, one of the clearest manifestations of the spirituality of man's soul. Thus to learn for Augustine is to remember. Memory thus becomes the deepest hidden recess of the mind. Here God dwells and by His light He teaches us as our «internal Master». To learn and to know intellegible truth therefore is to remember in the present, the everlasting presence of divine light in us».<sup>6</sup> We have here the makings of a Platonic doctrine of salvation through anamnesis, except for the fact that Augustine does not accept the pre-existence of the soul. Here, however, we can see the basis of his illumination theory and his belief that blessedness lies in the intellectual vision of the *summum bonum*, God, «the intellectual Sun of righteousness who lightens the minds of all men». Man thus must turn his mind away from sensation (produced by the soul when stimulated by

1. *Confessiones* 7, (IX) 13. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Transl. by Edward B. Pussey.

2. *Enneades* I, 1,3 quoted in Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, Charles Scribners, New York, 1936 p. 74.

3. *Gilson*, p. 74.

4. *De Immortalitate Animae*, 7,12. *PL.* 32, 1027.

5. *De Quantitate Animae* 22, III, 41. *PL.* 32,1058.

6. *Gilson*, p. 595. *De Trinitate* XIV, 17.

the senses) and purify the soul from vice and raise his mind to contemplation of truth: intellectual contact with God. Thus man in contemplation goes «*ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*».<sup>7</sup> Thus the knowledge of truth leads to happiness which is man's purpose in life.<sup>8</sup>

We now turn to Augustine's cosmology. God spoke, and since his Word was both His will and His power, the world was. God willed it into existence. God created all things *at once*. By a single instantaneous act God created *ex nihilo* (yet from archetypes within His mind) «all the beings which then where, and in them, all those that have come to be ever since the first instant of creation, as well as all those that still are to come up to the end of the world. The created world was big with their «seminal reasons» that is with the seeds or germs of future beings, and since to create mutable beings is tantamount to creating them, it can be said that the succession of all future things was created at once, together with the totality of all future beings in the very instance of creation»<sup>9</sup>. Thus each and every individual has his own idea in God. Even change and becoming in time follow a rule that does not change. Thus world history appears as the progressive unfolding of an immense poem. Thus for Augustine everything is predetermined, even man's salvation. There is here an exposition of a pre-existing law in God's essence (the relationship of divine ideas) to which all of creation must conform. Hence, Augustine believes in a created natural law. Thus we see here an identification of God's creative will with his salvific will and an identification of both with the divine essence. This of course is due to the fact that Augustine is unaware of the Patristic distinction which the Fathers make between God's will (βούλησις), his energies (ἐνέργειαι) and his essence (οὐσία).

For Augustine there exists a created natural law with which everything is in harmony. Therefore, there can exist nothing which can be contrary to this pattern set down by God, otherwise a change would mean that either there exists a change in divine essence, and this would go against the simplicity of God's essence, or his *eudaimonia* — for any mutability is a sign of imperfection and desire — or that the change in order is brought about by another being or beings possessing free will

7. *Ennaratio in Ps.* 145.

8. *Contra Academicos* I, 3.

9. *Gilson*, p. 73. *De Trinitate* III 9, 16; 10.

or a will contrary to that of God's. This however would mean duality. Thus evil in so far as it finds a place in God's predetermined scheme is good.<sup>10</sup>

The patristic outlook concerning God and creation however, differs considerably from Augustine's.<sup>11</sup> Rather, God is above all categories of being (and non-being as Augustine defines them).<sup>12</sup> He is above happiness, necessity and freedom. His essence is unknown to us, but His actions (ἐνέργειαι) and His will is known. God did create the world *ex nihilo*, but He did not set it under a created natural law, but He Himself governs and sustains creation directly through His uncreated energies, and He continues to create new beings. If there is a stability of order in natural phenomena, this is due to the stable will and action of God, and not to a law of nature.

Thus, in complete contradiction to Augustine's doctrine of spontaneous creation, God's omnipotence is not an accomplished fact. God does not rest, though His nature is simple and immutable. Rather, God's omnipotence is dynamic and eschatological.

Augustine's doctrine of original sin is thus framed within these philosophical presuppositions.

He teaches that God created man good and upright, completely free from concupiscence and possessing free will. Augustine, however, uses free will in a peculiar sense. «Will is free whenever it does not serve vices and sins.»<sup>13</sup> This will depends upon knowledge. «A thing cannot be loved unless it is known.»<sup>14</sup> A will is perfectly free when it is controlled and permeated by the will of God. This can happen only when one has knowledge of God and this knowledge, as we have pointed out, is innate: «an interior sense» which apprehends the nature of things through their intellegible forms (*per intellegibilem speciem*).<sup>15</sup> Thus we

■ 10. Since God permits evil, its existence must be good «otherwise the Almighty will would not allow it.»

«Nor can we doubt that God does well even in the permission of what is evil. For He permits it only in the justice of His judgment. And surely all that is just is good. Although therefore evil, in so far as it is evil, is not a good; yet the fact that evil as well as good exists is a good.» *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, XCVI.

11. *De Trinitate* V, 2.3.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, II.4; Reinhold Seeberg, *History of Doctrines*, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1908, Vol I, p. 341.

14. *De Trinitate* X. 1,2; Seeberg p. 310.

15. *De Civitate Dei* XI. 27.2; Seeberg p. 310.

see that salvation for Augustine is nothing more than Platonic contemplation of the original forms of all existing things.

Man's will then, at the time of his creation was positively good and thus, free. Augustine, under Platonic influence, believed and taught that man was created perfect, while for the Orthodox Church man was created a perfect child in order to develop through *synergy* into a perfect man *eternally* — *a process which never ends*. Further Augustine taught that man had communion with God, undoubtedly through contemplation, and thus served God with great satisfaction. «And the body with all its impulses served the soul and reason reigned in man»<sup>16</sup>

One would thus assume that if this were the case it would be impossible for man to fall — to desire evil — since he possessed knowledge of the *summum bonum*. There can be nothing higher, nothing sweeter, nothing more satisfying than this knowledge of God, and the consequential subjugation of human will to the divine. For this reason angels, who are mutable, for they are matter, do not fall because of the sweetness of the beatific vision.<sup>17</sup> «The Heaven of Heavens which Thou created in the beginning is some intellectual creature» (*De Civ. Dei*, XII, 15).

This mutable matter «doth through the sweetness of that most happy contemplation of thyself, strongly restrain its own mutability».

Yet in direct self-contradiction to this very own belief of his, Augustine says that man fell. How? if he was already «at rest» in God?

«It was within his choice,» Augustine says «either that he [Adam] should always wish to be in this (good will) or that he should not always thus wish, but could change from it to an evil will *without compulsion* from any source (*op. imp. v. 61*).<sup>18</sup>

But one may validly ask, if man's will before the fall were «free» in the Augustinian sense — i. e. subject to the will of God because of intellectual contemplation of the Divine Essence, how could he at the same time possess a «free will» in the patristic sense, i.e. freedom of choice between good and evil?

How does man turn from God, *the summum bonum*, to evil? There can be no *entelechia* greater than God's exercised upon man! Augustine does not explain this very explicitly. Man fell through pride, he says.

16. *De Civitate Dei* XIV, 24, 1.

17. *Ibid.* XII, 15f.

18. *Confessiones* XII, 9.

Man suddenly was no longer willing to obey God. He wished to be his own master. This turning from God towards the self came from within *without compulsion* from any source.

Man thus transgresses divine order, with the subjugation of the soul to the body as the outcome. Man, having turned towards matter and away from God, «...feeds upon the sensible and since his soul draws sensations from images from its own substance, exhausts itself in furnishing them. Thus, finally, the soul, drained from a loss of substance, becomes unrecognizable to itself. It thus takes itself to be a body and this is the body from which the soul must be liberated».<sup>19</sup>

Ignorance is thus a consequence of this turning away *ab interioribus ad exterior* and *ab superioribus ad inferiora*. No longer attracted by the superior but by the inferior, the soul is unable to turn within towards the source of divine knowledge and thus becomes ignorant. It lusts after what is harmful and false. Man thus loses his «free will» since he is now ignorant of what is good and evil, loving only what he knows. God punishes man severely because of his transgression of divine order. Such a violent turning away is worthy of death — God's penalty justly imposed upon those who have sinned — and all have sinned and have come short of the glory of God» (Rom. 3:23).

Augustine believes that the whole human race inherits the guilt of Adam, through the punitive decree of God. Adam has become a different man, and human nature has been changed. «Nature (was) violated by sin. Our nature being transformed for the worse not only became a sinner but also begets sinners, and yet that languor in which the power of living aright has been lost is certainly not nature but defect, for all men were in Adam. «All men were that one man»<sup>20</sup>. Hence according to Rom. 5:12 (ἐφ' ᾧ = *in qua*) in Adam all then sinned. Thus Adam's moral character and the penalty of being subject to concupiscence and death is passed on through sinful concupiscence in generation.

This transgression against the Divine Law quickens the wrath of God which justly punishes man through death. If man is to be saved, this wrath must be appeased. This indeed for Augustine, was the primary purpose of the Cross. «For every man is born with it [sin]; wherefore the Apostle says, 'We were by nature the children of wrath even as others'. Now as men were lying under this wrath by reason of their original sin, and this original sin was the more heavy and deadly in propor-

19. Seeberg, p. 341.

20. *De peccatorum meritis et remissions et de baptismo* 1.10.11.

tion to the number and magnitude of the actual sins which were added to it, there was need for a mediator, i.e., for a reconciler, who, by the offering of one sacrifice of which all the sacrifices of the law and the prophets were types, should take away this wrath.»<sup>21</sup>

For Augustine the destruction of the devil was really a secondary result of the crucifixion, for the devil was overcome «by the truth of justice, *not by the violence of power*, since he had most unjustly slain Him who was without and desert of sin», and «thus most justly lost those who he for the desert of sin held in his power,<sup>22</sup> and an example of humility is given to disobedient man».<sup>23</sup>

Rather, the wrath of God is removed and the will of man restored through the Grace of the Cross received through Baptism. «Grace is the resistless creative power<sup>24</sup> of God which exerts its influence in the heart of men as the power of the good».<sup>25</sup> It infuses love or a new and good will into man through the Holy Spirit, a good concupiscence instead of an evil one, for even after Baptism concupiscence remains, but is no longer sin. God no longer counts it as such.<sup>26</sup> Thus there is no ascetical means of salvation here. Purification of passions is not necessary.

This then briefly is the teaching of Augustine concerning Adam's fall. Let us now compare it to that of the Fathers.

We have already taken issue with Augustine's doctrine of God and his cosmology and hold to the patristic distinction of essence and energies. We also accept the patristic concept of providence as God's uncreated energies acting directly in the world. Thus for us there is no created divine law based on eternal ideas and archetypes. Further, free will for the Fathers is *free* choice between good and evil. Man's will and the will of any other rational being is completely independent of

21. *Enchirid.* Chap. 33.

22. *Ibid.*, Chap. 49.

23. Is not pride the greatest sin through which the devil tries to cause the ruin of God's saints? Yet pride does not spring from within but is the result of *πονηροὶ λογισμοὶ* hurled at them by the devil.

24. *Seeberg*, p. 342. The Patristic interpretation of Rom. 5:12 is ἐφ' ᾧ = ἐφ' ᾧ θανάτῳ, for death and corruption is the environment we inherit, and through it do we willingly or unwillingly sin.

25. Here we see in spermiadic form the springboards of both Anselm's and Abelard's doctrines of atonement.

26. Again, notice the confusion between God's creative and saving powers!

God's will even though these beings have their existence from God, for God wills and acts so that they do exist.

Thus the existence of will contrary to the Divine will in no way hampers divine omnipotence, since the Fathers do not hold to «instantaneous creation» and created natural law. God wills that His omnipotence not extend and govern man's free will. Evil will be destroyed in the end and thus God's omnipotence is eschatological.<sup>27</sup> For God's long-suffering patience is equally indicative of His omnipotence.

There follows then the belief that the devil is not an organ of God functioning by divine command, but rather a rational being who along with his angels freely work evil and through scorn try to work the fall of man. Thus the Fathers teach that Adam fell *ab exterioribus* through the teaching of the devil. St. Irenaeus thus says: «Man disobeyed God, having been *deceived* by the angel (that is, the devil), who because of God's many gifts to man became envious of him, and thus having destroyed himself convinced man to sin through disobedience of God's law. Thus the devil became, through deceit (ψεύδους) the cause of man's expulsion from paradise.<sup>27a</sup>»

Further, God did not create death (*Wisdom of Solomon* 1,13), but man, through his disobedience, cut himself off from the Source of Life.

St. Athanasius says that «men having turned away from the eternal (αἰώνια) and *through the counsel* (συμβουλῆ) of the devil turned to corruption (τὰ τῆς φθορᾶς) by themselves (ἑαυτοῖς) became the cause of corruption in death. Man's nature stripped through sin of the Grace which clothed it was weakened (νερόσηκεν) and man's nature was attacked (εἰς-ἑδραμον τὴν φύσιν τῆς σαρκὸς ἡδοναί τε καὶ ἀκαθαρσίαι) by pleasures and uncleanness *from without*». Thus man's nature was weakened and this weakness was passed on in generation. Man, however, inherits weakness, not guilt. Except for the devil who tempted him, Adam alone is responsible for his sin and not his offsprings. We inherit a weakened nature which, born into an evil environment — for the devil and his cohorts are the rulers of this world — inevitably sins.<sup>28</sup> The power of the devil over man is real though unlawful. Through death, which God allows so that evil will not exist eternally (ὅνα μὴ τὸ κακὸν ἀθάνατον γένηται) and so that God may recreate man's nature after his dis-

27. *De nuptiis et cupiscentia* I. 25. 38; Seebergp. 347.

27a. *Epidexis* 16.

28. John S. Romanides, *The Original Sin*, Athens, 1957 pp. 65-66. (in Greek).



solution, the devil held men captive and caused man to sin; for man, losing the security he had when he possessed life-giving grace, tries to sustain himself in life and tries to give it meaning by trying to find happiness in riches and the praises of men. Thus, this inevitably begets sin and this brings about death.

Thus, salvation for the Fathers is precisely what it is not for Augustine — the conquering of the devil and the destruction of death and corruption and the restoration of our nature *and not our will* to life. «All of human nature is healed and restored with a certain compulsion by the mighty power of God's omnipotent and invisible grace.»<sup>29</sup> Thus, blessed Nicholas Cabasilas writes, «Resurrection is a rectification of nature and this God grants freely, but the kingdom of heaven... and union with Christ presupposes will (τροπή ἐστι τῆς θελήσεως) and available only to those who have longed for them and loved and desired».<sup>30</sup>

Justification is not a granting of *good will* (*sp. lit. lit.* 26.45; 48.31) or working of righteousness in the Holy Spirit but vivification (ζωοποίησις), the destruction of the unjust rule of the devil over the righteous. It is the granting of life-giving grace, not a good concupiscence.

For the Fathers, in the final resurrection the restoration of human nature will be completed. All will be restored (ἀποκατάστασις) and death and corruption will not exist, though not all will partake of God's salvation. Augustine holds that only the predestined shall be saved, and the damned, possessing a body will have as their fate a continual dying and decaying<sup>31</sup> (*Enchiridion*). Thus *evil and corruption will exist forever* as part of God's divine will. For Augustine everyone is worthy of being in hell. None have merit to be otherwise. But of those damned, God has chosen some for salvation. There is no merit in salvation. All merit hell. Those who are going to heaven do not merit it. Those who are going to hell merit it. They are therefore justly damned, and thus for Augustine, God is free. The worse thing that Augustine does is to tie in the Crucifixion with his doctrine of predestination. For Augustine Christ

---

29. Sin is willful or unwillful disobedience of God's will. *Romanides*, p. 151. George Florovsky, «The Resurrection of Life», *Official Register of Harvard University — Harvard Divinity School* (Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.) Vol. XXIX, No 8, April 7, 1952 p. 17.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 18. (*De vita in Christo II*, 36-96).

31. *Enchiridion* XCII.

dies on the Cross only for those predestined to salvation and not for all sinners.<sup>32</sup> Death was destroyed only for those few whom God's mercy selected to replace the fallen angels, and good will was given only to them. The rest of the world lies in corruption and death and one is led to wonder about God's omnipotence and the limitations of His justice and mercy.

Indeed, the entire philosophical structure of Augustine's thought is subject to question, and after close examination proves to be filled with contradictions. It proves that any theology based on philosophical categories cannot stand, for theology is based on the revelation of super-rational truths, and thus to limit oneself to philosophical categories and to try to comprehend the incomprehensible through discursive thought is folly.

Augustine's thought is Platonic. This is quite obvious, for Augustine thought that Plato knew the goal (Christ) but did not possess the way. Of course Augustine was wrong, for Christianity and Platonism are incompatible, «an elementary fact of which the Platonists, to do them justice, were perfectly aware.»<sup>33</sup>

---

32. For the Orthodox Church all men are predestined to salvation. «God our Saviour... will have all men to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth» (*I Timothy* 36-4). The fact that some are not saved is not because they are not so predestined but because they do not will to be so.

33. *Florovsky*, p. 8.