

The Use of the Poor and Poverty in Augustine's *City of God*

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INTRODUCTION

Augustine's *City of God* is one of the most comprehensive treatises in his corpus, setting out a systematic critique of pagan thought and an elaborate apologia of the theology of sacred history. Begun in late 413 or early 414, the 'magnum opus et arduum' (book 1, prologue) of the twenty-two books was to take Augustine about fourteen years, even sporadically, to fully complete (426). It seems natural that the reader is led astray by the seemingly recursive and complex structure of the massive work. But two pieces of evidence for the retrospective summary of the work show the existence of a well-planned scheme. First, in the *Retractationes* (2.43, 426-427), written after the completion of the *City of God*, Augustine explains the overall structure of the work. Second, the same account is taken from the *Letter 1A** written to Firmus. Augustine clearly articulates the work which falls into two main parts. The argument of the first ten books is directed against the claim that the cult of pagan deities is necessary for Rome's prosperity and well-being. The second main part (Books 11-22) deals with the origin, growth, and destined end of the two cities (*ciuitas*): one is the city of God and the other the secular city.

I have been concerned with examining the use of the poor and poverty in the writings of Augustine, the subject which has recently received considerable interest, especially when we appreciate the outcome of our Australian team's *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Realities* which 'considers the plight of the poor and responses to them from the early Roman empire through to late antiquity and Byzantium.' (p. 15) In the chapter 4 entitled 'Augustine on Poverty', Prof. Pauline Allen and Dr. Edward Morgan, along with no modern study of Augustine's view into poverty, poor relief, and voluntary poverty, investigate the issues within his huge amount of texts thoroughly. Most of the material examined is from his sermons. Some of other discourses are under consideration, including the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, about 300 letters, the *Regula*, and theoretical writings as *On Trinity*, *City of God*, and *Confessions*. Although this valuable and illuminating study concludes that 'Augustine's treatment of poverty concentrates on psychological reconfiguration assisted by a rhetorical re-articulation of social and communal identity' (p. 164), it may seem to be legitimate to revisit the subject in the *City of God* which was written for the purpose of responding to the concerns of pagans who had given overwhelming support to the proper functioning of civil society. Since there emerged a series of crises in the late antiquity, how did he attempt to reflect on the problem?

In this paper, therefore, I shall examine the use of the poor and poverty to the extent that these references include the way to clarify the dimensions of the poor and the significance for people living in this world. For the sake of clarity and argument, I have divided them into two groups according to the structure of the work, and in each group I will consider them thematically as far as possible.

THE POOR AND POVERTY IN THE FIRST TEN BOOKS OF THE *CITY OF GOD*

In the first five books of the work, which Augustine himself defines as a particular part of the work (*City of God* 5.26, 6 pref.), we find occasional references to the poor and poverty. Most obviously, in the Book 1.10-12, Augustine's discourse on poverty tends towards a psychological and spiritualised analysis which also penetrates the imagery of the poor in his other writings.

Or are we to conclude that the utterance of the apostle was in vain when he said, 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God'? (Rom 8:28) They lost all they had. Their faith? Their godliness? The goods of the inward man who is rich before God? These are the riches of the Christians, (*City of God* 1.10.1, trans. R. W. Dyson (1998) 16)

Augustine begins by posing a question, 'whether any evil has befallen the faithful and godly that was not turned to their good.' (*City of God* 1.10.1 *init.*, Dyson 16) In fact, the apparent subject of sufferings has been derived from the sack of Rome by the Goths (410). He intended to answer the charge of pagans who were blaming Christianity for the disaster and its aftermath. (*City of God* 1.1) But he does not remain consumed with the vulnerability of material and physical things in this world. It can be seen that the emphasis on the proper attitude to things is taken seriously by Augustine. This is the most fundamental element of the 'poor without but rich within' (*City of God* 1.10.2, Dyson 16) which will have an important part to play in his eschatological view of poverty.

With regard to the individual behaviour during the sack, he feels no need to provide in detail for the harsh realities of the catastrophe which were indeed informed both by letters from Italian bishops and by the influx of refugees into North Africa. It seems to be the conviction of Augustine that it is required not to condemn the victims clung to their properties, but to consider the true moral status in their disposition. How should not good Christians be affected by misfortunes? The prescription follows by his use of the scriptural language and, in answer to the question of whether 'the faithful and godly' has been overcome by afflictions, Augustine quotes a passage from the First Epistle to Timothy (6:6-10):

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil;

which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrow. (*City of God* 1.10.1, Dyson 16)

This view of the bond between the transiency of temporal riches and the greed for them is put immediately in line with the distinction between temporal and eternal goods.

They are more gladdened by those spiritual things which they have preserved all the more securely by freely giving of their earthly goods, than saddened by the loss of those things which they would have lost anyway, even had they fearfully withheld them. (*City of God* 1.10.2, Dyson 17)

Such is the way Augustine defines the difference of inner disposition in the opposite direction. The order is based on the security of possessing the things which 'could lose nothing on earth.' (*City of God* 1.10.2, Dyson 17) Thus, he presents the description of the poor, that is 'the inward man who is rich before God' as possessing spiritual things which purify and nourish the appropriate attitude to the indiscriminate sufferings.

After quoting two passages from 1 Tim 6:17-19 and Matth 6:19-21, Augustine combines the renunciation of temporal goods with the example of voluntary poverty.

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, Who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. (*City of God* 1.10.2, Dyson 17)

Augustine speaks with approval of the idea of expecting the future harvest 'in the time to come', supporting the self-interested behaviour by reference to Paul's precept to the 'rich in this world' to distribute generously and share their goods. This is the case that Paulinus, Augustine's friend and the bishop of Nola, distinguished by the radical voluntary poor, was not troubled with his possessions after captivated by the Gauls in the sack. It was the outcome of his self-deprivation. Again, referring to others who obeyed the precept, he makes similar observations.

Another point to be made is that, in the first main part (Books 1-10), Augustine often recalls the dignity of Roman virtues in the history of Rome. In the Book 1.24, the story of Marcus Regulus is shown as: 'He was neither corrupted by good fortune, for he remained entirely poor even after his great victories,

 (*City of God* 1.24, Dyson 37). Again in the Book 2, Regulus appears as being 'tormented by captivity, servitude, poverty, sleeplessness and pain (*City of God* 2.23.1, Dyson 82) In a series of examples in Book 5, the voluntary poor of Lucius Valerius and Quintius Cincinnatus is referred to. (*City of God* 5.18.2, Dyson 222)

How will a Christian dare to praise himself for the voluntary poverty which enables him to walk more lightly, during the pilgrimage of this life, on that path which leads to the country where God Himself is the true riches? (*City of God* 5.18.2, Dyson 222)

Here Augustine is full of admiration for these honourable representatives of the Roman past and their virtues. These examples which reveal the remarkable human achievement in the society appear to have the effect of inspiring Christians. Yet, not only does he give the praise to the nobility of the ancient Romans, but expresses his disillusionment with the society and the status of the poor: according to the hedonistic opinion of pagans, 'Let the poor serve the rich because of their abundance, and let them enjoy under their patronage a senseless idleness; and let the rich abuse the poor as their clients and the appendages of their pride.' (*City of God* 2.20, Dyson 75) Again, in correspondence with the absence of social justice in the state, quoting a passage from Sallust (e.g. *Bellum Catilinae* 52.19-24), he introduces the reader Marcus Cato's address on the critical situations: 'we have luxury and avarice; the public purse is impoverished while private citizens grow rich; we praise riches, but we follow idleness; ...' (*City of God* 5.12.5, Dyson 211)

THE POOR AND POVERTY IN THE LATTER PART OF THE *CITY OF GOD*

In the second main part, Augustine's use of the poor and poverty might be divided into two groups: first, he occasionally interprets the meaning of the poor appeared in some scriptural passages; second, he focuses on the eschatological dimension of the poverty.

Augustine's scriptural interpretation appears first in the Book 14, in which he investigates the function of emotions in this world and concludes as follows:

good and evil men alike feel desire, fear and joy. But the good feel these emotions in a good way, and the bad feel them in a bad way, just all the will of men may be righteous or perverse. (*City of God* 14.8.3, Dyson 596)

Augustine does not accept the Stoic view which advocates the freedom from passions (*apatheia*). He nevertheless admits that 'to the life to come for which we hope' (*City of God* 14.9.4, Dyson 599) the condition of neither being terrified nor tormented will belong. His concern is to understand the experience of the fear (2 Cor 11.3) which 'is clean, enduring for ever'. (Psalm 19:9) Will it endure for ever? He explicitly appeals to Psalm 9:18 'The patience of the poor shall not perish for ever' as a proof text to sustain the correlation between the patience and the fear, which cannot be existed 'in that most secure state of perpetual and happy joy'. (*City of God* 14.9.5, Dyson 601) Thus, he interprets the poor as those possessing the secure state of emotions in the life expected to come.

Next in Book 17, we find a commentary on the prophecy of Samuel's mother Hannah in 1 Samuel 2: 1-10. He has already started considering the course of the two cities in Book 15, and arrives at the age of the prophets. (*City of God* 17.1) Within the interpretation is focused on the veiled meanings of her words, passages concerned with Christ reveal us the eschatological dimension of the poverty:

The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: He bringeth low and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dung-hill, to set them among the princes of the people, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: ...' (1 Samuel 2: 7-8 LXX, in *City of God* 17.4.1, Dyson 771)

Plainly in his explanation we encounter the voluntary poverty of Christ who made himself poor so that 'the poor' might become rich. While the rich humble people will be given grace, the poor proud will be resisted. (Cf. Psalm 16:10) Furthermore, he refers to the passage from 2 Cor 8: 9 ('... Who for our sakes became poor so that, through His poverty, we might be enriched') (*City of God* 17.4.6, Dyson 775), in which the humility and the spiritual wealth is closely correlated. It follows that he identifies 'the beggar' with 'the poor' who 'might sit among the princes of the people, to whom He says, "Ye shall sit upon twelve thrones." (Matth 19:28)' (*City of God* 17.4.6, Dyson 776). It can thus be seen how the poor in its eschatological dimension will be brought from the eternal salvation of Christ.

Augustine's interpretation in Book 18 provides the focus for the later prophets from Hosea to the Maccabees, in which two short commentaries are related to the poor and poverty. From the prayer and song of Habakkuk (*City of God* 18.32), the spiritual understanding of the poor is explicit.

They shall open wide their mouths to bite, like a poor man eating secretly. (Habakkuk 3:14, in *City of God* 18.32, Dyson 866)

Augustine regards the poor as those who are earnestly in search of Christ's teaching, with reference to the Gospel (John 3:2, 19:38). For it is not unusual for him to use the imagery of food as the doctrine of Christianity. Among the commentaries on three minor prophets (*City of God* 18.35), he introduces Zechariah's words on Christ and the Church, and regards the 'lowly' as the Lord Christ whose journey is expressed in the Gospel as the fulfilment of this prophecy.

In the last four books of the work, Augustine's discourse tends towards the 'ends' of the two cities in the history, although these books have their own topics respectively. There emerges no scriptural interpretation related to the poverty, but seems to be two compelling references to the problematic. First, in Book 20, in which he considers the last judgement and final separation of the two cities, Augustine faces the difficulty of showing the evidences of divine judgement about human affairs. It is plainly confessed as follows:

For we do not know by what judgment of God this good man is poor, while that wicked man is rich. We do not know why this man is joyful even though, as we judge the matter, his abandoned morals render him worthy to be tormented with grief. (*City of God* 20.2, Dyson 967)

Augustine's main concern is to prove that human beings will arrive at the last judgement and to provide proofs of this judgement from scriptural texts. The question of whether or not God's behaviour ensures the consistency is simply resolved: this is a

consequence of knowing only a part of God's intention by the limited ability of human beings. What is crucial is to accept and bear the inscrutability of the divine judgement— 'for God is judging even now' (*City of God* 20.1.2) —, and not to adhere to the absurdity in this world. From the viewpoint of eschatological expectation, the designation of the poor and the rich is conditionally and provisionally given in the society, yet the serious unfairness and imbalance should not be evaluated as a radical change will be required.

it is salutary for us to learn not to attach great value to those things which, whether good or evil, we see to be common to good and evil men alike; but to seek instead those good things which belong only to good men, and especially to shun those evils which belong only to evil men. (*City of God* 20.2, Dyson 968)

It is remarkable that in Book 21 he clarifies the point that the behaviour of mercy would be defined as a means of both realising the future benefit and improving the inner disposition. In the case of Paulinus and other persons referred to in Book 1 (*City of God* 1.10.2), the former reward was plainly stated, but the latter, that is the inner improvement seems to be obscure. Here Augustine agrees with those who claim the suitable act of mercy must be done in order to atone their sins. Yet, it is increasingly difficult to gain the divine forgiveness by virtue of their alms. How could they know their own appropriate level? Augustine, then, turns to consider the disposition of the almsgiver.

Therefore, anyone who wishes to perform acts of mercy worthy of his sins must first begin with himself. For it is unworthy not to do for oneself what one does for one's neighbour, since we hear God say, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'; and, again, we hear 'Have compassion on thy soul, and please God.' How, then, can he who does not have compassion on his soul — that is, who does not please God — be said to perform works of mercy worthy of his sins? (*City of God* 21.27.2, Dyson 1100)

Not only does he regard the almsgiving as an expression of alleviating the punishments in this life but it should be primarily advocated for taking care of the poor disposition of the individual giver. Augustine puts the moral progress of the donor before the expected favour of both the receiver and of the donor of the almsgiving.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the *City of God* of Augustine, the discourse on poverty and the poor is not so much a matter of devoting much thought to show the comprehensive understanding of the problem, still less of drawing out the social and economic realities of the late antique society from it. In this work his use of the poverty occurs sporadically, and within at least eight books of the work there does not emerge any clear reference to the poverty. However, among these limited examples, the mention of poverty is naturally induced by his interest in approaching the main topic. Augustine's apologetic way of dealing with

the sufferings caused by the sack of Rome moves the discussion to the point where the vulnerability of temporal things enables us to examine the disposition of people's soul living in this world. The distinction between the poor and the rich becomes insignificant, thereby clarifying the spiritualising dimension of poverty. Again, under the consideration of the last judgement of God and of the proofs of this judgement, the difference between the poor and the rich should not be regarded as being remained in the time to come. It will be out of human affairs. Thus, the eschatological view of poverty is firmly rooted in the future hope in which any tension and conflict inherent in the society will be resolved thoroughly.

Some descriptions of poverty seem to be definite and enlightened on the fact in which people were involved and embedded, simply because they show us the names of who were, and have been, the models for the behaviour of contemporary people: first, Paulinus of Nola who abandoned immense wealth is the example of voluntary poverty; and second, Marcus Regulus, Lucius Valerius, and Quintius Cincinnatus are the representatives of Roman virtues. Augustine is quite proud of both the Christian present and the Roman past. As to the former, he suggests the possibility of those who were put to torture in order to make reveal their properties. While as to the latter, he speaks clearly of their prize: 'They were honoured among almost all the nations; they imposed the laws of their empire upon many races; and they are glorious among almost all peoples to this day, in literature and history.' (*City of God* 5.15, Dyson 216) Although there appears to be a sharp contrast between sufferings and glories, another difference is revealing:

the confessor of holy poverty could not be tortured without a heavenly reward. (*City of God* 1.10.3, Dyson 19)

They have no reason to complain of the justice of the highest and true God: 'they have received their reward'. (*City of God* 5.15, Dyson 216)

This is the way Augustine highlights the transient and passing nature of these consequences and proceeds to the expectation of receiving future reward. By virtue of their honours, the Roman accomplishment has been rewarded: despite their misfortunes, the Christian accomplishment will be rewarded. It does not depend on our esteem of human perfection in this world. It can thus be seen that, again, the foundation of his view of voluntary poverty is the invisibility of the eschatological categories in these realities.