

Augustine's *City of God* and its Psychagogical Function

Introduction

Augustine worked on the *City of God* for some thirteen years, from about 412 to 426. Undoubtedly the most influential of Augustine's writings, it is thought to have been written to answer the doubts of imperial officials who found it difficult to understand how Christians could meet the demands of their obligations to the civil community (Markus 1970, xi–xii). Augustine, reviewing this work in the *Revisions* (2.43.1), states that it was motivated by the sacking of Rome by the Goths in August 410 and the subsequent attempts by the pagans to blame the Christians for this event. Therefore, the work's controversial agenda tends to overshadow Augustine's intention to address the concerns of these civil communities. It is interesting to note here that while Augustine's sermons, delivered to large audiences in late antique North Africa, take a psychagogical approach to point out the tasks of mutual care to be fulfilled by members of the community (Claes and Dupont 2017, 329), the *City of God* also employs a psychagogical rhetoric to achieve the specific aims of this work. Is there a difference between the two strategies applied in different situations? This paper will focus on this question, considering the psychagogical and argumentative intentions in the *City of God*.

I. Readership of the City of God

Augustine preached to a diverse congregation in response to his responsibilities in late antique North African society. Through his sermons, he spoke words that provided clues to the consolation and resolution of the current difficulties of life faced by believers in the community of faith. Although it seems complicated to comprehend the power and scope of the social impact of his theological writings, Augustine's sermons touched many of the faithful gathered in the cathedral city of Hippo. His audience was not limited to Christians. Some of his sermons were written down by stenographers at liturgical rites and influenced church leaders in North Africa and Rome.

Augustine defined himself as a bishop with a direct responsibility to the poor and the sick in the community. He aimed to improve their way of life by articulating the community's social problems through his preaching. Augustine's sermons, which were highly rhetorical, can therefore be seen as intended to guide his

congregation and bring about changes in their lives and thinking. Following the ancient philosophical tradition, he compared the relationship between teacher and learner to that of doctor and patient. He then incorporated into his sermons the psychagogical function of bringing about change in his hearers through the rhetorical use of medical imagery, just as the doctor works with the patient to activate the guide of the healing process. He used preaching as a primary means of therapy to heal the soul.

Having spent some thirteen years writing the *City of God*, Augustine was aware of the danger that those who read the massive work, with its occasional digressions and developments, might sometimes lose sight of Augustine's argument. He, therefore, regularly clarified what he intended to do and how much remained to be written, especially at the beginning of each new book, about what he had discussed so far. In this way, Augustine had a clear plan for this work. Furthermore, as he himself later reflects, these two parts (books 1 to 10 and books 11 to 22) have belonged inseparably together, complementing, interpreting and reinforcing each other. So Augustine urged Firmus to see the careful planning of the work whose overall unity would be articulated and apprehended according to its compulsive logic. From the two letters to Firmus, it is shown how Augustine hoped to use his books to persuade potential converts and strengthen the perseverance of those already converted.

When in your other letter you excuse yourself from receiving the sacrament of regeneration, you refuse all the fruit of all those books you love: for their fruit is not that they delight the reader, or that they make him know much that he does not know, but that they persuade him to enter the city of God without hesitation, or to live there with perseverance. The first of these is conferred by regeneration, the second by love of righteousness. If the books do not do this in those by whom they are read and praised, what do they do? (Aug. *Ep.* 2*.3: CSEL 88,10–11; trans. R. Teske, WSA II/4 (2005), 233)

II. The City of God and its rhetorical intention

With the establishment and sole acknowledgement of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire by the edict of Theodosius in 395, the need to develop apologetic arguments against pagan criticism became obsolete. The methods employed by these apologists remained valuable in different circumstances and contexts, especially in

times of crisis. Thus, after the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in 410, Augustine decided to write a work that developed such arguments to refute those who 'began to blaspheme against the true God with more harshness and bitterness than usual' (*Revisions* 2.43.1). As a result, the *City of God* was to be placed at the last of the tradition of defending the legitimacy and power of the Christian God, challenged by the traumatic event of the sack of Rome, and his work was to be seen as the culmination of this tradition.

It was a traditional view of Roman religion that the prosperity of Rome and the development of the empire over the centuries would have been impossible had the Romans not been at peace with their gods. The 'peace with the gods' was ensured by the correct and accurate performance of ritual, sacrifice and auspiciousness. It was to this tradition that the early Christian apologists owed their complaint that the rise of Christianity and the subsequent disregard for the traditional polytheistic cults had led to a series of disasters. This complaint gained new strength after the sack of Rome in 410, which caused great distress to the Christians of the North African community, who were under increasing pressure from their non-Christian surroundings. Many of them seem to have felt religious doubts themselves.

But as the *City of God* quickly acquired a broader purpose, it is difficult to believe that Augustine addressed this work only to pagans. Around the time he was planning the *City of God* according to his original conception, Augustine exchanged letters with Flavius Marcellinus, the notary and courtier, a devout Christian with theological interests, and with Volusianus, the cultivated pagan aristocrat, whose family was largely Christianised. His correspondence indicates that readers in and around these Christian communities were interested in such writings (*Ciu. dei* 2.1). It is somewhat more consistent with what Augustine says about his intentions if he sees his readers as Christians or people closely concerned with Christianity. They were in a situation where they needed a convincing refutation of pagan views, both for their own satisfaction and as a tool to use in their disputes with pagan defenders. Thus, for the first time in the apologetic tradition, this work can be said to have been written with Christians in mind.

A careful examination of the whole of the *City of God* reveals that Augustine does not address the pagans in the second person but refers to them almost in the third person. On the other hand, what is characteristic of Books 11–22 is the conspicuity of biblical quotations. Such quotations would not be convincing to pagans. Hence it seems that, besides the author Augustine, there are two persons:

the hostile pagan and the Christian whom the author calls. In this way, it is certainly likely that a kind of dialogue similar to a forensic speech is rhetorically construed between the three persons — the defendant or petitioner, the accuser, and the judge. If this is the case, the author's persuasion is directed at the judge rather than the accuser.

However, the *City of God* is not a legal argument. If we turn to the second half of the *City of God*, something interesting becomes apparent. For Augustine does not lose sight of his pagan opponent in the last books of this work. His adversary is not a real person but a fictional opponent created by the author Augustine to serve his purpose. Indeed, ancient theorists of forensic rhetoric recommended imagining a dialogue with an opponent in order to make one's arguments clear and natural to the audience. Augustine may have constructed the comprehensive defence of Christianity. In the *City of God*, this opponent was prepared to address any possible argument against Christianity he could think of and that Christians might encounter in real life. The *City of God* is a universal apologetic with encyclopaedic content, consisting of many refutations of earlier apologetic writers in the tradition.

III. Rhetoric and medical metaphor in Book 22

Augustine appealed to Christians, whom he assumed would be his jury readers. He recognised the need to appeal to their emotions so that they would not only clearly understand Augustine's arguments but also naturally admit them. And this threefold process of teaching, delighting, and motivating them to action is consistent with the three purposes of rhetoric. It should be noted that Augustine describes the ideal and practice of the Christian rhetorician in book 4 of *De doctrina christiana*, which he completed around the time he was finishing the *City of God*. In his letter to Firmus mentioned above, he also suggests this point in the agreement.

When in your other letter you excuse yourself from receiving the sacrament of regeneration, you refuse all the fruit of all those books you love: for their fruit is not that they delight the reader, or that they make him know much that he does not know, but that they persuade him to enter the city of God without hesitation, or to live there with perseverance. The first of these is conferred by regeneration, the second by love of righteousness. If the books do not do this in those by whom they are read and praised, what do they do? (Aug. Ep. 2*.3: CSEL 88,10–11; trans. R. Teske, WSA II/4 (2005), 233)

His aim was not just to instruct learned Christians but to encourage them. However, his readers must not have been surprised by his use of rhetoric in this way. Because such use of exhortation not only reflected the education that Augustine had received but was also shared by those steeped in a culture in which the learning and practice of rhetoric was an integral part of the educational curriculum. And alongside their rhetorical contexts, there is no doubt that the ancient philosophical traditions had a significant influence. Already in these traditions, attention has been given to the conception of philosophy as a discipline aimed at the transformation of individual life through the practice of a 'way of life', an 'art of living', and alongside this, his appropriation of Stoic views and rhetorical practice is noteworthy. Through the handbooks on rhetoric by Cicero and perhaps also Quintilian, Augustine drew attention to the possibility of practical discourse that changes the direction of moral motivation and desires. Interestingly, he focuses on the function of 'exhortation', which the Stoics added to the list of classical rhetorical forms.

Thus, along with Augustine's direction of using rhetoric for moral purposes, the process of fulfilling the Christian integration of anthropological premises is recognised. In his anthropology, Augustine starts from the Platonic framework of the immaterial and immortal soul and the Stoic ethic centred on virtue. Synthesising them in a Christian way, he understands that human defect (*defectus*) was inscribed in their nature after the fall of Adam and Eve through original sin. This defect in human nature is ignorance (*ignorantia*) and weakness (*infirmitas*). After the fall, Augustine believed that humankind lacked both the ability to know what was good and the will to do it. Only Christ the physician can liberate humanity from original sin.

On every question relating to moral life there is need not only for instruction but also for encouragement. With the instruction we will know what we ought to do, and with the encouragement we will be motivated to do what we know we ought to do. (Aug. *De bono uiduitatis* 1.2: CSEL 41,306; trans. D. Hunter, WSA I/9 (1999), 113)

But on the other hand, this psychagogic rhetoric, which acknowledges human metaphysical limitations while 'encouraging' the readers to strive to overcome their difficulties, is also effective in realising Augustine's intention in writing the *City of God*.

Now I would turn to book 22 to see what kind of medical metaphor is used. In book 22, Augustine points the reader to signs of God's goodness and grace,

contrasting the miseries of earthly existence with the peace of the heavenly city to discuss the 'eternal blessedness of the City of God' (*Ciu. dei* 22.1).

By freely using a series of words (*aeger, aegrotus, infirmus, infirmitas, morbus*) for sickness, infirmity and disability, Augustine focuses not only on individual sickness and disability but also on the defects that affect humanity as a whole. As mentioned above, Augustine thus develops a theological interpretation of human wounds and disorders suffered by human beings that transcends the individual dimension and develops a motif of salvation and liberation. The image of disability makes it possible to express the 'defects' inscribed in the totality of humankind in a way that is easy for the reader to understand. Based on his Christian anthropology, Augustine was convinced that human nature, created by God as good, is tainted by original sin and that, therefore, the restoration of man, expressed in his transformation into a perfect body, does not take place on this earth. In other words, bodily perfection is an eschatological reality reserved for after death.

What, therefore, are we to say of infants, if not that they will not rise in that tiny body in which they died, but will receive, by the wondrous and most rapid operation of God, that body which they would have received in any case by the slower passage of time? For in that utterance of the Lord, where He says that, 'Not a hair of your head shall perish', it is said that we shall not in future lack anything that we once had; [...] (Aug. *Ciu. dei* 22.14: CCSL 48,833; trans. Dyson (1998), 1142)

Augustine's view of the process of the transformation of the body is characterised by its Christological focus. This is because the wholeness of the eschatological Christ functions as a model for eschatological restoration, even if the individual human being is imperfect or disabled. Thus, from the metaphor of individual disability, Augustine locates the universally fragile and earthly condition of humanity in the universal perspective of salvation and eternity. At the same time, Christ, as a healer and an exemplary human person, becomes the norm of all human suffering and disability.

Augustine was also familiar with using classical images of the human body to refer to the relationship between the church and the world as an organic whole. This is a Pauline influence. Augustine emphasises the unity of church and society as he interprets 1 Corinthians 12: 12–25. At the same time, he believes that each church member should care for one another. In fact, after referring to situations that can be surrounded by worldly obstacles, Augustine follows Paul's argument and suggests a

direct relationship between the church community as the body and Christ as the head. Christ is the head of the body and is seen as the norm for all human resurrected bodies.

Behold, then, what 'a perfect man' is: Head and body together, made up of all the members, which will be perfected in its own time. But new members are being added to this body daily, while the Church is being built up: the Church to whom it is said, 'Ye are the body of Christ and His members'; and, again, the apostle says, 'For His body's sake, which is the Church' (1 Cor. 12: 27); [...] (Aug. *Ciu. dei* 22.18: CCSL 48,837; trans. Dyson (1998), 1146–1147)

Christ is the physician of the sick on earth and intercedes before God for all people because he is the head. Therefore, the relationship in the community is established in the spiritual and earthly dimensions of mutual care. In this relationship, God's salvific work is present in the community. Thus, starting from the metaphor of the body-head relationship, Augustine, while stressing the unity of the church and the world, seeks to show the way to greater unity with the body of Christ in the community and to locate within the community the practice of charity towards those who are to be cared for.

Concluding remarks

The *City of God* is defined as a work with a confused and uncoordinated structure while at the same time being an exhaustive and universal apologetic, providing Christians with material to refute the pagans they might encounter in their lives. Given what Augustine says about the work's principal aim, it can be assumed that its targeted addressee is Christians and potential converts closely concerned with Christianity. However, this does not necessarily exclude pagans. It is a book designed to be read as efficiently as possible to teach them about the city of God, to encourage them to pursue it, and to persuade them to persevere.

What is remarkable is Augustine's consistent psychagogical message that, while considering the limits of the human defect (*defectus*), we must not let pessimistically close off the possibility of future perfection. He encourages the transformation of the whole life of the individual and mutual care between members of the community of faith. In particular, he often uses medical metaphors to help them anticipate God's salvation, in which divine salvific work is present in the community through the ministry of caring for the neighbour and the sick. Augustine

develops his argument to persuade learned Christians and future converts in an erudite manner, drawing on the inherited resources of classical culture. The *City of God* is an attempt to be both theological and pastoral and contains rhetorical devices that have a common dimension with those used in the sermons.