

COMMENTARY

A SIGN OF HOPE. There is as much difference between optimism and the Christian virtue of hope as there is between a stage property and a house with real foundations. Everyone may decide for himself why it is that St Augustine, the sixteenth centenary of whose birth occurs this month, should seem to us so much more contemporary than Queen Victoria or the promoters of the Great Exhibition, at one time the embodiments of permanence and progress. It is, however, certain that Augustine's ability to survive the test of time, and still to speak with an authentic voice, is due to something more than the fact that, when ruins as great as Rome have fallen, we find him more sympathetic. Whatever coincidence of stars shone upon November 13th, 354, they cannot altogether explain that peculiar destiny which made of a small North-African ragamuffin first the father of a little local flock, and ultimately a Father of the whole Church. At least, so Augustine, who had formerly been impressed by the astrologers, would have believed. He would have been as ready as any Marxist to admit the existence of pre-determining circumstances. Destiny, as it should be for any Christian, had been for him the subject of a good deal of meditation. Yet as a Christian he also came to acknowledge that history, whether his own or that of the world, was subject to one incalculable interruption, which could, in a moment, make almost irrelevant the existence of good times or bad. The Incarnation, itself an event occurring at a definite point in time, redeemed the times, and was thus, in faith, a source of hope for all generations.

It is this profound realization that accounts for Augustine's absorption with history. The Incarnation relieved him of the necessity of having to find a cause for optimism in the confusion and suffering which, as it is today, was reported on every hand. For optimism, even in its dependence on a certain mental dexterity, can scarcely afford to be wholly without foundation in human probability, if it is not to appear ridiculous. Christian hope on the other hand, may almost be said to thrive on the humanly impossible, being by definition a simple dependence, not on the inner possibilities of things in this world but upon the unqualified

power of God. Nevertheless, Augustine was fully aware that this truth should not lead us to suppose that we can turn our backs upon the world. The very doctrine that leads us beyond history insists on doing it *through* history. Thus it was that, while the world he knew as a boy was vanishing before his eyes, Augustine turned confidently to the building of a new one, a 'city which hath foundations'. Yet with the instincts of all the early missionaries he pictures the Christian Church rising not on a new site, but on the very ruins of the ancient shrines. Had he not built up his own mind in the same way? Something of Plato was there and something of Cicero; changed but not obliterated. It would be wrong to insist exaggeratedly on Augustine as a traditionalist. His contribution to the theology of the Trinity, for instance, was not only important but also original. No one had previously thought of treating the question quite as he did. Yet it remains true that, like a wise scribe, he brought out of his treasure things new and old.

God had, after all, been doing the same in Augustine himself, as grace worked upon his unusually gifted nature. So that the saint we honour is now for us a peculiar sign of hope, a tangible witness to the power of divine providence. Indeed, it is not altogether surprising that it was in this guise that our Lord presented him to St Gertrude in a vision of great splendour which she recounts in her *Revelations*. 'And the Lord said to her: "See how my well-beloved shines with a purity more dazzling than the snow, with his tender humility and his ardent charity". But she replied with some astonishment: "My Lord, how can you say that this saint shines with a purity dazzling like snow? He is certainly worthy of veneration on account of his holy life, but still he did remain for a long time in heresy. Surely he must have contracted some stains." And the Lord answered: "If I permitted him to remain so long in error, that was to glorify in him the ways of my providence which caused me to await his conversion with so much patience and mercy. I also wished to display my infinite goodness which deigned to call him, and my free loving-kindness whose effects he so powerfully experienced."' We devote the present number to his honour.