

ST. AUGUSTINE ON PEACE AND WAR (II)

HOW DO WARS COME ABOUT?

Rome, the colossus, insatiable, brooking no rival, had meant then, as Augustine and others realised, a never-ending series of wars, some of them necessary in self-defence, others, perhaps, wars of pure aggression. But now a more appalling spectre was showing its head: the barbarian hordes. Rome had at least stood for law and equity. But these barbarian hordes simply wasted and ravaged. Augustine may well be portraying them when he asks: 'What else is it but robbery on a huge scale to wage war first on our near neighbours, and after subduing them to attack those more remote; and so, through mere lust of power, to grind down and make subject peoples who have never done us any harm?'⁴² So, too, when he asks again: 'What else are kingdoms wherein there is no justice, save robberies on a large scale? Take the case of a robber-band. It is made up of men who act under some sort of leader, who have some sort of social pact among themselves and divide their booty by mutual agreement. Supposing now that, owing to the numbers who join it, this evil institution so grows that it is able to establish itself in definite localities and have a centre whence it conducts operations—why, then, it proceeds to attack cities, to subjugate other peoples, and ends by acclaiming itself a kingdom. A rise in rank which was in no sense due to those robbers having laid aside their evil ambitions but simply to their ever-growing impunity.'

Apropos of this Augustine repeats the well-known story of the pirate who, when captured by Alexander the Great

⁴² *De Civitate Dei*, IV, vi.

and asked by what right he had thus infested the seas, retorted: 'Precisely by the same right as yourself, who have infested the whole world! But because I do it with a few small ships I am dubbed "a pirate"; you do it with a big fleet, and are styled an Emperor!' ⁴³

The fault lies of course in man's fallen nature: 'O man, thou wert made to the image of God, but by your perverted and evil life thou hast defaced that image which was in thee, indeed thou hast driven out of thee that image of thy Creator. Thou hast become no longer like unto God; look then well at thyself and thou wilt be displeased with what thou seest there. And the very moment thou are disgusted at discovering within thyself what causes God disgust, in that very moment hast thou begun to be like Him.' ⁴⁴

As a general rule this lust for domination seems to be a disease of some individual rather than of a whole nation; Caesar, for instance, was eulogised by Sallust because 'he yearned for some big command, for an army and a fresh war, so that he might have a chance of exhibiting his prowess.' Augustine's comment is to the point: 'So, then, the result of great men cherishing such ambitions was "Bellona" brandishing her bloodstained scourge and stirring up war against hapless peoples—all to afford such men scope for showing their valour! Lust of praise, lust of glory, then, brought such things to pass; beginning with love of liberty, it ended with love of dominion over others.' ⁴⁵

But he realised, too, that individual leaders were not alone to blame for such a state of affairs, and that a like lust for dominion over other peoples could infect a whole nation. 'This lust for dominion,' he says, 'obsessed the entire Roman populace. So much was this the case that

⁴³ *Ibid.*, IV, iv.

⁴⁴ *Enarr.*, i, 3, on *Ps.* lxxv.

⁴⁵ *De Civitate Dei*, V, xii, 2.

when once they had prevailed over the few more powerful States they speedily reduced others—already crushed and worn out—to a state of slavery. How indeed could that lust be expected to remain quiescent in haughty minds like theirs until they had finally realised their ambition and had attained by successive stages a regal position? Yet not even ambition would have sufficed to secure that goal had not the populace been already so corrupted by luxury and avarice that, eaten up by such vices, they lost their balance owing to their very prosperity. How significant that the illustrious Nasica had all along realised that in such prosperity lay a danger which had to be avoided at all costs! That was the source of his conviction that this great, courageous and wealthy city (Carthage) ought not to be destroyed by the Roman conquerors; he felt that that lust of dominion needed to be held in check by fear (of a still powerful rival).⁴⁶ But when, Augustine says, a little further on, Carthage actually was destroyed, then corruption swamped Rome in a veritable flood.⁴⁷

Yet the irony of it all! For even the most violent and most unjust aggressor is, after all, only seeking for peace—of a kind: 'Just as there is no man who does not want to be happy, so there is no one who does not want to be at peace. Even people who want war really only want to be victorious; they hope, that is, to secure a glorious peace by waging war. For what, after all, is war save reducing to subjection people opposed to us? That subjection once secured, we shall have peace. The aim of all wars, then, is peace; this is true even of people who keep alive a war-like spirit by bidding their subjects go to war, and by fighting. Peace, then, is clearly the goal aimed at in every war. Everybody who fights does so for the sake of peace; no one indulges in peace for the sake of war. In fact, not even men who make up their minds to upset the peace-

⁴⁶ *De Civitate Dei*, I, xxxi.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, xix; cf. *Ep.* cxcix, 46.

ful state in which they are living at the moment really hate peace; what they want is to change the kind of peace they have at the moment and make it square with their own ideas of it. It is not, then, that they do not want peace, but they want that peace to be of the type they would prefer.⁴⁸

St. Augustine often refers to the 'horrors and cruelties' of war, and it is worth while quoting from a letter he wrote to one who had experienced them when, in A.D. 409, the Barbarian hordes were rapidly advancing in Gaul, Italy and Spain: 'Your letter,' he says, 'filled me with sorrow. But I could not help feeling when you asked me to reply to it at some length that such long-drawn-out agony called for long-drawn-out sighs and for tears rather than for a lengthy treatise. In very truth the whole world is so filled with slaughter that it is hard to discover any part of it, wherein things such as you mention have not occurred. Why, only a short time ago the Brethren in monasteries in the famous Egyptian solitudes, monasteries which had stood in fancied security, remote from the turmoil of the world, were put to death by the Barbarians. You must have heard, too, of the enormities being committed in Italy and Gaul; and now I hear the same news of many districts in Spain which have up to now been immune . . . Yet we ought not to be astonished at such happenings, but to grieve over them and cry to God that He may in His mercy deign to deliver us from such terrible things and not punish us according to our deserts. After all, what else can we human beings expect, seeing that both the Prophets and the Gospels foretold such things long ago? Surely we ought not to be so inconsistent as to believe those prophecies when we read them, but grumble when we see them fulfilled?'

Augustine then quotes at length the story of the three men in the Babylonian furnace (Daniel iii, 26-37), also

⁴⁸ *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, xxi.

Daniel's prayer in which he confesses that all the sorrows of his nation are but due punishment for their sins (ix, 3-20); similarly the case of the seven Maccabees (II Macc., vii, 18-19): 'Read these things,' he says, 'in the spirit of faith, preach them too in the same spirit of faith, and so far as you can, be careful—and teach others too to be careful—not to murmur against God amid these trials and tribulations. You tell me that good and faithful servants of God have fallen by the sword of the barbarians. Yet what does it matter whether people die of fever or by the sword? God does not ask in what manner His servants' souls left their bodies, but in what condition of soul they were when death came to them and they presented themselves before Him . . . I quite agree that it is a grievous and deplorable thing that holy and chaste women should be led into captivity: yet it is not their God who has been taken prisoner; nor—so long as He recognises them as His—will He desert them in their captivity.'⁴⁹

THE GOAL OF WAR IS PEACE.

The only legitimate reason for entering upon a war is to secure peace; for 'Peace is something so supremely good that even peace in our earthly, transient affairs is one of the most pleasant things we can contemplate; there is nothing we more desire; its attainment is one of the best things imaginable.'⁵⁰ Hence, when writing to Count Darius, who had been sent to Africa to try and restore peace, he says: 'It is a far more glorious thing to try and stave off a war by discussion than to slay men with the sword. For even those who have to fight do unquestionably—at least if they are good men—seek peace by so doing, though they may be compelled to seek it by shedding blood.' He congratulates Darius on not being compelled

⁴⁹ *Ep.* cxi.

⁵⁰ *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, xi.

to resort to such measures: 'You, fortunately, have not been commissioned to shed blood; that obligation falls on others.'⁵¹

But we need to have very clear ideas on the true nature of peace, and Augustine defines it with almost meticulous care:

'Bodily peace consists in the due proportion of that body's component parts; peace on the part of an irrational being lies in the proper satisfaction of its appetites; that of man's rational soul in the fitting correspondence between thought and action; peace of body and soul combined in an animate being depends upon its life and health. Peace between mortal man and God consists in man's due obedience in faith to the eternal law. Peace between men depends on their preservation of their appointed harmony. Family peace consists in harmony on the part of those who form part of it, whether in giving commands or in obeying them. The peace of a State depends on the same harmony on the part of its members in ordering and obeying. The peace of the City of Heaven is most perfectly regulated and harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God and of one another—in God. The peace of all things is that tranquillity which is derived from due order; while "order" means that arrangement whereby, alike to things equal and unequal, due regard is paid.'⁵²

He then emphasises the doctrine so fundamental to Christian sociology, that since the family is the unit whence the State takes its rise, it follows that peace in the State depends on peace in the domestic circle:

'If any member of a family disturbs its peace by disobedience he is corrected by admonishment in words, even by stripes or any kind of just and lawful punishment such as human society permits for the benefit of the delinquent,

⁵¹ *Ep.* ccxxix.

⁵² *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, xiii, 1.

so that he may live once more in that harmony which he has broken. For just as it is no real kindness to cooperate in the loss of some better thing; so, too, no one can be considered blameless if, through forbearing to punish, he permits a person to fall into some graver evil. It is, then, the duty of an upright person not only to do harm to no one, but also to restrain people from doing wrong, even to punish their wrongdoing, so that the offender may be corrected by the experience, or at least that others may thereby be deterred from doing the like. Since, then, a man's household is the beginning, or a small portion, of the State, and since every starting-point has some reference to the end or goal of the genus to which it belongs—just as every part has its due relation to the integrity of the whole of which it forms a part—it will at once appear that peace in a household makes for peace in the State. In other words, the regulated harmony of a family in giving and obeying commands ensures the same harmony in commanding and obeying on the part of citizens. From all of which it follows that the head of a household ought to base the precepts he gives on the law of the State, so that his family may help to further the peace of the State.⁵³

Elsewhere, in a passage too long to quote, St. Augustine insists on the further point that in the ultimate resort it is the individual who is responsible for the peace of the family, and thus for that of the State, indeed of the whole world. For unless there reigns in men's individual souls that 'tranquillity of order' which means that a man's lower nature is kept in subjection to his higher nature—and this for the love of God who 'has made man to His own image'—which 'image' is peace, we can never act as the peace-maker who is 'blessed.' If, on the other hand, our souls are the scenes of a jarring conflict in which the lower ultimately triumphs over the higher, we descend to the level of the 'beasts that perish,' and if that infection

⁵³ *Ibid.*

spreads it taints the whole life of a nation, with direst consequences to all around them.⁵⁴

THE WORTH OF VICTORY.

The moral aspects of victory and the consequent dangers to the victors themselves intrigued the Bishop of Hippo even more perhaps than the problems involved in war. He felt that the more overwhelming the victory the more fraught it was with danger. An African, and familiar with Carthage and its history, he had always before his eyes the tragic fate of that city after the Third Punic War. That act of wanton, ruthless destruction spelled the ruin of Rome. Mankind has not changed very much since Augustine wrote:

'The city of this world (as distinct, that is, from that of the next world, the City of God), which cannot last for ever, finds its goal here, and so far as there can be any true joy in such things—rejoices in that goal. Now inasmuch as this goal is not of such a nature that it enables them that love it to escape all troubles, this earthly city is often divided against itself, and seeks, whether by litigation or by wars and quarrels, a victory which must either result in its death or at least in grievous wounds to itself. For supposing it is victorious in the conflict and hence becomes swollen with pride, then the victory it has won involves its own death; and even if in the very tide of victory it stops to reflect on the general fate and condition of all human affairs, views things as they generally turn out, and is in consequence more distressed at the thought of adversity than puffed up with pride at the thought of prosperity, then the victory it has won will, though not involving the death of the victor, at all events result in grievous wounds to himself. For since he cannot last for

⁵⁴ See *Sermones Inediti*, ed. Dom Morin in *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, Sermon xi.

ever, the conqueror cannot hope always to keep in subjection those whom he has vanquished.⁵⁵

The above-quoted words find an echo in the Encyclical of the present Holy Father, Pius XII (Oct. 1939):

'The hour of victory is an hour of external triumph for the party to whom victory falls, but it is in equal measure the hour of temptation. In that hour the angel of justice strives with the demon of violence. Safety does not come to peoples from external means, from the sword, which can impose conditions of peace but does not create peace.'

There is, too, a victory which can only be described as unworthy when, that is, the peace sought after is merely the unrestrained enjoyment of purely transient and temporal things: 'though it would not be true to say that the goal sought by "the city of this world" was not a good one, since that city—being a human thing—stands superior to the goal it seeks, yet it remains that what that city seeks is a sort of peace here on earth, a peace for the sake of things far beneath that city itself in value; and such things it strives to attain by undertaking a war. Supposing now that it proves victorious and there is no one left to resist it, what will be the result? A peace which neither side had had before. For both sides have been fighting—amid the accompanying miseries of want and famine—for things which they were not both able simultaneously to enjoy. Behold the kind of peace wrung from all the toil of war! See the kind of peace which a so-called victory secures!'⁵⁶

But there is a really great victory, that secured by a just war: 'When people who are fighting for a really just cause prove victorious no one can question but that such a victory is fit matter for congratulation, and that a really desirable peace will be the result. Such a result is of course good, and—equally of course—is the gift of God. But if we neg-

⁵⁵ *De Civitate Dei*, XV, iv.

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lect the "better things," the things which pertain to the City of God, where victory will be for ever and we shall be secure in that peace which transcends all other, and if we allow ourselves so to hanker after the desirable things of this world as to deem them the only things worth having, or at any rate prefer them to those things which we rightly deem to be the better, then the sole result must be misery, while the miserable state in which we already are will but be increased.⁵⁷

One thing is certain: victory or defeat, peace or war, all are absolutely in the hands of God. In these materialistic days, when men like Julian Huxley are not afraid to declare boldly that there is no God and that biology has mastered matter;⁵⁸ when Forsyth could contrast what he terms 'pleasure-thinking,' otherwise the arts and religion, with 'reality-thinking,' or science, and maintain that this latter 'alone counts,'⁵⁹ there is a natural temptation for us all to calculate in terms of men, money and munitions as though these were the sole factors in the case. It is almost as though we thought of God as the last despairing resort, of prayer as a merely possible factor when all other means shall have failed. All very 'natural,' but hardly 'supernatural.'

How differently the saintly Bishop of Hippo looked at the problem: he insists that however just or unjust a war may be, the final result lies with God alone: 'Since, by God's hidden judgements and through the vagaries of our human wills, some are spoilt by prosperity while others profit by it, since, too, "the life of man upon earth is a warfare" (Joh vii, 1)—can any but God decide for whom it is best to be master or to be slave—in peace; for whom it is best to live a life of leisure or to die; or in war to

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *What dare I think?* 1931.

⁵⁹ In his Presidential Address to the Psychiatric Section of the Royal Society of Medicine, November, 1934.

be a general or merely one of the forces, to conquer or to die? This much at any rate is certain: he who gains by war does so through God's kindly mercy; he who suffers through it does so owing to His Divine judgement,⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ *Contra Faustum*, xxii, 78.