

The Idea of Rome in the Sermons of St. Augustine

When on August 24, 410 A. D., the city of Rome fell a victim to the Goths of Alaric, the idea of Rome had already a long and varied history behind it. There had always existed a close and seemingly indissoluble union between the Roman state and Roman religion. It was a common Roman idea that the city or state — like the family and indeed any collectivity with a permanent identity — had a divine character. Thus, in securing religious veneration for himself, Augustus did not claim a divinity which belonged to him as a person or had come to him by descent ; all he claimed was a participation in, and association with, the divinity of the Roman *respublica*. Moreover, in Roman hearts there had grown up the firm belief that it was their *pietas* — their ready obedience to the will of the gods of Rome and the scrupulous performance of their duties to them — that had given Rome her imperial sway. Thus the gods of Rome were set in relation with the idea of Rome. As a matter of fact, in the course of time the gods of Rome themselves lost more and more their independent, self-sufficient existence and were pressed into the service of Rome and her empire, while the glorification of the greatness and divinely purposed importance of the empire was brought consciously into the forefront of the state-religion.

With the foundation of the *templum Urbis* by Hadrian, Roma entered the official circle of the gods of the state. She was worshiped, however, not so much as a divine protectress of the Roman state and empire, but rather as a divine personification of the imperial capital with the splendor of its monuments and works of art and, above all, its great past. Witness the votive altars which Roman officers, stationed in the distant garrisons of the empire, erected to *Roma aeterna*, *Fortuna Redux*, and kindred

deities, to express in a religious form their longing and nostalgia for Rome ¹⁾. These apparently sincere expressions of sentiment were in accord with the glowing terms used by contemporary writers in describing the city. While the Augustan poets and other authors of the first century A. D. confine their praises to one or two especially impressive monuments of the city, such as the Capitol ²⁾ and the Flavian amphitheater ³⁾, now these praises are bestowed upon the city as a whole, and they carry the more weight as they are written by non-Romans. Human words, Aelius Aristides, a second-century Greek sophist from Mysia, says in his *encomium Romae* ⁴⁾, do not suffice to praise the city according to its merits; human eyes are not capable of beholding the city in a manner commensurate to its splendor; man would need the eyes of « an all-seeing Argus » or rather « an all-seeing god » to do so. About two hundred years later Themistius, another Greek sophist from Paphlagonia, calls Rome « a marvellous sea of beauty, defying all description » ⁵⁾. In reporting on the visit of Constantius to Rome in 356 A. D., Ammianus Marcellinus, a Greek from Syrian Antioch, tells us ⁶⁾ of the awe and admiration with which the emperor was filled when he beheld the Roman forum, the imperial fora, the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the *templum Urbis*, the Pantheon, the Flavian amphitheater, the theater of Pompey and the other famous monuments of the Eternal City. Only a few years before Rome's capture by Alaric, Claudianus, an Egyptian, extols the city as second to none on earth. According to him, no eye can measure its seize, no imagination grasp its beauty, no voice utter its praise ⁷⁾.

When the city on the Tiber had to surrender its position as capital of the world to the emperor's new residence on the Bosphorus, the belief in the eternity of the empire — the most tenacious of all the beliefs which survived from the old religion —

¹⁾ *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* III, 1422; 10470; VII, 370; 392.

²⁾ VIRGIL (*Aeneid* VIII, 347 f.) and OVID (*Fasti* VI, 73) describe the Capitol as « golden », HORACE (*Carmina* III, 3, 42 f.) as « gleaming », and SENECA the Elder (*Controversiae* I, 6, 4) as « gleaming in pure gold ».

³⁾ MARTIAL, *Epigrammaton liber* 2.

⁴⁾ *Oratio* XIV (ed. G. DINDORF, Leipzig, 1829, vol. I, p. 323).

⁵⁾ *Oratio* XIII (ed. G. DINDORF, Leipzig, 1832, p. 218).

⁶⁾ *Res gestae* XVI, 10, 13-15.

⁷⁾ *De consulatu Stilichonis* III, 132-133.

did not follow the person of the emperor, but remained attached to the place. In explaining the famous lines of the *Aeneid* ⁸⁾ in which Jupiter declares that he had bestowed « dominion without end (*imperium sine fine*) on the Romans », Servius ⁹⁾, the fourth-century commentator of Virgil, says expressly that the poet used the word « Roman » instead of « Rome » only because « not even in sacred rites does any person utter the real name of that city ». The same belief that the fate of the empire was intimately connected with the very existence of the city of Rome, was also at the bottom of the plea for the restoration of the altar of Victory to the senatehouse, which Symmachus addressed to Valentinian II (383-392). The last great champion of the old religion makes Roma herself speak in her role of divine personification of the Eternal City ¹⁰⁾:

Allow me to perform the sacred ancestral rites, for I am anxious to perform them. Allow me to live after my custom, for I am a free woman. This religion has subjected the world to my laws, these sacred rites have driven Hannibal from my walls and the Gauls from the Capitol. Have I been spared only to be censured in my old age ?

It is in the same role that Roma is pictured by Claudianus ¹¹⁾. The poet praises her because she has not acted like a mistress, but like a mother, receiving the conquered peoples into her bosom and inviting them to share her citizenship. It is to her rule of peace that the world has become one common home where everyone may live where he pleases. The passage comes to an end with the prophetic words: « Nec terminus umquam Romanae ditionis erit ».

Though early Christian writers bluntly deny the pagan claim that the Romans owe their imperial sway to their renowned *pietas*, they believe as firmly as their pagan counterparts that an end of Rome would mean the end of the world. In defending the loyalty of the Christians towards the Roman emperor, Tertullian ¹²⁾ states:

A Christian is an enemy of no one, much less of the emperor. Since he knows him to be appointed by his own God, he must

⁸⁾ VIRGIL, *Aeneid* I, 275-279.

⁹⁾ On VIRGIL, *Aeneid* I, 277.

¹⁰⁾ *Relationes* 3, 9 (ed. O. SEECK, MGH, *auct. ant.* VI, 1, 282).

¹¹⁾ *De consulatu Stilichonis* III, 150-160.

¹²⁾ *Ad Scapulam* 2,

love, reverence, honor, and wish him well, together with the whole Roman empire, as long as the world shall last. For so long the Roman empire will last.

Lactantius ¹³⁾ expresses himself even more precisely, linking the fate of the world with the existence of the very city of Rome:

But when that capital of the world shall have fallen, and shall have begun to be a street, according to the prophecy of the Sibyls ¹⁴⁾, who can doubt that the end of human affairs and of the entire world has arrived? It is that city which still sustains all things, and the God of heaven is to be entreated and beseeched — if, indeed, His ordinances and decrees can be delayed — lest, sooner as we expect, that abominable tyrant should come who will commit so great an outrage and dig out that eye by whose destruction the world itself will hasten to its ruin.

In view of the tenacious belief that the fate of the world was irrevocably bound to that of Rome, we may easily imagine the panic which seized the inhabitants of the vast Roman empire when the hords of Alaric entered the Eternal City: to them it seemed the death-blow to civilization itself. No other contemporary writer has expressed more vividly these feelings of horror and dismay than St. Jerome. When the terrifying news reached him in Bethlehem, it almost broke his heart ¹⁵⁾. For a moment, his scholarly activity seemed to have been paralysed; and though the great champion of asceticism did not allow himself to fall victim to despair and saw in the catastrophe a warning lesson of God to men to disengage themselves from the pleasures of the world and turn to things eternal, he seems to have never resigned himself completely to the evils then visited upon the West by the barbarian invasions.

St. Augustine's reaction to the historical circumstances which climaxed in Alaric's capture and sack of Rome was quite different. Not as if he had not been affected by the grave events of his age. Being a pastor of souls, he felt and understood the profound anguish of Christian minds at the turmoil of the times. Nor was he a less loyal citizen of the *orbis Romanus* than St. Jerome, or

¹³⁾ *Divinae institutiones* VII, 25, 7 f. (CSEL 19, 664 f.).

¹⁴⁾ *Oracula Sibyllina* III, 364; VIII, 165 (ed. J. GEFFCKEN, GCS, *Die Oracula Sibyllina*, pp. 67; 150).

¹⁵⁾ Cf. especially *In Ezech.* I, *praef.* (PL 25, 15 f.); *Ep.* 126, 2; 127, 12; 128, 5 (CSEL 56, 144; 154; 161).

devoid of feeling for Rome when that noble victim succumbed to the barbarian onslaught. It is the old Roman spirit that speaks in him when he praises the virtues which had made Rome's historical greatness ¹⁶). But he sees the phase of history experienced by his generation in a much wider perspective than the excitable hermit of Bethlehem; he sees it in a perspective that embraces the entire history of mankind and the whole system of Christian beliefs. It is, of course, his greatest work, *The City of God*, which gave to his troubled contemporaries a comprehensive answer to the burning question as to why such great calamities had befallen Rome and the empire after they had become Christian. Begun as a *livre de circonstance* to answer the specific pagan accusation that Christianity was responsible for all the evils then besetting the Roman world, it grew into a monumental work in which he analyzed most minutely Christian attitude toward history as a whole. The bishop of Hippo was, however, too keenly aware of the particular needs of his time and too anxious to bring peace to men's souls as to remain silent in face of the mounting pagan accusations and the profound anguish troubling Christian minds until his comprehensive work had been completed in 426. Immediately following the stirring events of August, 410, he preached especially four sermons ¹⁷) in which he not only revealed his own reaction to the sufferings caused by the continuous barbarian invasions and infiltrations in general, and to the tragic episode of the fall of Rome

¹⁶) *De civitate Dei* V, 12.

¹⁷) *Sermo* 81 (PL 38, 499-506); *sermo* 105 (PL 38, 618-625); *sermo Biblioth. Casin.* I, 133 (ed. G. MORIN, *Sancti Augustini sermones post Maurinos reperti*, in *Miscellanea Agostiniana* vol. I [Rome, 1930] pp. 401-412; the sermon was known before as *sermo* 296 in the Maurist edition — PL 38, 1352-1359); and *sermo de urbis excidio* (PL 40, 715-724).

St. Augustine seems to have made the first reference to the capture of Rome by Alaric in *sermo* *Denis* XXIV, 10 (151 Morin); cf. A. KUNZELMANN, *Die Chronologie der Sermones des hl. Augustinus*, *Miscellanea Agostiniana* II, 501, who established September 25, 410, as the date of the sermon (a month after the fall of Rome). To the same period there must belong *sermones* 25; 80 (PL 38, 167-171; 493-498); and *sermo Caillau et Saint-Yves* II, 92 (272-274 Morin). In the first two sermons St. Augustine speaks of 'evil times' (cf. especially *serm.* 25, 3; 4; 5; and 80, 8); the third sermon carries the title *De tribulationibus et pressuris mundi* (cf. KUNZELMANN, *loc. cit.*, p. 500). The idea of Rome in St. Augustine has been treated shortly by J. FISCHER, *Die Völkerwanderung im Urteil der zeitgenössischen Schriftsteller Galliens unter Einbeziehung des heiligen Augustinus*, Heidelberg-Waibstadt, 1948, pp. 83-87.

in particular, but also laid down the principles by which the Christian should be guided in the adversities of the day. It is in these sermons that St. Augustine also proposed a new interpretation of the idea of Rome.

We begin with *sermo* 81 which belongs to the end of the year 410¹⁸). The sermon is based on the words of Christ: « Vae mundo a scandalis... » (Matt. 18, 7-9), and anticipates the apologetical thoughts of *The City of God*. Like the first books of this work it deals with the question how the existence of a Provident God can be reconciled with the sufferings of the Roman world, caused by the barbarian invasions, and with the great « scandalum » of St. Augustine's day, the fall of Rome.

The bishop of Hippo begins his discussion of the crucial problem by making a clear distinction between *pressura* (affliction, trial) and *scandalum* (stumbling-block)¹⁹). Earthly affliction should not be a stumbling-block by inducing us to criticize God's ways with man. As the main purpose of the olive-press is not to crush the olive, but to separate the clear oil from the pulp, thus earthly affliction is not sent to man to crush him, but to bring out his true value by giving him an opportunity to practise the virtues of patience and perseverance, to profess his faith, and to resist the temptation to sin. Job, the great sufferer of the Old Testament, was a model of such patience, resignation and filial trust in God. The misery suddenly engulfing him was no stumbling-block to him, though it was to his wife because she foolishly advised him to renounce God and die (cf. Job 2, 9).

St. Augustine then applies this distinction to the calamities of his own time. A master of the Latin tongue, he gives a graphic description of the ever rising tide of barbarism that was overwhelming fresh territories every year, cites the pagan accusation, and explains to his listeners how a Christian should receive such afflictions²⁰):

The world is laid waste, the press is trodden. Come then, O Christian, scion of heaven! You, who are pilgrims on earth, who seek citizenship in heaven, who long for communion with the holy angels, understand that you have come into the world in

¹⁸) Cf. KUNZELMANN, *Die Chronologie*, p. 500.

¹⁹) *Sermo* 81, 2 (PL 38, 500).

²⁰) *Ibid.* 7 (PL 38, 503 f.).

such a way that you might leave it again. You are but passing through the world, seeking to reach Him who has created it. Let not the lovers of the world, who wish to remain in it — though they too are compelled to leave it whether they like it or not — confound you: let them not deceive you, let them not lead you astray. The present afflictions are no stumbling-blocks. Fear God, and they will be but trials. The affliction has come. It rests with you which of the two it will be: trial or punishment. It will be such as it finds you. Affliction is a fire. Does it find you gold? Then it will take away the slag. Does it find you chaff? Then it will turn you into ashes. The afflictions, then, of which there are so many now, are no stumbling-blocks. But what are stumbling-blocks? Those foolish talks and utterances telling us: Look what Christian times are bringing about. Those, indeed, are stumbling-blocks. For such things are told you to make you love the world and blaspheme Christ. This is what you are told by your friend, your adviser, that is, your eye. This is what you are told by your servant, your fellow-worker, that is, your hand. That is what you are told perhaps by your employer, the one who has raised you from a humble position in the world, that is, your foot. Pluck out, cut off, cast from you, do not consent. Give such people the same answer as the man who was advised to give false testimony. Thus you also answer. If somebody says to you: Look, it is in Christian times that there are so great afflictions and that the world is laid waste, answer also you by saying: Christ has foretold me this before it came to pass.

Continuing this thought, St. Augustine explains by a simile taken from human nature, why the world is afflicted with such trials ²¹):

You wonder because the world is failing and has grown old? The world is like man. The latter is born, grows, and wastes away. In his old age he is plagued by many vexations: coughing fits, obstruction caused by phlegm, inflammation of the eyes, difficulty in breathing, feebleness. Man has grown old, and his vexations are many. The world has likewise grown old, and its afflictions are many. Is it not enough that God has sent Christ to the world which has grown old in order to strengthen you in a time when all things begin to fail?... Do not attach yourself to the aged world, but become young in Christ who says to you: The world passes away, is old and feeble, and suffers from shortness of breath. Have no fear: « your youth shall be renewed like the eagle's » (Ps. 102, 5).

The sermon reaches its culmination in the last section in which St. Augustine tries to allay the profound anguish troubling the

²¹) *Ibid.* 8 (PL 38, 504 f.).

hearts of his listeners at the fall of Rome by spiritualizing the rather gross belief in the eternity of the *urbs Roma*. According to him, it is not the material existence of the city, built of stone and wood, but the preservation of the spiritual values created under the leadership of that city in the course of its long history, on which the duration of the *orbis Romanus* depends. In this sense Rome will not perish as long as there are Romans who show themselves worthy of Rome's great past. No injustice is, therefore, done to the city of Rome by saying that, since it has been built by the hands of men, it also will perish some day. For also the world which has been created by God will some day come to an end. According to the will of God, this is the fate of all things earthly. For the very same reason, God has created man mortal. Man's earthly life is but a pilgrimage. The community of men (*civitas*) on earth is likewise finite and will some day come to an end. Though St. Augustine's ultimate ideal is the passage of the *civitas Romana* into the *civitas Dei*, he believes that the time for this transition has not yet arrived. As in his *De civitate Dei* (IV, 7), he sees rather in the fall of Rome only a punishment by God, and not the end of the *orbis Romanus*. Thus, in spite of all other-worldliness, the historical outlook of St. Augustine was not so pessimistic as that of many of his contemporaries. To be sure, the barbarian invasions with all the horror and suffering they involved, and the fall of Rome were causes of great concern to him, but he did not despair because he believed in the historical mission of the *orbis Romanus* as planned by Divine Providence. According to him, this mission was not bound to the material city on the Tiber, but to the spiritual forces still alive in the *orbis Romanus* ²²):

Look — somebody says — it is in Christian times that Rome has perished. [But I answer:] Perhaps Rome has not perished ; perhaps it was only severely punished, not annihilated ; perhaps it was only chastised, not destroyed. Perhaps Rome has not perished, if the Romans do not perish. For they will not perish, if they give God the honor ; they will, however, perish, if they blaspheme Him. For what is Rome without the Romans ? The things that matter are not masses of stone and wood, not high tenementhouses and towering walls. All this was built to topple in ruins some day. When man built it, he put stone upon stone ;

²²) *Ibid.* 9 (PL 38, 505).

and when he destroyed it, he tore stone from stone. The hand of man built it ; the hand of man also destroyed it. Do we Rome any injustice by saying that it falls in ruins ? Not to Rome, but perhaps to him who built it. Do we cause any injustice to its founder because we say that Rome founded by Romulus falls in ruins ? The very world which has been created by God will go up in flame some day. On the other hand, the work of man does not fall without God's will, nor does God's own creation fall without His will. For if the work of man does not fall without the will of God, how can God's work fall by the will of man ? Yet God created the world for your sake in such a way that it will perish. He, therefore, also created you as a mortal man. Man himself, the ornament of the community (*ornamentum civitatis*), member, ruler and master of the community, comes into the world to leave it again, is born to die, enters the world to pass through it. « Heaven and earth will pass away » (Matt. 24, 35). What wonder then, if some day the community will come to an end ? And if this end has perhaps not yet arrived, some day it will nevertheless come.

The pagan accusation that the fall of Rome occurred in Christian times, St. Augustine rejects by pointing to the fate of Rome's mother-city, Troy, that went up in smoke and flame in pagan times. Quoting from Sallust and Virgil, he reminds his critics that it was with the vanquished and fugitive gods of fallen Troy that the founding fathers arrived in Latium, and he asks the question whether this very fact might not have been an indication portending the fate which were ultimately to befall Rome ²³):

Yet why is it that Rome has perished in times of Christian worship ? [Let me rather ask:] Why did Rome's mother-city, Troy, go up in flame in times of pagan worship ? The gods in whom the Romans put their trust, gods, entirely Roman, upon whom pagan Rome relied, left Troy, destroyed by fire, to found Rome. The very gods of Rome then were first Trojan gods. Troy went up in flame, and Aeneas carried the fugitive gods away ; or, he rather fled and carried the senseless gods with him. For though they could be carried by a fleeing man, they themselves were not able to flee. With these very gods Aeneas came to Italy ; with deceitful gods he founded Rome. It would be tedious to go through the remaining part of history. I should like to mention only briefly a statement from their own literature. One of their best-known authors ²⁴) says as follows: « The founders and earliest inhabitants of the city of Rome, as I understand, were Trojans who, under

²³) *Ibid.* (PL 38, 505 f.).

²⁴) SALLUST, *De coniuratione Catilinae* 6.

the leadership of Aeneas, were wandering about as exiles from their country, without any settled abode ». They had then their gods with them, founded Rome in Latium, and introduced there the cult of the same gods who had been worshiped in Troy. One of their own poets ²⁵⁾ introduces Juno saying in her wrath against Aeneas and the fugitive Trojans: « A people hateful to me sails the Tyrrhenian sea, carrying into Italy Ilium and its vanquished gods » — that is, they carried their defeated gods with them to Italy. Was this already a sign from above, or an omen, when defeated gods were brought to Italy ?

The sermon comes to a close with the bishop's urgent appeal to his flock to give the example of true Christian charity by receiving into their homes the many refugees who had fled from the horrors of the barbarian invasions across the Mediterranean into Roman Africa. By acting with supernatural charity and kindly affection toward the homeless in this hour of need, St. Augustine assures his listeners, they would overcome what the pagan world considered a « scandalum », and make a mockery of the pagan pretensions ²⁶⁾:

Keep joyfully the law of God, do not be scandalized. We beg, beseech, and exhort you: be of kind heart, have compassion with those who suffer, receive the disheartened. In this hour of need when you see so many who are homeless, needy, and afflicted, show generous hospitality, let your good works abound. It is Christ's command that Christians should fulfil. Let the pagans speak ill of their own misfortune only.

We have given a rather minute analysis of this sermon because it not only refutes the pagan accusation imputing to the new faith the fall of Rome, and what seemed to many the irreparable overthrow of all the grandeur of the past, but also makes an interesting contribution to the Christian argument by giving a new interpretation of the idea of Rome. According to St. Augustine, this idea is not embodied in the material city on the Tiber, built of stone and wood, which, like all things earthly, is destined to topple in ruins some day. Offering new hope to his fellow-citizens, he explains that the fall of that material city, the *urbs Roma*, though a punishment of God, must not mean the approaching end of the *orbis Romanus* and the spiritual values it represents. Though its

²⁵⁾ VIRGIL, *Aeneid* I, 67 f.

²⁶⁾ *Sermo* 81, 9 (PL 38, 506).

end, as the end of all the community of men on earth, will ultimately come at a time known only to God, he sees no power on the historical horizon of his day, capable of taking over the mission of the Roman empire. Thus, in spite of the markedly ascetical character of his arguments, the great African looks into the future not only with a truly Christian trust in God's Providence, but also with a genuinely Roman belief in the historical mission of the empire.

Being a pastor of souls, St. Augustine was anxious before anything else to make his audience understand that the trials then visited upon the Roman world must be seen in the light of the entire history of man, as planned by Divine Providence, and in relation to the ultimate goal of creation. He discusses the crucial problem again in the second half of another sermon delivered towards the end of 410 ²⁷).

The subject of the sermon is based on a passage from the Gospel of St. Luke (11, 5-13), containing lessons by Christ on prayer. In chapter 5 ²⁸), the preacher sees in the egg for which the child asks his father, an allegory of the virtue of hope. This gives him an opportunity ²⁹) to exhort his listeners to surrender themselves entirely into the hands of God who purposely mixes earthly happiness with sorrows and troubles in order to induce man to seek « another happiness whose sweetness is not deceptive ». They should not murmur about the present afflictions and trials, saying that « all things perish in Christian times ». Christ never promised the unceasing existence of earthly values: all that He, the « Eternal », promised were eternal values. It is the belief in this promise of Christ that will lift man out of his mortality into life everlasting.

Rousing hope in the hearts of his flock, he continues ³⁰): « The community (*civitas*) which gave us material life still exists. God be thanked for it ». But he is quick to add: « If only it [this community] would grow into a spiritual one and, together with us, pass into eternity. If the community which gave us material life

²⁷) *Sermo* 105 (PL 38, 618-625): Concerning the date, see KUNZELMANN, *Die Chronologie*, p. 500.

²⁸) PL 38, 621.

²⁹) Chapter 6 (PL 38, 621 f.).

³⁰) Chapter 7 (PL 38, 622).

ceases to exist, the community which gave us spiritual life remains in existence ». It is clear that here the main theme of *De civitate Dei* is anticipated. According to St. Augustine, the city of man may topple in ruins, there still remains that city which is really eternal, whose destiny can be accomplished only in the bosom of God, though it has its beginnings already in the souls of those who believe ³¹):

The holy city, the faithful city, the city sojourning on earth, has its foundations in heaven. O faithful servant, do not spoil that hope, do not lose charity, gird your loins, rise, hold up your lamps, wait for the Master when he returns from the wedding (cf. Luke 12, 35 f.). Why do you take fright at the fall of earthly kingdoms ? For that very reason the Kingdom of heaven was promised to you that you might not perish with the earthly kingdoms. For the downfall of the latter has been foretold, even expressly foretold. We cannot deny that. The Lord for whom you are waiting, told you: « Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom » (Mark 13, 8). Earthly kingdoms are subject to vicissitudes. There will come He of whom there is said: « Of His kingdom there will be no end » (Luke 1, 33).

Having thus prepared the minds of his hearers, St. Augustine discusses the delicate subject of the fall of Rome ³²). Those who have promised eternity to earthly empires, he explains, have done this in order to flatter. Vindicating the honor of Virgil, he gives a rather forced interpretation of two passages from the poet's works. According to him, Virgil ³³) put the words containing the promise of « dominion without end » to the Romans purposely into the mouth of Jupiter, « a false god » and « deceptive prophet », thus indicating that it was not his own (the poet's) conviction, but only a compliment paid to the pride of the Romans. On the other hand, when the poet expresses his own belief, he speaks in one breath of « the power of Rome » and of « Kingdoms doomed to fall » ³⁴).

St. Augustine is, however, by no means a prophet of doom and despair, who is insensible to the misfortunes besetting the Roman empire, including the latest and most shocking blow, the

³¹) *Ibid.*

³²) *Ibid.* (PL 38, 622 f.).

³³) *Aeneid* I, 278 f.

³⁴) *Georg.* II, 498.

fall of Rome. We have to keep in mind that, in these sermons, he speaks first of all as a bishop who has the salvation of the souls entrusted to his care most at heart. Feeling the heavy burden of responsibility and « blazing with zeal for the household of God »³⁵), he never grows weary of calling his flock to penance and a better understanding of earthly afflictions which demonstrate the frailty and limitations of all passing things, and are lessons for man to view the course of human events *sub specie aeternitatis*. Final security, he insists, can be found only in the eternal life. No doubt this gives to his sermons a strongly ascetical character, but he is fully alive to the anguish of his fellow-citizens, and tries to rouse them from their mood of despair. Thus the statement concerning the transitoriness of all earthly empires, the Roman empire not excepted, is followed immediately by words of encouragement³⁶):

Let us not be disheartened then, brethren. There will be an end of all earthly kingdoms. If the end has come now, it is according to the plan of God. But perhaps it has not yet come, and, induced by a certain want of strength, or compassion, or distress, we wish that it is not yet at hand. Yet will it, therefore, fail to come altogether? Put your trust in God, yearn and ask for things eternal. You are Christians, brethren. We are Christians. Not for things which give pleasure to the senses did Christ come to the world. Let us rather suffer these days of ours than love them... Why do we attach ourselves to this earth, observing that it is up-rooted? All we can do is to exhort you again and again to hold fast to what your mouths are saying, and to answer the slanderers and blasphemers of the Christian name on the strength of your hope. Let no one through rebellious murmur divert you from the expectation of the things to come.

That the bishop's efforts to explain the alarming events of the year 410 from a supernatural point of view evoked vehement pagan reaction, we may see from the next chapter of this sermon. What he had intended as a word of comfort, namely, that the fall of the material city of Rome was but a chastisement by God and did not necessarily mean the end of the *orbis Romanus*, was considered an insult by his pagan opponents³⁷):

We are reviled and we bless; having been maligned, we entreat (cf. 1 Cor. 4, 12 f.). But he should not talk about Rome, they have

³⁵) AUG., *Retractationes* II, 69 (CSEL 36, 181).

³⁶) *Sermo* 105, 8 (PL 38, 623).

³⁷) *Ibid.* 9 (PL 38, 624).

said concerning me. Oh, would he only cease speaking of Rome ! As if my intention were to revile, and not rather to intercede with the Lord, and to encourage you in whatever way possible. Far be it from me to revile... Did we not have many brethren in Rome ? Do we not have them still there ?

Anticipating a thought of his *De civitate Dei*, he continues ³⁸⁾:

Do not dwell there a great number of those who belong to the city of Jerusalem — that city which is but a stranger on earth ? Do they not suffer there trials which are but fleeting ? They did not lose, however, the blessings which last for ever. What then should I say, if I am not silent about Rome ? What else than that it is false what they say about our Christ: that it is He that caused Rome to perish which gods of stone and wood protected ?... Behold, to what kind of guardians these clever gentlemen have entrusted Rome — to guardians who have eyes, but see not (cf. Ps. 134, 16). Or, if they had possessed the power to save Rome, why did they themselves perish before ? My opponents say that it was in consequence of the overthrow of the gods that Rome perished. There remains the fact that they themselves perished. But, they object, it was not they themselves that perished, it was their images only. How then could they protect your houses, if they were not able to save their own images ?

That the overthrow of the pagan gods does not lead to grave misfortunes, St. Augustine proves ³⁹⁾ by pointing to cities like Alexandria, Constantinople, and Carthage. Alexandria overturned such gods, and remained prosperous. Carthage, once called « the celestial city » after the goddess Caelestis, was destroyed ; now, after acknowledging the name of Christ, it stands unharmed. Constantinople, founded by a Christian emperor, grew into a large city and still grows unhampered.

In the closing chapter, St. Augustine rejects the pagan contention that the overthrow of the gods was followed immediately by the fall of Rome, by reminding his audience that, only a few years before the capture of Rome by Alaric, Italy and Rome were saved by crushing a Teutonic invasion under Radagaisus who was an ardent devotee of the pagan gods. The passage deserves quoting because it shows that the bishop of Hippo believed in the possibility of a salvation of the Roman world. In the graphic description he gives of this event there seems to be alive once again the

³⁸⁾ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁾ *Ibid.*

martial spirit and stoutheartedness of a Roman of classical times ⁴⁰⁾:

Likewise there is no truth in their contention that Rome was taken and cast down immediately after the overthrow of the gods. This is absolutely untrue. The idols were overthrown before, and so were the Goths under Radagaisus. Remember it, brethren, remember it. It was not long ago, only a few years. Recall it to your mind. After all the idols in the city of Rome had been overturned, Radagaisus, king of the Goths, came with a powerful army which was much more numerous than that of Alaric. Radagaisus was a pagan. Every day he offered sacrifices to Jupiter. Everywhere the story was spread that Radagaisus never left the sacrificial altars. Then all those idol-worshippers said: Look we do not sacrifice and he sacrifices; we who are not allowed to sacrifice must submit to a defeat by one who offers sacrifices. God, however, demonstrated that earthly welfare and earthly power do not depend on those sacrifices. Radagaisus was defeated with the help of the Lord in a manner that caused amazement.

The charge that shortly afterwards Rome fell a victim to the hords of Alaric, St. Augustine counters by pointing to the fact that the Goths were victorious in spite of their hostility to the idols ⁴¹⁾:

Then came the Goths who did not sacrifice. Though with regard to their Christian faith they were not Catholics, they were foes of the idols. They came as foes of the idols, and took them as booty. After their victory they carried them off, searching even for the idols which had been destroyed, and for those who still wanted to sacrifice to them after their overthrow.

St. Augustine closes the sermon ⁴²⁾ by contrasting the unshakable courage of the Christians in Rome and the despondency of their pagan fellow-citizens during the sack of the city. The former « went forth from the furnace as spotless vessels », because they accepted earthly trials from a supernatural point of view. « They suffered affliction in the earthly kingdom, but did not lose the Kingdom of heaven ». To the latter nothing has been left: « empty are their coffers, still emptier are their souls ». Therefore, St. Augustine concludes, the argument that pagans and Christians suffered indiscriminately during the sack of the city is fallacious.

⁴⁰⁾ *Ibid.* 10 (PL 38, 624 f.).

⁴¹⁾ *Ibid.* (PL 38, 625).

⁴²⁾ *Ibid.*

Thoughts similar to those found in the two sermons analyzed above occur in the sermon which the bishop of Hippo delivered on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul (June 29), 411⁴³⁾, that is, ten months after the capture of Rome by Alaric.

In chapter 9⁴⁴⁾, St. Augustine rejects again as untrue the accusation that Christianity was responsible for the fall of Rome. From the Christian point of view, he explains, there is but one answer to this question troubling the minds of so many people, namely, that Rome fell because it was the will of God. Moreover, the Christian should remember that God called men not for transitory happiness on earth, but for eternal bliss in heaven. The best answer to pagans, he holds, is an argument taken from their own history. Rome met two similar catastrophes in pagan times: for the first time, the city, except the citadel, was destroyed by the Gauls; the second time it fell a victim to the fire under Nero.

Chapter 10⁴⁵⁾ likewise deals with an accusation which the bishop had already refuted in an earlier sermon. To those who point to the fact that, in the sack of Rome by Alaric, the Christian inhabitants suffered as much as their pagan fellow-citizens, he gives the same answer as before: « Did you forget that it is the lot of Christians to suffer earthly afflictions, and to hope for eternal blessings? You, being a pagan, have reason for wailing, because you have lost your earthly possessions, and not yet found the eternal ». He adds that the fall of the city did not happen unexpectedly: « When the world will grow old, when the end will approach — you have heard it, brethren, we both have heard it — there will be wars, violent commotions, afflictions, periods of famine. Why do we contradict ourselves, believing when we read it, but murmuring when it comes to pass? ».

The sermon contains, however, some new material for our subject. Some Christians seem to have been especially shocked because not even the tombs of the princes of the apostles and so many martyrs could save Rome from the barbarian onslaught. St. Augustine's answer to these pusillanimous brethren is interesting

⁴³⁾ *Sermo Biblioth. Casin.* I, 133 (401-412 Morin). Concerning the date, see KUNZELMANN, *Die Chronologie*, p. 449 f.

⁴⁴⁾ 407 Morin.

⁴⁵⁾ 407 f. Morin.

because it shows again his efforts to spiritualize the idea of Rome ⁴⁶⁾:

The body of Peter rests in Rome, people say, the body of Paul rests in Rome, the bodies of Lawrence and other holy martyrs have their resting-place in Rome. Yet Rome is in distress Rome is laid waste, cast down, destroyed, set on fire. Famine, plague and sword help death to hold a rich harvest. Where are the monuments of the apostles? What are you talking about? I said: Rome suffers so many calamities — and where are the monuments of the apostles? They are there, they are there: yet they are not in you — you who talk and think such foolish things, you who think according to the flesh though you were called according to the spirit, you who are this kind of Christian. If only the monuments of the apostles were in you! If only you would contemplate the apostles! Then you would see whether earthly or eternal happiness had been promised to them... Peter's flesh was perishable — and you do not want that Rome's stones are perishable? The apostle Peter reigns together with the Lord; his body rests in a certain place: his monument wants to rouse in you the love of things eternal so that you might not attach yourself to the earth, but, in communion with the apostle, think of Eternal Bliss.

We have seen that the immediate aim of the three sermons discussed above was twofold. On the one hand, they were intended as an answer to the pagans who attributed all the misfortunes of the empire, including the fall of Rome, to the anger of the gods who had been outraged and disowned. On the other hand, they aimed at strengthening the faith of many Christians who, having cherished the belief that, with the arrival of the Christian emperors, the Kingdom of God on earth and its welfare were safeguarded within the framework of the Roman empire, began to doubt about Divine Providence in the face of the mounting barbarian threat. St. Augustine answers the pagans with arguments taken from their own history and with quotations from classical writers whose words still flow easily from his lips. To his fellow-Christians he gives comfort and advice by reminding them of the prophetic words of Holy Scripture about the transitoriness of this world and the spiritual value of earthly suffering. Hence it is that the apologetical arguments are thoroughly permeated with ascetical thoughts. This ascetical character is even more pro-

⁴⁶⁾ Chapters 6 and 7 (404 f. Morin).

nounced in the sermon *De urbis excidio* ⁴⁷⁾ which, like the sermons 81 and 105, probably belongs to the end of the year 410.

The sermon is intended in a special manner for those to whom the fall of Rome seemed to be irreconcilable with the concept of an all-just God. St. Augustine quotes the very words of these doubters in the course of the sermon ⁴⁸⁾: « They say especially with regard to the ruin which recently befell that great city: Were there not fifty just in Rome ? Among such a great number of Christians, nuns, ascetics, servants and handmaids of God, could there not be found fifty, or forty, or thirty, or twenty, or even ten just ? ». The bishop's basic answer to this objection is that, during life-time, a person may be called just according to the *regula humana*, but never according to the *regula divina* ⁴⁹⁾. According to human standards, Daniel could certainly be called a just man, yet he suffered captivity like all his countrymen and confessed his and his people's sins ⁵⁰⁾. Again, judging according to human standards, the life of holy Job may be called blameless. And yet he had to undergo trials much more severe than those experienced by Rome, and he did not dare call himself sinless. To him the mystery of suffering was cleared up by faith: thinking of the eternal punishment awaiting the dying blasphemer of God, he considered earthly suffering a trifling price to pay for eternal happiness ⁵¹⁾. In the same way there were certainly a good number of just in Rome according to human judgment. It was for the sake of those just that Rome was only punished and not destroyed as Sodom in whose ruin nothing was spared, neither man, nor beast, nor house. In the case of Rome, however, many were able to leave the city in time, and now are about to return to it ; many stayed in the city, and were not harmed ; many sought refuge in holy places, and remained unmolested. And though others were made captives or even killed, the same happened to many just prophets and apostles and even to the Master of the prophets and apostles ⁵²⁾. If the Roman Christians died after suffering many tribulations, their lot was the same as that of poor Lazarus who,

⁴⁷⁾ PL 40, 715-724.

⁴⁸⁾ Chapter 2 (PL 40, 718).

⁴⁹⁾ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁾ Chapter 1 (PL 40, 715-717).

⁵¹⁾ Chapters 3 and 4 (PL 40, 718-720).

⁵²⁾ Chapter 2 (PL 40, 718).

after death had made him free from want, was borne away by angels into Abraham's bosom (cf. Luke 16. 22)⁵³). Though the calamities of the sack of Rome engulfed both just and wicked, their fate was quite different: the just were either freed from all earthly bonds to enjoy Eternal Bliss, or their souls were made purer and more valuable in the fire of tribulations; of the wicked, some were carried off to receive still more just punishment, others survived either to increase their guilt by continuing to offend God, or to receive from God's mercy another opportunity to atone for their sins⁵⁴). A Christian should, therefore, not be depressed, when he sees the just suffering injustice and tribulations in this world, because it means trial only, not condemnation. Moreover, by choosing suffering as a direct means of following Him, Christ gave the full human meaning of suffering and added to it the rich flavor of the divine⁵⁵).

There is hardly any doubt that, in this sermon, the historical significance of the capture of Rome by Alaric, whose name is not even mentioned once, has receded into the background. Instead of it, the moral-ascetical aspect of the event is emphasized throughout. Like the *exempla* taken from Holy Scripture, the fall of Rome serves the preacher as an illustration of the instability and transitoriness of all things earthly, and of the Christian ascetical doctrine about the value of suffering, the latter being interpreted either as a punishment by God, or a warning from Him, or an expression of His mercy, or a means of spiritual purification. In this way we may also understand why St. Augustine could add to the series of *exempla* the story about Constantinople, which has all the earmarks of a pious legend⁵⁶).

In bringing this essay to a close, it will be proper to emphasize that an objective evaluation of St. Augustine's treatment of the idea of Rome in these sermons must proceed from a consideration of their very nature and purpose. They contain the thoughts of a man who, amidst the mournful aspects of his age, tried to raise the souls of his contemporaries above their material and moral misery. Hence their striking otherworldliness which

⁵³) Chapter 5 (PL 40, 721).

⁵⁴) Chapter 8 (PL 40, 723 f.).

⁵⁵) *Ibid.* (PL 40, 724).

⁵⁶) Chapter 6 (PL 40, 722).

seems to be almost oblivious of the import of historical realities. And yet it would be unjust to accuse the great African of being hard-hearted and devoid of feelings for the horror and suffering the fall of Rome and the barbarian invasions involved. Again and again the great anguish of his soul and his deep sympathy for the suffering population of the Eternal City and the Roman empire manifests itself in passages as the following: « Tidings of dreadful events have reached our ear: accounts of defeat, conflagration, pillage, murder, tortures. It is true, we have heard about these outrages. We have deplored all of them; often we have wept; and we have hardly been able to console ourselves. Again I state: I do not deny that we have heard many reports, and that many outrages have been committed in that city » ⁵⁷). St. Augustine's train of thought does not stop, however, at the contemplation of earthly misery. Before his eyes there is the image of that city which reaches beyond the society of the just on earth into the next world, and also comprises the communion of all those who, after a just life, serve God in company with the angels and await the resurrection of their bodies. The stirring hope which the great Doctor of the Church held out to the troubled hearts of his contemporaries was the realization of the supplication of the Lord's prayer: « Thy Kingdom come ».

Rudolph ARBESMANN, O. S. A.

Fordham University.

⁵⁷) *De urbis excidio* 2 (PL 40, 718).