

The Great in the Small: Donoso Cortés' Variation on a Theme from the *Civitas Dei*

Franz Rosenzweig once made the insightful observation that the Scriptures constitute the first conversation of mankind, a conversation in which gaps of half and whole millennia occur between speech and response. St. Paul attempted to find the answer to the question of the third chapter of *Genesis* [the disobedience and expulsion of Adam and Eve] by questioning the words of the twentieth chapter of *Exodus* [the giving of the Decalogue]. Augustine replied with the *Civitas Dei*¹). We may add that Donoso Cortés, in a far less impressive manner, replied with his *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo, y el socialismo*²). The differences between the two works are enormous. Where Augustine writes an apologia for a surging Christianity, directed against the remnants of an awesome culture, possibly truly alive in libraries, Donoso endeavours to come to terms with the adverse changes of fortune afflicting a waning Christianity faced by the resurgence of a new, worrisome, neo-paganism.

In this conversation which spans some 1400 years, the principles and ideas which are found in the *Civitas Dei* suffer extensive modification at the hands of Donoso. One need but mention the differences in character, genius, and historical context. Scarcely of Augustine's stature, Donoso was a statesman-politician with the talent for justifying his practical insights — at times surprisingly on target — by highly questionable argument. He possessed little of Augustine's profundity or wide-ranging interests. The principle themes of the *Civitas Dei* are encountered in Donoso's work in a hardened, crystallized form, made one dimensional, their horizons narrowed, functioning as interpretive tools. By far the most interesting of these sea-changes is found in Donoso's application of the pivotal notion of the two cities.

Augustine traces the pre-history of the two cities to the opposition

¹) Franz Rosenzweig, *His Life & Thought*, edited by Nahum N. GLATZER (New York: Schocken, 1974), "On the Scriptures", p. 260.

²) *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo, y el socialismo considerados en sus principios fundamentales. Obras Completas*, edited by Carlos VALVERDE, S.J. (Madrid: B.A.C., 1970), Vol. 2, pp. 499-702.

between the faithful and rebellious angels in whom the love of God is contrasted to the love of self³). They comprise two societies which anticipate the two cities which arise with the creation of man. Although Adam already contains the elements of the two cities in his own person⁴), these inner contradictions are made explicit in Cain and Abel. This division of mankind into two pyramids of loyalty, communities, or cities is grounded in Scripture⁵). Augustine contrasts them in vivid colors. One City lives by the standard of flesh — he points to the catalogue of vices given in *Galatians* 5,19-21⁶) — the other by the standard of the spirit. Each city yearns after its own peace. Man can choose to live either according to God's standard or his own: a "living by rule of self" which is Satanic and characteristic of the Earthly City⁷). In a familiar passage Augustine indicates that the two cities were created by different loves; the Earthly City by self-love which reaches contempt for God; the Heavenly City by love of God carried as far as the contempt of self⁸). Here the "*amor meus, pondus meum*" of the *Confessions*⁹) is projected outwards as a social principle of cosmic proportions.

Each city is directed towards a goal or end. The Earthly City moves towards Supreme Evil, which is equated by Augustine with eternal death. The Heavenly City moves toward Supreme Good, which is identified with eternal life. The former is at home in the world. Cain founded a city and Scripture testifies to the productivity of his descendants¹⁰). Abel was a pilgrim in the world as is the Heavenly City in the persons of its members¹¹). But only it is eternal. The Earthly City,

³) *De Civitate Dei*, 11, 33. English translation by Henry BETTENSON, *The City of God* (New York: Penguin, 1984).

⁴) *Ibid.*, 12,1; 12,28.

⁵) "Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow-citizens with God's people, member of God's household". *Ephesians* 2,19. "We, by contrast are citizens of Heaven, and from heaven we expect our deliverer to come, the Lord Jesus Christ". *Philippians*, 3,20, N.E.V.

⁶) "Anyone can see the kind of behaviour that belongs to the lower nature: fornication, impurity, and indecency; idolatry and sorcery; quarrels, a contentious temper, envy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, dissensions, party intrigues, and jealousies; drinking bouts, orgies, and the like".

⁷) *De Civitate Dei*, 14,3.

⁸) *Ibid.*, 14,28.

⁹) *Confessions*, 13,9. English translation by R.S. PINE-COFFIN (New York: Penguin, 1985).

¹⁰) *Genesis*, 17,23.

¹¹) *De Civitate Dei*, 15,1; 15,4, et al.

upon its final condemnation, will disintegrate as a city. For the present, however, it rests content with temporal happiness, and is comfortably ensconced within that public orthodoxy which is generated by the world.

The frontiers between the two cities are not closed. Augustine speaks of the attraction which the world holds for the citizens of the Heavenly City, that prior to the Flood an intermingling occurred which provided the conditions for the deluge¹²). None the less, in spite of the divisions which must take place — caused by lust for power, war, litigation, and so on — the Earthly City is bonded together by “a sort of fellowship based on a common nature”¹³). It is divided into a great number of empires of which the most impressive have been the Assyrian and the Roman. Although Augustine makes his own the prophetic injunction to “escape from the midst of Babylon” he has a spiritual pilgrimage not a physical distancing in mind. It is a process of spiritual purification by which the believer advances through the “steps of faith” and takes refuge in the Living God¹⁴).

There is something unsettling, not to say elusive, in Augustine’s conception of the Heavenly City and its citizens. Perhaps Peter Brown had this in mind when he speaks of the latter as “resident aliens”¹⁵). It develops in the “shade” of the Earthly City and is its positive double, at least for the present¹⁶). The Heavenly City is not identified with the Christian Church, as the Church is a mixture of elect and reprobate, and the City also includes the elect of Israel and others to whom the mystery was revealed¹⁷). Its true citizen is a pilgrim in a foreign land, a resident alien, who, nevertheless, makes use of those things necessary for life as do his worldly counterparts, albeit in a different way. Because of this, the Heavenly City, though living a life of captivity, obeys those laws of the Earthly City which are designed to further the common good and guarantee the support of life. In these essentials a *harmony* — the word is Augustine’s — is preserved¹⁸).

Clashes arise in the religious sphere. The Heavenly City worships

¹²) *Ibid.*, 15,22.

¹³) *Ibid.*, 18,2.

¹⁴) *Ibid.*, 18,18.

¹⁵) Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), esp. “*Civitas Peregrina*”, pp. 313-329.

¹⁶) *De Civitate Dei*, 18,1; 18,47.

¹⁷) *Ibid.*, 18,49.

¹⁸) *Ibid.*, 19,17; 19,26.

one God: to Him only is *latreia* given. This means that it cannot accept civic religious laws which take polytheism for granted and set up false gods. Augustine indicates that at this point the Heavenly City — now more closely identified with the Christian Church — was obliged to become a “burdensome nuisance” until she was able to prevail. This, both because of God’s help and, more pragmatically, by means of “the terror inspired by her numbers”¹⁹). Once assured of true worship, the aspiration of its citizens to heavenly peace, presently possessed in faith, enables them to lead a life of righteousness. In this way, they use the peace of the Earthly City to their own advantage.

One further point. Augustine’s considerations on the book of *Revelation* did not fail to impress Donoso who was much given to apocalyptic speculations²⁰). Perhaps his equation of the Beast with the Ungodly City and the final defeat of the Anti-Christ by Jesus himself, present in person, made the greatest impact²¹). In any case, it will prod Donoso towards a radicalism foreign to Augustine and a pessimism which was considered by many — and at times by himself — to be truly pathological.

These brief observations present the main lines of Augustine’s conception of the two cities, the basis of his impressive unfolding of a philosophy/theology of history. Donoso read and pondered on the *Civitas Dei*. Fifty-two pages of smallish script are preserved in the archives which contain notes and reflections on the work. Donoso, in spite of himself, would prove to be an erratic if not bizarre disciple, falling into the temptation of attempting to fill in and provide the specifics of Augustine’s master themes. Moreover, he suffered from both a certain speculative naivete as well as a residual sympathy for the cyclical view of time, a belief which negates the possibility of a philosophy/theology of history²²).

¹⁹) *Idem*.

²⁰) Refer to my “Donoso Cortés: A Second Look at Political Apocalyptic”. *Continuity*, N° 11 (1987), pp. 63-74.

²¹) *De Civitate Dei*, 18,53; 20,14.

²²) “la verdad está en la identidad sustancial de los sucesos, velada y como escondida por la variedad infinita de las formas”. *Cartas a Montalembert*, *Obras* 2, p. 327 et al. John O’MEARA’s statement in his introduction to the Bettenson translation of the *City of God* is unfortunate: “Neither in Books XV-XVIII of the *City of God*, nor elsewhere in the work, is there any serious attempt at a philosophy of history other than his repudiation of the Platonic theory of the cycle of existence and the substitution for it of the linear progress implicit in the Christian view of creation, fall, redemption, and final destiny”. *Op. cit.*, p. xxxiv.

Donoso's first reference to Augustine, possibly without having read him attentively, is rhetorical fustian. He is "antorcha de la iglesia... prodigio de Africa, maravilla del mundo"²³). But after he initiated a thorough reading of Augustine his own works begin to show their influence. Donoso's definition of order, the equation of God with the Platonic triad of the Good, the Just, and the Beautiful, variety considered as issuing from unity and returning to it, and his notion of the vast depredations of sin, all show Augustine's influence. But these borrowings, if they in truth are such, are colored by Donoso's own interests, projects, aspirations, and preoccupations, as well as with his own type of pessimism which more than one critic has called Manichaeism.

In an early work, *Estudios sobre la Historia* (1837), Donoso rather primly compares Augustine's "simple and majestic account of facts" in the *Civitas Dei* to later accounts which are 'mere' dogmatic expositions of philosophic or social theory²⁴). He goes on to distinguish between ecclesiastical and profane history, the first dealing with the concatenation of events which illustrate God's designs regarding the Church, the second those series of events which manifest the designs of God regarding empires and nations²⁵). Even in this early work, Donoso makes the antagonists God, viewed almost in the manner of an oriental potentate, and sinful man. He stresses the sovereignty of God: only in him are absolute right and absolute power identified. Divine Law is irresistible in the physical order and obligatory in the moral order. Yet, opposed to order is sin, disorder, the evil *par excellence*. Adam's sin he views as the radical shattering of the primitive order which consisted in the perfect union of God and man, Creator and creature, the One and the many²⁶).

Twelve years later, in the wake of his "Discurso sobre la Dictadura" which gave him European stature, a more mature and careful Donoso takes up the theme of the two cities in his letters to Montalambert. Parallel to the cities are two explanations of the "profound mystery of human destiny". They are the Catholic and the Philosophic. Between them there exists absolute antagonism, "un abismo insondable"²⁷). All efforts to find a common ground, a rapprochement,

²³) "Sobre Historia de la civilización de España". *Obras*, 2, p. 17.

²⁴) "Estudios sobre la Historia". *Obras*, 2, p. 233.

²⁵) *Ibid.*, 2, p. 36.

²⁶) *Idem*.

²⁷) "Cartas al Conde de Montalambert". (5/26/1849), 2, p. 324.

are doomed to failure. Donoso proclaims: "I believe that Catholic civilization contains good without any admixture of evil, and philosophic civilization contains evil without any admixture of good"²⁸).

Donoso insists that original sin has caused serious depredations. Man is "sick" in both intellect and will. He cannot discern the truth nor will and perform the good without external aid, viz., Divine assistance. As philosophic civilization affirms that human nature is whole and in good order, it perforce will ignore the necessary correctives which insure the proper functioning of human thought [a teaching authority] and human willing [fear of God]. But in spite of this disastrous oversight, or perhaps because of it, the political and social solutions of Philosophic civilization will triumph and abolish those wise restrictions which inhibit the *húbris* of reason and will²⁹). As the good cannot suffer ultimate defeat, Donoso is led to conclude that although evil will assuredly triumph in the natural order, good will vanquish evil in the supernatural through direct and personal Divine intervention³⁰).

Although in cooler moments Donoso made the distinction between philosophy *per se* and the negative philosophic systems based on human autonomy³¹), most if not all of the philosophies of modernity were put into the second grouping. Compared to Augustine who recognized the urges of Divine Providence at work in the various schools of thought, and had kind words for 'Platonism', Donoso views Christianity as radically opposed to Philosophy which reflects sinful man and human reason unaided by grace. He insists that belief in the natural perfectability of man leads invariably to the desacralization of society and will issue into a new, unheroic, paganism. Furthermore, in a novel twist, Donoso asserts that human reason, in affirming its independence from God and objective norms, manifests its relation to the Absurd. To affirm the self is to deny truth³²). He suggests that there is a secret affinity between the unregenerate human mind and the Absurd, that, in a sense, the human mind is the creator, the god of the Absurd, and finds it to be good.

On the social and political level Donoso restates the theme of the *Civitas Dei*. Two communities or cities engaged in struggle throughout

²⁸) *Ibid.*, p. 325.

²⁹) *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

³⁰) *Ibid.*, p. 326.

³¹) "Polémica con la Prensa Española". (6/16/1849), 2, pp. 339-340.

the course of time. History is the account of the various events in the struggle³³), which is itself the determinant of all other events. Based on his version of the two cities, Donoso launched his "black prophecies". Europe would be conquered and be incorporated into the vast world empire of a Russian Rome. Even this victorious empire would be infected and fall victim to a virus it would contract from Europe³⁴). After those forces of dissolution which he called "corrupting angels" have done their work, and things are at their very lowest, the true City of God will be imposed through direct Divine intervention.

In the struggle between the two cities, "aquel gigantesco combate" there are no noncombatants. Everyone participates. Divine Providence is opposed and defeated by human Liberty³⁵). The conflict is already lost on the natural level. The event he describes as the "catastrophe *par excellence* of history" looms on the horizon. Society simply does not want to be Christian and its death wish is being fulfilled³⁶). Only individuals can still save themselves. Once the process of gradual sedimentation initiated by Christianity, and responsible for civilization at its best has been disrupted, the rest is simply a matter of gravity. With his usual penchant for striking images, Donoso indicates that this final catastrophe will take the form of a demagogic empire led by a plebeian of Satanic greatness. Donoso identified him as the Man of Sin of II *Thess.* 2:4³⁷).

Augustine's majestic conception has here been reified and turned into a lens with which to view the political vicissitudes of the Nineteenth Century and its backdrop in the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. The first, Donoso interprets as a crucial turn in history when the spirit of revolt is strengthened through its incorporation to a perverse form of the Christian *verbum*. In turn, this conjunction makes the French Revolution possible, which itself opens the doors to a new paganism, a parasite which draws its strength from its Christian host. Ancient aspirations to omnipotence are reborn in the

³²) *Ensayo*, 2, p. 561.

³³) Letter of 4/15/52.2, p. 737.

³⁴) *Discurso sobre la Dictadura*, 2, pp. 315-316; 319.

³⁵) *Ensayo*, 2, p. 561.

³⁶) "That day cannot come before the final rebellion against God, when wickedness will be revealed in human form, the man doomed to perdition. He is the enemy. He rises in pride against every god, so called, every object of men's worship, and even takes his seat in the temple of God claiming to be a god himself". (N.E.V.).

³⁷) The best summaries of these views are found in *Discurso sobre la Dictadura* (1849), 2, pp. 305-323, and *Carta al Cardenal Fornari* (1852), 2, pp. 744-762.

State, the Church is immured in the sanctuary, and vitiated reason enters the political arena as majority rule and government by debate. This fleeting world, which only Satan attempts to convert into something firm, becomes the principal object of human concern. Donoso believed that the 'Age of Revolutions' which culminated in 1789 and 1848, would lead to further fragmentations of an already fragile civilization. Provisional holding actions such as dictatorship is the last defense against the forces of chaos until there is nothing left preserving³⁸).

In Donoso's speculations, Augustine's pessimism has been radicalized and his optimistic moments overlooked. Weighty principles with vast implications have been contracted and used as the basis for prediction if not pseudo-prophecy. The interrelations between the Heavenly and Earthly Cities — the use which the pilgrim community makes of earthly peace — is all but ignored. In a bizarre manner, Donoso works against his own intention of spiritualizing the political domain. The two cities are voided of their spiritual dimensions and become secularized. The Heavenly City is equated with Christian civilization centered around the Roman Catholic Church. An obligatory absence of exact detail is replaced by massive projections into the future course of history. A subtle appraisal of future possibilities grounded on Scripture gives way to a brash apocalypticism.

Donoso may have been justified in castigating belief in progress as one of the major errors of the day. Perhaps, as he believed, History is retreating not advancing³⁹). None the less, this belief, joined to an almost pathological pessimism, the Spanish penchant for exaggeration and high drama, and a mind which was scarcely at home in the rarified air of high speculation, generated his adaptation of Augustine's two cities. Though merely a minor variation on the theme, it is a superb example of conversation at a distance between two persons of wildly unequal genius and disparate temperament.

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³⁸) *Ibid.*, 2, p. 316.