

IN MEMORIAM TARSICIUS JAN VAN BAVEL

1. Some dates

Tarsicius Jan van Bavel passed away on July 28th 2007. Van Bavel was born in Tilburg (The Netherlands) on June 7th 1923. He entered the Augustinian order on September 9th 1941, made his solemn profession in Ghent on October 6th 1945, where he was also ordained to the priesthood on April 4th 1948. Under the guidance of Othmar Perler he obtained his Doctorate in Theology at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) in 1954 with a dissertation entitled *Recherches sur la christologie de Saint Augustin. L'humain et le divin dans le Christ après Saint Augustin* (Paradosis, 10), a study that continues to be a standard work to the present day.

When the Catholic University of Leuven split in 1968, it became necessary to search for new professors to support the development of the Dutch and English language programmes within the Faculty of Theology. Prior to 1968, the faculty had been staffed – at least with respect to its full time professors – by diocesan clergy. To sustain the expansion of the new faculty, useful candidates were also sought among the regular clergy, an admirable pool of which were active in the former Centre for Ecclesial Studies (*Centrum voor Kerkelijke Studies* – CKS¹). One of the professors at CKS was Tarsicius Jan van Bavel, a scholar who had already established an academic bibliography at the moment of his appointment at the K.U.Leuven, of which the majority of the university professors of the day could only dream. In addition, van Bavel brought his experience as an international scholar to the faculty. Thanks to Dutch Augustinians such as J. Wilderbeek osa (1905-1978), and in particular E. Hendrickx osa (1909-1985), van Bavel had acquired a taste during his formation for the study of Augustine. The provincial administration of the Flemish Augustinian Province were aware of van Bavel's intellectual talents and valued his interest in Augustine. After WWII, they sent him to the Université Miséricorde in Fribourg, Switzerland, to study under the supervision of Othmar Perler. Fribourg enjoyed an international reputation and attracted considerable respect in those days in the domain of patristics

¹ The Centre for Ecclesial Studies (*Centrum voor Kerkelijke Studies* – CKS) was established in 1967 with a view to providing collective theological formation for a number of congregations and orders of male religious. The centre was located in Leuven.

in general and Augustine research in particular. Renowned scholars such as Georges de Plinval and Charles Journet were among the academic staff and van Bavel became one of their students.

In addition to his substantial list of publications and international research experience, Tars – as he was known among his confreres and friends – also brought considerable teaching experience to the faculty. As part of the formation programme of his own order, he had taught primarily patristics, Christology, Trinity and sacraments in Ghent from 1952 and later in Leuven from 1958. In his early years, it would appear that he also taught moral theology although he seldom made reference to the fact. Van Bavel was inclined by nature to dislike condescension and exaggerated rules and regulations, and I suspect that teaching moral theology was more of a burden than a passion for him, especially within the context of moral theology in the 1950's.

I can testify from a first hand basis that van Bavel was a true teacher, in the most positive sense of the term. He had a command of the material, was aware of the most recent developments in his field, combined depth of content with simplicity of expression, taught what he believed and believed what he taught. It is understandable, therefore, that the governors of the K.U. Leuven promoted this eminent scholar to professor in ordinary in 1972, only three years after his initial appointment.

The tasks assigned to him at the Faculty of Theology were many and varied, and the number of classes he taught considerable, especially at the outset. Van Bavel was expected to teach Christology, sacramentology and Latin patrology. An external observer might be inclined to imagine such a teaching assignment as heterogeneous, but Tars saw his work in a different light. He endeavoured to attune life and teaching to one another in both the classroom and his personal existence. He never understood his patristical research, for example, with Augustine as its natural focus, as a question of exploring a figure from the past – his research with respect to the rule of Augustine offers unequivocal evidence of his command of the historian's craft, but he never considered it an end in itself – but as seeking nourishment from the past's riches. T.J. van Bavel believed strongly in the adage: *historia magistra vitae*.

Van Bavel served as chair of the faculty's Department of History of Church and Theology from 1985 to 1988, a task he fulfilled with care and sensitivity. For several years he was also a member of the faculty's assessment commission in which he enjoyed considerable moral authority on account of his academic gravity, his exemplary honesty and his role as intermediary. He may have been a man of few words, but when he spoke everyone listened.

2. Van Bavel, the Augustine specialist

Tars was a first class patrologist. While it is a literary convention of the academy to praise its members for their pioneering research, in van Bavel's case convention and reality coincide. His doctoral dissertation, completed under the supervision of Othmar Perler and, as we noted above, defended in Fribourg, was given the rather open-ended title *Recherches sur la christologie de saint Augustin* (Fribourg, 1954). The title is justifiably open-ended, however, if one bears in mind that Christological patristic research in Leuven and elsewhere was dominated by themes from Greek patrology at the time van Bavel commenced his research. Van Bavel's research demonstrated the extent to which Augustine's Christ was caught up with humanity, a figure who was genuinely a *lac parvulorum*. Augustine's Christ appeared to manifest himself in the poor, the vulnerable, the wounded, the insignificant. If you want to meet Christ, the Church Father insisted, go then to the door of the church. The poor man lying there and begging for alms is pointing to Christ. To the present day, van Bavel's dissertation remains a standard text, as can be demonstrated by consulting such reference works as the *Augustinus-Lexikon* or *Augustine through the Ages*².

A second imposing work, *Répertoire bibliographique de saint Augustin 1950-1960* (*Instrumenta Patristica*, 3, Steenbrugge-Den Haag, 1963), imposing because of its more than one thousand pages, remains unequalled. The term *bibliographique* in the title does not do sufficient justice to the content of the volume. In this work, van Bavel not only collected all the scientific literature from the aforementioned period in one volume, he also provided each title with a brief summary relative to its content and added an evaluation on the basis of his now familiar 'cognac stars'. Such an evaluation was only possible after reading the studies in question and thus serves to demonstrate van Bavel's assiduous commitment to his task. While a diversity of new assignments prevented Tars from continuing this work, he saw to it that the bibliography was further maintained within the Augustinian Historical Institute by his confreres F. Van de Zande and J. Van Houtem in the first instance, and presently by Van Houtem and G. Van Reyn, based on the elaborately detailed classification system established by van Bavel himself. The bibliography

² For an important study representing a continuation of his doctoral research see van Bavel, *L'humanité du Christ comme "lac parvulorum" et comme "via" dans la spiritualité de Saint Augustin*, in *Augustiniana* 7 (1957) 245-281.

is and remains a gold mine for every researcher in the field of Augustinian studies³.

In the meantime, van Bavel had turned his attention in particular to Augustine's Rule⁴. For his entire life, van Bavel demonstrated an abiding interest in the content and implementation of the Rule. He not only provided a Dutch translation thereof with accompanying commentary (*Aurelius Augustinus. Regel voor de gemeenschap. Vertaling en commentaar* [Rule for the Community. Translation and Commentary] Averbode, 1982)⁵, but also published additional more detailed commentary on a regular basis⁶.

Van Bavel was aware that the general public were unfamiliar with Augustine on account of impressive extent of his works and his often deep and penetrating thought. It thus remains one of van Bavel's merits that he succeeded both in his talks and in his writings to make Augustine the man, monk, bishop and scholar accessible to a broader public. His book *Augustinus. Van liefde en vriendschap* (Of Love and Friendship, Baarn, 1970) represents an excellent example in this regard⁷. The present author is also struck by the fact that not only the latter book but an entire series of articles intended in the first instance for a Dutch speaking audience, were then translated into French, English or German⁸, serving as indisputable evidence that van Bavel's efforts to draw attention to the figure of Augustine and encourage contemporary study of the man were appreciated far beyond the Low Countries. Where van Bavel still had to "struggle" in 1970 to give Augustine his proper place in academic and popular literature, there was no question of a struggle in 1986, at the commemoration of the 1600th anniversary of Augustine's conversion to orthodox Christianity. On the same occasion, van Bavel published a beautifully illustrated book entitled: *Veel te laat heb ik jou liefgekreget. Leven en Werk van Augustinus van Hippo. Bij het zestiende eeuwfeest van Augustinus'*

³ This project is currently being digitalized in cooperation with Villanova University (USA) under the project name *Panta Rhei*.

⁴ Cf. "Ante omnia" et "in deum" dans la *Regula sancti Augustini*, in *Vigiliae Christianae* 12 (1958) 175-165; *Parallèles, vocabulaire et citations bibliques de la Regula sancti Augustini*, in *Augustiniana* 9 (1959) 12-77.

⁵ The work was translated into English (1984; 1986²), Indonesian (1984), Italian (1986), Spanish (1986), French (1989), German (1990), Maltese (1992) and Polish (1995).

⁶ Cf. J. Van Houtem, *Bibliographia Academica T.J. van Bavel*, in *Augustiniana* 40 (1990) XIX-XXXVI, *passim*.

⁷ Reprint in 1986. The work was translated into German (*Christ in dieser Welt. Augustinus zu Fragen seiner und unserer Zeit*, Würzburg, 1974) and English (*Christians in the World: Introduction to the Spirituality of St. Augustine*, New York, 1980).

⁸ *Bibliographia Academica*, *passim*.

bekering (Late Have I Loved Thee. The Life and Work of Augustine of Hippo. On the Occasion of the 1600th Anniversary of Augustine's Conversion, Heverlee, 1986). The book became a longstanding best-seller and was the subject of considerable local press interest.

Van Bavel, on a regular basis, succeeded in tracing and exposing material in relation to Augustine, which dovetailed seamlessly with contemporary interests while shedding a unique light on less contemporary problems. Reference can be made by way of example in this regard to the way in which van Bavel was able to establish the relevance of Augustine's *totus Christus* thinking for contemporary ecclesiology. Van Bavel demonstrated that Christ for Augustine was not a "distant" redeemer but a person to be realised in each of us: "Christus in nobis, pro nobis, de nobis"⁹, whereby the mutual relationship of love forms the cornerstone of reliable and permanent ecclesiology rather than structures thereof. According to van Bavel, Augustine had developed an ecclesiology in which there was space for freedom and in which the church was to be understood as an event of a community on pilgrimage¹⁰. A review of van Bavel's bibliography reveals the constancy with which he endeavoured, by taking Augustine as his point of departure, to devote attention to contemporary problems whilst entering into dialogue with such problems: creation theology, the sacrament of the Eucharist, reflection on the Trinity, the place of women in the church, the Petrine office or ecumenism¹¹. This is perhaps most clear when he deals with the topic of religious life. Religious to the core and an Augustinian through and through, van Bavel was nevertheless capable of speaking as a realist about the art of dying in relation to religious communities while still focusing on the core of the religious life, and all this at a time in which religious life seemed to be in a state of persistent and permanent decay and to have lost much, if not all, of its power to attract. Van Bavel revealed himself to be an advocate of genuine religious poverty in line with Augustine. He sought after new perspectives on the vow of obedience. He saw Augustine as a theologian in search of God¹², spoke

⁹ Cf. Van Bavel, *Augustinus. Van liefde en vriendschap*, pp. 93-111, p. 107; cf. also *Die Einheit des "Totus Christus" bei Augustinus*, in *Scientia Augustiniana. Festschrift A. Zumkeller zum 60. Geburtstag*, Würzburg, 1975, pp. 43-75. The theme recurs with frequency throughout van Bavel's work (cf. *Bibliographia Academica II*).

¹⁰ Cf. *Wat voor kerk kies je? De ruimheid van Augustinus' ecclesiologie*, in *TvT* 16 (1976) 355-375 (translated more than once into English and German). Van Bavel's reaction to the occasionally authoritarian stance maintained by the church in doctrinal matters became something of a standard expression "How do they know all that?"

¹¹ *Bibliographia Academica*, passim; *Bibliographia Academica II*, passim.

¹² Van Bavel frequently insisted in his lectures that negative theology also had a place in the theology of Augustine; cf. in this regard, the detailed study *God in*

about the core of prayer in Augustine¹³, was able to present him as a liberation theologian in the best sense of the term – with respect to Augustine's option for the poor¹⁴ –, discussed less “popular” values of his day such as humility from an Augustinian perspective, and was always in search of ways to build bridges between Augustine's world and ours¹⁵. Like Augustine, van Bavel was a man who could not survive without his confreres. Like Augustine, van Bavel was a man who considered common life in friendship and love as the foundation of religious life. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the major part of van Bavel's writings were devoted to this theme and exhibit a clear preference for the theme of love, whereby he cherished profoundly Augustine's idea: if God be love, then love is truly God¹⁶.

Van Bavel not only found it important for the public to hear and read about Augustine, he also considered it opportune for them to read Augustine himself. Reference should be made in this regard to his valuable translation work. His translation of Augustine's sermons on the First Letter of John was published as early as 1969 under the title *Eenheid en liefde. Augustinus: Preken over de eerste brief van Johannes* (Unity and love. Augustine: Sermons on the First Letter of John, Heverlee; reprint 1992). His translation of Augustine's *Commentary on Psalm 118/119* was published in Baarn in 1996. The first complete Dutch translation of Augustine's *De Trinitate: On the Trinity* was published in Leuven just short of a decade later in 2005. In the last year of his life, Tars made a start on his translation of Augustine's *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate*¹⁷ and in spite of his failing health he managed to complete it. He thus symbolically occupied himself to the last with the essence of being Christian: faith, hope, and charity.

between Affirmation and Negation According to Augustine, in J.T. Lienhard, E.C. Muller, R.J. Teske (eds.), *Collectanea Augustiniana. Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, New York, 1993, pp. 73-97; cf. also *Spreken of zwijgen over God bij Augustinus*, in *TvT* 37 (1997) 132-148.

¹³ Based on texts drawn from the works of Augustine himself, van Bavel put together a book of prayer entitled *Verlangen bidt altijd. Bidden met Augustinus*, Leuven-Heverlee, 1988; 1989². He also studied Augustine's ideas on prayer more systematically in *Als je hart bidt: Augustinus' leer over het gebed*, Heverlee, 1996; 2001² (Spanish translation in 2001, English and German translation forthcoming in 2008).

¹⁴ *Keuze voor de armen bij Augustinus*, in *Collationes* 21 (1991) 73-88 (translations in English, German, Italia and Spanish; cf. *Bibliographia Academica II*).

¹⁵ See in this regard, numerous publications on the said themes in *Bibliographia Academica* and *Bibliographia Academica II*.

¹⁶ Cf. *De kern van het religieuze leven: evangelische spanning die onze gemeenschap drijft*, Tiel, 1973; *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, Villanova, 1996; *Charisma: Gemeenschap. Gemeenschap als plaats voor de Heer*, Leuven, 2000 (German translation in 2000; French translation in 2003; Spanish translation in 2004).

¹⁷ The translation is set to be published in 2008.

3. Van Bavel, director of the Augustinian Historical Institute

T.J. van Bavel played an important role in establishing the journal *Augustiniana* and the Augustinian Historical Institute that emerged therefrom. The journal appeared for the first time in 1951. It not only published studies on Augustine's life, work and thought, but also devoted a substantial amount of attention to the history of the Augustinian order and the insights of Augustinian authors. The journal also exhibited considerable interest in the history of Jansenism. Van Bavel served as editor of the journal and head of the institute from 1973 to 2001. The journal's merits can be summed up in a few short words: from the outset, it focused its attention on the international research community. Long before the emergence of international editorial boards and referee procedures, both were incorporated as policy for the journal. As editor in chief, van Bavel was the first to read incoming contributions. Discretion and authority enabled him to convince authors to fine-tune, rewrite, emend and even omit passages from their work. The journal provided young researchers with the opportunity to present the early results of their studies to the academic community. Many academics contributed to the journal with regularity throughout their careers and it is evident from a recent survey of European academic journals that *Augustiniana* has earned its international credentials. Van Bavel also played an important role in the development of the institute. Together with his confrere Norbertus Teeuwen (1910-1973), van Bavel constructed the centre step by step, or better said, book by book. The institute's library now enjoys an international reputation and includes virtually all of the international literature in the field. The Augustine bibliography referred to at the beginning of this oration has also found its rightful place within the institute. Tars was justifiably proud of the institute. He was likewise well aware that its development would not have been possible without the financial and personal support of the Flemish and Dutch provinces of the Order of Saint Augustine, for which he was eternally grateful. The fact that careful leadership of the institute did not coincide in van Bavel's mind with an attitude of protectionism is evident from his complete cooperation in the integration of the institute into the network of the Maurits Sabbe Library of the Faculty of Theology (K.U. Leuven). The said integration led to a more intensive use of the institute's library, his library, something that brought him enormous pleasure. It allowed him to make his considerable expertise available to the last to a new generation of young, talented scholars from every corner of the globe.

4. Van Bavel, the systematic theologian

As we stated at the beginning of this oration, van Bavel not only taught Augustinian studies at the Faculty of Theology, he was also responsible for courses in Christology, Trinity, and the sacraments. Various bibliographical surveys testify to the fact that his publications in the domain of systematic theology were also worthy of distinction. It is well known that the Flemish Dominican E. Schillebeeckx had an important role to play in the development of Christological thought in his capacity as professor at the University of Nijmegen. Van Bavel represents a parallel in this regard, who likewise made a significant contribution to the renewal of Christology¹⁸. The Leuven systematic theologian J. Haers draws attention to van Bavel's particular interest in "a hermeneutic of the event of Jesus Christ, rooted in questions surrounding the meaning of Jesus for contemporary men and women, for those who have lived through the ecclesial and faith crisis of the 1960's." Van Bavel kept abreast of theological developments and was one of the first to introduce the theology of Rudolf Bultmann into Dutch speaking regions¹⁹. He also followed the thought of Piet Schoonenberg and had an enormous affinity with the thought of Edward Schillebeeckx. Van Bavel did not limit his loyalty towards his colleagues in the theological endeavour to empty words. In the controversy surrounding remain Schillebeeckx he published: *Hermeneutische knelpunten in een theologisch dispuut: Latente vooronderstellingen in de stukken van de 'zaak Schillebeeckx – Hermeneutical obstructions in a theological dispute: Latent presuppositions in the documents relating to the 'Schillebeeckx affair'*²⁰. More than 25 years ago, van Bavel expressed an interest in ecological theology in his: *Kosmische christologie of theologie van de natuur? Een verkenning rond de theologie van Joseph Sittler – Cosmic Christology or theology of nature? An exploration of the theology of Joseph Sittler*²¹. The aforementioned publications stand out for their clarity of expression, interest in important theological themes, and enormous respect for colleagues whose problems with church authorities were a cause of much concern on van Bavel's part, especially as he had come to know them as sincere and authentic theologians in search of God.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Haers, *Dogmatische theologie*, in L. Gevers & L. Kenis (eds.), *De Faculteit Godgeleerdheid in de K.U. Leuven (1969-1995)*, Leuven, 1997, pp. 167-168.

¹⁹ 'Actualisme' in de theologie, een bezinning naar aanleiding van R. Bultmann, in *TvT* 6 (1966) 1-25.

²⁰ Cf. *TvT* 20 (1980) 340-360.

²¹ *TvT* 20 (1980) 280-303.

5. To conclude...

The Festschrift presented to T.J. van Bavel on the occasion of his retirement by the Augustinian Historical Institute and the Faculty of Theology (K.U. Leuven) bore the adage *condiscipuli in schola Christi*. For Tars there was no doubt that Christians were expected to be liberating people as Jesus Christ himself was liberating. Through the many ways in which Tars expressed the love of Christ down through the years and in his concrete role as part of the *totus Christus*, the man who quoted Augustine's words "If God is love, then love is God" so frequently and with much pleasure, demonstrated how God is close to us in our fellow human beings. As a fellow disciple in the school of Christ, he was also aware that when it came to important matters, when it came to fundamental questions such as suffering (and Tars suffered) and death, there was no more room for masters and disciples within the Christian faith. Rather we are all fellow disciples in the school of the one who suffered as an example to all. Together with Augustine, he can now affirm: "Insofar as I could, insofar as you gave me the power, I have sought you."

The last written message I received from Tars contained the following: "Only in the finite do we attune ourselves to the infinite." Tars taught us to comprehend the infinite in the finite. Now that he has taken his place in the infinite, there can be little doubt that he will remain close to us in the finite. Such was the Tars we all knew, Tarsicius Jan van Bavel, a man worthy of our gratitude.

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Addition 1990

- *Regel für die Gemeinschaft, Einf. und Kommentar von Tarsicius Jan van Bavel*; ins Deutsche uebers. von Lutzger Harstkötter, (Augustinianus Heine, 6) Würzburg, 1990, 138 p.
- *The Creator and the Integrity of Creation in the Fathers of the Church especially in Saint Augustine*, in *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990) 1-31.
- *Augustine's View on Women*, (Ever ancient... ever new, 4), Villanova, 1990, 53 p.
- *The Meaningless of Suffering and Attempts of Interpretation*, in *God and Human Suffering*, L. Lambrecht, R. F. Collins (eds), Leuven, 1990, 121-136.
- *Where is God when Human Beings Suffer?*, in *God and Human Suffering*, L. Lambrecht, R. F. Collins (eds), Leuven, 1990, 431-451.