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A CHRISTIAN IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE
IN THE LIGHT OF SAINT AUGUSTINE'S
ENARRATIONES IN PSALMOS

Abstract. The question of Christian's identity was an imperative issue in the socio-religious realities of the fourth and fifth centuries. This topic was undertaken by St. Augustine as a priest of the community of Hippo. Taking examples from the life of the faithful people it explicates the events from the fundamental perspective, i.e. from the point of view of a Christian. This publication presents the first part of the Christian attitude with regard to others. The second part is devoted to the overriding respect for the world in which people live as Christians. The third part presents the Christian as a citizen of the Roman Empire. Numerous moralistic indications create a somewhat handbook for Christians and present the concrete postulates for Christian formation.

Key words: Christ; Christian; neighbour; sacraments; interpersonal relations; citizen of the world; the Roman Empire.

Jesus' words to his first disciples: „You are salt for the earth. You are light for the world” (cf. Mt 5: 13-14) are still applicable over the centuries. Every age in the history of Christianity in its proper socio-cultural context embodies the message of the Sermon on the Mount. A pictorial comparison referring to

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the role played by salt and light is used to reflect on Christian identity. This issue has occupied an important place in the pastoral work of the Catholic Church in the fourth and fifth centuries in the northern part of Africa. It was reflected particularly in Bishop of Hippo's homiletic teachings. The bedrock of this work is constituted by a comprehensive commentary on the *Book of Psalms* titled *Enarrationes in Psalmos* – released in a binary series prepared by Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana. Taking into account the substantive content of the work, in which on the one hand one can find a systematic exposition and explanation of individual psalms, and on the other hand one can identify numerous references to the mundane life of the inhabitants of Hippo, one can thus perceive the value in its historical accidentality – caused by specific circumstances. Saint Augustine plays here the dual role of an interpreter of the Revelation and the pastor of Hippo Regius' community – who explicates the events from the fundamental perspective, i.e. from the point of view of a Christian.

The society of the North Africa in the days of Saint Augustine was an intricate structure of various religious traditions¹. The religious freedom and peace enjoyed by the Church in the days of St. Augustine did not guarantee a high level of Christian life. The growth in numbers of Christians had no consequences for their quality of life and the testimony of life that they had been giving. The essential questions that arise in this context will concern the quality of Christian witnessing; what differentiates a Christian from his non-Christian neighbours, and how to implement the ideal of being a faithful follower of Christ in everyday circumstances?

The article, with regard to the above-mentioned issues, consists of three parts. The first displays how to be a Christian in interpersonal relations; part two will show the relationship that should characterise a Christian with the world around him, and the third concerns the attitude of a Christian as a citizen of the Empire and the manner of his functioning in the organism of the state².

¹ See G. CHARLES-PICARD, *La civilisation de l'Afrique romaine*, Parigi 1959; IDEM, *La Carthage de saint Augustin*, Parigi 1965; F. DECRET, M. FANTAR, *L'Afrique du Nord dans l'Antiquité*, Parigi 1981.

² The presented work does not incorporate the issue of the relationship between a Christian and God and Church. These issues will be discussed in a separate article.

I. BEING A CHRISTIAN
– IN RELATION TO NEIGHBOURS

Back then, in the Hippo municipality there lived side by side diverse in terms of social status and cultural background Christians, pagans, Jews and heretics³. Augustine emphasizes that Christians are a large group saying in one of his speeches: „There is no home without a Christian or a family in which Christians would not be more numerous than the Gentiles”⁴. The relations between different representatives could be described as appropriate, though often there occurred hostile incidents in everyday life principally between Catholics and the Donatists.

In such a situation of diversity in terms of religious, social, and cultural aspects the art of cohabitation becomes of great import. In this context the key issue for Augustine to deal with is the following query: Who is my neighbour?

The immediate context prompting one to reflect on the relationship of Christians and their neighbours were the observations of misconduct among the members of the Hippo community. They expressed themselves in a form of contempt shown towards the unbelievers and those who worshiped inanimate nature, and thus called the „worshippers of stones”⁵. The bishop denouncing such attitudes draws attention to the fact that the heathen may repent, begin to worship God and then surpass the believers in terms of faith. „So our neighbours are hidden away in people who do not belong to the Church, or are afar from us, hidden in the Church”⁶.

Bishop of Hippo disregarding the visible and obvious differences discerns a unity on the ontological plane that is in human nature. He explains that „one cannot think of any differences in species where there is a common nature”⁷. The sole concept of neighbour is explicated by St. Augustine based especially on this fundamental notion: „Owing to bodily birth we are all neighbours for

³ Cf. P. BROWN, *Augustin of Hippo*, California 2000; See M. TERKA, *Nauczanie św. Augustyna o żydach w świetle Enarrationes in Psalmos*, VoxP 32 (2012), vol. 57, pp. 659-680; B. BLUMENKRANZ, *Augustin et les Juifs, Augustin et le Judaïsme*, Rech Aug 1 (1958), pp. 25-241; G.G. WILLIS, *St. Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, London 1950.

⁴ AUGUSTINUS, *Sermo* 302, 19, PL 38, 1392: „[...] nullam domum inveniri, ubi non sint Christiani”.

⁵ Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, (then: *Enarrationes in Ps.*) 25(2), 2, NBA 25/1, 333.

⁶ *Ibidem*; Cf. A. HAMMAN, *La vita quotidiana nell’Africa di s. Agostino*, Milano 1989, pp.160-161.

⁷ AUGUSTINUS, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 118 (8) 2, NBA 25/3, 1168.

each other”⁸. Consequently, it follows that all people share a common experience of earthly fate and existence. On such basis the Bishop displays to his faithful the proper attitude towards the Gentiles, for as he continues: „you should treat as a neighbour every person previous to being a Christian”⁹. This view he foregrounds on God’s omniscience with regard to human lives and sensitises his faithful to the mystery of man’s nature, which only God truly comprehends.

Augustine reinforces such a call for respect for every human being when he introduces alongside the ontological plane another dimension, i.e. the eschatological perspective. In due respect for the neighbour – one should also bear in mind the future of heavenly heritage – because one „does not know what happens to the one, who now is nothing”¹⁰.

Another erroneous tendency among the Hippo Regius’ believers which the Bishop of Hippo noticed was the treating of the Gentiles as less significant. It expressed itself in the belief that a heathen does not deserve respect, honesty, or truth. Augustine condemned such attitudes, moreover, put the Gentiles as a model for Christians when he wrote: „How many pagans feed the hungry, clothe the naked, show their hospitality, visit the sick, and comfort the imprisoned? How many does this?”¹¹.

Setting forth the requirements in the process of formation of interpersonal relations Augustine bases it on the central commandment to „love your neighbour as yourself.” Realisation of this commandment in practice obliges believers to present love and care having in mind a peaceful coexistence¹². At the same time, it should be noted that Bishop’s concern is accompanied by a large realism and good knowledge of their faithful, as is clear in the words: „You cannot however do without disagreements as between brothers. (...). But there must not be such which kill agreement, nullify love”¹³. According to Augustine a difference in opinion cannot destroy the unity.

Bishop of Hippo was aware that sacraments remain not without an impact on the lives of Christians. He believed in their transforming power, hence he was convinced that accepting the sacraments helped to shape a Christian’s proper behaviour. The ones receiving the sacraments, consequently, should be

⁸ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps. 25* (2) 2, NBA 25/1, 332.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps. 83*, 7, NBA 25/2, 1186.

¹² Cf. IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps. 33* (2) 19, NBA 25/1, 658.

¹³ Ibidem.

endowed with a code of behaviour. The bishop warns against false Christianity: „Whilst everyone receiving the sacrament of baptism call themselves Christians, not all live worthy of this sacrament”¹⁴.

The bishop points to the apostolic duties towards his neighbour, which should be met by every Christian. A Christian is someone whose heart is in the hands of God and does well¹⁵. The style in which is carried out the good is not indifferent to the bishop as well: „Whatever you do, do it with joy: then you are doing well and you do it well”¹⁶. A Christian is characterised also by a spirit of sacrifice for his brother and instead of his brother, what according to Augustine, is tantamount to the sacrifice for Christ: „Anyone giving his life for the brethren, give it for Christ, as they feed his brother so they feed Christ”¹⁷.

In the light of Bishop of Hippo’s teachings a Christian is a man who discerns the needs of others, while discarding his own egoistic attitudes. „See everyone who in some way is poor. Because perhaps you are rich in this regard in which he is poor, and can lend him. (...) Love each other in this manner, love so. Do not be focused only on yourselves. Pay attention to those in need around you”¹⁸. Augustine encourages the believer to seek out the needy: „Be curious, be discerning. Look out, see who lives of what, how he manages. (...) Be curious, and you will have an understanding for the poor and the underprivileged”¹⁹. In Saint Augustine’s view the radicalism of love for our neighbour is to be the hallmark of Christians. The above-presented Bishop of Hippo’s postulates directed to the faithful are the essence of Christianity.

II. CHRISTIAN – IN RELATION TO THE WORLD

The relationship of Christians to the world is described by St. Augustine on the basis of the teachings of St. Paul the Apostle²⁰. The Christian is to use the world, not to serve it; is to utilise the world, not to live for the world. Living in the world is meant to be treated as an exile what should aid one in avoiding

¹⁴ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 47, 8, NBA 25/1, 1180.

¹⁵ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 83, 7, NBA 25/2, 1186.

¹⁶ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 91, 5, NBA 25/3, 194.

¹⁷ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps. Ps.* 90(2) 13, NBA 25/3, 184.

¹⁸ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 125,13, NBA 25/4, 132; Cf. A. ECKMANN, *Troska o ubogich w nauczaniu i działalności świętego Augustyna*, VoxP 16 (1996), vol. 30-31, pp. 161-182.

¹⁹ AUGUSTINUS, *Enarrationes in Ps* 103 (3) 10, NBA 25/3, 718.

²⁰ See ST. PAUL, Letters: 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians.

any attachments to the worldly. The faithful should perceive themselves as exiles from their homeland – a much recurring theme to St. Augustine’s works. *Homo viator* is a proper name of a Christian: „Beware – warns Bishop – how you act during the pilgrimage of life. Allow not Babylon to be the cause of our pleasure, we have not forgotten about our city of Jerusalem. While your body is still stuck in Babylonia, let your hearts go to Jerusalem ahead”²¹. The progress of Christians through the land cannot be lazy or deprived of emotion, but it has to have the right speed, i.e. the zeal and dynamism, which are granted to all²².

Christians are despised by the world, are experiencing oppression, they live among the wicked, but those difficulties and anguish should not cause grief. For, according to the Bishop of Hippo, the only true torment for a Christian heart is to be the one that does not live with Christ; the fact that one still pilgrimages to his homeland and longs for it²³.

III. CHRISTIAN – A CITIZEN

The Christians were citizens of the Roman Empire. They undertook national service at different levels of administration. St. Augustine, with regard to the service for state, grants the faithful with numerous tips: „A citizen of the kingdom of heaven is manages something on the ground: for example, wears purple, is an officer, aedile, proconsul, Caesar, rules the republic of the earth. However, his heart is raised upward, if it is a believing, pious Christian”²⁴. The Christian lives in the perspective of heaven, however, with commitment to complete the earthly duties²⁵. The Republic of the Earth – says Augustine – has our citizens managing its affairs. For in fact how many faithful, how many good people govern their cities, are judges, chiefs, provincial governors and kings? All the righteous and good, holding in their hearts nothing except for the glorious things that were spoken about you, heavenly city of God²⁶.

Christians fulfilling the obligations imposed on them by the state remain faithful to the laws of God. „The servants are ordered to endure wicked and

²¹ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 148, 4, NBA 25/4, 872.

²² Cf. IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 147, 22, NBA 25/4, 848.

²³ Cf. IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 122, 2, NBA 25/4, 38.

²⁴ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 51, 6, NBA 25/2, 10.12.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 61, 8, NBA 25/2, 356.

troublesome masters. The citizens of Jerusalem were commanded to suffer the citizens of Babylon and show them submission than even if they were citizens of Babylon”²⁷.

The activities of Christians in the world, which Augustine with a certain biblical predilection, called the citizens of Jerusalem, is to denote the good. Christians – according to the Bishop of Hippo – are good potentates. „What they are doing in order to build, they do carefully and in a way that anything could survive”²⁸. Christians, as citizens of the earthly city, guided by justice and truth are honest in performing their duties. Their activity is to serve and not dominion, although they have been bestowed power.

St. Augustine also regulates the relationship between masters and servants in their homes. He explains the situation in which a Christian has got a human master: „You have not become a servant in order to consider it a degradation. When at the behest of Christ you are serving a man, you do not serve him but the one who told you this”²⁹. A Christian should not discredit to serve even an evil master, with all his mind, with all his goodness, will and love. Augustine refers as well to the history and points to the emperor Julian the Apostate, who was an idolater, under whom served however Christian soldiers. „If he [Julian the Apostate] sometimes wanted them to worship the idols, that they make sacrifices with incense, they put up God above him. On the other hand, when he commanded them: line up in formation, go up against those people, they immediately obeyed. They made a distinction between the eternal Lord from the temporal. They were, however, subordinate to the temporal due to obedience to the eternal”³⁰.

CONCLUSION

According to the Bishop of Hippo the realization of the ideal of a Christian is to harmonise in itself the above-mentioned notions. A Christian’s life is to be a testimony of belonging to God. In the light of the findings it should be said that Christianity in terms of St. Augustine is relational and open. This specific program and way of life of others, is far from passivity, on the contrary, it is full of dynamism, which remains at the service of another man.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ IDEM, *Enarrationes in Ps.* 124, 7, NBA 25/2, 10.12.

³⁰ Ibidem.

Christian – as a follower of Christ is characterised by clarity of attitude. A Christian is guided by love and respect towards others with awareness of the transience of earthly world his commitment as a citizen of the state is characterised by honesty and faithfulness to God's rules. Despite the passing ages this issue has not lost none of its universality and freshness, and indeed may become a reference that for the contemporary Christian will provide many valuable clues. The results of analysis of St. Augustine's texts should be taken into account in the formation of a mature testimony of Christian life.

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CHRZEŚCIJANIN W CESARSTWIE RZYMSKIM W ŚWIETLE *ENARRATIONES IN PSALMOS* ŚW. AUGUSTYNA

Streszczenie

Kwestia tożsamości chrześcijańskiej stanowiła ważne zagadnienie w religijno-społecznych realiach IV/V w. Stała się tematem, który podejmował, św. Augustyn jako duszpasterz gminy hippońskiej. Czerpiąc przykłady z życia wiernych, interpretuje wydarzające się sytuacje na podstawie fundamentalnej opcji, jaką jest bycie chrześcijaninem. Prezentowana publikacja w części pierwszej ukazuje postawy chrześcijanina w odniesieniu do bliźnich. W myśl biskupa Hippony relacje interpersonalne pomiędzy mieszkańcami Hippony bez względu na wyznanie czy pochodzenie mają być budowane na wzajemnym szacunku i braterskiej miłości. Druga część poświęcona jest zasadniczemu odniesieniu w stosunku do świata, w którym żyje chrześcijanin. Wierzący w Chrystusa ma traktować życie ziemskie jako wędrówkę ku wieczności i nie może zapominać o zmienności i przemijającym charakterze rzeczywistości świata. Część trzecia ukazuje chrześcijanina jako obywatela Cesarstwa Rzymskiego, który jest zobowiązany do rzetelnej i sumiennej służby państwowej, pozostając wiernym Bożym prawom. Liczne wskazania parenetyczne tworzą swoiste *vademecum* dla chrześcijan, są konkretnymi postulatami w formacji chrześcijańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Chrystus; chrześcijanin; bliźni; sakramenty; relacje interpersonalne; obywatel; świat; Cesarstwo Rzymskie.