

THE HUMANITY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE, PART 2

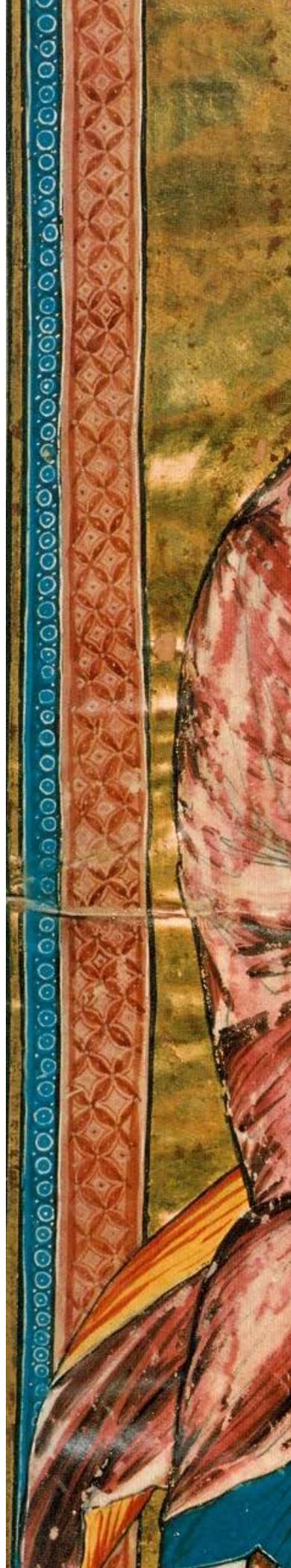
BY LEONARD DELORENZO

GRAND OPENING



Previously in this series, I argued that renouncing the closed and, ultimately, solitary meaning of existence precedes living in the way of Christianity (see “Renouncing Closure” in 2.3). I presented Friedrich Nietzsche—who is named in the opening sections of Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*—as the one who brazenly avows this closed way that Christianity decries. Based upon this preliminary work, let us now commence our exploration of the humanity of Christian doctrine by turning to a figure who announces the decisive importance of the first article of the Creed, thereby both anticipating and foiling Nietzsche’s protest: St. Augustine of Hippo.

As if addressing Nietzsche himself at a distance of more than 1400 years, Augustine incisively critiques the vicious circularity of the eternal recurrence and the full-throated affirmation of life in itself as a closed phenomenon. In Book XII of *City of God*, Augustine writes, “The ungodly will walk in a circle; not because their life is going to come round again in the course of those revolutions which they believe in, but because the way of their error, the way of false doctrine, goes round in circles.”¹ To Augustine (and Popes Benedict XVI and Francis after him), Nietzsche is one who has succumbed to complacency in the worst degree: he cannot break out of his closed realm of interpretation because he staunchly refuses to ask *the* question of existence.





"God the Architect of the Universe"
from the *Bible Moralisée* (13th c.);
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Augustine's praise of questioning is perhaps most lyrical in this segment of Sermon 241:

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everything, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be controlled, the invisible souls controlling them; question all things. They all answer you, "Here we are, look: we are beautiful."²

If nothing else, Augustine is a habitual questioner. Seldom does he miss an opportunity to ask a question about any manner of life, whether the deeply hidden mystery of the human will or the utter ubiquity "of the air, amply spread around everything." His habit of questioning is so strong that when he looks upon his own life, he cannot help but meditate upon his own existence through a barrage of questions, one after another, looking for the deeper meaningfulness and beauty of his own created nature.³ It seems as though Augustine takes it for granted that there is something about existence that invites and even demands questioning. There is not just something 'there' for Augustine, but rather meaning intended in each thing and all things that he finds.

As he questions, Augustine repeatedly—almost obsessively—returns to the creation narratives of Genesis. It is as if all questions lead to something in these narratives, or even that these narratives give form to all other questions. In his *Confessions*, Augustine reads his life forward from birth to conversion, to an eschatological vision and on to a meditation on time and memory, only to arrive at a representation of Genesis 1 in the closing books. Once he provides his allegorical interpretation of Genesis 1 at the end of the work, the entire story up to that point is revealed anew as the story of a life patterned after the act of God in creation, bringing something out of nothing and giving coherence to what was chaos. That an allegorical interpretation is possible at all signifies a primary conviction that there exists a meaningfulness that exceeds what is apparent.

Toward a similar end but in a more sustained and systematic manner, Books X and XI of *City of God* provide the key for the critical and fundamental distinction between the earthly and the heavenly cities. These two books provide the bridge from Part One to Part Two of Augustine's *magnum opus*. As these books connect the two parts, they provide a lens through which to read the whole work.

It is significant, then, that what is presented in these two books is a sustained meditation upon Genesis 1. Book X offers the antidote to the disease described in the first nine books. The disease is the Empire's arrogation of all meaning to itself, such that the Empire refers all things back to itself and thereby hegemonizes meaning. All meaning—i.e., the entire economy of signifiers—is referred back to the glory of the Empire, with nothing left outside of this economy. Augustine will ultimately name this the “rule of the self”⁴ and mark it as the standard operating procedure for the earthly city.

The antidote to this disease is wonder. Wonder is the implicit admission that there is something outside of oneself—or the Empire—to which all may be referred. Only the humble may wonder, for wonder necessarily points one beyond the closed economy of ‘self.’⁵ The source of humanity's illness is that we have been dulled to the wonder of existence: “And whatever miracle happens in this world, it is certainly a lesser marvel than the whole world, that is to say, the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, which God undoubtedly made. But the manner of its making is as hidden from man and as incomprehensible as is he who made it.”⁶

Beginning in earnest with Book XI of *City of God*, Augustine seeks to reawaken wonder. He invites and even demands that one question all that is. *Why do things exist? How did they come to be? Who created them?*⁷ Such questioning pierces through the orb of

self-interpretation and self-reliance. Augustine proceeds from a fundamental conviction that the world “bears a kind of silent testimony to the fact of its creation.”⁸ It is this conviction that prompts him to ask a question of all the earth, and precisely this submission to questioning opens up to ever more significant realms of meaning.

At the bottom of all this questioning—both at its end and at its beginning—is the one irreducible fact of all creation: it comes from the freedom of God, which surpasses understanding.⁹ “There is only one cause for the creation of the world—the purpose of God's goodness in creation.”¹⁰ To say that the universe is created in the Trinity—as he does throughout this eleventh book—is to say that it is created in an unfathomable freedom that cannot be understood in reference to something else. All of creation bears the marks of the freedom of its Creator.¹¹ One can follow all things back and forward to the freedom of God. This is the beauty that shows itself when one questions any aspect of creation. The source of the universe is freedom, not destiny.

Augustine's bedrock claim is that there is an irreducible purpose to existence. The purpose is hid in the sovereignty of God, who creates out of nothing—i.e., from no preexisting matter, no compelling reason outside of himself, no lack within himself. To ask a question of any part of existence is to move towards the singular question about existence itself: ‘Why?’

For Augustine, this question is *the* opening to the mystery of God, who gives coherence to what was incoherent, form to what was formless, and existence to what was non-existent (see Gn 1:1; Jn 1:1–3; Rom 4:17). With the force of a divine command, creation pleads with the human person: *Be opened* (cf. Mk 7:34)! *Ask about my beauty! In whole and in part, I testify to the beauty of the Creator!*

As the habitual questioner, Augustine stands as a paradigmatic figure of the Christian tradition. Like the tradition to which he contributed so significantly, Augustine takes existence to be inexhaustibly meaningful. This meaning is secured in God's freedom, which arises from nothing but God's selfsame essence and activity. The freedom of God redounds to the Wisdom of God, in whom all things came to be and without whom nothing came to be (see Jn 1:3).¹²

The world is created—this is the decisive thing for Augustine. As created, all things seek to be referred to their source, and this signification is meant to provoke and cultivate wonder in human beings. When the Christian professes belief in *God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth*, he assumes the humble posture of wonder and waits for the gift of understanding the meaning of creation.



NOTES

1 Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 2003), XII.14.

2 Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 241 <http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20000721_agostino_en.html> (Accessed 7 April 2012).

3 See Khaled Anatolios, “Quest, Questions, and Christ in Augustine’s *Confessions*” in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2000), 47–76.

4 *City of God*, XIV.3–4.

5 Ibid., X.29.

6 Ibid., X.12.

7 See *ibid.*, XI.24.

8 Ibid., XI.4.

9 See especially *ibid.*, XI.5, 16.

10 Ibid., XI.23.

11 Ibid., XI.26–27.

12 Ibid., XI.10.



Leonard DeLorenzo is the Director of Notre Dame Vision in the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, where he concurrently teaches in the Department of Theology.