

A Contemporary Assessment Of St. Augustine's *On The Good Of Widowhood*

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Introduction

Augustine was criticized, even in his own day, for his account of 'original sin', that all the sons of Adam must suffer not only physical death, but are born with hearts disposed to sin, so disposed that without the saving waters of baptism and the saving grace which predestines, we are forever damned.¹ Reading Romans 5:12 literally, "...as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned", it seems on the face of it quite unjust to visit the sins of a father on his children. But the root of sin, what therefore makes it "original" and inheritable, is our human nature itself, the antinomy between flesh and spirit, reason and nature, in all Adam's progeny. Hegel gives to the account of the Fall a distinctly philosophical significance:

Man, created in the image of God, lost, it is said, his state of absolute contentment, by eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Sin consists here only in knowledge: this is the sinful element, and by it man is stated to have trifled away his natural happiness. This is a deep truth, that evil lies in consciousness: for brutes are neither evil nor good; the merely natural man quite as little. ... The state of innocence, the paradisaical condition, is that of the brute. Paradise is a park, where only brutes, not men, can remain. For the brute is one with God only implicitly (not consciously). ... The Fall is therefore the eternal Myth of man in fact the very transition by which he becomes man.²

¹ In his own day by Pelagians, most notably by Julian, bishop of Eclanum; later by critics too numerous to survey, among them Kant who criticizes Augustine's position as a doctrine of "inherited sin". *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, 1st ed. 1793, Bk I observ.iv, note to "in Adam all have sinned." Contemporary feminist critics include Elaine Pagels in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (1988), Rosemary Ruether, Mary Daly and others; see the bibliography in *Augustine Through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, 1999, Article: "Women", 892.

² G.W.F.Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, London, 1890, Part I, sect. ii, chap. iii, 223. See also *The Encyclopedia Logic*, Prelim. Conception, § 24

It is not because of some peculiarity of Adam that he sinned, but rather that man is by his nature evil, at odds with himself. His innocence in the state of nature is for him an "unnatural" state, the starting point which must be transformed, a transformation that begins in infancy itself, as Augustine has described it with great insight and precision in *Confessions*, Bk. I. God's Curse, the penalties which follows Adam's fall, are clearly those which separate him from purely natural beings: he must work for his living, Eve must bring forth children in travail, for Nature is not their mother; expelled from the Garden, they know they will die.³

Nowhere, perhaps, is the conflict of reason and nature more evident than in our sexuality. We are not like animals for whom sexual relations are perfectly natural. Rather, as Augustine observes, sexuality in us is a source of embarrassment and shame. Adam and Eve, once they have sinned and have knowledge of good and evil, clothe their nakedness. We can command our limbs to obey us, and they do so barring illness or injury; but as Augustine vividly reminds us, lust (*libido*) "refuses to be a servant not only to the will to beget but even for mere self-indulgence", for although lust is sometimes "an unwanted intruder", it also "sometimes abandons the eager lover and desire itself deserts desire." [*De civ. Dei*, xiv, 10] By Augustine's account, this would not have been the case in Paradise. There, the sexual organs would have been "the obedient servants of mankind, at the bidding of the will in the same way as the other" [*De civ. Dei*, xiv, 23]. In the Paradisal state, man and woman lived in unalloyed bliss, their love for God and each other unperturbed by desire [*libido*] since, as Augustine puts it, "...the beloved object was always at hand for their enjoyment." [*De civ. Dei*, xiv, 10]. There would not have been difference and the movement toward overcoming difference which human emotions engender.

But there would have been sexual intercourse and procreation with children to be loved. Augustine is clear that God's command to "increase and multiply" in accordance with God's blessing was the gift of marriage before man's Fall, something quite evident in the physical difference of male and female, that they might be "two in one flesh".⁴ How this might take place without lust [*libido*] Augustine admits is such that the very mention of the subject arouses a prurient interest and suggests only "the turbulent lust which we experience, not the calm act of will imagined in my speculation."⁵ There would have been that perfect tranquillity of mutual love and felicity, such that "without feeling the allurements of passion goading him on, the husband would have relaxed on his wife's bosom in tranquillity of mind and with no impairment of his body's integrity."⁶ But in Paradise as subsequently, sexual intercourse is solely for the sake of having children.

³ In the Garden they were spared from the inevitability of death "not by that ultimate immortality, which is absolute and indissoluble", says Augustine "but by the tree of life." *De civ. Dei* xiii, 23. Adam and Eve were therefore naturally mortal.

⁴ Procreation was originally decreed to complete God's creation by spreading the human race over all the earth; after the Fall, it was required to check the effects of mortality; once the number of saints, traditionally taken to be replacements for the fallen angels, has been completed, procreation will cease.

⁵ *De civ. Dei* xiv, 26. He admits that "a sense of shame inhibits my speech, though reason supplies abundant material for thought." *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Since there is not lust in Paradise, sexual relations between Adam and Eve would never have occurred except for that purpose.

We live in history, after the Fall, specifically in the sixth age of the world, the *senectus mundi*, looking toward the end. How should Christians conduct their lives in this interim, this time between the Incarnation and the Parousia?⁷ Augustine has said what he could about human conduct in Paradise. He has something to say also about Christian conduct at the end of history, after the Final Judgment and the resurrection of the body. We turn briefly only to those reflections which might be relevant to the conduct of the married and the widowed who live neither in Paradise nor in Heaven, but in the 'pilgrim city' in this world.

Augustine has no doubt that in Heaven both men and women will have their appropriate bodies, all defects having been removed. The woman's sex, contrary to the opinion of some, is not a defect but entirely natural. Women will be free of the necessity of sexual intercourse, since free from child-bearing; her female organs will be part of a new beauty, not exciting lust in the beholder, but praises to God who created *ex nihilo* and freed what he created from corruption. [*De civ. Dei*, xxii, 17] The creation of woman from Adam's rib is for Augustine clearly a prophesy of Christ's relation to the Church: Adam's sleep an image of Christ's death; from Adam's side, as from Christ's side there flowed blood and water, i.e. the sacraments of the Church by which it is "built up", just as God from Adam's rib "built up" the woman; and although woman is created by God just as is man, still she is created "out of man" signifying their unity and foreshadowing the unity of Christ and the Church. [*De civ. Dei*, xxii, 17] Finally, as Scripture says [Matt. 22:29], there is no marriage or giving in marriage in resurrected life. [*De civ. Dei*, xxii, 17] Augustine is understandably cautious about speculating what the saints will be doing in their immortal, spiritual bodies, when the flesh lives 'according to the spirit', given St. Paul's characterization of that "peace of God" as "surpassing all understanding". When it is said that we shall see God "face to face", how, asks Augustine, is this to be understood? "And so, when there are some things which are beyond our understanding, and on which the authority of holy Scripture offers no assistance, then we must needs be in the state described in the Book of Wisdom, in these words: 'The thoughts of men are timorous and our foresight is uncertain.'"*[De civ. Dei*, xxii, 29]

The union of Adam and Eve in Paradise, a union of 'supreme pleasure' as Chadwick puts it,⁸ will have been considerably changed in Heaven. But Augustine offers this suggestion for how we might be said to see God "face to face":

...perhaps God will be known to us and visible to us in the sense that he will be spiritually perceived by each one of us in each one of us, perceived in one another, perceived by each in himself; he will be seen in the new heaven and the new earth, in the whole creation as it then will be; he will

⁷ Robert Marcus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970) 25, observes: "The whole scheme [of the ages of the world] is an entirely formal expression of the theological conviction that the decisive event in history has already taken place, in the coming of Christ."

⁸ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), 112.

be seen in every body by means of bodies, wherever the eyes of the spiritual body are directed with their penetrating gaze. The thoughts of our minds will lie open to mutual observation; and the words of the Apostle will be fulfilled; for he said, 'Pass no premature judgments', adding immediately, 'until the Lord comes. For he will light up what is hidden in darkness and will reveal the thoughts of the heart. And then each one will have his praise from God.' " [1 Cor. 4:5] [*De civ.Dei*, xxii, 29]

The Christian living in the last age of the world contemplates what was, and what will be, considers also what these two poles would teach him about the conduct of his life here and now. It is with these thoughts about the beginning and the end that Augustine's writings on marriage, and for this study, on widowhood, receive illumination.

A. A Sketch Of The Argument Of *On The Good Of Widowhood*

De bono viduatatis (A.D. 414) was not a treatise but a letter addressed to Juliana, a widow from a noble Roman family. She had joined her daughter Demetrias, a consecrated virgin, and her mother-in-law, Proba, "widow of the richest man in the Empire"⁹, as a consecrated widow in a convent in Carthage. These three noble ladies had come under the influence of the ascetism and moralism of Pelagius, appealing as it did to Christian Roman aristocrats, "with the hauteur and exclusiveness which goes with it."¹⁰ The letter would correct the tendency to vanity of the consecrated virgin or widow -- as he says in his monastic Rule, "Pride lies in wait for our good works to rob them of their fruit" -- exacerbated in the followers of Pelagius.

Augustine wrote in answer to the entreaties and letters of Juliana "concerning the profession of holy widowhood", that is, through a solemn vow, but he warns that some of what he writes will not pertain to Juliana herself, and will not give counsel for the conduct of her own life. "Forsooth this letter, though it be addressed to you was not to be written for you alone," but rather profit others through her means.¹¹ The work is divided into two parts: the first, and most important here, is devoted to the doctrine or teaching concerning widowhood, "that we may know what is to be done" [*Ibid.* 2], a teaching derived from Scripture, especially St. Paul; the second is devoted to exhortation, "that the good which is known wisely may be pursued ardently." [*Ibid.*, 20]. What is the primary teaching of St. Paul? "I say unto the unmarried," that is, virgins and widows, "that it is good for them if they shall have so continued even as also I" [1 Cor. 7:8] This is a good

⁹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Berkeley, 1967, 340.

¹⁰ Gerald Bonner, "Augustine and Pelagianism in the Light of Modern Research", *The St. Augustine Lecture, 1970*, Villanova, 1972. Cf. George Lawless, "Augustine's Decentering of Asceticism" in *Augustine and his Critics*, ed. R. Dodaro and G. Lawless, London, 2000, 147: "Pelagianism brought to light the reluctance on the part of the upper classes in society to dethrone aristocratic ideals that had been entrenched for centuries in the heroes and heroines of ancient Rome."

¹¹ *De bono viduatatis*, 1. Translation by Rev. C. L. Cornish, at [<http://www.ccel.org>], Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Vol. III.

which St. Paul places above the good of Christian married women, to whom he says "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?" [1 Cor. 6:15], not that the consecrated widow is anything more than a member of Christ, but rather that she has a better place, having gifts according to the grace which has been given to her. Wedded chastity, when intercourse is embraced for the sake of bearing children, and the marriage faithfulness of the Christian bed are also "gifts of God", as is the *sacramentum* or covenant of matrimony (indissoluble so long as both shall live). [*Ibid.* 5] Augustine emphasizes that widows are among the "unmarried", not now bound by marriage, for part of his argument will be directed against those who condemn second marriages, even regarding the widow who marries another as an adulterer.¹²

But Paul allows the widow to marry again if her husband dies, even as he exhorts that she would be more blessed if she continue [a widow] according to his counsel [1 Cor. vii, 39-40]. Thus, contrary to "the heresies of the Cataphryges and of the Novatians" as well as of Tertullian, second marriages are not condemned, but are given lower honour. [*Ibid.* 6] He adds, "...marriage chastity is a good, but widowed continence is a better good."¹³ So Paul in exhorting to continence "that they have thought of the things of the Lord, how to please God" added that this is said "for your profit, not to cast a snare on you", that is, not to condemn as base what is but a lesser good. As though to instruct those ascetic widows who might be too haughty about their virtue, Augustine reminds them over four paragraphs that their good is to be praised not because those who are married are not also good, but simply because theirs is a better good. And the whole, married and unmarried, like creation itself is "very good". [*Ibid.*, 9]

Moreover, Augustine reminds Juliana, "Nor, because I called Ruth blessed, Anna more blessed, in that the former married twice, the latter, being soon widowed of her one husband, so lived long, do you straightway also think that you are better than Ruth," for the times of the Prophets were different from this sixth age, that age after the birth of Christ. Holy women were kindled not by lust, but by piety to bring forth children "for the propagation of the people of God"; husbands were allowed to have several living wives; and Ruth, "not having seed such as at that time was necessary in Israel, on the death of her husband sought another of whom to have it." [*Ibid.*, 10] Augustine grants that marriage, and therefore widowhood, can change from one age to another. A more thoughtful reflection on the comparison of Ruth and Anna reveals this: Anna, a widow even without sons (assuming she had none) refused to marry again "in that she knew that now was the time wherein Christ were better served, not by duty of bearing, but by zeal of containing, not by fruitfulness of married womb but by chastity of widowed conduct." Concerning Ruth, if she also was aware that from her seed Christ should hereafter be born, "I dare not any longer to say that the widowhood of Anna was more blessed than her fruitfulness." [*Ibid.*]

¹² The Montanists (Tertullian with them) and the Novatians are among these. Augustine places the condemnation of second marriages among the heretical doctrines. *De Haeresibus*, 26, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.* "Marriage chastity" is the exclusive use of sexual intercourse between married couples for procreation; "continence" is abstention from sexual behaviour altogether.

But this is the time "not of casting stones, but of gathering; not of embracing, but of abstaining from embracing", or as St. Paul says, "...the time is short; it remains that they who have wives be as not having", that is, as themselves continent. Marriage in these times is not for the sake of offspring, of which there is already so great and abundant a supply needing to be spiritually reborn. The good of marriage, whatever it is, is ever a good. "But in the people of God it was at one time an act of obedience unto the law [i.e. "Go forth and multiply"], now it is a remedy for weakness, but still a solace of human nature." It is surely a good to be engaged in the begetting of children in the honest order of marriage, "not after the fashion of dogs", and not an affection to cast blame on a man. "Yet this affection itself the Christian mind, having thoughts of heavenly things, ...surpasses and overcomes." [*Ibid.* 11]

What of the virgin or widow who, having promised perpetual continence, marries in spite of her vow? Augustine would hold that though she had sinned in breaking her vow, her marriage is valid. This is in opposition to the Pelagians who hold that since the consecrated virgin is the bride of Christ, she is an adulteress if she marries. But, Augustine adds, such departures from the vow to Christ are worse than adultery. He rejects the thesis that the consecrated virgin is the bride of Christ, knowing from Scripture that it is the Church herself, of which all Christians are members, which is the bride of Christ.¹⁴

To emphasize that "any marriages whatsoever, being marriages, are not evil," he considers the extreme case of several marriages: three or four, or even "dare I say, seven," reminding the reader of Jesus' response to the question of the Sadducees that in heaven there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage: Jesus in saying this showed no sign of condemning the woman for the "shame of their great number [i.e. her marriages]". Nor will Augustine condemn any number of marriages whatsoever, but simply state to a widow of one husband or more than one, "you will be more blessed if you shall have so continued."¹⁵

There are those casuists (surely not Juliana herself!) who would ask who is more perfect, the widow who had but one husband, having lived with him for a long time, had sons with him, and after his death made profession of continence; or "she who as a young woman having lost two husbands within two years, having no children left alive to console her, hath vowed to God continence, and in it hath grown old with most enduring sanctity." [16] Augustine asks for argument from those who would weigh the merits of widows by the number of their husbands and not by the strength of their continence. Reducing their position to absurdity, he suggest three criteria -- one or more husbands,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13. Cf. II Cor. 11:2, where Paul says to the universal Church: "I joined you unto one husband a chaste virgin to present unto Christ." Augustine has much amusement in drawing out the absurdities of calling the consecrated virgin the "bride of Christ", asking would that mean the consecrated widow had Christ as her second husband, and if a married woman, with her husband's consent, were to vow continence to Christ, would this make Christ an adulterer?

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15. Augustine praises his mother twice for being the widow of just one husband: "Fuerat enim unius viri uxor..." *Conf.* IX, ix, 22. This the praise of 1 Tim. 5:9. "Sit ergo in pace cum viro, ante quem nulli et post quem nulli nupta est..." *Conf.* IX, xiii, 37.

length of widowhood, piety of life -- for the casuist to concatenate, weigh and measure. "Who can doubt that in this contest the palm must be given to the greater and more glowing piety?" [17]

Of note in Augustine's exhortations are his admonitions against the Pelagian concentration on free will, a tendency he would correct even in "certain of our brethren most friendly and dear to us". Juliana would obviously know to whom Augustine referred. He expresses the hope that this letter "by the worthy deed of your excellence will soon come into the hands of such" and on this account he thought he should say something about these matters pertaining to divine grace to answer his semi-Pelagian brethren. [22] The rest reads as a sermon encouraging fidelity, perseverance, holiness of life, reflecting on these times as the "last days", not as expecting the apocalypse imminently, but that since the coming of Christ there are no divisions in history to be discerned from sacred Scripture.¹⁶ There are also exhortations which address particular matters which must have come to Augustine's attention: he cautions them to guard their character and reputation, and to encourage others to join them in their continent life together. To the complaint "How shall the human race subsist if all had been continent?" he answers realistically that there will only be few who follow the invitation. But considered in principle, "If all have heard and all have received, we ought to understand that this very thing was predestined, that married goods already suffice in the number of those members which so many have passed out of this life." "As though it were for any other reason that this world is delayed, save that the predestined number of the Saints be fulfilled, and were this the sooner fulfilled, assuredly the end of the world would not be put off." [28]

B. Understanding The Argument Of *De Bono Viduatatis*

To set Augustine's teaching on widowhood in its context, it is required that we recreate briefly family life in early fifth century North Africa, analyze how Augustine accommodates his Christian views on marriage to his time, then draw from these considerations what might be said of the "good" of widowhood.

i. Marriage in North Africa (400 D) as a Roman Institution

The origins of Rome as recounted by Hegel did not augur well for loving family relations.

¹⁶ Marcus [20-1] remarks on this fundamental theme of Augustine's reflection on history: "...since the coming of Christ, until the end of the world, all history is homogenous...it cannot be mapped out in terms of a pattern drawn from sacred history...it can no longer contain decisive turning-points endowed with a significance in sacred history. Every moment may have its unique and mysterious significance in the ultimate divine tableau of men's doings and sufferings; but it is a significance to which God's revelation does not supply the clues."

The founders of Rome...-- Romulus and Remus -- are, according to the tradition, themselves freebooters [plunderers] represented as from their earliest days thrust out from the family, and as having grown up in a state of isolation from family affection. In like manner the first Romans are said to have got their wives, not by free courtship and reciprocal inclination, but by force. This commencement of Roman life in savage rudeness excluding the sensibilities of natural morality, brings with it one characteristic element -- harshness in respect to the family relation.¹⁷

The Christian religion in its original revelation seemed to repudiate the family: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." [Luke 14:26]¹⁸ In Augustine's time, the Christian religion did not materially affect, much less inform, family life. Monnica's life, both before her marriage, and as wife to Patricius and mother to his children, manifests the thoroughly Roman character of her upbringing in her own family and her married life. Augustine writes of these matters simply and openly, in general without critical comment. Monnica grew up in a "believing household", "a good limb of your church" [*Conf.* ix, 17], therefore Catholic although she had Donatist relatives.¹⁹ She was under the control and tutelage of an old maidservant "vehement with a holy severity in administering correction," [*Conf.* ix, 8, 7] where she was brought up in modesty and sobriety, "made obedient to her parents by you, rather than by them to you," suggesting a willfulness not tempered in her childhood, although it would be in marriage.²⁰ She and her sisters were being prepared by the aged slave woman to be good wives. So except when they ate their frugal meals they were not allowed to drink even water, "however great their thirst" a discipline to assure that when they grew up they would not be overcome by a love for stronger drink.²¹ Hegel notes that family relations among the Romans was not the free relation of love and feeling, as with the Greeks, but this was usurped "by the principle of severity, dependence, and subordination." [*Phil. Of Hist.* 297]

¹⁷ *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. from 3rd ed. by J. Sibree, London, 1890, III, Sect. 1, ch. 1, 297.

¹⁸ J.A. Doull puts the matter more precisely and universally in "The Christian Origins of Contemporary Institutions" *Dionysius VI* (1982), 111: "The Christian religion was originally polemical towards worldly institutions: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

¹⁹ Henry Chadwick in the introduction to his translation of *Confessions*, Oxford, 1991, remarks in a note: "Her name, spelt by Augustine Monnica, is probably Berber, and perhaps both parents were ethnically Berber. Their culture was Latin. Monnica had near relatives who were Donatists."

²⁰ Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writing on Women*, London, 1995, suggests this could simply be the Augustinian theme of attributing all things to God. The old maidservant had more influence than her mother in such matters which Power adds is "quite consistent with the data on the mother's role in antiquity." 74-5.

²¹ *Conf.* ix, 8, 17. Roman society was especially harsh in its judgment of women with the taste for wine, regarding that as a sure sign of adultery. O'Donnell remarks: "Thus they greeted male relatives with a kiss, to facilitate olfactory detection." *Commentary*, 9.8.18.

When she was old enough -- the legal age for Roman marriage was twelve years²² -- "she was given to a man and served him as her lord". [Conf. ix, 9, 19] Patricius was her *dominus*, exceptional for both his kindness and for his quick temper, and she knew how to deal with this potentially explosive husband. "She bore with his infidelities and never had any quarrel with her husband on this account." [Ibid.] Monnica was part of his property, *in manum conventio*, and she accepted that she was his servant.²³ Augustine recounts with admiration this advice his mother gave to other abused women in Thagaste:

Indeed many wives married to gentler husbands bore the marks of blows and suffered disfigurement to their faces. In conversation together they used to complain about their husband's behaviour. Monnica, speaking as if in jest but offering serious advice, used to blame their tongues. She would say that since the day when they heard the so-called matrimonial contract read out to them, they should reckon them to be legally binding documents by which they had become servants. She thought they should remember their condition and not proudly withstand their masters. [Ibid.]

The marriage contract to which Monnica refers are the *tabulae matrimoniales*, written contracts containing a statement of the contents of the dowry and what would happen to the dowry at the end of the marriage, as well as general statements about the duties and obligations entered into. It was usual, as in this passage, that the marriage contract was read aloud in the presence of the wedding guests, who then took turns attaching their seals to it. There is no evidence of a Christian marriage rite in North Africa in the early fifth century, no evidence that Christians either married in their churches or were accorded other Christian rituals such as veiling, blessing or other liturgical ceremonies, practices that were becoming common in other parts of the West in the late fourth century.²⁴ In his sermons, Augustine makes frequent reference to these *tabulae*, most often to exhort his hearers to honour those contracts, observing that if married couples engage in sexual intercourse beyond what is necessary for offspring (*proles*), they violate their own marriage contracts.²⁵ Indeed, the marriage contract did specify such a purpose -- "It is found in most legal definitions of Roman marriage"²⁶ though not as though to exclude sexual intercourse as simply a matter of conjugal right.

²² Power, 75, notes "...in the fourth century twelve was considered too young to marry" and that Monnica was about twenty-three years old when Augustine was born. We don't know whether he was her first child. He had a brother, Navigius, and an unnamed sister, who as a consecrated widow was abbess of a convent.

²³ Patricia Clark, "Women, Slaves, and the Hierarchies of Domestic Violence", in *Women & Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Sheila Murnagh and Sandra R. Joshel, London, 1998, remarks: "This is the first example in Augustine's account ... of the language of slavery used to describe the relationship between husband and wife. In effect, Patricius' mode of domestic control was based, like slavery, on the implicit threat of violence: anger was his weapon, and he achieved behavior compliance...simply by the threat of his explosive temper and propensity for rage...Monnica for her part employs the techniques of patience, subservience, and placation..."

²⁴ David G. Hunter, "The Practice and Theory of Marriage in Roman North Africa (200-400 C.E.)", [<http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/burns/chroma/marriage/huntermar.html>].

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Augustine also appeals to the *tabulae* to justify the subordination of the wife to the husband. "She regards the marriage contract as the deed of her purchase."²⁷ Thus, Augustine accepts the principles of the Roman family, urging women to accept that a good wife has to regard her husband as her master (*dominus*), and she as his handmaid (*ancilla*). Roman family life was based not on understanding and love but on domination, fear and violence. This must be borne in mind when one appraises Augustine's teaching on marriage and continence.

ii. Augustine's Christian accommodations to Roman marriage

Émile Schmitt, in his thorough treatment of marriage in Augustine's thought, notes that Augustine regularly considers baptism and the eucharist sacraments of the Church. He sometimes adds "unction", that is, confirmation, which could be thought a completion of baptism, and also recognizes as sacramental rites, the "laying on of hands" in the rite of penitence, and "orders" for those who dispense "the word and the sacrament". Nor does Augustine leave out the rite of "unction for the sick". "When it comes to marriage, which interests us especially here, one searches in vain for some mention in the Augustinian enumeration of Christian sacramental rites."²⁸ This fact is even more surprising because Augustine recognizes in every marriage, and especially in that of Christians, the quality he calls a "*sacramentum*", something Schmitt finds "absolutely exceptional, ..." "How to explain this absence of marriage in the category of Christian rites?" Schmitt asks.²⁹

The reason for the absence of marriage as a "sacramental rite" is explained probably from the perspective in which Augustine sees marriage: the conjugal union is not so much the contract itself, the marriage "in becoming", but the conjugal state, the marriage "in reality", not the ritual ratification but the common life which results. Marriage becomes a living reality in the bond which unites those conjoined, and it is this reality which Augustine calls a *sacramentum*.³⁰

Augustine acknowledges three "goods" of marriage: offspring (*proles*), fidelity (*fides*), and the "sacramental bond", and uses Genesis 2:24, "two in one flesh", to illuminate the third good, the *sacramentum*, not the second good, *fides*, as might be expected. The "essence" of marriage was principally this spiritualized, mystical bond. Hence, nothing physical could break a marriage, neither a wife's sterility [*De bono conj.* 3.3, 7.7; *De Gen. Ad Lit.*, 9.7; *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, 1.10.11] nor chronic

²⁷ Hegel comments: "Marriage, in its strict and formal shape, bore quite the aspect of a mere contract; the wife was part of the husband's property (*in manum conventio*), and the marriage ceremony was based on a *coemptio*, in a form such as might have been adopted on the occasion of any other purchase. The husband acquired a power over his wife, such as he had over his daughter; nor less over her property; so that everything which she gained she gained for her husband." *Philos. of Hist.*, 297.

²⁸ *Le mariage Chrétien dans l'oeuvre de Saint Augustin*, Paris, 1983, 220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 222. The word *sacramentum* is interesting. It is a legal term for a binding agreement, an oath, even a sacred bond, or a sacred mystery. Augustine uses it here as a solemn bond or, better, a covenant, the word I use here, acknowledging with gratitude Rev. Jane V. Doull who suggested it to me.

illness [*De conjugiiis adulterinis*, 2.13.13] nor adultery [*De nupt. et conc.* 1.10.11, 17.19; *De conj. adult.* 2.4.4] This latter 'cause', even though apparently sanctioned in Matt. 5:32 and 19.9, linked marriage too heavily to sexual conduct. And if the couple separated, permitted on the grounds of infidelity, they were still married, hence no second marriage was possible. Schmitt finds fifteen passages where these "three goods" occur, and notes that '*sacramentum*' is ordinarily given as the third of this triad. It is spoken of as a 'bond' [*vinculum*]³¹, an 'alliance' or 'compact' [*foedus*], once as a 'conjoint compact' [*coniunctionis foedus*]³², once negatively as 'the impiety of separation' [*impietas separationis*]³³ Marriage creates between the spouses a permanent and irreversible relation. It alone of the three goods is the one indissoluble good. Since Augustine accepts neither sterility nor infidelity as grounds for divorce³⁴, of the "three goods" it stands alone as absolutely necessary and is therefore the very substance of marriage. It is a bond which is broken only at the death of one of the spouses.³⁵

This bond is not primarily nor necessarily a sexual one. Augustine would in fact exhort Christian married couples to continence. If among the Old Testament prophets, procreation, and hence sexual intercourse was a duty, "for the purpose of begetting and preserving a people for God, amongst whom the prophesy of Christ's coming must needs have had precedence over everything", now there is no longer the same necessity. Thus, Augustine concludes: "... we must acknowledge that the scripture which says there is 'a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing' is to be distributed in its clauses to the periods before Christ and since. The former was the time to embrace, the latter to refrain from embracing."³⁶ These three "goods" then exhibit an evolution through the 'ages', especially from the Age of the Patriarchs to this present age, the *senectus mundi*, and we can look forward to further modification in the significance and importance of these three goods at the *parousia*.

³¹ In *De nupt. et conc.*, I, 11(13), "*vinculum foederis*"; in *De bono conj.*, 7(6), "*foedus nuptiale*"; in *De conj. adult.* II, 5(6), "*vinculo foederis conjugalis*"

³² *Contra Jul.* III, 25 (57).

³³ *Ibid.* III, 16 (30), in accordance with the Scriptural admonition, "What God has joined together let no man put asunder."

³⁴ There is a certain evolution of his views on the subject of divorce. In *De bono conj.*, 7 (A.D. 401), he would not grant that a man who has sent away an adulterous wife could himself marry again. But in *de fide et operibus*, 35 (A.D. 412-413), he recognizes a certain ambiguity in the Scriptural texts and writes: "As the Word of God does not say clearly that he who has sent away his wife lawfully because of adultery becomes himself an adulterer in taking to himself another, it would seem to me that a fault in this matter would not be grave." Augustine held subsequently, based on the premise that the law must be equal for husband and wife, what Kari Elizabeth Børresen says is his "definitive doctrine" that the marriage bond demands that the couple live together, except in the case of adultery, when separation but not remarriage is acceptable, Augustine's position in *De conjugiiis adulterinis* (A.D. 419). Cf. her *Subordination and Equivalence: the Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, D.C., 1981, 98-100.

³⁵ Augustine is clearer about this than his contemporaries, allowing as we have seen, the survivor to remarry

³⁶ *De nupt. et conc.* 14 (13), translation at <http://www.ccel.org>, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 5. This accords with St. Paul's instruction, "Let them that have wives be as though they had none", which St. Augustine explains thus: "For they who have wives in such a way as to care for the things of the Lord, how they may please the Lord, without having any care for the things of the world in order to please their wives, are, in fact, just as if they had no wives. And this is effected with greater ease when the wives too are of such a disposition..." *Ibid.* 15 (13).

The first good of marriage, offspring (*proles*), was most important in Paradise and in the age of the Patriarchs, the former to complete the "blessing pronounced in the words, 'Increase and multiply' [until] the number of predestined saints was made up." [*De civ.Dei*, xiv, 10]. This first good in the age of the Patriarchs became so important that it modified the other two goods. Faithfulness (*fides*) and the covenant between spouses (*sacramentum*) would suggest that a man have but one wife. Yet to prepare for the coming of Christ and fulfill the promise made to Abraham that through his descendants a people would arise from whom the Saviour would appear, the patriarchs accepted procreation as their divine duty, even accepting multiple wives and the servants of their spouses. More purely than in this sixth age, the Christian era, the holy patriarchs sought through sexual intercourse as a means this "good" of marriage.³⁷ Moreover, what is not permitted in Christian times in the case of sterility was without blame then: "Clearly with the good will of the wife to take another woman, that from her may be born sons common to both, by the sexual intercourse and seed of the one, but by the right and power of the other was lawful among the ancient fathers .. To have intercourse with females in right of marriage was to holy men at that time a matter of duty, not of lust." [*De bono conj.*, 17]

In the Christian period the requirement to "increase and multiply" is itself modified. Since Christ has come, there is no longer the need to preserve and expand the house of David. "The social institution which serves as the sign of the invisible City of the Saints on earth is no longer established and maintained by the generation of an ethnic group."³⁸ Christians no longer have the obligation to bring forth children in the flesh, but to "increase and multiply" spiritual children in the conversion and baptism of those outside the fold, from every nation and people. Polygamy therefore gives way to monogamy and there is no barrier to marriage for the elderly or sterile.³⁹ Sexual intercourse is virtuous within marriage only for the sake of begetting children, though permitted as a conjugal right, the right each has to the body of the other.⁴⁰ Indeed, in these times "the very desire of sons is carnal, as in those [the holy men of old] it was spiritual..." [*De bono conj.*, 19]

³⁷ "Whence we gather that, in the first times of the human race, chiefly for the propagation of the People of God, through whom the prince and Saviour of all people should both be prophesied of, and be born, it was the duty of the Saints to use this good of marriage, not as to be sought for its own sake, but necessary for the sake of something else." *De bono conj.*, 9, translation, "On the Good of Marriage", Rev. C.I. Cornish, available at <http://www.ccel.org>] Nicene and PostNicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. III. Their superiority then over the present age: "...at a time when also it was allowed one man to have several [wives], whom he had with more chastity than any now has his one wife." *Ibid.*

³⁸ J. Patout Burns, "Marriage and Society in the City of God", [<http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/burns/chroma/marriage/cityofgod.html>] , 3.

³⁹ Augustine writes these touching words about the warmth of the union of elderly couples: "But now in good, although aged, marriage, albeit there hath withered away the glow of full age between male and female, yet there lives in full vigor the order of charity between husband and wife...If therefore there be kept good faith of honor, and of services mutually due from either sex, although the members of either be languishing and almost corpse-like, yet of souls duly joined together, the charity continues, the purer by how much it is the more proved, the safer, by how much it is the calmer." *De bono conj.*, 3.

⁴⁰ "There is this further, that in that very debt which married persons pay one to another, even if they demand it with somewhat too great intemperance and incontinence, yet they owe faith alike one to another. Unto which faith the Apostle allows so great right, as to call it 'power', saying, 'The woman hath not power of her body but the man; again in like manner also the man hath not power of his own body but the woman.'" *Ibid.*, 4.

But its *raison d'être* has been superceded. As a consequence, continence within marriage becomes the ideal, "seeing it to be now 'a time' as it is written 'not of embracing, but of abstaining from embracing' [Eccles.3:5]." [*De bono conj.*, 15]

In a continent Christian marriage, the second "good", *fides*, is strengthened since husband and wife by mutual agreement, she having power over his body as he has over hers, purge themselves by subordinating their legitimate rights to the body of the other to a transcendent good. This new determination ought to strengthen them against being driven by lust to seek illicitly in extra-marital affairs what they could have legitimately within marriage.⁴¹ But if continence in marriage in Christian times is the ideal, one might well ask, "Why marry?", since continence outside marriage, the continence of the virgin or the widow, is an even greater good. There remains the third "good" of marriage to consider.

This third "good", *sacramentum*, is also strengthened in the continent Christian marriage:

God forbid that the nuptial bond should be regarded as broken between those who have by mutual consent agreed to observe a perpetual abstinence from the use of carnal concupiscence. Nay, it will be only a firmer one, whereby they have exchanged pledges together, which will have to be kept by an especial endearment and concord, not by the voluptuous links of bodies, but by the voluntary affections of souls. *De nupt. et conc.*, 12 (xi)

If now it is asked of what value is marriage, continent marriage where children in the flesh cannot be anticipated and spiritual children, those regenerated in baptism, can be born too of virgins and widows, it is this *sacramentum* itself which gives to marriage its *raison d'être* in Christian times. This covenant between one man and one wife which cannot be broken is at the same time a sign or type of an even greater bond, that between Christ and his Church: "As therefore the *sacramentum* of marriage with several of that time signified the multitude that should be hereafter made subject unto God in all nations of the earth, so the *sacramentum* of marriage with one of our times signifies the unity of us all made subject to God, which shall be hereafter in one Heavenly City."⁴² Indissolubility is therefore essential to the marriage of Christians, and monogamy is its hallmark. "Forsooth in the marriage of one woman the sanctity of the *sacramentum* is of more avail than the fruitfulness of the womb." [*De bono conj.*, 21.]

⁴¹ Augustine is emphatic that continence within marriage must be by the consent of both. "...although perpetual continence be pleasing to one of them, he may not save with the consent of the other." *De bono conj.*, 6. There is the now infamous case of Ecdicia, to whom Augustine wrote on the occasion of her having taken a vow of continence and her husband's subsequent adultery. He chided her for forcing continence on her husband against his will. The 'infamy' is Augustine's, at least in the mind of Kim Power [*Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women*, New York, 1996, 113], who sees in this criticism of Ecdicia a veiled concern about the growing power of women ascetics. "empowering them with virile status and the capacity for authority..."

⁴² *De bono conj.* 21. The *sacramentum* in that earlier age had a different signification: "...the many wives of the old Fathers signified our future Churches out of all nations made subject unto one husband, Christ."

Marriage is a temporal institution: it will end at the death of one of the spouses. But this third "good" gives to it its eternal dimension. Procreation in the flesh, the "first good", gave way to the strengthened *fides* of the continent marriage, the "second good", for where procreation in the flesh was primary, the faithfulness of one man to one wife was not sustained. Thus procreation in the flesh and *fides* are in a certain opposition. Only in the continent marriage, where procreation in the flesh gives way to the procreation of spiritual children in baptism, can the two goods be sustained. It is the "third good", the unbreakable bond signifying Christ's relation to the Church, which draws these opposed goods into unity where they find their completion and perfection: Christian marriage is the joining of two members of the mystical body of Christ who are united to consecrate themselves to the extension of that body. This unity in the body of Christ is an eternal unity, which is not dissolved with the death of the spouse. Its fullest expression is in the continent marriage.

Still, one must not romanticize Augustinian marriage. Husband and wife were not friends, although in an ideal marriage there would have been perfect mutual companionship, as in the relation of Adam and Eve before the Fall. Men and women were not equal, not simply sociologically but in principle. "If God had wanted Adam to have a partner in scintillating conversation he would have created another man; the fact that God created a woman" he writes, "showed that he had in mind the survival of the human race."⁴³ Kim Power observes that Augustine's concept of marriage reduces to that of a contract rather than a relationship. "This perception reduces Augustine's presentation of the sexual relationship to an economic one. Intercourse is a mutual debt owed by spouses, preferably to be called due only for the procreation of children, or to be written off altogether, but tolerated as pardonable sin within marriage if it protects the partners from greater sin such as adultery."⁴⁴

Augustine knows that "What food is unto the conservation of the man, sexual intercourse is unto the conservation of the race," [*De bono conj.*, 18] and therefore anticipates the murmur of some: "What, say they, if all men should abstain from all sexual intercourse, whence will the human race exist?" With impeccable logic he answers: "Would that all would this, only in 'charity out of a pure heart and a good conscience, and faith unfeigned;' much more speedily would the City of God be filled and the end of the world hastened." [*De bono conj.* 10]

He sees nothing left to do in this world, and would be done with it. .

⁴³ From his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, quoted by Henry Chadwick in the Introduction to his translation of *Confessions*, xviii-xix.

⁴⁴ Power, 125.

C. Continenence In The Subsequent History

The new ascetic forms of worldly and sexual renunciation, both eremitic and monastic, which arose in Egypt in the early fourth century spread rapidly outside Egypt. St Athanasius introduced both hermits and cenobites to Rome and Italy (*circa* A.D.339). The movement was especially welcomed by women, among whom were certain aristocratic, wealthy and powerful women, who established monasteries and churches in independence of the male clergy. Its attraction to women is obvious when one considers the plight of women in Roman families.

Consider, for example, Augustine's everyday acquaintance with and experience of marital relations between men and women. Simply from *Confessions* we know these details: his father was unfaithful to his mother, something that did not seem of much concern to Monnica except in so far as it was harmful to his soul. Augustine saw the bruises and marks on women around him beaten by their husbands. His mother was wiser than most of her female friends, knowing how to escape Patricius' violent temper. She was obedient, tolerant of his drunkenness and rage, knowing that he would brook no opposition. Augustine himself lived with the mother of his son in a certain fidelity for at least twelve years, then allowed her to be dismissed, only to take up with another concubine, and this while he was betrothed to a young maiden. These were the ordinary mores of his North African relatives and neighbours. None of this was hidden from him nor does he hide it from the reader because it was obviously commonplace. Augustine's family was not poor, he was not underprivileged: this was rather the ordinary experience of the harsh treatment of women in Roman family life.

Thus, pious women flocked to nunneries or undertook the independent life of the anchorite. So popular were these movements that bishops sought to control their independence and numbers, some bishops restricting the numbers of women who could be consecrated virgins.⁴⁵ It was therefore by their ascetical practices that consecrated virgins and other celibate women of the early church shook off the bonds which would have enslaved them in Roman marriages. Current feminist literature recognizes the part that such women played in what might be called "liberation movements". What is perhaps harder to grant is the role that the Church played in this liberation, a complex role not easily grasped at a glance. At first, it reined them in, veiling the virgins to put them under some sort of control. The symbolic sense of 'veiling' was female submission to sacerdotal authority. But this authority was in general much kinder and freer than the authority of the *paterfamilias*. It is important to note that these independent women who emerge in the fourth century are widows and virgins, 'continent women' in Augustine's terminology, who achieve their independence precisely through their continence.

⁴⁵ David Hunter, "Clerical Celibacy and the Veiling of Virgins", in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vesey, Ann Arbor, 1999, 143: "At the Spanish Council of Saragossa in 380, for example, the assembled bishops declared that no virgin should be veiled until she had reached the age of forty."

And who can deny the subsequent power of monasteries in the middle ages, for men and women? Contenance, one of the vows of religion, was assuredly part of a liberation movement from Roman culture, as were the other vows of religion.

As noted earlier [*infra*, n.18], the Christian religion was at first 'polemical toward worldly institutions'. Such institutions as the Roman family and Rome itself 'were not built in a day', nor were they be easily replaced. At first, Christians read their Scriptures rather literally. If the Scripture said, "Go sell what thou hast and come follow me," some took that to heart (Anthony the monk, for example), and provision or at least allowance was made, one way and another, for them to obey the injunction to 'poverty'; their religion after all bade them do it. Similarly with the other polemical quotations pertaining to human institutions: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children...", the injunction (among others) to 'chastity'; "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's", the injunction to 'obedience'. These three vows of religion define monastic life in the Middle Ages. Through them men and women moved beyond the Roman state, civil society and family, to a Christian freedom at the same time unfree, a freedom from worldly institutions but not a self-determined freedom within appropriately Christian institutions.

The Christian religion by its very doctrines cannot tolerate a 'world' outside itself not reconciled to it. Augustine would draw all into the celibate monastery, hastening the end of the world. But Christ came to redeem the world, not to destroy it. The secular institutions of family, civil society and state, from which monks had fled -- though of course these interests crept back into the monastery in corrupt forms -- more properly would be redeemed in coming forth from the Christian principle itself, the principle of freedom, of self-determination. "One inference," writes Hegel "is that *Marriage* is no longer deemed less holy than *Celibacy*. Luther took a wife to show that he respected marriage, defying the calumnies to which he exposed himself by such a step. It was his duty to do so, as it was also to eat meat on Fridays; to prove that such things are lawful and right, in opposition to the imagined superiority of abstinence. ...The Family introduces man to community to the relation of interdependence in society; and this union is a moral one"⁴⁶And so for the other vows of religion: it was thought more commendable, in place of the vow of poverty, for men by their activity, intelligence and industry to make themselves properly independent. The vow of obedience, blind obedience, was replaced by obedience to the laws of the state, and in general, the principles of moral conduct were derived now from the rational element in will and action, rather than externally from the prescriptions of confessors and bishops. "Reason and the Divine commands are now synonymous." Thus, the three vows of religion are done away with, and replaced by the properly Christian institutions of Family, Civil Society and State, as the principle of Christian freedom dictates.

⁴⁶ *Philos. of Right*, 440.

Conclusion

How, in these times, is the widow's relation to her spouse to be understood? The Reformation announced that marriage was not to be regarded as less holy than celibacy, and in subsequent centuries the three vows of religion have been thoroughly supplanted by Christian institutions of family, civil society and state. How would the words of Paul, that she could contemplate the things of the Lord more readily *as a widow* than as married apply to her. Manifestly not as delivering her from the servitude of the classical Roman marriage. But if in her marriage she was called to such service of the Lord, how is she to understand this calling in her widowhood?

The historic Christ embodied in his person a full and final revelation of the divine nature, and apart from him the Father is unknown and unknowable. "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." [John 14:6] But it was not enough that Jesus should walk this earth, preach to the masses, be with his disciples instructing them, suffer death and rise again. "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you."⁴⁷ [John 16:7] But the Comforter who will come only after the death and resurrection of Christ is the Spirit of truth, not creating a new truth, "for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak." This Spirit who does not speak of himself is the gift of insight into the truths revealed in the historic Christ, revealing principally the substance of the Father which is in the Son..

Analogously, and for her, the Christian widow is given the opportunity and the calling to contemplate what it was she lived with her husband, in the Christian family, and what it might be in eternity. If her thoughts turn nostalgically to times past, the Spirit who comes to her only at the cost of the loss of those times, the diremption of marriage and family, bears to her the gift of insight into the truths revealed historically in her husband and family. In short, she is not called to forget the past in order to think of the things of God, but to embrace it for the great truths respecting the things of God revealed in her experience of Christian marriage and family.

From Augustine she should have learned that marriage which terminated at the death of her spouse and is done away with entirely in Heaven has as its eternal significance the relation of Christ to the Church. The unshakeable bond or covenant, the *sacramentum*, is temporal, but the truth of that relation - Christ eternally bonded to them, they to each other and to the whole body of Christ - is eternal. It is precisely through her relation to her husband, that eternal relation which perhaps she grasped only temporally while married to him, that she can come to know the truth of that relation. Nothing of the former relation is lost except its temporality; and that is not lost, but rather known in its truth.

⁴⁷ "To the Apostles, Christ as living was not that to which he was to them subsequently as the Spirit of the Church, in which he became to them for the first time an object for their truly spiritual consciousness." Hegel, *Philos. of Hist.*, 337.

