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Marc D. Guerra

Assumption College, mguerra@assumption.edu

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Pierre Manent and the Dialectics of Augustine's *The City of God*

Marc D. Guerra
Assumption College

MY REMARKS TODAY will be taken from the French Catholic political philosopher Pierre Manent's latest book, a genuine *tour de force* of theologico-political reflection, titled *Metamorphoses of the City*.¹ Works of genuine theologico-political reflection like those found in Augustine's magisterial *The City of God* or Baruch Spinoza's influential *Theological-Political Treatise* are increasingly difficult for late modern human beings to grasp, even when they are set forth in the bright light of day. Inasmuch as they do not advance a familiar and immediately identifiable academic or political *parti pris*, they are not sectarian or ideological in the now all too familiar sense of those terms. For this reason, they tend to appear unfamiliar and unfinished, if not, to use Nietzsche's term, "untimely" to human beings who have grown accustomed to hearing religious and political claims couched in the terms of dogmatically formulated ideologies. Manent's *Metamorphoses* is undoubtedly a work of theologico-political reflection.

Manent's *Metamorphoses* introduces a relatively new field of study. Unlike works of classical political philosophy such as Aristotle's *Politics*, *Metamorphoses* does not present a study of regimes, the kind of authoritative political constitutions – monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, mixed regime, democracy – that can organize life in the political order. Rather, Manent offers us a study of the political form, that is, the prior, broader organizing political idea within which the regime and political life ultimately takes shape and operates. Manent identifies four political forms in the history of the West: the polis, the empire, the Church, and the nation. Each of these forms is a way of holding things in common in the world of human affairs. As Manent says in his introduction, his concern with the political form grew out of his seeing more and more clearly the significance of "the prodigious innovation" in human life "that

countenance the brutality of Thomas Hobbes that simplifies things in the name of solidity and expediency. To cite Manent, "whereas Thomas Hobbes rebuffs a ridiculous vanity, the Christian critique is concerned to reveal noble error, where the accent can fall either on the nobility of the error or the erroneous character of the noble movement. One finds in Augustine at times one, at times the other accent."⁸

Manent sees Christianity's deepest point of impact on the political order affecting our understanding of the problem of the one and the many. Christianity's teaching on the universal way of deliverance and salvation in Christ opposes not social or political inequality *per se*, that is, the perceived great demon that modern liberal democracies increasingly seek to slay, but the pertinence of Greek philosophy's exaggerated distinction between the philosopher and the nonphilosopher, with regard to a human being's capacity to attain or receive the truth. While to the pagan elite the mysteries are shrouded in secrecy and meant for initiates only, the Christian mysteries are offered publicly, ostensibly to everyone. In a word, in Christianity there is no "secret doctrine." Thus over the philosophers, Augustine has the advantage of the liberty or boldness of speech of the Christian apostle who offers the same salutary truth to all. I will come back to this point later. Here, I want to emphasize Manent's undeniable appreciation of Catholicism's unflinchingly dialectical approach to this question. When conjugating the problem of the one and the many, Catholicism does not engage in an easygoing and formulaic ancient/modern two-step, siding simply or instinctively with classical thought over and against modern thought on all things. Rather, working out of its own distinctive claim about the true nature of things, Catholicism engages in what I like to call a dual dialectic – one dialectic between premodern and modern political philosophy, and one dialectic between classical philosophy and Catholic theology about the truth about God and man.

Returning to Manent's reflection on Augustine's argument in *The City of God*, Manent places great importance on the fact that unlike the readily surveyed *polis*, to use Aristotle's phrase, or the panoramic empire or the discernibly identifiable nation-state, the two cities Augustine describes are not visibly separated. Certainly, the Church is in one sense and in one part visible. But we must make this important qualification: Among the Church's most sworn enemies are concealed its future citizens, and even

among its most sworn enemies lie hidden predestined friends, who as yet do not know themselves. On the other hand, among those who appear to be in the Church are some who will not have a share in the eternal destiny of the saints. As Augustine arrestingly states in the opening book of *The City of God*, "in truth, those two cities are interwoven and intermixed in this era, and await separation at the last judgment."⁹

As Augustine memorably states, these two cities, the earthly city and the city of God, "were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self."¹⁰ One city seeks its glory from men, the other takes God as witness of its conscience is its greatest glory. One city is dominated by the passion to dominate, while in the other mutual service is rendered by charity, the rulers by ruling, and the subjects by obeying. One city, in its masters, loves its own strength, while the other says to God, "I will love you, Lord, my strength."

Manent offers a rich analysis of Augustine's portraits of the fratricides that marked the earthly birth of the earthly city and the mythic birth of Rome as a way of highlighting the contrast just mentioned. Outwardly similar, these two fratricides are in truth quite different. The legendary founding of Rome began with Romulus killing his brother Remus. As Augustine makes clear, Romulus and Remus were clearly both citizens of the earthly city: both sought the glory of establishing the Roman state. But the two brothers jointly could not receive as much glory as one could receive on his own. For in the earthly city, to share glory is to diminish one's own glory. Expounding on this theme, Manent notes that in the earthly city the "attainment of the greatest glory, the glory attached to *tota dominatio*," is the spoil of the man who rules alone.¹¹

The tale of Romulus and Remus is undoubtedly deplorable, but in the end it is a rather simple tale since it is a tale of rival brothers who coveted the same earthly good. The case of Cain and Abel, as Augustine shows, is far more complex and thus far more interesting. In Manent's reading of Augustine, Augustine suggests that Cain killed his brother Abel because "he envied his brother who was good."¹² Cain envied his brother Abel even though Abel, choosing the life of a shepherd and not a farmer like Cain, was willing to let his brother have all the earthly goods he desired. Augustine speaks of "the diabolical envy that the wicked feel for the good simply because they are good, while they are themselves evil."¹³ The point

is not so much Cain's wickedness, but Abel's goodness. The sinful Cain hates what ought to be the natural object of his love, his brother's goodness and through that what is truly good in itself. According to Manent, "the rivalry between Romulus and Remus expresses the division within the earthly city, which is divided against itself. With Cain and Abel, the conflict between the two cities comes to light. At the common source of the two divisions or conflicts is the depraved human will, sin."¹⁴ Christianity thus highlights a tension that marks human life as we know it by simultaneously affirming the desirability of human unity and the sharing of what is truly good for human beings and emphasizing the divisive effects of the fallen human will which ensures that men cannot ultimately act or be righteous on their own.

It is significant, I believe, that in his chapter on "The Two Cities" Manent quotes the following remark by Augustine twice: "The human race is, more than any other species, at once social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion."¹⁵ The problem with man as we know him, according to Christianity, if I may put it this way, is with his history, specifically his history as a fallen creature with a rational appetite, not with his nature. Man's created nature is good; it is his sinfulness, his suffering from what Augustine calls the twin effects of original sin, ignorance and difficulty, which inclines to him evil. The two parts of this thesis are of a piece for Augustine. Augustine's very definition of a bad will is that it perverts a nature that is good or capable of being good. In Manent's words, "the ambivalence of the human being divided between friendship and hostility is rooted on the one hand in the good nature of the human soul and on the other in the fallen condition of the human being; it is rooted in the 'nature vitiated by sin.'"¹⁶ Hence, for Augustine, the term that best seems to allow these two ideas to be held together is not corruption but wound: Human nature is "wounded in the natural powers proper to it."¹⁷

Yet Manent realizes that as powerful and illuminating as Augustine's analysis of the fallen condition of man is, it only emphasizes the political problem man faces when the Christian dispensation is taken into consideration. For Augustine's searching insight hardly helps us to order life in common in a concrete, actionable way. In Manent's view, this partly explains why men like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke would so radically simplify the complex and tension-ridden analysis Augustine gives in the name of advancing the modern political program. Manent notes that the

Augustinian knot that joins a sociable nature and an unsociable will and that only the grace of God could untie is cut by the human institution. For Augustine, hatred has to be healed. For Hobbes, it is enough to master hostility. The sovereign State will take care of that. Such is the moral simplification that makes modern political philosophy trenchantly effective. This philosophy, the philosophy of human rights, presupposes human unsociability, a morally neutral unsociability.¹⁸

But the contrast between Augustine and Hobbes on this question is not the whole story. One needs to look at the classical side of the equation as well. Manent observes that while Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, especially in his *Ethics*, were wont, at least exoterically, to show human virtue victorious or shining triumphantly on its own, Augustine is more apt to show man visibly struggling with virtue, to show human virtue engaged in a dramatic battle that it seems constantly to be on the verge of losing. Manent states, "this is the case in particular of temperance, the virtue especially in charge, I dare say, of the war against the weakness of the flesh, a war we cannot win by our own forces and for which we must ask the help of God."¹⁹ Though he does not reference it here specifically, it is difficult to believe that Manent did not have book 8, chapter 12 of Augustine's *Confessions* in mind as he wrote this passage.

We are now in a position to appreciate what Manent sees as the political import of Augustine's argument in *The City of God*. Unlike many modern Christian thinkers ranging from the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to the Catholic political theorist Robert Kraynak, Manent does not see Augustine offering a political program or even an actionable political template in *The City of God*. As illuminating as Augustine's treatment of the twin histories of the earthly city and the city of God are, and as instructive as Augustine's account of the invisible and seemingly intermingled terrestrial existence of these two cities is, his teaching does not provide a political model that is, to use Manent's preferred term, "operational." Manent is emphatic about this. At the end of the day, the argument about the two cities Augustine advances in *The City of God* makes abundantly clear that there is no history of the education of the human race, one could say, except in the measure that there is a sacred history, that is, a history of a holy people called to communion with God

and held in communion by God. To cite Manent again on this fundamental point, “the final education of humanity requires that the revelation of the truth become a truly universal way (*universalis via*) that does not belong as such to a particular nation but has been granted to all the nations to be common to them.”²⁰

According to Manent, if we employ the scientific classifications of classical philosophy, we can say that Augustine’s teaching on the two cities in *The City of God* is

neither practical nor theoretical. . . . [H]is concern is to arouse a specific disposition, half practical since it concerns evaluating human behavior and half theoretical since it is constituted by a “view” of the human condition on earth that does not change. . . . [I]t is a disposition that incites us to desire to enter into the city of God, but it is not certain that it helps us much to orient ourselves in the city of people.²¹

In sum, the solution to the problem of human living that Augustine sets forth in *The City of God* is fundamentally transpolitical. In fact, as Manent notes, it was their dissatisfaction with the perceived irresponsibility and impracticalness of this transpolitical solution that first moved early modern philosophers like Hobbes to mock and reject Christianity’s solution in the name of finally resolving the unavoidable problem of ordering life in the earthly city. In the wake of the Christian dispensation, modern political philosophy audaciously claimed to be able to finally quiet the tensions in the human soul and in the human person – tensions that have pulled (and will always pull) men between the universal and the particular, the love of one’s own and the love of what is good, the temporal and the eternal.

Let me conclude with a somewhat lengthy footnote. Near the end of his chapter on “The Two Cities,” Manent entertains what is, I think, Leo Strauss’s fundamental objection to Christianity’s tension-ridden formulation of the relationship between the legitimate ends of the earthly city and those of the city of God – and therewith to Christianity’s formulation of the theologico-political problem *tout court*. Manent is one of the small but growing number of Catholic thinkers who have both seriously and carefully engaged the wide range of Strauss’s thought and learned from the twentieth-century political philosopher. However, we must note Manent is a critical but respectful student of Strauss.

Manent takes book 10 of *The City of God* as his point of departure in this engagement with Strauss. In that book, Augustine critically examines Porphyry's thought on what the Neoplatonist saw as the tightly knitted problem that man's embodiment poses to human existence and human happiness. Manent cites Augustine's response to Porphyry's tri-compartmentalized solution to this problem, a solution that ultimately fractures the unified human being into a body, an intellectual soul, and a spiritual soul. Augustine concluded his subtle theological response to Porphyry's claim by stating that

this is the way which purifies the whole man and prepares his mortal being for immortality, in all the elements which constitute a man. We have not to seek one purification for that element which Porphyry calls the "intellectual" soul, another for the "spiritual," and yet another for the body itself. It was to avoid such quests that our Purifier and Savior, the true Purifier and the all-powerful Savior, took upon him the man in his entirety.²²

After drawing attention to Augustine's remark, Manent notes a similarity between the role that the Jewish people and Greek philosophy played in the development of humanity. Both the formation of the Jewish people and Greek philosophy, he remarks, constituted decisive qualitative progress in the relative "self-awareness" of humanity. This progress, however, came at the expense of a rupture or a separation within humanity. According to Manent, the "separation or rupture between the people of God and the 'nations' and the separations or rupture between the philosopher or wise man and the 'vulgar,' the latter deriving from the separation and even the rupture between soul and body that is the condition and achievement of philosophy."²³ Through these separations humanity, Manent argues, was raised a level. Manent goes on to state that "Christianity preserves or confirms the advances achieved by these two ruptures while it overcomes them by restoring human unity on a higher plane through the mediation of the God-man,"²⁴ Jesus Christ.

Strauss saw this restoration as the result of a synthesis between the demands of obedience held out by Judaism's divine law and the life of unencumbered inquiry held out by Plato's portrayal of the philosopher *par excellence*, Socrates. For Strauss, the alleged Christian synthesis necessarily

comes at the expense of transforming and destroying what is most distinctive and choiceworthy, according to the Hebrew bible and Greek philosophy, of Jerusalem and Athens.

Manent offers what he describes as an Augustinian-inspired partial response to Strauss's objection. Manent understands this response to be partial, in part because it depends on acknowledging the truth of Christianity's divinely revealed claim about the nature of man and the nature of God and the kind of graced communion that God offers to man through the Incarnation and in the Kingdom of God. But Manent also recognizes that this response is partial inasmuch as it speaks about what would have to be true about human perfection if a creature with a rational appetite like man were actually to attain, not just seek or quest for, human wholeness and human perfection. Bearing this in mind, Manent points out that Strauss's formulation posits as humanly necessary a separation "against which something in the human being" must unavoidably and necessarily protest in the name of the human being himself.²⁵ Hence, he asks, "why would the immense majority of humanity not know the Law of the true God or in any case be excluded from its benefits . . . and how could . . . wisdom," that which man's desire to know seeks to possess, in the end "evade nearly all people?"²⁶ Manent's Augustinian formulated response directs attention to the fact that man seeks wholeness and perfection as a whole being, a whole being whose perfection stands not in isolation from the members of all the other nations, as Judaism's distinctive claim to be the one chosen people does, or from the nondialectical many, as classical philosophy's exaggerated claim about the radical superiority of the Socratic philosopher does. On the contrary, it speaks of a form of graced perfection conferred on and attained by a concrete person that the human being necessarily holds in solidarity with all human beings inasmuch as they too are created human beings called to perfection in (and by) God.

Manent argues that one gains further insight into this problem if he takes into consideration not simply its Greek philosophic and Hebraic formulations, but also modern democracy's purported solution to the problem of the one and the many. Viewed from this fuller ancient/modern dialectical perspective, "Christianity instead of being simply a 'synthesis' is [seen to be] in the position of a 'middle term' between the Jewish and Greek 'separations' on the one hand and the unification or 'maximum

synthesis' of the Moderns on the other."²⁷ Perhaps here is a good and, I have no doubt, provocative place for me to stop.

Marc D. Guerra is associate professor and chair of the department of theology at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the author of Christians as Political Animals: Taking the Measure of Modernity and Modern Democracy (ISI Books, 2010), and editor of Reason, Revelation, and Human Affairs (Lexington Books, 2001), Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome: Essays in Honor of James V. Schall, S.J. (St. Augustine's Press, 2013), and Pope Benedict XVI and the Politics of Modernity (Routledge, 2013).

¹ Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, trans. Marc LePain (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴ *The Leviathan*, chap. 39.

⁵ *Metamorphoses of the City*, 228-29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁹ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 1.35, 46, quoted in *Metamorphoses of the City*, 274.

¹⁰ *The City of God* 14.28, 593, quoted in *Metamorphoses of the City*, 276.

¹¹ *Metamorphoses of the City*, 277.

¹² *Ibid.*, 278.

¹³ *The City of God* 15.5, 601, quoted in *Metamorphoses of the City*, 278.

¹⁴ *Metamorphoses of the City*, 279.

¹⁵ *The City of God* 12.28, 508, quoted in *Metamorphoses of the City*, 279.

¹⁶ *Metamorphoses of the City*, 279.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 405.

¹⁸ *Metamorphoses of the City*, 280.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 290.

²² *The City of God* 10.32, 424, quoted in *Metamorphoses of the City*, 293.

²³ *Metamorphoses of the City*, 293-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.