

ST AUGUSTINE'S 'INTENSE SUFFERING'

THOMAS BOOS, O.S.B.

PARALLEL with the liturgical movement, though less widespread and effective, there has been obvious among Catholics during the last decades a growing concern for the unity of Christians, an anguish that the divisions among Christians present a stumbling block to many who are seeking the truth, a longing that Christ's fervent prayer that 'all may be one, as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee' be realized so that the world may believe in Christ's mission. In France and in Germany this anguish has taken hold of the faithful in a far greater measure than in this country; here there are but a few self-effacing individuals, encouraged by the memory of such men as the Abbé Paul Couturier and Dr Max Josef Metzger, working quietly that Christians in general, and Catholics in particular, become more conscious of the tragic divisions. This annual number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* is one fruit of that work.

As among those active in the liturgical movement, those interested in the restoration of oneness among Christians have turned to a deeper study of the Bible, and, to a lesser extent, of the Fathers of the Church, whose writings are considered by many non-Catholic Christians as part of a common heritage. The problems the Fathers had to face were not quite the same as ours, and a sermon devoted solely to the question of unity, which would be so welcome in this review, does not seem to have been preached. In many patristic sermons, however, the pre-occupation with concord among the faithful, with the divisions caused by heresy and schism, provides indications of what the preacher has still to tell us today. St Augustine's concern at the division caused among the African Christians by the Donatists often finds expression in his sermons. Perhaps the closest parallel in our own day to the Donatist schism is the tragic position in China, although the origins are admittedly quite dissimilar; mention of China is a reminder that at this time our prayers for the unity of Christians must extend to the Chinese in the Far East as well as to all our other separated brethren nearer home, in loving concern and with deep sympathy.

The sermon from which extracts are to be given was edited by Dom G. Morin in 1913. He convincingly argued that it was to be attributed to St Augustine, and suggested that the occasion on which it was preached was the consecration of a bishop at Fussala, a town situated some forty miles from Hippo. For a long time it had been a

stronghold of Donatism; its distance from the episcopal see, coupled with the fact that the only language of a large number of its inhabitants was Punic, rendered its administration difficult. St Augustine determined to remedy the situation by separating Fussala from his own diocese and creating a new episcopal see. Unfortunately, the priest whom he had in view, who seemed to have united all the qualities needed for the delicate post, refused the burden at the last moment, and St Augustine consecrated in his place one of his own clerics. Antony, the cleric in question, had been brought up by St Augustine who loved him as a father; his later conduct, however, caused no end of trouble to his consecrator so that the warnings contained in the sermon appear prophetic. The concluding part in which St Augustine speaks of his sorrow at the divisions among Christians makes it particularly interesting in these pages, but the earlier part is surely also relevant since it is the bishop who is the centre of unity in a diocese.

Today, we are preaching to you, most beloved brethren, for the third time since God deigned to bring us among you; our sermons on the previous days concerned primarily you yourselves, but today a bishop, a gift of God's mercy, is being consecrated for you, so that our words should be such as to serve to exhort ourselves, to inform him and to instruct you.

He who presides over a people must first understand that he is to be the servant of all. Let him not despise such an attitude, for the Lord of all lords did not despise serving us. A kind of passionate longing to be in the top place did indeed creep in among the disciples, through an earthly weakness, and a haze of excitement began to get in their eyes, for, as we read in the Gospel, 'there was rivalry between them over the question which of them was to be accounted the greatest' (Luke xxii, 24). But our Lord as a doctor who was present with them got rid of their tumour, for seeing the vice whence came this rivalry he stood little children before them and said: 'Unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. xviii, 3).¹ It was the lowliness he recommended in the child. He did not want us to have childish minds, for the Apostle says elsewhere: 'Do not be content to think childish thoughts'. He adds: 'Keep the innocence of children with the thoughts of grown men' (1 Cor. xiv, 20). The great evil is pride; pride is the prime evil, the beginning, the origin, the cause of all sins. It was pride

¹ Passages from different gospels are in St Augustine's head and he combines them. The Knox version has been used in this translation except when it did not sufficiently agree with St Augustine's citations.

that toppled over an angel and made a devil, and that creature who had been toppled over offered to upright man the cup of pride to drink; he raised him, who had been made to God's image, into pride, and now he too became unworthy because he was proud. He envied him; he persuaded him to despise God's law to enjoy his power. How did he persuade him? 'If you eat', he said, 'you will be as gods' (Gen. iii, 5). See then whether it was not through pride that he persuaded. Made man, Adam wanted to be god; he took to himself that which he was not, he lost that which he was; not that he lost his human nature, but that he lost his happiness, both present and to come, and he lost it by the very thing which had been intended to lift him up, deceived by him who had been thrown down from thence

Addressing the apostles and strengthening them in a holy lowliness, after he had set them an example in the child, our Lord said: 'Whoever would be a great man among you, must be your servant' (Matt. xx, 26). I am not doing an injury to my colleague, your bishop-to-be, in wanting him and admonishing him to be your servant. If I am acting like this towards him, I have done so first towards myself; I am not simply someone speaking about a bishop, I am a bishop myself, and what I am admonishing I myself tremble about, and I call to my mind what the holy Apostle himself said: 'So I do not run my course like a man in doubt of his goal; I do not fight my battle like a man who wastes his blows on the air. I buffet my own body, and make it my slave; or I, who have preached to others, may myself be rejected as worthless (1 Cor. ix, 26-27).

Therefore, briefly, we are your servants; your servants, yet also your fellow-servants; your servants, but we all have the same Master; your servants, but in Jesus, as the Apostle says: 'We are your servants for Jesus' sake' (2 Cor. iv, 5). We are servants through him through whom we are also free-men, for it is he who has said to those who believe in him: 'If it is the Son who makes you free men, you will have freedom in earnest' (John viii, 36). Shall I hesitate to be made a servant through him, through whom unless I were made free, I would remain in hopeless slavery? We are superiors, and we are servants; we preside, but only if we benefit our subjects. Let us see then in what the presiding bishop is a servant. It is just as our Lord is, for when he said to his apostles, 'whoever would be a great man among you,

must be your servant', lest human pride should be displeased at the name of a servant, he at once comforted them by offering himself as an example of that to which he was exhorting them. 'Whoever would be a great man among you, must be your servant.' But see in what way: 'just as the Son of Man did not come to have service done to him, but he came to serve others (Matt. xx, 28)

In fine, listen to something most evident. Two of his disciples, brothers, the sons of Zebedee, John and James wanted places above the others; because they were ashamed to do it themselves they spoke to him through their mother, pushing her forward to express their desires: 'Lord', she said, 'here are my two sons; grant that in thy kingdom one may take his place on thy right and the other on thy left'. And our Lord replied to them, not to her: 'You do not know what it is you ask'. And he added: 'Have you strength to drink of the cup I am to drink of?' The cup he was thinking of is the one he spoke of shortly before his passion: 'My Father, if it is possible let this cup pass me by'. Have you the strength, he asked, to drink of the cup I am to drink of? At once, keen on being in first places and forgetting their weakness, they replied: 'We have'. To which he answered: 'You shall indeed drink of my cup; but a place on my right hand or my left is not mine to give; it is prepared for others by my Father'² (Matt. xx, 23). For whom is it prepared if it is not prepared for disciples? Who will sit there if not the apostles? It is prepared for others, not for you: for others, not for the proud. Our Lord, himself, sets before them lowliness when he said: 'it is prepared for others by my Father', for although he too prepared them, he said they were prepared by his Father, lest he should appear arrogant here and not set an example of lowliness, as he intended when he said all this. For there is nothing the Father prepares that the Son does not also prepare, nor the Son prepares that the Father does not prepare, for he himself said: 'My Father and I are one' (John x, 30), and he also said: 'What the Father does is what the Son does in his turn' (John v, 19). He is a doctor of lowliness both in word and in action; in word, for never since the beginning of his creating has he held his peace in the matter of teaching man lowliness, whether by his angels or by his prophets; and what is more he has deigned to teach by his own example. Our creator came in

² St Augustine follows a different reading in the last part of this verse.

lowliness, created among us; he who made us was made for us; God before all time, man in time to deliver man from time. A great doctor came to heal our sickness. From the East to the West the human race lay stretched out like someone grievously ill and needed a doctor. At first this doctor sent his servants, and came himself later on when he had been despaired of by many. Just as a doctor, when he sends his servants, it is as though to do something easy, and when the danger is great, he comes himself; thus the human race was in great danger, with the complications of all the vices, and most of all suffering from the open wound of pride. And so he came to cure that very pride by his example. Blush then, man, still to be proud when on your account God made himself lowly! If he had only been born for you he would have humbled himself very much, but he deigned even to die for you. He was here on the cross as man when the persecuting Jews shook their heads in front of the cross, and said: 'If he is the Son of God, he has but to come down from the cross, and we will believe in him' (Matt. xxvii, 42). But he did not come down because he was keeping unharmed his lowliness; it was not that his power had deserted him but that he was showing forth his patience. For if you only think of what he had done and of his power, you will see how easily he, who could rise from the tomb, could have come down from the cross. But lowliness and patience would not have been commanded you if they had not been shown to you; if they were to be commanded in word, then first they were to be shown and commended by his example. Let us therefore take heed of this in our Lord; let us consider his humility; let us drink the cup of his lowliness; let us draw close to him; let us study him. It is easy enough to think big thoughts; it is easy enough to enjoy honours; it is easy enough to lend our ears to those who agree with us and flatter us. To put up with invective, patiently to listen to reproaches, to pray for those who do you injury, this is the cup of our Lord, this is the banquet of our Lord. 'Have you been invited by a great man? then think what things you must prepare yourself for . . .'³

With the help of your prayers, may our Lord grant that we be and persevere in being what you would have us be, all you who wish us well, what he who has called us and commissioned us would have us be; may he help us to carry out what he has

³ This is a free and summarized citation of the Septuagint version of Proverbs xxiii, 1 seq.

commanded. Yet whatever we be, do not put your hope in us. I am diminishing myself; as a bishop let me say I want to rejoice about ourselves, I do not want to be puffed up. I do not congratulate anyone who puts his hope in me; no, I do not, whoever he may be; he is to be put right not confirmed in his opinion, to be changed not fixed in his way of thinking. If it is impossible for me to warn him, I am worried; should I be able to do so then I am no longer worried. Just as I have been doing before, now too I speak in Christ's name to God's people. I speak in God's church, I speak as God's servant no matter what I am personally: your hope must not be in us, your hope must not be in human beings. Whether we are good or bad we are but servants, and even if we are good and faithful servants we are but servants. Listen for a moment to the matter of our service: if you are hungry and do not want to be ungrateful take heed from whose store it is produced. If you are eager to have a certain thing to eat it does not bother you in what kind of a dish it is served to you. 'The great house' of the father of the family, 'besides its plate of gold and silver, contains other objects made of earthenware' (2 Tim. ii, 20). The dish may be of gold, or of silver, or of earthenware, but do not you bother about that but only whether it contains bread, and whose bread this is, which is being served up to you by his ministry. Pay attention to him of whom I speak, through whose gift this bread is served up. He himself is the bread. 'I myself am the living bread that has come down from heaven' (John vi, 51). We serve in you, therefore, Christ for Christ, we serve him under him; may he perfectly come to you, may he be the judge of our serving. Should the bishop be a thief, he will never say to you: 'Steal' but only: 'Do not steal!' This is what he receives from our Lord's storehouse. If he were to say anything else, you must despise him and say: 'This is not from our Lord's storehouse, you are giving me your own produce'. 'When he utters falsehood, he is only uttering what is natural to him' (John viii, 44). Let him therefore say to you, according to God: 'Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not commit murder'. Let him tell you according to God that you should fear, that you should not be puffed up, that you should turn away from love of the world, that you should put your hope in God. May he say these things to you, according to God. What of you though, if he himself should not act accordingly? The Lord your God is Christ who has looked

after you; he has said: 'The scribes and Pharisees', referring to them as a type of superiors in general, 'have established themselves in the place from which Moses used to teach; do what they tell you then, continue to observe what they tell you, but do not imitate their actions, for they tell you one thing and do another' (Matt. xxiii, 3). What are you going to say about this? How can you excuse yourself when the time comes for Christ to judge? You are going to say: 'I did wrong because I saw my bishop misbehaving himself'. Let it be answered you: 'You have chosen for yourself the person with whom you will be damned, not the one with whom you will be set free. You imitated him in his misdemeanours; why did you not rather listen to me through him instead of imitating him? Did I not tell you in my gospel that when you saw evil superiors, you were to do what they taught and not what they did? You are to hear me through them and like that you will not perish on their account.'

St Augustine himself realized that there were other passages in the gospel which seemed to make the position much less straightforward. He cites: 'Hypocrites, how could you speak to good effect, wicked as you are?' (Matt. xii, 34), and again: 'Can grapes be plucked from briers, or figs from thistles? Every tree is known by its fruit' (Matt. vii, 16). He insists, though, that the distinction be made between the teaching and the evil living, and that the faithful distinguish between the vine and the briers. It is clear that he has the origins of the Donatist schism in mind and is preparing to speak about the division in the African church. It does not seem possible to him that the schismatics were in good faith, but in the concluding passages of the sermon his love for them and his longing for their return to the oneness of the Church stand out most forcibly.

Listen, my brethren, while we say something about our intense suffering; listen to the reasons why our brothers separated themselves from us. Let them tell us why. They say the bishops were evil. They occupied their sees, the sees of Christ, they were in Christ's unity, it was not right then to be separated from that unity. They were evil, you say. Well, it was for you to do what our Lord commanded: 'Do what they tell you, but do not imitate their actions'. Why have you separated yourself from the see of Peter? If there was a noxious person in the see, it was for you to hear through him, not to imitate him. And in any case, can you prove that, as you say, a noxious person was in the see? I for my part prove you to be noxious, you who have abandoned

the see of Christ. What you affirm is hidden; what I affirm I prove. Your separation punishes you, your breaking off punishes you. We were purchased at the same time, we were bought for the same price, the cost has been made public, the record of our purchase is the holy gospel. Look as I open and read the passage where we were bought, where we are brethren and fellow-servants, where we are set together in oneness. For Christ did not keep silent about what he had bought lest anyone should take what he owned, and substitute something foreign; in short, he was not silent respecting what he had bought. Open up the account books and read: the documents are all drawn up, the purchase was not made without a written contract; future quibblers were provided for.

You say that the Church of Christ is among the Africans and in Africa; I declare that the Church of Christ is spread among all nations. Here lies the question, it is from this that the dispute among brothers has arisen. You are keeping up the litigation on behalf of a part and in order to stay in a part. I am disagreeing with you so that you might possess the whole. Do understand the struggle as a struggle for concord, and the dispute as motivated by love. I do not say to you: 'Go away, you have been defeated'. For from the very beginning those who wanted to split up the inheritance were displeasing to our Lord Jesus Christ. For someone in the crowd said to him while he was preaching the truth to the people: 'Master, bid my brother divide with me the inheritance' (Luke xii, 13). And our Lord, who did not want to increase a division, he who had come to bring oneness—we have heard him in the gospel at another time speak of that very oneness: 'I have other sheep, too, which do not belong to this fold: I must bring them in too; so there will be one fold and one shepherd' (John x, 16)—our Lord then, who loved unity and hated division, said to that man: 'Why, man, who has appointed me to divide the inheritance among you?' I say unto you: 'Look well and keep yourselves clear of all covetousness'. He did not want to be a divider of the inheritance; he had come to assemble into unity, to give one inheritance throughout all countries. Let the records of his inheritance be read, let them be read so that I may begin to talk. He rose from the dead, he showed himself to his disciples, not only so that they could see him but also so that they could lay their hands on him and touch him. 'Touch me, feel me, and

see; a spirit has not flesh and bones, as you see that I have' (Luke xxiv, 39). For they thought it was a spirit and no body, an illusion not a reality. 'While they were still bewildered by joy he said to them: do you not know that while I still walked in your company, I told you how all that was written of me in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, must be fulfilled?' (Luke xxiv, 44). Listen to what it was that was written in the law and the prophets and the psalms: 'it was fitting that Christ should suffer' (Luke xxiv, 46).

I believe that, he says.

Oh, and rightly, brethren; take heed too of the rest!

I am reading the documents of our Lord, I am reading the record or rather the testament of our inheritance; let us read together, and let us understand; and then why do we quarrel? See I shall go on reading, listen to the rest! 'It was fitting that Christ should suffer.' Do you believe this with me? I do believe, he says. 'And should rise again from the dead on the third day.' Do you believe this with me? I do certainly believe. Believe the rest too then and there will be an end to discord. What is there in that rest? 'And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' You see what I read; this is the Church of Christ: 'to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem'. Hold firm to it with me, and you will remove discord. Should you not be in it you will simply be in a faction. By your loss you conquer, by your gain you are conquered. Do acknowledge you are overcome, and with me you will hold firm to her who is spread to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

St Augustine then mentions an incident which was being thrown in his face by his adversaries, but insists that, whatever the truth of the matter, they should all let bygones be bygones. He speaks too of the bishop, Caecilianus, whose alleged misconduct was being used as a defence for their attitude by the schismatics, and once more he points out that the Christian's hope is not to be put in a person, and that in the whole affair abstraction should be made of Caecilianus and his memory. Movingly he concludes:

I interrupt my Lord, I interrupt Christ against my brother. I do not do it like the man in the gospel; I do not say to him: 'Master, bid my brother divide with me the inheritance', but I say: 'Master, bid my brother hold the inheritance with me'. Hence then when I beset our Lord with a demand against my

brother, it is not against my brother but for him. I do not want him to be disinherited; I do not want to be the sole possessor, for I know that what I possess will not be diminished if many possess it with me. What I possess is called charity, and that grows larger and larger the more numerous the possessors.



EXTRACT

DR OLIVER TOMPKINS, formerly a high authority in the Ecumenical Movement and now Bishop of Bristol, wrote as follows in an article in the *Church Times*, August 22, 1958, which bore the title *Ten Years of the World Council of Churches; a permanent feature of the Christian landscape*. His words corroborate the verdict of the Rev. Francis House in his article *Roman Catholic Ecumenism* printed elsewhere in this number.

'One of the most significant testimonies that the World Council must be thought of as a permanent feature of the Christian landscape may well be the seriousness with which it is treated by the Church of Rome, which is not wont to waste words upon phenomena that it expects to fade. It is probably true to say that Roman Catholics have produced a greater volume of serious, informed and pertinent comment upon the World Council than have the theologians in the bodies which actually belong to it.

'Most weighty, because most official, is the *Instruction of the Holy Office to Local Ordinaries*, dated December 20, 1949, which Fr Boyer, the editor of *Unitas*, described as being, for Roman Catholics, 'the great charter of unionist activity'. Since then many careful studies have been published, among the more recent and more solid being Gustave Thils' *Histoire Doctrinale du Mouvement Œcuménique*; George H. Tavard's *The Catholic Approach to Protestantism*; and, by Edward Duff, s.j., *The Social Teaching of the W.C.C.*—and a good deal more, mostly in French and German.

'Non-Roman theologians have yet to catch up with such writers in analysing the consequences, for a theology of the Church, of the deep degree of unity which their common profession of faith in the deity of Jesus Christ (the "basis" of the W.C.C.) confers upon a wide range of "separated Christians".'