

From Pilgrim to Perfect Man: Augustine's Doctrine of Deification as Ecclesial Progress in *The City of God*

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The belief in progress has been, and many argue still is, a central and driving force in Western culture. Augustine's magisterial work *The City of God*¹ is a response to various ancient ideas of progress, and in responding to these he also sets forth his own theological understanding of the origin, progress, and consummation of human history. In traditional theological terms, this is the domain of the doctrine of providence, but it is instructive to set Augustine's thought in conversation – as he so clearly desires to – with competing systems of thought, for it is especially in comparison that Augustine's theology of history is revealed for its radical reformulation of ancient thought. In this essay, then, I will set forth a constructive portrayal of Augustine's theological idea of progress as presented in *The City of God*. Augustine in no way offers a general theory of progress that might be universally recognized *in history*; however, there is progress nonetheless as the city of God, alongside and in opposition to the earthly city, develops as a pilgrim in the world from the time of Adam and progresses until the final judgment when the two cities will at last be separated. In particular, I will argue that, even in the present age (for him the sixth and final historical age), Augustine understands there to be progress in the Church as it is being built up through love into a perfect man (XXII.18). This progress in love is *both* vertical *and* horizontal in that Augustine understands the Christian hope to be both an enduring participation in God through Christ, and a responsible participation in the world through the body of Christ.

1. Two Ideas of Progress in the Ancient Roman World

If the idea of progress is going to be a useful tool for understanding both

1. Unless otherwise noted, references are from Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013). Henceforth, only book and chapter numbers will be given.

Augustine's thought and that of his various interlocutors, we will require a broad definition of the term. A brief overview of various sources on the idea of progress leads very quickly into a land of competing claims. For example, J. B. Bury argues that the "notion of Progress... is of comparatively recent origin," and that "the intellectual climates of classical antiquity and the ensuing ages [up until "the sixteenth century"] were not propitious to the birth of the doctrine of progress."² This is not least because, for Bury, the idea of progress is intrinsically anthropocentric, which is to say "it must not be at the mercy of any external will; otherwise... the idea of Progress would lapse into the idea of Providence."³ His point is well-taken and any account of the general idea of progress would have to distinguish between its pre-modern and modern manifestations. However, I do not see any necessary reason to begin with such a narrow understanding of the term. On the other end of the spectrum, Robert Nisbet traces the idea back to the ancient Greeks and sees great continuity right through the early Church and beyond: "Far from being obstacles or barriers the thoughts of progress by the ancients and Christians alike were steps toward the modern idea of progress."⁴

There is more agreement with respect to the general features of an idea of progress. At the very least, scholars agree that progress is a change through time for the better (not merely for individuals but for human society); most argue for an "end" to progress in some final state of felicity; and there is broad consensus regarding the dual-aspect of progress in terms of either its 'material' or 'spiritual' significance (or both as the case may be).⁵ On the latter point, these two aspects of progress might productively

2. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (Read Books, 2011), 6-7. Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), is at one with Bury here, arguing that "the idea of human progress... was absent in classical times, and could grow only after the mental fetters inherited from them had, at least in part, been broken" (1).

3. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 5.

4. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), xiii. Nisbet calls Bury's book "a deeply flawed classic" (xviii).

5. Other terms are often used synonymously with these: 'moral', 'religious', or 'mystical' in the place of 'spiritual'; and 'secular', 'scientific', or 'technical', in the place of 'material'. Cf. John Baillie, *The Belief in Progress* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 7-38; Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 2004), 3-4; Pollard, *The Idea of Progress*, 1-17; Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 4; and Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, xii.

be categorized in terms of symbolic trajectories: the horizontal (material), which is immanent and *this*-worldly, and the vertical (spiritual), which is transcendent and *other*-worldly.⁶ The broadest definition of progress is thus supplied by Baillie as “a continued change for the better.”⁷

1.1 Horizontal Progress: Rome without Limits

On the one hand, Augustine is arguing against those Romans who believed the empire was to progress with limitless power and dominion. In fact, his reason for writing *The City of God* was to defend Christianity against those who claimed the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 was due to the abolishment of the ancient gods and the influence of the new religion. It is hard to imagine the loss experienced by both pagans and Christians alike who were schooled in words like those of Jupiter found in Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “To the Romans I assign limits neither to the extent nor to the duration of their empire; dominion I have given them without end.”⁸ What the Romans believed for centuries concerning the empire – limitless in space and time – many Christians now took up and understood to be fulfilled in Christ.⁹

6. The reason for choosing these terms will become clearer in the course of my argument. In short, I think it is possible to identify a social or even political (i.e., horizontal) progress in Augustine that, while having significant material impact, is not very concerned with technical development or utilitarian ends. His desire is to infuse the material with moral or spiritual significance, raising it to a higher plane.

7. Baillie, *The Belief in Progress*, 2. J. D. Bury defines progress as “an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing – *pedetentim progredientes* – in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely” (*The Idea of Progress*, 5). For Robert Nisbet, it is “*the idea [...] that mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future*” (*History of the Idea of Progress*, 4-5; italics original).

8. Quoted in Theodore E. Mommsen, “St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the City of God,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (June 1951), 347. Mommsen provides many more examples of this belief than I can include here, and he argues that it was commonly held among Christians as well. I am indebted to his diligent research throughout this section. Even at the end of the fourth century, the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus could proclaim that “as long as there are men, Rome will be victorious so that it will increase with lofty growth”; and the Christian poet Claudianus could write: “There will never be an end to the power of Rome...” (347).

9. This is the focus of Mommsen’s article: he seeks to show that Augustine is responding not only to Roman pagans but also to Roman Christians. For example, Prudentius in AD 403 wrote:

Writing, then, on the other side of this catastrophe (he began the work in 413 and completed it in 426), Augustine sought to provide both a defense of Christianity and a critique of such exclusively horizontal understandings of progress. His method is twofold: first, he provides a barrage of historical examples that undercut any theology of material reciprocity, or what Mommsen calls “the old [Roman] principle of *do ut des*: ‘I give that you may give.’”¹⁰ The Romans presumed that by offering to the gods the gods would in turn provide them with material benefits, but for every historical example where the Romans see a positive correlation between religiosity and material gain, Augustine can find another of negative correlation (II-III). Second, he provides a theological critique of the gods in an attempt to reveal their impotence: each god is assigned “power” over particular tasks of human life; however, as the number of gods increase, the tasks become more and more minute such that no one god could ever be responsible for anything of real significance (IV). In short, the Roman gods are utterly impotent – worse, they are in truth demons inciting humans to participate in evil acts (IV.1).

How then is one to explain the spectacular growth of the Roman Empire? Here Augustine considers, and is even willing in part to commend, “the virtues of the Romans” (V.12). In particular, “the Romans were led to do many great deeds, first by their love of liberty, and then by their desire for praise and glory” (V.12).¹¹ At first, freedom was sought with such great

“[Constantine] did not set any boundaries, nor did he fix limits of time; he taught an imperial power without end so that the Roman valor should no longer be senile nor the glory which Rome had won should ever know old age” (“St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress,” 367).

10. Mommsen, “St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress,” 359. Augustine criticizes the principle thus: “For the good make use of this world in order to enjoy God; but the evil, by contrast, wish to make use of God in order to enjoy this world...” (XV.7). In other words, the principle turns the gods into the means of a desired material and temporal end; whereas, for Augustine, God is properly an end and not a means.

11. Desire for glory, according to Augustine, is not really a virtue but rather a lesser vice that keeps greater vices – such as the lust for mastery – in check. “But the heroes of Rome were members of an earthly city, and the goal of all the services which they performed for it was its security. They sought a kingdom not in heaven, but upon earth: not in the realm of life eternal, but in that region where the dead pass away and are succeeded by the dying. What else were they to love, then, but glory, by which they sought to find even after death a kind of life in the mouths of those who praised them?” (V.14).

fervor that Romans were willing “either to die brave or live free” (V.12). Then, once freedom had been achieved, their desire for glory led to a quest for “dominion over others” (V.12). This desire for glory led many Romans to prefer the empire to their own wealth and even lives, and so that empire grew. Eventually, however, the desire for glory gave way to the corruption of luxury in which “the commonwealth was impoverished by the wealth of private citizens” (V.12). In the end, the Romans justly received what they desired: a material reward and a temporal empire (V.15). It is worth noting here that while Augustine rejects the *do ut des* formula, he does see an intrinsic – though not necessary – relationship between virtue and material welfare: greed (vice) leads to destruction, but self-sacrifice (virtue) is capable of contributing to the common good.

Detached from the transcendent God, the Roman Empire sought to “transcend” on a purely horizontal level, but its immanent ontology led to a progress of stretch and collapse. By exposing the Romans gods as demons belonging to the spatiotemporal realm, Augustine reveals the untenable nature of an exclusively horizontal progress; all such progress – driven by love of self – in the end curves in on itself, distorting external goods for the sole purpose of temporal pleasure.

1.2 Vertical Progress: Platonic Progress and Regress

Augustine has more sophisticated interlocutors in the Greek philosophical tradition. If the first five books are Augustine’s rejection of the immanent ontology of Roman religion, books six through ten are an analysis of the dualist ontology¹² of the Greek philosophers who promote the possibility of vertical transcendence. Here Augustine has much to commend, especially among the Platonists; for, he argues, “No one has come closer to us than the Platonists” (VIII.5).¹³

Augustine lays out the idea of progress in Platonic philosophy beginning with the premise of Plato that “no god has dealings with men”

12. There is obviously a distinction to be made between the dualism of the Manicheans, which posits an eternal dualism of good and evil (and is rejected by Augustine), and the dualism of the Platonists, which posits an eternal dualism of being and becoming (and is more amenable to Augustine). We will see his modifications to the Platonist position below.

13. Cf. VIII.6-11 for Augustine’s generous commendation of Plato.

(VIII.18).¹⁴ If, then, there is to be vertical progress from men to gods, there must be a means of mediation between the two. As a test case in Platonic philosophy, Augustine takes the thought of Apuleius who believed that demons function as intermediaries between gods and men (VIII.18ff). Augustine quotes Apuleius at the core of his argument:

You have here two kinds of living creature, gods and men, with the former sharply distinguished from the latter by the sublimity of their *location*, the everlastingness of their *lives*, and the perfection of their *nature*. There is no direct means of communication between the gods and men, for not only are the highest habitations separated from the lowest by a great gulf; also, the life-force of the gods is eternal and unfailing, whereas that of men is fleeting and intermittent. Moreover, the nature of the gods is sublime in its blessedness, whereas that of men is sunk in misery (IX.12; *italics added*).

In responding to Apuleius's position, Augustine grants that the *location* of the demons is intermediate. However, wonders Augustine, how is it that Apuleius neglects to assign to the demons one attribute from each of the other two opposing pairs? Unlike *location*, neither their *lives* nor their *natures* can possibly be intermediate; therefore, if they are to remain suspended between gods and men, the demons must possess one attribute like the gods and the other like humans. And "since everlasting life cannot be received from the lowest extreme, because it does not exist there, they must receive this one attribute of theirs from the highest; and, accordingly, there is nothing but misery left for them to receive from the lowest extreme, thereby completing their intermediate position" (IX.13). In their intermediate position, the demons are in fact intermediaries, argues Augustine; however, they "cannot confer upon us a blessedness which they do not have themselves," and so their role is not one of reconciliation but of "separation" unto "eternal misery" (IX.23; IX.15; IX.13). And, as Augustine argues previously, it is utter madness to worship that which is unworthy of imitation (VIII.17).

Further, *even if*, as the Platonists hold, there is real vertical progress from the realm of becoming to the realm of the Forms, there remains among the Platonists the aporia of *enduring* transcendence. The Platonists introduced the notion of cyclical time (*circuitus temporum*) "in which the same natural things are renewed and repeated eternally" (XII.14). But

14. "Gods do not mix with men; they mingle and converse with us through spirits instead..." (Plato, *Symposium*, ed. John M. Cooper [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997], 203A).

from this notion “they cannot find a way of freeing even the immortal soul, which, even when it has achieved wisdom, still ceaselessly passes back and forth between false blessedness and true misery” (XII.14; cf. 21). Unlike the horizontal progress of stretch and collapse that Augustine perceived in Roman religion, the problem with Platonism is a vertical progress and regress that continues for eternity. Augustine’s solution is a return to the particular historical events of Scripture.

2. The Pilgrim’s Progress: Making a Straight Path for the City of God

Theodore Mommsen provides a detailed analysis of the terms that Augustine uses pertaining to the “progress” of the city of God (*excursus*, *procursus*, and *procurrere*).¹⁵ He concludes that the linguistic evidence suggests “the City of God on earth ‘proceeded in running out its course’ [XIX.5].”¹⁶ In other words, he suggests,

mankind has grown up from the time of its infancy through the phases of childhood, adolescence, young manhood, and mature manhood to its old age (*senectus*) which has begun with the birth of Christ. That growth of the spiritual enlightenment of the human race found its clearest expression in the scheme of “the six ages”.... The summit has been reached with the gospel of Christ, and no further fundamental change will take place in the spiritual realm to the end of time.¹⁷

Mommsen is certainly right that Augustine did not expect another “age” of progress to commence until the return of Christ.¹⁸ However, it does not follow to suppose this means the end of progress in the age of the Church. For example, to Christians, Augustine is still able to write: “Now, therefore, let us walk in hope, and progress [*proficientes*] from day to day as we mortify

15. Mommsen, “St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress,” 371-72. It is curious to me that Mommsen does not look at the word *proficere* (“to make progress, advance, gain ground, get an advantage”), which a superficial perusal of the text shows to be quite pertinent (cf. X.14; XVIII.11; XIX.19; XXI.15, 27).

16. Mommsen, “St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress,” 372.

17. Mommsen, “St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress,” 372-73.

18. The ages of Augustine’s scheme are as follows: (1) Adam to the Flood; (2) Flood to Abraham; (3) Abraham to David; (4) David to Exile in Babylon; (5) Exile to Nativity of Christ; (6) Current Age of the Church; (7) Return of Christ and Rest; (8) Eternal Rest (XXII.30).

the deeds of the flesh by the spirit” (XXI.15). Then he offers a dramatic summary of his overarching theo-logic:

‘...as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God’: not by nature, however, but by grace. For there is only one Son of God by nature, Who in His compassion became the Son of man for our sakes, that we, being by nature sons of men, might become sons of God by grace through Him. For He, abiding unchangeable, took our nature upon Himself so that, through that nature, He might take us to Himself. Even while holding fast to His own divinity, *He became a partaker in our infirmity, that we, being changed for the better, might, by participating in His immortality and righteousness, lose our condition of sin and mortality, and preserve whatever good quality He had implanted in our nature, now made perfect by that supreme good which is the goodness of His nature* (XXI.15; *italics added*).

This is what I intend to unpack for the remainder of this paper: that the logic of incarnation leading to deification is what Augustine understands as ecclesial progress, which begins even “in this passing age, where she dwells by faith as a pilgrim among the ungodly...” (I.Pref.).

2.1 Time: The “New Things” of History

For Augustine, it is vital that the end of progress be a secure and lasting rest. He stresses this point in the final book of *The City of God*, describing the final state of affairs as a “full, certain, secure and everlasting felicity” (XXII.30); and he contrasts the original state of affairs in paradise with the final state of affairs in the coming kingdom of heaven in terms of “being able not to die” as opposed to “being not able to die” (XXII.30). Why is this so important? Because he understands that, without eternal security, there is no true felicity: “For how can the soul be truly blessed when it has no assurance of being so for all eternity, and if it is either unaware of coming misery because ignorant of the truth, or most unhappy with foreboding even in its blessedness?” (XII.14).

In order for the end of progress to be a secure and lasting rest, Augustine rethinks time and history in opposition to the cyclical view of the Platonists. To do this, he focuses on the genuine historical novelty introduced especially by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. By arguing that there are really “new things” in history, Augustine is able to break open the cyclical worldview and propose a linear view of history, one

with a definite beginning (creation), a surprising intervention (Incarnation), and a final consummation (deification).

With respect to his view of history, Augustine's argument is centred on chapter fourteen of book twelve when he introduces the genuinely "new things" of history in the story of Jesus. After strongly opposing the Platonic "theory of cycles," Augustine proclaims that "Christ died for our sins *once*, and 'being raised from the dead dieth *no more*; death hath no dominion over Him'" (XII.14; *italics added*). Following from the event of Christ's resurrection is that "we ourselves, after the resurrection, shall be 'ever with the Lord'" (XII.14). It is the novelty and finality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that breaks the cyclical worldview.

The truth of history is therefore discovered in the receptivity of time to eternity. The two realms are not hermetically sealed, but God intervenes – indeed, he participates – in history in the person of Christ introducing genuinely "new things." Apart from this revelation, philosophical reason is stuck in an endless cycle of progress and regress. History is thus revealed in its linear and participatory nature,¹⁹ and "by following the straight path of wholesome doctrine, we may escape I know not what false and circular paths discovered by wise men who are both deceived and deceiving," for "[t]he wicked walk in a circle' – not because their life is to recur in cycles, as they believe, but because the path of their error, that is, of their false doctrine, is circular" (XII.14). Augustine summarizes his achievement like this: "Therefore, now that we have exploded those cycles in which it was supposed that the soul is brought back at fixed intervals to the same miseries, what can be more in keeping with godliness than to believe that it is not impossible for God both to create new things never before created, and, by his ineffable foreknowledge, to preserve His will unaltered in doing so?" (XII.21).²⁰ This linear-participatory perspective opens up for Augustine the possibility of legitimate progress *from creation to deification*.

19. For an exposition of history in its "linear and participatory... dimensions," cf. Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Exegesis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

20. Christopher Dawson suggests "This recognition of the uniqueness and irreversibility of the temporal process – this 'explosion of the perpetual cycles' – is one of the most remarkable achievements of St. Augustine's thought." Cf. "St. Augustine and His Age," in *A Monument to St. Augustine* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), 69.

2.2 Space: Creation and Incarnation

2.2.1 Dependent Dualism: Creation *ex nihilo*

In a certain sense, creation *ex nihilo* is, for Augustine, the first “new thing,” for creation inaugurates time.²¹ The doctrine also introduces an original ontology that I am calling dependent dualism. If the material realm is eternally evil (as in Manichaeism or Gnosticism), it is ultimately subject to decay and death; spiritual escape is the only mode of enduring progress. If the material realm is eternally mutable (as in Platonic philosophy), it is susceptible, after a period of progress in the realm of Forms, to fall back into the flux of becoming. Neither option is plausible for Augustine who is constrained by the limits of biblical revelation: matter is good, and only God is eternal. Therefore, creation, which for Augustine contains both spiritual and corporeal matter, must have a beginning that does not emanate from the eternal life of God. His solution, in line with the Christian tradition before him, is to propose “that there is no immutable good apart from the one, true, blessed God; and that the things which He has made are indeed good, because they come from Him, but are nonetheless mutable, because made not out of Him, but out of nothing” (XII.1).²² The result is an ontological dualism between Creator and creation, yet not one of absolute separation or autonomy. In his own words: “For although [all the things which He has created] can be *nothing without Him*, they are *not what He is*” (VII.30; *italics added*).²³

21. Augustine writes: “And is it any wonder if, wandering around in these circles, they find neither a way in nor a way out? For they do not know how the human race and this mortal condition of ours began, nor how it will be brought to a close, since they cannot penetrate the depth of God’s intention. *For though He is Himself eternal and without beginning, He has nonetheless caused time to have a beginning*; and man, whom He had not previously made, He has made in time not from a new and sudden resolve, but by His immutable and eternal purpose” (XII.15; *italics added*). There is nuance in Augustine’s understanding of the relation between creation and time that is beyond the scope of this paper. For a more thorough explanation, cf. Simo Knuuttila, “Time and Creation in Augustine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 2nd ed., eds. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), 81-97.

22. In other words, one could say that, for Augustine, God is the efficient, formal, and final cause of creation, but not its material cause.

23. Contrary to the view of Gnosticism or Manichaeism, Augustine’s cosmos is good; contrary to the view of Platonism, though of course much closer to his own view, Augustine’s cosmos is

This doctrine, then, provides a foundation for an enduring spiritual-material progress. Dawson argues that Augustine:

admits that the idea of a perpetual return is a natural consequence of the belief in the eternity of the world, but if we once accept the doctrine of Creation, as Origen himself did, there is no further need for a theory of “the circumrotation of souls,” or for the belief that nothing new or final can take place in time. Humanity has had an absolute beginning and travels to an absolute goal. There can be no return. That which is begun in time is consummated in eternity.²⁴

Moreover, the material realm is good and therefore analogically compatible with the good God. (The soul was never a problem for the Platonists, nor for Augustine.) However, sin causes a disruption in this dependent dualism such that, under fallen conditions, the end result of creation is necessarily corruption and decay (cf. XIII), for the created realm is now constantly susceptible in its reduced ontological status to fall, drawn by the law of ontological gravity, back into nothingness.²⁵ If we are to get beyond a foundation for progress and move forward as “pilgrims,” the radical ontological otherness of creation in relation to the Creator must be resolved. The situation demands an ontological bridge between Creator and creation that makes a way for true progress. Herein lies the significance of the divine-human mediator, the one who bridges the provisional ontological gap left by creation *ex nihilo* and so preserves and raises that which was susceptible to decay.

2.2.2 Divine-Human Mediation: Incarnation

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* renders the created realm vulnerable to corruption, inevitable disintegration, and a return to nothingness. The Incarnation is, therefore, the pivot point for Augustine that ensures both access of the created to the uncreated, and the enduring significance of the

created *ex nihilo* and therefore 1) is willed by God (cf. XI.21); 2) has a temporal beginning (cf. XI.4); and 3) is ontologically other than the being of God (cf. XII.1; quoted above).

24. Dawson, “St. Augustine and His Age,” 68-69.

25. Augustine notes: “To be sure, man did not fall away from his nature so completely as to lose all being. When he turned towards himself, however, his being became less complete than when he clung to Him Who exists supremely. Thus, to forsake God and to exist in oneself – that is, to be pleased with oneself – is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come closer to nothingness” (XIV.13).

created.

The key passage on Christ's mediation immediately follows Augustine's repudiation of demonic mediation in the thought of Apuleius. Instead of the demons who are immortal and miserable, what if we looked for a mediator who was at once blessed (like God) and mortal (like men)?

But if, as is argued much more credibly and probably, all men must necessarily be miserable while they are mortal, then we must seek a Mediator Who is not only man, but also God: Who, by the intervention of His blessed mortality, may lead men out of their mortal misery to a blessed immortality, and Who must neither fail to become mortal nor remain mortal. He was indeed made mortal not by any infirmity of the divinity of the Word, but by His assumption of the infirmity of the flesh. But He did not remain mortal even in that flesh, for He raised it from the dead. For this is indeed the fruit of His mediation: that those for the sake of whose redemption He became the Mediator should no longer remain subject to eternal death even of the flesh. It was, therefore, fitting for the Mediator between us and God to have both transient mortality and everlasting blessedness, so that, in His transient condition, He might resemble those destined to die, and might translate them from their mortality into His everlasting condition (IX.15).

Influenced by the conventional wisdom on Augustine, one might expect his discussion on mediation to focus on the chasm introduced by sin between humans and a holy God.²⁶ Instead, Augustine consistently cites 1 Timothy 2:5²⁷ as a resolution to the ontological gap introduced by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The Incarnation bridges that ontological gap as the immortal God assumes, raises, and translates the mortal flesh of humans. It fuses the immutable to the mutable and in so doing rescues the latter from decay. Having, then, pointed the way in his linear doctrine of history, Augustine now paves the path toward a real and enduring progress by means of divine-human mediation.

26. David Meconi points to Mausbach (and others) as an example of the standard interpretation of Augustine: "Mausbach singled out Augustine as the sole antagonist to the Greeks, the lone representative of a theological vision centered on human depravity. Consequently, as Mausbach suggested, Augustine is to blame for the Latin West's dismissing Christian salvation as theosis and transformation, favoring a remedial and reconciliatory construal." Cf. David Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), xiii.

27. "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human..." (NRSV). In Augustine, cf. XI.2, XVIII.47, and XXI.16.

Immediately after proposing the Incarnation as a solution to the Platonic problem of divine-human mediation, Augustine introduces the “exchange formula”²⁸ so widely utilized among the Greek fathers: “We have no such need [for other mediators] because a God Who is blessed and bliss-bestowing has become a sharer in our humanity, and so has furnished us with all that we need to share in His divinity” (IX.15). The descent of incarnation makes possible the ascent of deification.²⁹

3. A Perfect Man: The End of Progress in the City of God

Deification is the *telos* of progress in *The City of God*.³⁰ For Augustine,

28. The earliest example of the “exchange formula” is in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.Pref: “the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself” (Ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson [Ex Fontibus, 2010]). The most famous is in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54: “For he was incarnate that we might be made god” (Trans. John Behr [New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011]).

29. This “exchange” does not suggest either automatic or universal redemption for Augustine. Meconi contends that, “while the Son’s union with humanity is explained in terms of a *susceptio* [even *singularitate susceptionis*], humanity’s ‘contact’ with divinity is explained in terms of, most often, *participatio*” (*The One Christ*, 199-200).

30. An exhaustive treatment of the doctrine of deification in *The City of God* is beyond the scope of this paper. For passages pertaining to deification in *The City of God*, cf. IX.23; X.6; XII.9; XII.21; XIII.23; XIV.13; XVII.12; XIX.17, 27; XXI.15, 16; and XXII.30. While the term *deificare* (“to make a god”) occurs eighteen times in the whole of Augustine’s corpus (Meconi, *The One Christ*, xv), it is absent from Augustine’s vocabulary in *The City of God* (Augustine quotes Porphyry using it once in IX.23). However, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the concept is unimportant to Augustine. In fact, in his study on *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 2-3, Norman Russell provides a four-fold approach to classifying the language used to describe the concept of deification, and he suggests that the simple application of the word “gods” to human beings is an example of the weakest approach – the mere “nominal.” After the nominal is the “analogical,” in which humans “become sons and gods ‘by grace’ in relation to Christ who is Son and God ‘by nature’.” Then there is the “ethical approach,” which “takes deification to be the attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and philosophical endeavour”; and finally there is the “realistic,” which “assumes that human beings are in some sense transformed by deification.” “Behind the latter” approach “lies the model of *methexis*, or *participation*, in God.” It is this final, “realistic” and participatory approach that Augustine uses most consistently in *The City of God*. Russell argues that Augustine is alone among the Latin Church fathers to apply this participatory language to the divine (325-26). Likewise, Meconi argues that “It would be a methodological error... to restrict Augustine’s doctrine of deification only to those places where some form of

“deification means the perfection of the human person as he or she comes to live in total and perfect union with God.”³¹ This does not mean an erasure of the distinction between God and humans, for God remains the one “who deifies” and humans are “those who are made gods-by-grace....”³² In other words, by deification, humans participate in divinity but do not possess it.

Our modest proposal here is to focus on two short chapters (XXII.17-18) in *The City of God* with a view to understanding the climax of Augustine’s idea of progress in his theology of deification. While there are many passages that clearly indicate Augustine’s belief in deification, none are as explicit as these two chapters in describing the theological means of receiving this deification. Specifically, in his landmark study of deification in Augustine, Gerald Bonner argues that the Bishop of Hippo’s doctrine is Christocentric, that it is “an ecclesial process, in that it takes place in the communion of the Church,” and it is a “sacramental process.”³³ All three of these dogmatic loci are highlighted in these two chapters of Augustine’s thought.

This doctrine has monumental significance for Augustine’s idea of progress in both its social and material dimensions *here and now*, and it is on this point in particular that the best of scholarship on Augustine’s idea of progress requires revision.³⁴ No doubt it has been missed in part because the doctrine of deification is not a common feature of the early Latin Church,³⁵

‘deification’ explicitly appears. For, in Augustine’s mind, related and synonymous terms abound to describe deified creaturehood, just as readily expressible through more scriptural or creedal terms – such as becoming divinely adopted children, being made participants in God’s life, and incorporation as members of Christ’s own body, what he called the *totus Christus*” (David Meconi, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Deification,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), 208-9.

31. David Meconi, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Deification,” 225.

32. Meconi, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Deification,” 225.

33. Gerald Bonner, “Augustine’s Conception of Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986), 383.

34. Augustine’s doctrine of deification has recently and thoroughly been expounded by David Meconi, *The One Christ*. Meconi begins his book by suggesting that his “work will argue against much of previous scholarship to show that the deification of the human person is in fact a central doctrine in the overall thought of St. Augustine of Hippo” (xi-xii).

35. Norman Russell, in his *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, comments that “Deification is also found in the Latin tradition, but, with the exception of St Augustine, very sparsely” (325). Among Latin fathers, he provides brief discussions of

and perhaps it is also that Augustine was wary of affirming the idolatry of Roman religion.³⁶ Either way, the result has been an impoverishment of Augustine's idea of progress, with little or no appreciation for Augustine's contributions to horizontal progress. A prime example is Mommsen who, after a fine analysis of Augustine's rejection of an exclusively *this-worldly* city of God, concludes that Augustine "saw how perilous it was for the Christian faith to proclaim, as Eusebius and others had done during the fourth century, a belief in 'progress,' if that notion was understood in *any kind of materialistic sense*" (*italics added*).³⁷ Instead, for Augustine, Mommsen continues, "history was the *operatio Dei* in time, it was 'a one-directional, teleological process, directed towards one goal – salvation,' *the salvation of individual men, not of any collective groups or organizations*" (*italics added*).³⁸ In missing the doctrine of deification in terms of Augustine's soteriology, Mommsen is unable to grasp either the social or the material significance of human progress in the thought of Augustine. On the contrary, though, the city of God, for the Bishop of Hippo, is not a collection of individual souls en route to a private and immaterial end; it is the body of Christ knit together in love, united to Christ, and maturing through time until its eschatological realization as a perfect man (XXII.17-18).

3.1 Vertical Progress: Participation in God through Christ

In chapter seventeen of book twenty-two, Augustine begins by quoting from Ephesians 4:13 and Romans 8:29: "'Till we all come to a perfect man, to the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ', and 'Conformed to the image of the Son of God'...." Ostensibly Augustine's reason for dealing with these passages is to respond to those who believe that women will be resurrected as men. But Augustine dismisses this position immediately by

Tertullian and Hilary of Poitiers, and notes the theology of Novatian, Cassian, and Boethius (325-332).

36. Robert Puchniak makes this argument, pointing especially to *The City of God* in this respect. Cf. "Augustine's Conception of Deification, Revisited," in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 131. However, Augustine actually uses pagan idolatry as an occasion for discussing deification in IX.23.

37. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 369.

38. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 370.

reflecting on the innocence of nakedness in paradise and arguing that “Vice will be taken away from those bodies, therefore, and nature preserved. And the sex of a woman is not a vice, but nature.” Then Augustine moves on to what he sees as a more pressing concern: the meaning of female anatomy in light of the absence of “sexual intercourse and childbearing” after the resurrection. He suggests that “the female parts” will be “accommodated... to a new beauty” that “will move us to praise the wisdom and clemency of God, Who both *made* what was not and *redeemed* from corruption what He made” (*italics added*). The emphasis on the wisdom of God in *creation* and *redemption* here is vital. Augustine sees in the first man and woman a type of Christ and the Church: in the same way that “the woman was made from a rib taken from the man’s side as he slept,” so “the man’s sleep was the death of Christ, from Whose side, pierced with a spear as He hung lifeless upon the cross, there flowed forth water and blood, which we know to be the sacraments by which the Church is built up.” What is the meaning of this interpretation? Augustine suggests that “by the fact that she was made from the man’s side unity is commended to us; and, as we have said, the manner of her creation prefigured Christ and the Church.”³⁹ The one Christ gives of his body for the building up of the Church and in so doing the unity of Christ and the Church is revealed: there is no Church apart from the gift of Christ’s body. Moreover, the means of Christ’s gift of himself is understood by Augustine in terms of the sacraments, which are ultimately the means that lead to the end of deification.

Chapter eighteen takes the argument one step further. Again, Augustine inquires into “what the apostle means when he says that we shall all ‘come to a perfect man’.” This time, he quotes Ephesians 4:10-16 in order to consider the context of the phrase. Immediately following he writes: “Behold, then, what ‘a perfect man’ is: Head and body together, made up of all the members, which will be perfected in its own time.” This is a prime example of what Augustine so famously calls the *totus Christus* – “the divinely human head inseparable from the body which he has assumed, now constituting one person.”⁴⁰ The building up of the body is understood both in terms of numerical growth and in terms of spiritual maturation, the latter of which is realized in both the individual and the whole. But it

39. It is curious here that Augustine does not also utilize Ephesians 5:30-32 in this context.

40. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 196.

is as a whole that the Church grows toward “the fullness of Christ,” and, therefore, while perfection is an eschatological event for Augustine, there is real maturation in history. The age of the Church is that in which the body of Christ, together with its Head, progresses toward “the fullness of Him that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:22). While the metaphors have shifted between chapters – from male and female to head and body – the result is the same: the Church, made up of individual members of the body of Christ, is indeed one with Christ who, in turn, is one with the Father. Meconi summarizes it well: “As the mediator between permanence and dissolution, Christ has assumed humanity in order to conform all humans to himself. This is the Church for Augustine: a mystical person comprised of both a divine and human head as well as angelic and human members.”⁴¹ Christians, therefore, participate in God through the flesh of Christ, and so grow up into the *totus Christus*.

3.2 Horizontal Progress: Participation in the World through the Body of Christ

Robert Nisbet is among the minority of scholars of the idea of progress who are willing to attribute some form of material progress to Augustine. He points to “Augustine’s celebration of fecundity and growth in the organic kingdom for a paean to the wonders of secular culture, of the arts and sciences,” which he describes as “without parallel in scope and intensity until we come to the late-Middle Ages and early-modern era.”⁴² Here is the passage he quotes:

For over and above those arts which are called virtues, and which teach us how we may spend our life well, and attain to endless happiness – arts which are given to the children of the promise and the kingdom by the sole grace of God which is in Christ – has not the genius of man invented and applied countless astonishing arts, partly the result of necessity, partly the result of exuberant invention, so that this vigor of mind, which is so active in the discovery not merely of the superfluous but even of dangerous and destructive things, betokens an inexhaustible wealth in the nature which can invent, learn, or employ such arts[?] [XXII.24]⁴³

41. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 194.

42. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 54.

43. Quoted in Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 54-55.

Yet it is hardly clear from this passage that Augustine thinks he is describing a “continuous change” or that he thinks such change is always and necessarily “for the better.” Even when Augustine writes specifically of the “progress man has made in agriculture and navigation,” Baillie is certainly right in his assessment that these “human achievements” “are in themselves ambivalent, as capable of wrong as of right application.”⁴⁴ This “progress” of material culture, then, for Augustine, is no more than merely a fact of the local and periodic development of culture, susceptible to future regress as a result of moral collapse and cultural degradation. It does not amount to a belief in the idea of progress because its advancement toward the good is suspect, and because there is no intrinsic reason for its continuous advancement.

On the other hand, Nisbet astutely directs our attention more generally to “the early Christian ideas of *reformatio*, *renovatio*, *restauratio*, and *regeneratio* – with their implication of spiritual, but also, repeatedly, of material, political, and social improvement....”⁴⁵ It is on this point that the doctrine of deification bears fruit in terms of horizontal progress. Augustine could not conflate progress with the accumulation of *more things* (this was the undoing of the Romans), and he was rather ambivalent about the net result of making *better things* (this is a characteristically modern preoccupation); however, he was interested in how the progress of the city of God might contribute to making *things better*. This is a pithy way of saying that, for Augustine, the continuous *spiritual* progress in the body of Christ – itself inherently social and material – could and should lead to *material* progress in terms of a more just and peaceful society – in Augustine’s terms, “a better temporal kingdom” (IV.28). Tarcisius van Bavel grasps the profound horizontal implications of Augustine’s doctrine: “Since the moment Jesus left this world, He needs our hands to reach out to the destitute, He needs our eyes to see the needs of the world, He needs our ears to listen to the misery of others, He needs our feet to go to the persons to whom nobody goes. Salvation cannot be ‘extramundane’; Christians have to build up the beginning of the Reign of God in this world.”⁴⁶ Augustine says as much in

44. Baillie, *The Belief in Progress*, 21.

45. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 57-58.

46. Tarcisius van Bavel, “The ‘Christus Totus’ Idea: A Forgotten Aspect of Augustine’s Spirituality,” in *Studies in Patristic Theology*, eds. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 84-94; 86. Quoted in Meconi, *The One Christ*, 204.

The City of God where he argues that “works of mercy shown to ourselves or to our neighbours” are necessary precisely because “We, being many, are one body in Christ” (X.6).

There can be no doubt that Augustine thought God should be “sought and worshipped not for the transitory vapour of this mortal life, but for the sake of the blessed life to come, which is nothing less than eternal” (VII. *Pref.*). By horizontal progress, then, I am not here suggesting a reversal of Mommsen’s thesis against the *do ut des*, for example, which he so persuasively argued. However, with the new light achieved by unveiling Augustine’s doctrine of deification – in particular in its embodied, ecclesial dimension – the means of transforming *this* world are disclosed in terms of the love that is shared between and beyond members of the body of Christ. In the same way that Augustine is able to commend the half-virtues of the Romans as contributing to the spectacular growth of the Roman Empire, so he now sees an intrinsic – though again, not necessary⁴⁷ – relationship between virtue and social-material welfare in the city of God. Thus in the context of commending the Romans for their so-called virtues, Augustine contrasts the monetary sacrifice of the people for the good of the republic with Christians who “make a common property of their riches with a far more excellent purpose: namely, so that they may distribute to each according to his need...” (VI.18).

To take one example, Augustine summarizes some aspects of this “better temporal kingdom” in chapter seventeen of book nineteen. In contrast to those who “do not live by faith,” those “who live by faith” “make use of earthly and temporal things like pilgrims: they are not captivated by them, nor are they deflected by them from their progress towards God.” This means that “both kinds of men... make common use of those things which are necessary to this mortal life; but each has its own very different end in using them.” For example, both “kinds of men” agree that peace is a good to be promoted, but the heavenly city on pilgrimage recognizes this temporal peace primarily as a means to the final and eternal peace. This relativization

47. I emphasize that this relationship is not necessary, because it can never be said that virtuous behaviour always leads to felicity here and now. Throughout *The City of God*, Augustine reiterates Matthew 5:45 to emphasize that both good and evil come to the righteous and wicked alike *in this life*. In this life, therefore, virtue is its own reward; however, as I am arguing here, it also has potential to bear fruit for the common good.

of the good, secular realm is vital: while cultural and political realities are good, they can never be absolutized. Thus, for example, the heavenly city, as “a pilgrim on earth,” “summons citizens of all nations and every tongue, and brings together a society of pilgrims in which no attention is paid to any differences in the customs, laws, and institutions by which earthly peace is achieved or maintained. She does not rescind or destroy these things, however.” Augustine is able, therefore, to preserve and even promote significant diversity – cultural, legal, and political – within the one heavenly city.⁴⁸ He makes room for significant toleration and accommodation in pursuit of a common “earthly peace.” What is more, Augustine understands the motivation for such hospitable social action in terms of the dual love of God and neighbour: “This peace the Heavenly City possesses in faith while on its pilgrimage, and by this faith it lives righteously, directing towards the attainment of that peace every good act which it performs either for God, or – since the city’s life is inevitably a social one – for neighbour.” How can the city of God be anything less when by love each person is united to God in Christ, and to one another as members of the body of Christ? Therefore, social-material (horizontal) progress, understood as the growth of good will and good works exercised by the Church and on behalf of one’s neighbour, is intrinsic to Augustine’s logic of deification.

Conclusion

While I have argued that Augustine did indeed offer a coherent theological treatment of the idea of progress in response to other versions of the theme current in his day, this does not mean that this progress is evident *apart from the eyes of faith*. The reason for this is that alongside the progress of the city of God, Augustine also describes the “progress” of the earthly city (which is really a progress unto war and death). On the surface, then, the world is in conflict until the return of Christ, a spiritual battle waged between two loves: love of self, and love of God and neighbour. The wheat and the tares grow together until harvest (Mt. 13:24-30). Therefore, the progress of the Church in history is neither the progress of millenarianism

48. The same cannot be said for Augustine’s toleration of religious diversity. In the same chapter he writes: “it has not been possible for the Heavenly City to have laws of religion in common with the earthly city. It has been necessary for her to dissent from the earthly city in this regard, and to become a burden to those who think differently.”

nor Marxism, for example (for Augustine's repudiation of the former, cf. XX.7); it is the growth of practical, selfless love extended into the world by the body of Christ. In this sense, there is good reason to distinguish, as John Paul II did in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*,⁴⁹ between progress and development: the former belongs to the Church alone, while the latter is the effect of the Church's leavening influence on society. Greed remains, for now, but it may be countered with generosity; lawlessness remains, for now, but it may be tempered by justice; sin remains, for now, but it may be overcome by mercy.

However, the truth is that only the progress of the city of God has any substantiality; the progress of the earthly city is utterly transient. We are right then to focus on the progress of the heavenly city, which for Augustine is a progress that culminates in eternal peace and life, and which thrives only in dependence on the grace of God mediated by the sacraments of the Church. It is this city that grows and matures through time and therefore progresses until it reaches "the fullness of Christ" who is Himself the "perfect man." In terminology borrowed from Augustine, Benedict XVI describes the impact of this ecclesial progress on the development of human society in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

Man's earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity, contributes to the building of the universal *city of God*, which is the goal of the history of the human family. In an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the *earthly city* in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided *city of God*.⁵⁰

Thus, the progress of the city of God transforms the earthly city for good.⁵¹

49. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, December 30, 1987, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals.index.html>, sec. 27.

50. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, June 29, 2009, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals.index.html#encyclicals>, sec. 7.

51. I wish to express gratitude to the ARC reviewer of this essay who carefully interacted with my thought and offered helpful suggestions and criticisms, many of which I regret have not been adequately addressed.

