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"To Spare the Conquered and Beat Down the Proud": Augustine's Theory of Politics as Sacrifice and Compassion

Even granted Rome's occasional great and noble moments, from its fratricidal beginnings to its massive overextension into empire the Roman motivation for glory left a path of destruction in its wake. Augustine writes that their lust for domination "disturbs and consumes the human race with great ills" and "overcame other men also, worn out and exhausted as they were by the yoke of servitude". But what does he offer as an alternative? Criticisms of the Catholic Church from Machiavelli, Arendt and Rousseau among others appear to find little hope for protection from the *libido dominandi* in Catholicism. However, Augustine provides us with a positive (as opposed to a passive) model of political action that is embedded in his theology of the Eucharist. Though, in the history of Augustinian interpretation scholars fail to agree on whether resources for political action even exist in Augustine at all, I claim that the example of mercy present in the Eucharistic sacrifice becomes the guiding political light for the new class of actors Augustine will offer.

My interpretation relies on the reasonable oppositions Augustine's conception of sacrifice offers to the great flaws of Roman culture: in contrast to lust for domination, Augustine's model offers mercy grounded in charity; in contrast to *apatheia* toward the sufferings of others, he offers empathy grounded in cleaving to God; in contrast to raging pride he posits humility grounded in knowledge of our sinfulness and faith in the power of God.

Augustine's definition of sacrifice in conjunction with his account of compassion becomes the template for his political philosophy. Book 10 of *City of God* offers three definitions of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the act of cleaving to God and leading others to cleave toward him. The fruits of mercy grow in our hearts when we unite ourselves to God and hence we are able to perform the second definition of worship, acts of mercy performed with a contrite spirit. Finally, sacrifice is Christ's self-offering as both priest and victim, wherein the people of God are offered to the Lord because they are parts of his body. Augustine identifies this sacrifice with the Eucharist of the Catholic Mass.

This theory of sacrifice is related to Augustine's account of human emotion. When we cleave to God, he becomes the object of our will. Not only are the virtues born in our heart because of this cleaving, but our emotions are purified as well, so that we may experience "compassion" or "fellow-feeling" in our hearts for another's plight. This compassion, in turn, plays a role in our performance of merciful acts.

Five examples from *City of God* buttress my argument: three pre-Christian and two post-Incarnation. The pre-Christian models are the Sabine women contrasted with their Roman rapists, the Horatii sister slain by her brother and those practitioners of misguided *apatheia*. The two post-Incarnation models I employ are St. Paul and Emperor Theodosius. Each of these examples is analyzed in light of Augustine's theory of sacrifice and emotion.