Sursum Corda

Philosophical War

By Rev. James M. Gillis, C.S.P.

A few months ago we heard a great deal, from forum speakers and radio commentators, to the effect that the war in which we are now engaged is not only military and political but "ideological." Then, just as we were beginning to understand what the world meant, the speakers, and with them a host of writers, eased up on the use of that peculiar word "ideological," and lately they seem to have dropped it. That's too bad. Not that the word was the best or the easiest, but there was meaning behind it. Perhaps a better word would have been "philosophical." At any rate the idea behind the word—either word—is that we are now witnessing a titanic battle between two philosophies.

I wish we might call it not titanic but a battle to the death, or as the French say a outrance, a battle that goes on until one or the other combatant is altogether removed from the scene. But the chances are that the real enemy against whom we are pitting, or should be pitting, all our strength, will not be removed. In fact this enemy, stronger and more dangerous than any man or any army or any nation will come out of this war stronger than before. I don't mean Fascism. I don't mean Nazism. I don't mean the Japanese brand of Oriental Fatalism. The ideology, philosophy, system of thought with which we are in conflict is Materialism, which is the denial of all spiritual entities, especially of the two spiritual entities that we call God and the Human Soul.

It is a notorious fact that in hundreds of colleges and universities in our own country and in England, atheism is taught. Even more than taught, it is accepted without discussion; taken for granted. With that deplorable fact the general public has been long acquainted. We have commented upon it a thousand times.

But perhaps the people, by and large, are not so well aware of the fact that in college text books the doctrine of the human soul is brushed aside, and that in pretentious philosophical works it is discountenanced.

Let me present a sample. I take it from a simple and popular volume on the great philosophers of the world. The name of the author doesn't matter. He isn't so much the author as the compiler or the reporter. Generally he doesn't say whether he accepts or rejects; he simply presents, with a kind of take-it-or-leave-it attitude. But perhaps I should say that he is a teacher in a college maintained at the expense of the taxpayers of a great city, and that of these taxpayers [illegible] per cent are Catholics.

Here is a sample. Just a sample: "Most recent philosophy has abandoned the conception of soul and that of individual immortality. As one reads the pages of modern philosophers, one is struck with the fact that soul is seldom mentioned and the word 'immortality' is almost never encountered. In a recent anthology of modern philosophy, a book of some 800 pages selected from the writings of the present-day philosophers, there is no mention of the soul and only a very few mentions of immortality . . . The older attempt to account for man's ability to think and to reason on the basis of his possessing of a mind or soul has been largely abandoned. It is felt that such an explanation is no real explanation, but rather a dodging of the issue. Thought, it is held, is an activity with a peculiar quality, the quality of mindedness. Man who thinks does not have a mind distinct from the body with which he thinks."

Our toast-master, if we may call him such, then he introduces the speakers, mentions another who "believed that the search for a soul and a belief in immortality were characteristics of an earlier and more childish stage of human development. As man becomes more mature in his mental development, he recognizes that such beliefs are not exact, that they are mere wishes which cannot be proven or founded upon facts. Consequently, he argues, they must be abandoned."

And another who "recognized that many men believe in the existence of a soul which has immortality and that such a belief has a certain usefulness in man's moral life. But he was not able to make a place for this belief within the structure of careful thought."

And yet another who insists that "there is no basis for such beliefs. Indeed, he is convinced that the doctrine of the soul may be definitely harmful since it carries a load of tradition which weights man down or causes him to give up altogether the attempt to understand experience which has the quality of the religious."

I am not now concerned with the disproof of these philosophical opinions. The point I would make at the moment is that if this sort of thing continues after the war is won on the battle fields, our victory will be hollow. The real fight is indeed ideological or philosophical. The real battle ground is the campus, the college lecture room, the text books and the works of the masters of modern thought. We don't need to go as far away as Guadalcanal or Tunisia, to Kharkov or Rostov, to Iceland or the Aleutians to find the real enemy. He is here under our eyes, at the tips of our fingers. If we don't defeat him it won't matter very much that we defeat Hitler and Mussolini and Tojo. If the ideological, philosophical enemy prevails, or even survives, our civilization is done for.

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Library Signpost

North African Colossus

By Rev. Benedict Ehmann

Last week I wrote here of North Africa and how rich it is in historical associations, though it is now so down and out in poverty. Today I present to you its [illegible]est Saint, one of the five or ten greatest men of world history—Saint Augustine.

If I were Monsignor Sheen, or Father Gillis, don't think for a moment that I could compress into this column a satisfactory digest of the life and work of St. Augustine, and particularly of his tremendous meaning in the history of the world. But I'm not Monsignor Sheen, nor am I Father Gillis, so that there is all the more reason for you to suspect that this report, even at best, will rank a miserable Grade C or D in face of the true greatness of this amazing African genius. All I mean to do here is to give you a few hints of his greatness and of his place in history. For the rest, you ought to do the kind of delving reading (and praying) which is the only way to master the science of a Saint as great as Augustine. And if you ask, Why read about him in particular? I can only say that there is hardly a Saint who reveals so much of God and man to us, and whose person comprised so much of history; he was born at a crossroads of history, a man of destiny, a reservoir of the centuries before him, a fountain for all the centuries after him.

I have a little Atlas open before me with a map of North Africa as it was in the time of the Roman Empire. The names and divisions are quite different from what they are now. For one thing, outside of Egypt, only a fringe of about 200 miles depth was colonized and developed by Rome, after Carthage had lost her autonomy. Of this fringe, what are now Morocco and Algeria were then called Mauretania. The eastern part of the present Algeria together with Tunisia were called simply Africa; and beyond that where Lybia now is was called Cyrenaica. Egypt now was Egypt then; immemorial Egypt, older than Rome!

St. Augustine was born in Tagaste, right near the border of the present Tunisia, got much of his schooling at Carthage, which is on the Tunisian coast, and, after his conversion and ordination, finally became Bishop of Hippo, which is the present zone on the Algerian shoreline. He was born in 354 and died in 430. Those who know their ancient history (a badly-neglected subject these days!) will remember that those years spanned an enormous watershed of history. When you say the year 354, you are still thinking in terms of Imperial Rome and of the monumental fabric of the Roman order 500 years old. When you say the year 430, Imperial Rome is being shaken to its foundations and all but ready to collapse, and the tide of European history is beginning to drive strongly toward the Middle Ages. In his single self, Augustine was made great enough by Divine Providence to be representative of the heroic Roman past and prophetic of the sublime medieval future.

Christopher Dawson says: "He was, to a far greater degree than any emperor or barbarian warlord, a maker of history and a builder of the bridge which was to lead from the old world to the new."

And the non-Catholic scholar Harnack says: "It would seem that the miserable existence of the Roman Empire in the West was prolonged until then only to permit Augustine's influence to be exercised on universal history."

All most people remember of Augustine is that he was a wild youth, for whom a sorrowing mother prayed 17 years. The opening of the 3rd book of his Confessions tells of these early years, and of the gnawing hunger of his soul. "For within I was hungry, all for want of that spiritual food which is Thyself, O God; yet . . . I had no desire whatever for incorruptible food . . . Because of all this my soul was sick, and broke out in sores, whose itch I agonized to scratch with the rub of carnal things . . . Thus I polluted the stream of friendship with the filth of unclean desire and sullied its limpidity with the hell of lust . . . O my God, my Mercy, with how much bitterness didst Thou in Thy goodness sprinkle the delights of that time! . . . I wore my chains with bliss but with torment too, for I was scourged with the red-hot rods of jealousy, with suspicions and fears and tempers and quarrels."

St. Ambrose once told Augustine's mother, Monica: "The son of so many tears never can be lost." Lost? . . . Not only saved, but lifted to the priesthood, higher still to the bishopric, and, more important for the world, placed by God as a Doctor of the Church and a moulder of the centuries.

In his last years, as Bishop of Hippo, the breaking-up and defeat of the "eternal" Empire was like thunder in men's ears. The Vandals, whose name has become a common noun for wanton destruction, were sweeping across North Africa. Men felt then the way men felt in this war after Dunkerque, Pearl Harbor, Singapore. Only, the thing kept on going, then, from worse to worse, and the Empire finally did smash to smithereens. Men said: "What now? If Rome falls, what can there be, except chaos and the night?" But in the very thick of the despair and brunt of invasion, Augustine, spent though he was with his magnificent labors, wrote a book to show his terrified contemporaries how, through all History, God is building His Divine City, not made with hands, His Church, Rock and Refuge of humanity no matter how frightful the chaos and storm of the world. "The City of God" is Augustine's masterpiece—a monumental, impassioned, confident testimonial of faith in the Divine Plan through all the collapses of history.

At a time when American boys are taking a stand, for better or worse, near the very place where Augustine wrote his heroic masterpiece—they, too, fighting a battle of arms in what may be a crucial battleground of history, as he fought a battle of the spirit at a turning-point of history, they and we can do no better than to look to this magnificent Doctor of Wisdom for light in the night that is upon us.

Read: A Monument to St. Augustine which is in the Catholic Evidence Library; also the Saint's own Confessions and The City of God which are also there. But, best of all, buy for $1 the edition of the Confessions, published by Mr. Frank Sheed in his Tutorial Series (Sheed and Ward), and then read it again and again, and make it your heart-book.

'Quiz' Corner

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EDITORIALS

(Continued from Page [illegible])

worthy of a better cause to turn our country away from Spain.

In the midst of a barrage of anti-Franco and anti-Spanish propaganda in book and magazine and in the daily press, it is fortunate that thinking Americans have access to the objective knowledge on Spain of men like Dr. McGuire and Carleton Hayes, men whose interests are American, whose knowledge of things Spanish is founded on years of experience right in Spain, who have no desire to ruin Spain and blot out Franco merely to give a belated satisfaction to the Communistic elements who were not able to beat Franco in their own war, and now wish to force the Allied Nations to overcome him to their own loss in the present war.

Will the day ever come when ordinary honesty will lead press groups to be more correct, more reverent, in using the name of Democracy; will lead them not to use it to designate men and policies that deny every human right that true Democracy stands for? There was nothing of freedom, nothing of love for man and man's consciences, in the career of the leftists in Spain who for three years kept closed and bereft of all religious services every Catholic church in one-half of Spain. Assassination of 13 Bishops, of 3000 priests, of 300,000 civilians, was no democratic enterprise. Spain and Franco's neutrality has been a great blessing to the Allies during this war; let nothing be done that might alienate that neutrality! Keep Spain neutral!

LENT BEGINS

This Sunday marks the reading of the Annual Lenten Letter of Bishop Kearney. Lent is an important part in the cycle that brings into our religious observance the various seasons and feasts of the Church Year. It is a time of prayer, a time of penance; a time of self-denial of soul-disciplining. The duty of Lenten prayer, of self-denial, never changes; the law of fasting and abstinence is tempered to the needs of changing times, of particular emergencies, of acute local or national conditions.

Bishop Kearney's Lenten Letter will make a notable change in the regulations of the Diocese on fasting and abstinence. It will exhort all Catholics to a more spiritual observance of the Lenten Season. More prayer, more attendance at daily Mass, more assistance at Lenten Devotions, more practice of frequent Communion; a definite effort to come closer to the Heart of Jesus Christ through seeking the better things of life; these are duties that should call for better performance on the part of all.

HIDDEN FROM THEM

Two kinds of blindness are recorded in the Gospel of this Sunday, spiritual and corporal. Jesus tells His Apostles of the suffering and death that await Him as they journey now to Jerusalem; tells them of His coming resurrection. "But this saying was hidden from them"—they did not understand the word of Christ, they did not come to know the things that were being said. Yet Christ spoke clearly, plainly; He used precise words to convey a definite meaning; they were endowed with powers of understanding. We cannot explain just why they were unable to grasp the meaning of His words. They were spiritually blind, they could not see what Christ would show them. Not realizing their condition, they were content to remain in that unhappy condition.

Then came the incident that presented the man afflicted with corporal blindness; he realized his sad state; he longed to have it changed. He wanted to see! When told that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, he cried out to Him: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" When Jesus stopped and asked him what he desired, he replied: "Lord, that I may see!" Jesus cured his blindness, telling him his faith had saved him.

The Apostles did not pray that they might see! Too often we follow them in their weakness, we do not ask that the Lord may open our eyes spiritually. May the example of the blind man who knew his blindness, who prayed that it might be cured, help us to pray that the Lord may preserve us from blindness of the spirit! May the Lord keep us constantly alert to see all the good things He has purchased for us by His death and resurrection! May he help us see the way that leads to Life Everlasting!

FIVE and TEN Years Ago—

From March 2, 1933, Edition

In memory of the Very Rev. Francis Verdier, C.M., Superior General of the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity, who died in Paris, a Solemn Requiem Mass was offered in St. Mary's Hospital Chapel by Vincentian Fathers from Niagara University and was attended by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in charge of St. Mary's Hospital.

From March 3, 1938, Edition

Frank amazement was expressed in Catholic educational circles here over the decidedly unfair attitude taken by the Social Frontier Group of the American Association of School Administrators meeting in Atlantic City, in the matter of a recommended Federal grant of [illegible] to the [illegible] states to be shared [illegible] all American [illegible].