Antonianum XC (2015) 245-247

Ad lectores

Augustinian anthropology, which harmonises intellect and moral conduct; studies concerning ethics, carried out through experiments aided by neuroscience, and, finally, a prospect of apologetics through witness – these themes are perfectly consistent with the values undergirding the Franciscan tradition, which is itself Augustinian at root, and is directed towards *praxis*, and focused on *charitas*.

Thus, in this Summer issue of *Antonianum*, we are honoured to be able to bring you, first of all, "Augustine and the Ancient Quarrel Between Poetry and Philosophy", by Thomas P. Harmon, who is an assistant professor of theology at the Theology Department of the University of Saint Thomas in Houston, Texas. Augustin intervenes in the controversy between the poets and the philosophers on the question of which way of life is most suitable for the human being, which way of life makes for the fullest realisation of human potential. The poets, it turns out, charged that the philosophers, through their ratiocination, propose a *theoria* of contemplation of abstract being, which ends up by dissolving the "thickness" of human reality, with disastrous consequences for the political and social dimensions of the *polis*. The philosophers, for their part, charge the poets with knowing too little about the true good of the human being; an ignorance that leads the poets to devise dangerous mythologies that distort the moral and political order. In sum, each party accuses the other of misdirection when it comes to the true good of humans; by pointing either to the moral order alone, to the exclusion of the intellectual one, or solely to the intellectual dimension, at the expense of the moral one. As over against both, Augustine proposes the Christian revelation as the authentic way of salvation for the human being, inasmuch as it discloses God as personal and eternal being, *Logos*, reason, and at the same time, *agape*, *charitas.* For the Bishop of Hippo, God coming into history fuses harmoniously the moral and intellectual orders, integrating them into one and the same way of living. The human being who undertakes to follow Christ, lives, therefore, his own existence, in all its components, in an integrated and harmonious fashion. Such a human being thus gradually unifies all the components of human life, on the ascent towards communion with God. In Christ, the human being lives fully the contemplative dimension proper

to those who keep their sights on their ultimate goal, and at the same time "incarnates," as it were, the moral and political dimension of the wayfarer, engaged in making his way towards that destination. In this manner, it is in reaching for the love of God, that there is practised the love of neighbour; it is in pursuing eternal realities that there are recognised and followed those imperatives that must govern everyday living.

Michael N. Marsh, physician, research fellow of Regent's Park College v& Wolfson College, Oxford, contributes his deep-reaching study: "Above the bright blue sky: a critique of near death experiences – artefact or reality?". Thereby he introduces us into the fast growing, and ever more prominent, field of neuroscience, with its rather intriguing implications for the ethical and socio-political dimensions of human existence. Marsh maintains here that reported near-death experiences are almost certainly events that occur entirely within the brain, and are not excursions into a hypothetical "other world", given that they end rather brusquely with a return to consciousness.

In his view, such near-death experiences hold on to the personality traits of the subject that undergoes them, and do not separate that personality from the cultural, historical and geographic contexts typical of that subject's background. On that basis, Marsh holds that any data obtained from near-death experiences cannot provide us with any information concerning "the hereafter"; rather, such data furnish elements useful to evaluating so-called "clinical death," from which there is a reasonable chance of recovery. There is no doubt that there is truly an abyss separating such near-death experiences from claims of spiritual encounters with the divine; just as there are no usable data capable of serving some sort of conceptualisation of "heaven" that would be in evident contrast with Christian teaching on "life after death", i.e. with eschatology. Current studies on near-death experiences do still give excessive attention to the phenomenology of them, while, according to the Author, more attention should rather be paid to acquiring greater knowledge of the phenomenon's impact on the patient's life post-trauma, with reference, for example, to behavioural changes, simple lifestyle modifications, and religious beliefs.

Andrew Moore, who lectures theology at Regent's Park College, and at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Oxford, con-

tributes a study that originated with a lecture he delivered last year at our own University. He seeks to persuade the reader that it is necessary to move on from a form of apologetics dominant in the Christian West, called "rational apologetics", to apologetics through bearing witness. According to the Author, those who hold onto rational apologetics are mistaken in their interpretation of this verse from the First Epistle of Peter: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asked you a reason of the hope that is in you" (1Pet 3,15). Deeper recent enquiries into this same text highlight its connection with the preceding verses, showing that "giving a reason" does not refer here to providing rational arguments of a philosophical kind, but rather to exhibiting ethical conduct, worthy of the Christian message: "And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But, and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye! And *be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled, but sanctify the Lord* God in your hearts" (1Pet 3,13-14). It is at this point, just after: "...*neither be troubled, but sanctify the Lord* God in your hearts" that, keeping to this same perspective, there follows: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asked you a reason of the hope that is in you, [though] with meekness and reverence". In other words, literally: "Be ready always to present your defence (*apologian*) ...", where by *Apologian* there is to be understood the reason of unexceptionable evangelical conduct, the witness rendered by Gospel living.

As Moore himself concludes, it may sometimes happen that the strength of the reasoning offered in defence of the faith is made into weakness by the manner in which the professed creed is being lived. It is indeed faith, in a Pauline perspective, that endows the reasons for belief with their coherence, and not the other way around. For the rest, it is post-modernity itself that demands an ecclesial faith that speaks through the witness given to it by those who can show that their lives have been transformed thanks to the encounter with Christ.

I take this occasion to wish our colleagues, officials and academic personnel a serene conclusion of the academic year and, as summer approaches, a blessed and restful vacation.

Giuseppe Buffon ofm
E-mail: antonianumreview@yahoo.com