

AN EXPOSITION OF AUGUSTINE'S IDEAS ON MAN AND THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This article summarizes the discussions around the issue of the human environment and how humans can improve on care for the eco-system from the light of the catholic perspective, while focusing on the contributions, direct and indirect, of the famous church father, Augustine of Hippo who through his two major works, the confessions and the City of God, gave ample teachings on the divine intention for the human habitat, not sparing the amazing connection men can have with God through the physical creation visible to them. The life of Augustine was reflected on as well as his personal experiences that gave birth to what we have today as his contribution to this line of thoughts. The main focus was how practical we can be in the use of this knowledge and how we one can implement it in the many facets of our environment. At the end, the cross of the work is hinged on the lessons and deposits of teachings found in St. Augustine's "City of God", "Confessions" and the "Laudatosi" of Pope Francis.

Keywords: Physical environment, Saint Augustine, Man

Introduction

In Genesis 1:28, we read: "God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. This expression sounds more negative than positive in the mind of contemporary men and women. To conquer, subdue, and to dominate can easily mean to oppress and colonize. According to some intellectuals, Christianity promotes ignoring or even degrading the environment. A 1967 article in Science declared, "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. Furthermore, Christianity not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (Perano 2021). But the sense in which this expression was employed in scripture will direct us on the part we are about to undertake as regards the relationship between man and his environment

in the light of St. Augustine's thoughts and writings. We must note quickly:

“first, the word “subdue”. In Hebrew this is *kabash*. You can't get around it; it does mean “subdue” or “enslave”, and even in the harshest instances “molest” or “rape.” But here's the catch: it only means this when the party being subdued is already hostile. Hence, it's used to speak of military enemies in scripture. Not to subdue an attacking army would lead to death. Hence, we subdue the earth because without such subjugation the harshness of nature would yield death for us rather than life” (*Ibid*).

The above interpretation distracts us from the negative impression we get when we talk about subduing the earth. This sense of the word is what the church holds as the meaning of that expression in scripture which commands men and women to dominate the earth and to till its soil. It is not a negative relationship, but rather as the title of this work states, “To conquer is to Care for”. The earth has life and is expressed through the ecosystem, and there are natural occurrences that can be detrimental to the existence of human beings. To carry out activities that will make these occurrences turn into disasters cannot be appropriately termed 'subduing' the earth. 'Tilling' the soil with consciousness of the need to maintain the human habitat is paramount in the whole process of 'caring for the earth'. When we are therefore harsh to our physical environment, it gets back at us eventually in a more detrimental way.

Augustine is one writer that has attracted many scholars of today because of the wide range of knowledge the works he left behind covers. It ranges from the metaphysical to the physical, from religion to cultures. The church in turn, whose son (Augustine) we celebrate and remember in this light, has a role to play in fostering the understanding of the ecosystem and how man can relate within it. There are numerous works, including encyclicals and books that we can study from the shelf of the church. These works cover topics like Catholicism and the natural world, environmental justice, ecological instructions, environmental ethics, the Divine and the Human environment, care for the environment, environmental stewardship and papal encyclicals on creation and human work like “*Laudatosi*”, a document that states in no. 126 that “our experience of work makes us more protective and respectful of the environment; it imbues our relationship to the world with a healthy sobriety” (Pope Francis 2015). Reading these works help us to gain direction as to what the church thinks of and teaches about the physical environment. But one thing is still missing to an extent: how can this knowledge be brought to praxis and effect in the human society of today. It will be extreme to claim that the church has failed in this regard, but it won't be out of place to say a lot is left undone. In short, the following points in summary are imbedded on the pages of the above encyclical by

the Pontiff: The church acknowledges that the spiritual perspective is now part of the discussion on the environment, the poor are disproportionately affected by climate change; Less is more; the Catholic social teaching now includes teaching on the environment; and discussions about ecology can be grounded in the Bible and church tradition.

Again, “Pope Francis has...discussed the moral underpinnings of the call to stewardship on several occasions. The eternal perspective Christians have is not an excuse for disregarding earthly things; it does not mean that we do not care about the earth.... [If] we believe we have a God-given responsibility to care for His creation, we are serving God when we cultivate or protect His creation” (Perano 2021). In short, what this means is that it is our responsibility to take care of our environment and let life sprout more rather than death and reduction. “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion...in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White 1967, 155).

As we go through the mind of St. Augustine, as found in his works and those of his disciples, including the present day “Augustinians”, we shall discover charts and propose ways to implement this knowledge about man's relationship with his physical environment.

Augustine's Life

Augustine's life is full of intrigues, turns of all forms, adjustments of mindset and many profound achievements. He is a true North African with a mixture of European culture in his experience.

“Augustine was born in Tagaste, a modest Roman community in a river valley 40 miles (64 km) from the Mediterranean coast in Africa, near the point where the veneer of Roman civilization thinned out in the highlands of Numidia. Augustine's parents were of the respectable class of Roman society, free to live on the work of others, but their means were sometimes straitened. They managed, sometimes on borrowed money, to acquire a first-class education for Augustine, and, although he had at least one brother and one sister, he seems to have been the only child sent off to be educated. He studied first in Tagaste, then in the nearby university town of Madauros, and finally at Carthage, the great city of Roman Africa. After a brief stint teaching in Tagaste, he returned to Carthage to teach rhetoric, the premier science for the Roman gentleman, and he was evidently very good at it” (O'Donnell 2021).

This home coming was not the end of his sojourn for knowledge and truth, he had zest to explore the world in search for the solution to the lack in his soul and mind. He

wanted that completeness and so, he never gave up the search. Hence his popular quote, “our souls are restless until they rest in You”.

“Manichaean friends introduced him to the prefect of the City of Rome, Symmachus, who while traveling through Carthage had been asked by the imperial court at Milan to provide a rhetoric professor. Augustine won the job and headed north to take his position in Milan in late 384. Thirty years old, he had won the most visible academic position in the Latin world at a time when such posts gave ready access to political careers. Although Augustine spent ten years as a Manichaean, he was never an initiate or “elect”, but an “auditor”, the lowest level in the sect's hierarchy. While still at Carthage a disappointing meeting with the Manichaean Bishop, Faustus of Mileve, a key exponent of Manichaean theology, started Augustine's scepticism of Manichaeism. In Rome, he reportedly turned away from Manichaeism, embracing the scepticism of the New Academy movement. Because of his education, Augustine had great rhetorical prowess and was very knowledgeable of the philosophies behind many faiths. At Milan, his mother's religiosity, Augustine's own studies in Neoplatonism, and his friend Simplicianus all urged him towards Christianity. Not coincidentally, this was shortly after the Roman emperor Theodosius I had issued a decree of death for all Manichaean monks in 382 and shortly before he declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion for the Roman Empire in 391. Initially Augustine was not strongly influenced by Christianity and its ideologies, but after coming in contact with Ambrose of Milan, Augustine reevaluated himself and was forever changed” (The Spiritual Life 2020).

His conversion not only transformed his personal life but also the minds of those would listen to his works and listen to his teachings from that moment henceforth:

“In late August of 386, at the age of 31, after having heard and been inspired and moved by the story of Ponticianus's and his friends' first reading of the life of Saint Anthony of the Desert, Augustine converted to Christianity. As Augustine later told it, his conversion was prompted by a childlike voice he heard telling him to “take up and read” (*tolle, lege*), which he took as a divine command to open the Bible and read the first thing he saw. Augustine read from Paul's Epistle to the Romans – the “Transformation of Believers” section, consisting of chapters 12 to 15 – wherein Paul outlines how the Gospel transforms believers, and describes the believers' resulting behavior. The specific part to which Augustine opened his Bible was Romans chapter 13, verses 13 and 14, to wit: *Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.* He later wrote an account of his conversion – his very transformation, as Paul

described – in his Confessions (Confessiones), which has since become a classic of Christian theology and a key text in the history of autobiography. This work is an outpouring of thanksgiving and penitence. Although it is written as an account of his life, the Confessions also talks about the nature of time, causality, free will, and other important philosophical topics. The following is taken from that work:

*Late have I loved Thee, O Lord; and behold,
Thou wast within and I without, and there I sought Thee.
Thou wast with me when I was not with Thee.
Thou didst call, and cry, and burst my deafness.
Thou didst gleam, and glow, and dispel my blindness.
Thou didst touch me, and I burned for Thy peace.
For Thyself Thou hast made us,
And restless our hearts until in Thee they find their ease.
Late have I loved Thee, Thou Beauty ever old and ever new.*

Ambrose baptized Augustine, along with his son Adeodatus, in Milan on Easter Vigil, April 24–25, 387. A year later, in 388, Augustine completed his apology On the Holiness of the Catholic Church. That year, also, Adeodatus and Augustine returned home to Africa. Augustine's mother Monica died at Ostia, Italy, as they prepared to embark for Africa. Upon their arrival, they began a life of aristocratic leisure at Augustine's family's property. Soon after, Adeodatus, too, died. Augustine then sold his patrimony and gave the money to the poor. The only thing he kept was the family house, which he converted into a monastic foundation for himself and a group of friends. In 391 Augustine was ordained a priest in Hippo Regius (now Annaba), in Algeria. He became a famous preacher (more than 350 preserved sermons are believed to be authentic), and was noted for combating the Manichaean religion, to which he had formerly adhered. In 395, he was made coadjutor Bishop of Hippo, and became full Bishop shortly thereafter, hence the name “Augustine of Hippo”; and he gave his property to the church of Thagaste. He remained in that position until his death in 430. He wrote his autobiographical Confessions in 397–398. His work, *The City of God*, was written to console his fellow Christians shortly after the Visigoths had sacked Rome in 410. Augustine worked tirelessly in trying to convince the people of Hippo to convert to Christianity. Though he had left his monastery, he continued to lead a monastic life in the episcopal residence. He left a *regula* for his monastery that led to his designation as the “patron saint of regular clergy”. Much of Augustine's later life was recorded by his friend Possidius, bishop of Calama (present-day Guelma, Algeria), in his *Sancti Augustini*

Vita. Possidius admired Augustine as a man of powerful intellect and a stirring orator who took every opportunity to defend Christianity against its detractors. Possidius also described Augustine's personal traits in detail, drawing a portrait of a man who ate sparingly, worked tirelessly, despised gossip, shunned the temptations of the flesh, and exercised prudence in the financial stewardship of his see” (The Spiritual Life 2020).

Other aspects of his life are deeply learned from his writings and those of his disciples who wrote about him and commented on his earlier works.

His Writings

Many of Augustine's ancient writings as well as recent translations and commentaries are scattered in libraries all over the globe. Notable among these writings are the two texts that are very relevant to this piece. “Two of Augustine's works stand out above the others for their lasting influence.... The City of God was widely read in Augustine's time and throughout the Middle Ages and still demands attention today...Confessions...from the 12th century onward...has been continuously read as a vivid portrayal of an individual's struggle for self-definition in the presence of a powerful God” (O'Donnell 2021). History has the following background to the writing of *The City of God* by Augustine:

“the symbolic effect of seeing the city of Rome taken by outsiders for the first time since the Gauls had done so in 390 BCE shook the secular confidence of many thoughtful people across the Mediterranean. Coming as it did less than 20 years after the decisive edict against “paganism” by the emperor Theodosius I in 391 CE, it was followed by speculation that perhaps the Roman Empire had mistaken its way with the gods. Perhaps the new Christian God was not as powerful as he seemed. Perhaps the old gods had done a better job of protecting their followers. It is hard to tell how seriously or widely such arguments were made; paganism by this time was in disarray, and Christianity's hold on the reins of government was unshakable. But Augustine saw in the murmured doubts a splendid polemical occasion he had long sought, and so he leapt to the defense of 'Gods ways. That his readers and the doubters whose murmurs he had heard were themselves pagans is unlikely. At the very least, it is clear that his intended audience comprised many people who were at least outwardly affiliated with the Christian church. During the next 15 years, working meticulously through a lofty architecture of argument, he outlined a new way to understand human society, setting up the City of God over and against the City of Man. Rome was dethroned—and the sack of the city shown to be of no spiritual importance—in favor of the heavenly Jerusalem, the true home and source of

citizenship for all Christians. The City of Man was doomed to disarray, and wise men would, as it were, keep their passports in order as citizens of the city above, living in this world as pilgrims longing to return home” (*Ibid*).

The argument he employed was understandable to his audience even with the strangest of language. They were to see themselves a new light. The same gospel that Christ spoke about “storing our treasure in heaven rather than on earth”. The city of man was to be the imperfect city, while that of God was to reign as the eternal unending city. The *Confessions* was more about his private life and experience with God, full of many philosophical speculations and teachings from the Holy Scripture that takes the reader to a world filled with vast knowledge of the spiritual and the material.

“Although autobiographical narrative makes up much of the first 9 of the 13 books of Augustine's *Confessiones*..., autobiography is incidental to the main purpose of the work. For Augustine, “confessions” is a catchall term for acts of religiously authorized speech: praise of God, blame of self, confession of faith. The book is a richly textured...on the course and meaning of his own life. The dichotomy between past odyssey and present position of authority as bishop is emphasized in numerous ways in the book, not least in that what begins as a narrative of childhood ends with an extended and very churchy discussion of the book of Genesis—the progression is from the beginnings of a man's life to the beginnings of human society.”

These books were both metaphysical and physical in reference. They addressed both a God that is unseen beautifully, and a man alongside his environment that is visible and experienceable. It is fitting at this stage to go into the teachings of Augustine on the environment as well as the guidelines from the church that align with his teaching, which is the main purpose of this piece of work.

God, the Initiator of the Human Habitat

St. Augustine while discussing the beauty of God's creation within time and space, referring to all that makes up the natural habitat, and referring to how man understands his environment in connection to the Divine, expressed the following words:

“Your will is identical to yourself, and you made all things by no change of will whatsoever, without the emergence of any volition which had not previously been present. You made them all, not from your own substance, in that image of yourself that gives form to all things, but out of nothing, as formless matter quite unlike yourself, which was yet destined to be formed through your image by returning to you, the One, in proportion to the capacity

of each, as imparted to it according to its kind. Thus, they will remain exceedingly good, whether they remain closely grouped about you or arrayed in ever-widening circles through time and space, they bring about changes or themselves beautifully evolve. All these things do such people perceive, and they rejoice over them in the light of your truth, to the limited degree possible here below” (The Confessions).

The scholar, Augustine “made four distinct efforts to provide a clear and coherent interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis. Having suggested an allegorical interpretation in his work *On Genesis against the Manichaeans* (389 A.D.) and having made an unsatisfactory attempt at a literal interpretation in his *Letter of Genesis, Unfinished Book*, written in 393 A.D. but published with some revisions only in 426 as a useful indicator of his early efforts, he later expressed his opinions at greater length in his fresh undertaking *The Letter of Genesis* (401-415 A.D.), and summarized them with some modifications in *The City of God* (413-427 A.D.)” (McCarthy 2021). These works were attempts by him to show God as the initiator of the universe and for what purpose the heavens and the earth were made, with man as the custodian. There was nothing in form, or if you like, in existence before God commenced His beautiful work. Everything that came to be sprout out of the purposeful will of God Himself:

“In *the beginning* God created heaven and earth (Gen 1:1). St. Augustine maintains that we know from the sacred and infallible Scriptures that, in the first instant of time, God created the world out of nothing. He reasons that, when Genesis opens with the words, *in the beginning*, it means that God had made nothing previously, and, therefore, that the world was made, not in time, but simultaneously with time.” He sees time as being the measure of change in created things, and, since before this *beginning* there was no angel, no material thing, no matter at all, therefore there was no time before the creation recorded in Gen 1:1. He stresses that God made everything in the world out of nothing, that in the creation of the world change and motion itself was created, so that before this *beginning* there was absolutely no movement of anything bodily or spiritual outside of God, Who is Himself eternal and without motion” (*Ibid*).

When we speak about the heavens and the earth made by God, we most times refer to both the spiritual and material realms. In the city of God Augustine says:

“The education of the human race, represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs, or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things, and from

the visible to the invisible. This object was kept so clearly in view, that, even in the period when temporal rewards were promised, the one God was presented as the object of worship, that men might not acknowledge any other than the true Creator and Lord of the spirit, even in connection with the earthly blessings of this transitory world. For he that denies all things, which either angels or men can give us, are in the hand of the one Almighty, is a madman” (Augustine X, 14).

This was the point Augustine stressed in his interpretation of the Book of Genesis, a book which records within its first twelve chapters the dramatic beginning of the world in the sense of creation, humanity, animals, and cosmology in general.

Augustine, the Church and the Earth

The environment and material world in general in Augustine's ecology was looked upon differently according to the stages in Augustine's life. Augustine's view of the material world was progressive (Horski 3), in that, there was a shift from a purely negative perception of nature, which was informed by a dualistic Manichean cosmology, onto a positive view of nature, guided by a Christian creationist cosmology. Within the context of the shift from a Manichean to a Christian view underlies Augustine's understanding and approach to the environment and the natural world.

The Manichaeic worldview is definite and based on the division and separation of the material world from the non-physical. Magedanz paints the dualistic view thus:

Manichaeism was distinguished by its elaborate and detailed cosmology. According to myth, Light and Darkness originally existed separately, without knowledge of each other. The realm of Light, ruled by the Father, consisted of five orderly elements, called Fire, Water, Air, Ether, and Light. Its opposite, the realm of Darkness and matter, consisted of five disorderly elements. The Prince of Darkness then discovered the realm of Light and tried to conquer it. To defend Light, the Father produced the Mother of the Living, who in turn produced the Primal Man. Together with the five elements, the Primal Man went out to battle Darkness, but he was overcome, and demons of Darkness devoured his Light.

The light became trapped in evil physical matter. In order to rescue the Light, the Father created the Living Spirit. Together, the Primal Man and the Living Spirit battled the demons of Darkness. From the demons' corpses, they fashioned heaven and earth. They formed the sun and the moon from liberated bits of Light. Plants and animals were formed by the abortions and

ejaculations of demons, as they tried to imprison the Light. The demons, overcome by lust, copulated, eventually giving birth to the first human couple, Adam and Eve. Salvation began when Adam received enlightenment about his true state from the Primal Man. One of the central beliefs of Manichaeism was the notion that every human being had two warring souls: one that was part of the Light, and another that was evil (2004, 11).

Considering the origin of the physical world, from the background of Manichaeism, the natural world is a negative and evil matter, borne out of darkness and evil. This Manichean portrait of the world forms the building blocks of the pre-Christian Augustine's cosmology and the basis on which his relationship with the physical world depended. The view was reconsidered later in Augustine and he assiduously stood against this dualistic backdrop and looked at the world and its environment from a new and Christian prism. This new task of Augustine turned out to be of service to the natural and physical world. Horski shares this view in these words:

Augustine attempted to appreciate creation as it is, and also as it will be. In as much as creation is evolving to some abiding beautiful form, Augustine always saw its present beauty as a mysterious token of the promise of its future. This is not to say the creation as it stands and as it has evolved through the ages is bad in the strict sense of being evil; it is to suggest that it is provisional, as we experience it, and evolving to some mysterious fulfillment, the exact shape of which is difficult to ascertain (4).

Even though Augustine is a dualist, one whose anthropology (of mind/body dualism) questions his own appraisal for the created order in its physical sense, many of his works coincide with the current teaching of the church. *The Confessions* and the *City of God* are the two main texts to consider when reflecting on his thoughts in this area. One of the resolutions in the Augustinian General Chapter of 2019 was to promote environmental justice:

“The Roman Catholic Church teaches us the Earth and all creation are a gift from God, given to be shared by all of us, including future generations. This is one of the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching. 1,600 years ago, Saint Augustine taught that following Christ involves a concern for the common good. As Augustine states in the Rule which governs the Augustinian way of life, the more concerned we are about the common good, the more progress we have made in our spiritual journey (Rule, V). Both Augustine and Catholic Social Teaching invite us to a discussion on care of the environment. While there is considerable debate about the causes and extent of the ecological crisis, there is little debate over the fact that the

environment has and continues to suffer damage. At the core of the discussion is therefore the question about how we as a human family will share the goods of the earth in the present while considering what we will pass on to future generations” (Dueweke 2020).

Augustine gives us a mystical view of creation. He looks at the whole of creation with a spiritual beauty yet to be attained in its perfection. He says “the eyes shall possess some quality similar to that of the mind, by which they may be able to discern spiritual things...God will be so known by us, and shall be so much before us, that we shall see Him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another; in Himself, in the new heaven and the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist” (Augustine 1950). He constantly moved from the metaphysical to the physical in his interpretation of creation, the order of the world. This is obvious in the following comment. There is a movement from “a radical dominance of his thought by the metaphor of ascent to a mutually reinforcing formation of his thought by the metaphor of fecundity and migration to a good land.... We witness a metaphorical metamorphosis of profound scope, which saw him move from radical adherence to the spiritual motif on the one hand, to a thoroughgoing adherence to the ecological motif on the other hand” (Santmire 1985, 59). In his *Confessions*, Augustine notes that “there is no wholeness in those who are displeased with any part of your creation, no more than there was in me when I was displeased with so many things that you had made” (1986, VII. 13, 14), a proof of his thought on creation as transcendent, and having a nature that bits what our present state of mind can fathom. Of course, Augustine shifted his discussion on creation from the dualistic cosmology at some stage and gave more attention to the goodness in creation.

Because of this change in approach, his later teachings become very vital for our study. His ideas in the City of God become useful and relevant even today. There is a need to reawaken the true sense of man's conception of the environment in the path of the One who made everything good. This is very clear in the following words: “... there is room in Augustine's mind for all the confused emotions of any contemporary, who feels obscurely that the world he lives in can no longer be taken for granted ... What was [is] at stake ... was [is] the capacity of men to 'long' for something different, to examine the nature of their relationship with their immediate environment; above all, to establish their identity by refusing to be engulfed in the unthinking habits of their fellows” (Brown 290, 304, 332). This change in approach is seen also in the recent direction the church has taken on the human environment. The issue of global warming has become a popular discussion in every corner and on the internet. The church as an institution pays her role through practical interpretation of the teachings that already exist within her confines.

This change is progressive because it eliminates the academic attack some scholars had on the teachings of St. Augustine on the environment. For instance,

“For many environmental ethicists, dualism is not just a theological position, it is the source of improper valuation of the created order. For example, in her introductory essay for *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Carol Adams strongly opposes any form of perceived dualism, which she finds particularly in orthodox Christianity, as well as other, mainly western, sources. She writes, 'False dualisms result in several patriarchal theological tenets: transcendence and domination of the natural world, fear of the body, projection of evil upon women, world-destroying spiritual views'. Moreover, the second part of the dualism is not only subordinate but in service to the first. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in an essay that follows Adams' introduction, expands Adams' attribution of hierarchical dualism to Christianity and argues that 'ecofeminist culture must reshape our basic sense of self in relation to the life cycle'. This leads to conversions from alienated, hierarchical dualism to life-sustaining mutuality, [which] will radically change the patterns of patriarchal culture. Basic conceptions, such as God, soul-body, and salvation will be reconceived in ways that may bring us much closer to the ethical values of love, justice, and care for the earth. These values have been proclaimed by patriarchal religion yet contradicted by patriarchal symbolic and social patterns of relationship (1993, 22).

To consider the earlier criticism on Augustine's dualism is to reject him as a patriarchal contributor to the whole doctrine of environment as it relates with man caring for the earth. He cannot be considered a source of environmental ethics. But with closer study, we come across evidence showing that his critics clearly misunderstood his position on this area of study.

Many scholars have argued against the notion that Augustine is a dualistic Neo-Platonist. As Augustine writes, “A good God made [the created order] good; and that the things created, being different from God, were inferior to Him, and yet were good, being created by none other than He” (*City of God* 11, 23). Although Augustine argues for differentiation between the nature of the Creator and the creation, his expression of that differentiation does not support the view that he reviles matter (Hill and Rotelle 1990, 325). Augustine understands the created order to be good: he understands the ordering of the creation to reflect God's character. Therefore, with this argument, it is difficult to conceive of Augustine denigrating the creation. For Augustine, all of nature is wonderfully wrapped in intimations of the fullness of God's wonders and full of infinite surprises that serve as the tokens of God's creative goodness and promise (Augustine 136, 9)

On the importance of creation Augustine writes, “I speak only of this life which we know, and which we now are. [Who] can describe the tokens of God's goodness that are extended to humans even in this life? ... by looking reflectively at our experience of life. A major contribution that Augustine can make to a better understanding of the abiding concern for our relationship to the rest of creation centers around a notion of the autonomy or dignity of nature” (Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.22). We must realize that creation is not fallen and perverted. Even though we can say humans are fallen in the sense of our daily struggle between the choice of good and evil. On our relationship with nature and the ecosystem he writes:

“What man can go out of his house without being exposed on all sides to unforeseen accidents? Returning home sound in limb, he slips on his own doorstep, breaks his leg, and never recovers. What can seem safer than a man sitting in a chair? Eli the priest fell from his and broke his neck. How many accidents do farmers, or rather all men, fear that crops may suffer from weather, or the soil, or the ravages of destructive animals? Commonly they feel safe when the crops are gathered and housed. Yet, to my certain knowledge, sudden floods have driven the laborers away, and swept the barns clean of the finest harvest” (*Ibid*).

The point Augustine stressed in this part of the city of God was discouraging men from judging nature with a self-love that is biased. The dignity of nature for him is traceable to the connection it has with the Divine creator. Our response to nature is guided in this light. Therefore,

“... beauty does not strike us, because by our mortal frailty we are so involved in part of it, that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonized with the most accurate fitness and beauty. And therefore where we are not so well able to perceive the wisdom of the Creator, we are very properly enjoined to believe it, lest in the vanity of human rashness we presume to find fault with the work of so great an Artificer ... the natures themselves displease men, as often happens when they become hurtful to them, and then men estimate them not by their nature, but by their utility; as in the case of those animals whose swarms scourged the Egyptians. But in this way of estimating, they may find fault with the sun itself; for certain criminals or debtors are sentenced by the judges to be set in the sun. Therefore, it is not with respect to our convenience or discomfort, but with respect to their own nature, that the creatures are glorifying to their Artificer ... For [human beings] wish to see [by the light of the fire], but not be burnt. But they forget that this very light, which is so pleasant to them, disagrees with and hurts weak eyes; and in that heat, which is disagreeable to them,

some animals find the most suitable conditions for healthy life. All natures, then, since they are, and have therefore a rank and a species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good.” (*Ibid*).

He makes it clear that if we judge nature by its negative way of affecting us, we end up misjudging it. We will eventually see only evil. Men and women most times get involved in activities that provoke the negative reaction of nature like earthquake for instance. When this comes to be, they only remember the havoc and forget about the provocation, which is the vital concern of our world today.

An Augustinian Ecology

Reading Augustine, one would pick out instances where ecological issues are alluded to. This paints a picture of the mature Augustine's relationship to the environment, as against the backdrop of his adolescent encounter with a pear tree. In the confessions, Augustine put down an experience where in the company of his peers he rid a pear tree of all the fruits it had (Book 2, 9). In book two of the Confessions Augustine laments about his past, expressing sorrows for his past relationship with nature. This sorrow which Augustine felt in his latter life gives us a glimpse of his conversion in his relationship with his environment and the natural world. The mature Augustine would look back at this stage in his past and expressed a change of relationship with his environment. In the light of this Augustine wrote about their action thus; “I was foul”, furthermore, he described his past self as “a foul soul, falling from thy firmament to utter destruction” (Book 2; 9).

The words of the “new Augustine” discloses a new leaf in his relationship with the natural world which developed from the experience of maturing into manhood and his attentiveness to the good in the natural. Augustine's sadness, as recorded in book two, can be looked upon as a reflection of the need to take out of the material world only what is needed by man, as against the backdrop of an utter utilitarian and consumerist attitude towards nature. Hence, this brings to the fore Augustine's idea of using and enjoying the natural world as a means to another good which in turn promotes the good and beauty of nature. In the light of this, the environment is to be cared for such that when its resources are used up, adequate and efficient efforts should be invested so that a restoration back to nature and replenishing of the natural world can be achieved.

In book ten of the *Confessions*, Augustine narrates his dialogue with nature during his search for God. Augustine wrote this:

I put my question to the earth, and it replied, “I am not he”; I questioned everything it held, and they confessed the same. I questioned the sea and the great deep, and the teeming live creatures that crawl, and they replied, “we

are not God; seek higher.” ...and to all the things which stood around the portals of my flesh I said, “tell me of my God.” ...they lifted up their mighty voice and cried “He made us”. My questioning was my attentive spirit, and they reply, their beauty (par, 9).

From the above passage, the physical world was vital in pointing Augustine to the source of their beauty and splendor. The attentive spirit of Augustine would have been attuned to the beauty of creation which is accentuated by the care it has received from man to whom it was put in his charge (Ps. 8:6). In the light of this, we can point to Augustine's responsiveness to the beauty and detail in nature as an indicator of an Augustinian ecology, in which Augustine promotes the good and beauty of nature. Hence, bidding to perpetuate the beauty of nature which communicates to man the beauty, majesty, and existence of God.

The search for God in the natural world by Augustine can be looked upon as an advocacy for the need to care for the environment so that there will be present pointers and reminders of the eternal and sublime beauty which orders the universe and puts all things in its place. This advocacy is universal and the need to care for the environment is transcultural. Hence, the care of the environment is a divine vocation (Gen. 1:28) entrusted to man; it is the responsibility of man in every age and place to care for the earth and promote its beauty. This is a universal responsibility. Augustine alludes to this responsibility when he wrote thus “surely this beauty is apparent to all whose faculties are sound?” (*Confessions* 10; 10).

His Ecological Adjustment

To contemporary society, following some authors, we can present Augustine as one who offers a reasonable, insightful, and a sensible ecological stance toward the environment that is also decidedly God-directed. A realization of this informed Augustine that “there is no wholeness in those who are displeased with any part of your creation, no more than there was in me when I was displeased with so many things that You have created” (*Confessions* 7; 20). Precisely, as stated by Horski, “Augustine offers much to people of faith concerning the environmental issues that we face in contemporary life, helping us to appreciate nature without falling into nature worship. He offers us something by virtue of a 'methodology of conversion'” (1). Augustine stands as a glowing example of openness to a new attitude and thinking about creation in the midst of human crises. Augustine clearly “offers us a sound teaching about the nature of creation in virtue of his emphasis on the inherent and irrevocable goodness of creation that issues forth from an all-good Creator” (*Ibid*). In some quarters this is seen as a doctrine that highlights the goodness of the environment and the physical world. This “doctrine of the impeccable goodness of creation encourages us to think in terms of an 'ethical attitude toward the

environment,' that is, as something inherently dignified and to be valued for its own sake" (*Ibid*).

The constant recollection of the goodness of creation by Augustine does paper over the crack of contemporary man's relationship with the environment. As put in a different expression by Horski, this Augustinian recollection "does not gloss over the destruction that humans have often experienced in our encounter and relationship with and to nature" (*Ibid*). Taking a cue from Augustine there can be a change of attitude towards the environment. Horski writes that:

Because of the interplay of Augustine's openness to conversion with the conviction of the inherent goodness of creation, his teaching can prove valuable to us. Our times and our particular responses to the urgency of the environmental crisis can find resonance with the unique response of Augustine in the *City of God*. He calls us to the need for conversion (*metanoia*) and openness about our current presumptions about the environment and strongly reminds us of the inherent dignity and goodness of all of creation that demands a mature and intelligent response. Augustine saw and felt the risks and challenges of his time in a very human fashion (*Ibid*).

Augustine responded accordingly to the need for a change. As Brown notes:

... there is room in Augustine's mind for all the confused emotions of any contemporary, who feels obscurely that the world he lives in can no longer be taken for granted ... What was [is] at stake ... was [is] the capacity of men to 'long' for something different, to examine the nature of their relationship with their immediate environment; above all, to establish their identity by refusing to be engulfed in the unthinking habits of their fellows (290, 304 & 332).

The Teaching Augustine and the Church in Praxis

There is a particular ordering of all things that exist. Nature stands as the perfect representation of the ordering of everything that exist. Little wonder Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas in their metaphysical discourses would talk about Nature as being orderly, tranquil, and harmonious. More prominent also is the anaphora: "nature shall take its course." It is only but a pointer to the fact that there is a principle that guides nature and natural things. Nature, right from ancient times, in different traditional context, bears a symbolic significance. For example, In the African context, the environment ultimately represents culture. This is why in the typical African community, we could hear of such things as: "the gods of the land are angry;" for this reason, "the land has to be cleansed." The Greeks or Jews had also their environment and all that it contains. However, it is expedient to note that, according to the Church's teaching on the ecosystem, the human effort to care for it as seen in

the book of Genesis (Gen. 1:24-25) cannot be overemphasized. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that “the human person needs to live in a society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation” (CCC 2015, 417). Central to this teaching also, is Augustine's teaching on cooperation. He is known for his famous words which states that the God who created the world without you (*Creatio ex nihilo*) can but would not redeem you without you. It is from this we can make sense of man's co-operative creativity to secure and harness all that has been created by God as seen. This is essentially the teaching of pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

The heart of the encyclical, *Laudato Si* (praise be to you) by Pope Francis discusses the ecosystem ultimately. Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si* calls the environment as the common home, but hotly and vehemently discourages the philosophical, theological, and cultural destruction that man renders to the common home and his fellow man. St. Augustine on the one hand offers much to people of faith concerning the environmental issues that we face in contemporary life, helping us to appreciate nature without falling into nature worship (Horski 1998). He offers us a sound teaching about the nature of creation in virtue of his emphasis on the inherent and irrevocable goodness of creation that issues forth from an all-good Creator. Just like Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si* believes that the environment should be treated and handled with so much respect because it is a wonderful creation from a good God, so also did Augustine, drawing strength from the *City of God*, maintained the environment as the product of God's wonderful creation.

Number 217 in the *Laudato Si* speaks of the fact that the ecological crisis summons a profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. It continues by saying that others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So, what they all need is an 'ecological conversion,' whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. “Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human. Our tradition calls us to protect the life and dignity of the human person, and it is increasingly clear that this task cannot be separated from the care and defense of all creation” (Horski 1998). These understandings from St. Augustine and the Holy Father, Pope Francis are very fundamental, because it attempts to tell us that nature is life and life is God in nature, and hence is the need to care for nature and protect it, following the natural law of St. Thomas Aquinas.

In few points, the church's teaching on the environment suggests the following;

1. The environment is a sign of God's creation.
2. The need to preserve our environment from impending disaster, hence we are responsible to and for the happenings of our environment.
3. The need for *Fratelli Tutti* since the natural ecology is foundational for the existence of the social ecology.
4. That human beings are stewards and caretakers of creation. This point is exemplified in St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Creatures*, where St. Francis taught us to relate to all creatures as brothers and sisters.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* prescribes some breath-relieving practices that could help man conquer his environment as outlined in Gen.1:28 which instructs man to "rule and conquer the earth." It states the following

1. Recreating a new lifestyle towards our environment. (*Laudato Si*. No.203-208)
2. Environmental Education (209-215)
3. Practicing civic and political love
4. Ecological conversion. St. Francis of Assisi is foundational to this activity. (216-221)
5. By practicing environmental contemplation through the Sacraments, because it is by the sacraments that nature was assumed by God (the mystery of the holy eucharist explains this point; God becoming man, witnessing our environment. And as St. Paul in Phillipians 2 puts it, Christ took our own nature and became man for the sake of our redemption)- (233-237)
6. The practice of Joy and Peace as proposed in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Happiness according to *Evangelii Gaudium* means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer. (222-227).

Conclusion

I think the position of the Catholic Church on the teaching on the environment cannot be over emphasized in recent times. Augustine's idea and the *Laudato Si* are both masterpieces that educate the man of society to understand his ecosystem and what God, fully present in nature, requires of us in His intended order of creation. So far, this article has investigated and referenced Augustine's thoughts to see what he has to offer as a way of reflecting on a contemporary understanding and appreciation of our relationship with the rest of the environment. Certainly, Augustine's thinking is directly related to his conversion history, which bears strong marks of intellectual content and emphasis and is also born of a crisis-ridden environment, which the *De Civitate Dei* shows.

Augustine's day and ours have threats to the environment and there is a common basis for concern, although Augustine did not set out to address environmental issues

in his works. We need a sort of fundamental shift in our thinking about our relationship to the rest of the environment, and it is a need felt within a similarly crisis-like and urgent context, not unlike that of Augustine's.

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