V A R I A

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Some Aspects of the Pelagian Controversy

Abstract: Pelagius makes from our will something absolute. He suppresses the original sin: Adam was sent to us only as a bad example. He suppresses the work of salvation: Jesus acts on us only from the outside, by means of His examples and teachings, and does not exercise within us an intimate action that would involve the supernatural will. Pelagius, says Augustine, acknowledges the grace through which God reveals to us what we need to do, but he does not recognize the one by means of which God makes us act and helps us in our action. The problem is: how does the freedom of man, that is under the influence of grace, manage to preserve some of its own energy? For if it does not preserve anything, then we do not cooperate either. Augustine states two truths against Pelagius: man is free, and man cannot do anything without grace. The statements are important, but they themselves do not solve the problem, they only create the problems. The real *clavis* we find elsewhere, in the Augustinian explanation regarding the divine government of wills, therefore the biggest problem is the agreement of grace with freedom. Some aspects of the controversy we shall find in this text.

Keywords: Pelagius, Augustine, original sin, grace, liberty

A British monk named Morgan settled in the early years of the fifth century in Rome. He took the name of Pelagius – the Man of Seas and the contemporaries called him, because of his perfidy, *anguis brittanicus*. Scholar and with a scrupulous morality, he conquers including the pope's respect. Pelagianism is formally heretical and rather belongs to the lawyer Coelestius and to Julian of Eclanum, of whom Augustine will state: *totius Pelagiani dogmatis machina sine architecto necessario remanisisset* ("without him, the Pelagian machine would have lacked an architect") (Ferenț 1997, 115).

Pelagians exalt human nature, especially Julian, who is slanderous and calls Augustine "the most erudite among bipedal".

Being in the service of truth, Augustine fought fervently for the truth. He will send a personal letter and one on behalf of five African bishops to Pope Innocent I. He writes to John as well, Bishop of Jerusalem, about the

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Pelagian heresy. Rome answered (*Roma locuta est*), and if Rome has spoken, the debate was considered to be closed: *Causa finita est: utinam aliquando finiatur error.*

The dogmatic errors of the Pelagians are clearly formulated on the first conviction of heresy (Council of Carthage, 411). Coelestius is accused, much more risky than Pelagius himself, of the following errors (Portalié 1931, 2380-2383; Ferenţ, 1997, 116-7):

- Adam was created mortal; even if he had not sinned, he must die; death is therefore a consequence of the original sin;

- the original sin hurt only Adam, not his descendants as well; death and concupiscence are not the effect of the original sin, but the original condition of man. In *Enchiridion*, 26, Augustine argues, against Pelagius (*contra Pelagianos*), that the punishment of Adam's original sin reflects on his entire nation (*Hinc post peccatum exsul effectus, stirpem quoquesuam, quam peccando in se tanquam in ridice vitiaverat, poena mortis et damnationis obstrinxit*);

- children are born in the state in which Adam was before sin; the baptism of infants does not cancel sin, for it has nothing to cancel, it only unites the children of Christ;

- the children who have died without baptism enjoy eternal life;

- man can be without sin by its own power, without the assistance of grace, for there have always been people without sin. Julian the Pelagian accuses Augustine of inventing the original sin. By 420, Julian addresses to Augustine with the words: "at the beginning of your conversion you had the same concept of original sin like me". Augustine responds in *Contra Iulianum* (VI, 12, 39): in the books that I have written as a simple layman, I was not strengthened in Scripture; nevertheless, my language consorts with the ancient doctrine of the Church". Also in *Contra Iulianum* (V, 3, 13) Augustine says: before choosing God, we are not yet worthy; the choice brings with self dignity; and when God punishes, then that person is punished with justice".

The doctrine of sin was summarized by Coelestis in six phrases:

1. Adam was created mortal and would have died regardless had he sinned or not;

2. Adam's sin affected only him, and not the human race;

3. The law leads to the kingdom of heaven, as well as the Gospel;

4. Even before the arrival of Christ, there were sinless people;

5. newborn babies are in the same state as Adam was before the fall;

6. by means of Adam's death and sin, the entire human race does not die, nor does it raise by Christ's resurrection (Pelikan 2004, 324).

This is what is stated in *Propositiones Caelestii quae obiectae sunt Pelagio*: 1. *Adam mortalem factum, qui sive peccaret, sive non peccaret, moriturus esset*; 2. *Quoniam peccatum Adae ipsum solum laeserit, et non genus humanum*; 3. *Quoniam Lex sic mittit ad regnum quemadmodum Evangelium*; 4. *Quoniam ante adventum*

Christi fuerunt homines sine peccato; 5. *quoniam infantes nuper nati in illo statu sint, in quo Adam fuit ante praevaricationem*; 6. *Quoniam neque per mortem vel praevaricationem Adae omne genus hominum moriatur, neque per resurrectionem Christi omne genus hominum resurgat* (*De Gestiis Pelagii*, 11, 23). The issue is retaken in *De Gratia Christi et de Peccato Originali*, II, 12, 13; 13, 14: *nihil distat inter Pelagium et Coelestium quod doctrinam de peccato originali*. The fact is that Augustine is not a fatalist and does not either want to reintroduce the pagan blind necessity. Predestination is something else than divine foreknowledge, for God is able to want one thing (predestination) and allow another (foreknowledge). And unlike what He wants, what He allows is something else. He wants good, but allows evil as well, as He foreknows both of them without predetermining any. He helps the good ones through his goodness, and the bad ones are allowed due to the freedom of man's will. And when He helps the good ones, he foreknows them, not predetermine them!

Essentially, Pelagius denies the supernatural order and admits only the external data of revelation, exaggerating the power of freedom. We find the substance of the Pelagian system in the absolute independence of man's freedom in relation to God and in the unlimited power, both in good, as well as in evil and which is in man. The origin of this idea Pelagius finds in stoicism, and he will adopt the motto: to ask from God for wealth and health, not for virtue, that depends on us! To God, says Pelagius, man owes the being and the freedom (*possibilitas boni*). Freedom is the only gift from God, and because it is free, Pelagius calls it *gratia*. Following the action by means of which the gift is offered, God no longer has any influence on his own gift – freedom. If God intervenes, freedom is canceled, the heretics say by making use of three formulas: *non est liberum arbitrium, si Dei indiget auxilio* (Pelagius); *destruitur enim voluntas quae alterius ope indiget* (Coelestius); *si praevenitur, interit* (Julian, which Augustine quotes in *Contra Iulianum*). Once the perfect freedom is lost as a result of the original sin, says Augustine, free will cannot but sin if not assisted by grace, which he calls *auxilium quo volumus*. This *auxilium* is not accepted by Pelagius.

The most expressive formula belongs to Julian, and it is about the complete emancipation of will: *libertas arbitrii, qua a Deo emancipatus homo est*. Man has the omnipotence of freedom to achieve good only if freedom is completely emancipated from God. It follows from here, in the Pelagian system, a frightening rigor and which is the immediate consequence of the exaggeration of the power of freedom. Therefore, since perfection is possible for Pelagius, it also becomes mandatory. As in the Stoics' case, that Pelagius often invokes, the good forces, and it is no longer just about the simple advices, but about irrevocable precepts.

Augustine's thinking has voluntarism aspects, and for him the essence of man is not given by the intellect, but by will. The essential nature of man

combines *agapé* with *éros*, but this essential nature is not also the existential nature of man. Man's nature is distorted by the original sin.

The conflict between Augustine and Pelagius is one of the most important from Church's history and can be compared to the Trinitarian dispute or to the Christological one. We find the decisive point in the relation between moral and religion. The issue is to know whether the moral imperative depends, in order to be fulfilled, on the divine grace or if somehow even grace depends on the moral imperative. Pelagius believes that freedom is the essential nature of man and this idea, taken in itself, does not make Pelagius a heretic. The way in which he develops the idea will bring him into conflict with Augustine (Tillich 1970, 144-153).

To summarize: for Pelagius, death is a natural phenomenon and not a consequence of the fall. Since death depends on finitude, Adam would have died even if he had not sinned. The Adamic sin regards *only* Adam him, not the entirely human species as well. From this point of view, the original sin does not even exist. In order to be sinful, each one of us has, *he himself*, to sin. The simple Adamic descent does not make anyone a sinner through inheritance. Evil does not exist outside of us, says Pelagius; if so, religion risks to no longer surpassing the status of simple moral!

Augustine believes, as well as Pelagius, that freedom is an original and essential human quality and that Adam was free until he sinned. Originally, human freedom was oriented towards good. From this perspective, everyone is free. But this freedom is dangerous in the sense that man ceases to aspire towards God and turns to himself. Therefore, Augustine conceived the doctrine *adiutorium gratiae*, i.e. the helping power of grace given to Adam before the fall was not in a state of pure nature (*in puris naturalibus*), therefore the assistance of grace, in the case of Adam, before the fall, was only potential. Augustine believes that Adam had the freedom not to sin, not to die, not to move away from good. It was easy for Adam not to sin and he had no reason to do it either. And yet, he sins! But since the fall had no external motivation, it follows that he acted motivated from inside and for Augustine sin is, originally, something of spiritual order. The man was absolutely independent and had available, potentially, everything that was good.

Sin is not for Augustine just a simple moral mistake, is not, strictly speaking, the same as disobedience. Disobedience is the consequence of sin, not the cause of sin. We find the cause in fact that Adam turns his face away from God and sin is precisely this turn away. For this reason, there is no moral remedy for sin. Only one remedy the sin has: the return to God, and this return is possible only by the power of God. After the fall, the soul louses his power on body. The difference between Augustine and Pelagius lies in the concept and conception on *nature*. Pelagius thus argues: "the sin is not born with man, but it is committed afterwards because it is clear that

the offense does not depend on nature, but on will" (Ferenţ 1997, 123). But this regards freedom and free will.

In 412 Augustine writes the first text against Pelagius: *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione et de Baptismo Parvulorum*. He reconfirms here the doctrine of the Adamic sin (*In Adam omnes peccaverunt*, I, 10, 11; *Unum peccatum omnibus commune*, I, 11, 13) and then, in Book II, he does not agree that man could escape this conditions: "It is not true that man's perfection would become impossible, as it is claimed by Pelagians, when the possibility of not sinning is not admitted; the free will simply can not exclude the intervention of divine grace. Man, even if baptized, keeps in self the concupiscence that was forgiven as sin, but it is still alive in the body as « a law of sin »" (Moreschini & Norelli 2004, 49). The Pelagian controversy is the latter one that Augustine undertook. During the controversy there are coming out highly complex issues: the human nature, the original sin, the doctrine of grace. "The Augustinian conception on grace seems to raise a very serious problem, almost impossible: that of reconciling grace with free will. But, for Augustine, this contradiction does not exist at all. According to Augustine, if it is true that I possess free will, it is equally true that I want to live. Then, the will is something that I was given as a fact about which it cannot be discussed and to want means to always use free will, whose definition is always confused with that of the will" (Moreschini & Norelli 2004, 54).

The core problem that arises does not regard the relation of grace with free will, the problem regards the relation of grace with freedom. For I do not wonder if loving God depends on free will; I wonder if loving God is in my power. And the power of this kind is freedom as such. An effective free will is freedom. Where is the difference? In the fact that grace leaves intact the free will, but "the difference between the man who receives the grace and the man who does not receive it resides in the very effectiveness of free will: when he does not have the grace, it realizes that, even if he sees good, he can not achieve it, while the one that has it, he sees it and can achieve it" (Moreschini & Norelli 2004, 55).

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