



AUGUSTINE'S "DE ORDINE" AND HIS COMMENT ON PROSTITUTION

One of the earliest works of St Augustine is a work that he wrote in 386 AD at a country villa while preparing for baptism. It is one of a number of works that he wrote at that time. Augustine had just abandoned his job as a teacher of philosophy, but the milieu is still that of late philosophy.

The work is *De ordine*, "On Order", which Robert P. Russell, the first translator, revised to a more meaningful "Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil".^[1] The work is concerned with explaining how God controls everything that happens in the world, even the bad things, although he is not responsible for them. Given in dialogue form, it records a discussion between Augustine and his friends and a couple of students.

In *De ordine* book 2, chapter 4, we read the following statement:

TRYGETIUS: ... Indeed, the entire life of the unwise, although it is by no means consistent and by no means well regulated by themselves, is, nevertheless, necessarily included in the order of things by Divine Providence. And, certain places having been arranged, so to speak, by that ineffable and eternal law, it is by no means permitted to be where it ought not to be. Thus it happens that whoever narrow-mindedly considers this life [the life of the "unwise"] by itself alone is repelled by its enormous foulness, and turns away in sheer disgust. But, if he raises the eyes of the mind and broadens his field of vision and surveys all things as a whole, then he will find nothing unarranged, unclassed, or unassigned to its own place.'

AUGUSTINE: ... Now, you were looking for just one or two illustrations for that opinion of yours. To me there already occur countless illustrations which bring me to complete agreement.

What more hideous than a hangman? What more cruel and ferocious than his character? Yet he holds a necessary post in the very midst of laws, and he is incorporated into the order of a well-regulated state; himself criminal in character, he is nevertheless, by others' arrangement, the penalty of evildoers.

What can be mentioned more sordid, more bereft of decency, or more full of turpitude than prostitutes, procurers, and the other pests of that sort? Remove prostitutes from human affairs, and you will unsettle everything because of lusts; place them in the position of matrons, and you will dishonor these latter by disgrace and ignominy. This class of people is, therefore, by its own mode of life most unchaste in its morals; by the law of order, it is most vile in social condition.

And is it not true that in the bodies of animals there are certain members which you could not bear to look at, if you should view them by themselves alone? But the order of nature has designed that because they are needful they shall not be lacking, and because they are uncomely they shall not be prominent. And

these ugly members, by keeping their proper places, have provided a better position for the more comely ones.^[2]

(Paragraphing mine). The argument is fundamentally one in which Augustine is trying to explain how God controls evil and makes a use of it, assigning it a role in our broken society, but does not endorse it or take responsibility for it. The examples are incidental. Augustine was not describing how a society should be, but how his society was. The social order of the Western Roman Empire was pagan to the end.

Unfortunately this idea, that prostitution and pimping were a necessary evil, like the hangman, was picked up by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 10. a; 11. c, who used it to illustrate the idea that human legislators may at times permit certain evils for the purpose of avoiding greater ones. This led to the awful institution of legalised brothels in Catholic countries, the abuse of women for profit, even in Rome itself.^[3]

As the Fathers of the Church editor is keen to point out, Augustine spoke rather more clearly in *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, book 22, chapter 61 (Latin [here](#), English [here](#)):

Consulta quippe aeterna lex illa, quae ordinem naturalem conservari iubet, pertubari vetat, non nisi propagationis causa statuit hominis concubitum fieri, et hoc non nisi socialiter ordinato connubio, quod non pervertat vinculum pacis: **et ideo prostitutio feminarum, non ad substituendam prolem, sed ad satiandam libidinem propositarum, divina atque aeterna lege damnatur.**

Obviously by that eternal law, which commands that the natural order be conserved, and forbids it to be disturbed, human sex is not established to happen unless for the cause of propagation, and this not unless a marriage has taken place, so that the bond of peace is not overthrown/corrupted: **and likewise the prostitution of women who offer themselves, not for the begetting of offspring but for the sating of lust, is condemned by the divine and eternal law.**

The “bond of peace” is of course the institution of marriage. Certainly this indicates that Augustine reaffirms that prostitution is wrong.

It is remarkable what men will do to justify an evil, if they stand to profit by it. Indeed only this week I came across someone campaigning to “legalise prostitution”. Prostitution is legal; it is pimping that is not, so the campaign is to permit the legal trade in women to resume. I pointed out that prostitution was awful; and he had the cheek to ask me sneerily, “Why is prostitution awful”. Those willing to commit some obvious evil are seldom ashamed to lie about it as well.

Curiously the second half of the NPNF translation is wrong at this point, reading:

Undoubtedly, by the eternal law, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the transgression of it, conjugal intercourse should take place only for the procreation of children, and after the celebration of marriage, so as to maintain the bond of peace. **Therefore, the prostitution of**

women, merely for the gratification of sinful passion, is condemned by the divine and eternal law.

What happened to “non ad substituendam prolem”, one wonders.

1. ^[1]“Writings of Saint Augustine volume 1”, in: *Fathers of the Church* 5 (1948), p.229-334↩

2. ^[2]Key passage p.287-8.↩

3. ^[3]See for another example, Michael M. Hammer, “Prostitution in Urban Brothels in Late Medieval Austria”, online [here](#). It seems to be a paper from this 2017 seminar “Forgotten Women from a Forgotten Region: Prostitutes and Female Slaves in Central and Eastern Europe in the Long Middle Ages” [here](#).↩
