



TEMPO DI DIO TEMPO DELL'UOMO

**XLVI Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana
(Roma, 10-12 maggio 2018)**

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via Riviera, 1 - CH 6900 Lugano

e-mail: edizioni@nerbini.ch
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Marcin Wysocki

HOW TO MEASURE THE TIME OF GOD
AND THE TIME OF MEN?
STUDY OF THE LETTERS
OF AMBROSE AND AUGUSTINE¹

Time as a measure of a duration of all that belongs to the material world is the object of interest of mathematicians, physicists, philosophers, theologians, and in the non-scientific sense also of all the people who experience the passing of time. In different ways, the attempts are made to measure a passing of time – with the course of nature, with the events, with the units of the passage of time created by people. Regardless of the age in which a man lives, he tries to explore the mystery of time and to make time somewhat friendlier to himself. It was no different in the case of the Church Fathers. In their works, they repeatedly pointed to different categories of time: time of human life, moral dimension of the existence of time, liturgical time.² In this study, the letters of St. Ambrose³ and St. Augustine⁴ will

¹ The article presents the results of the research project No. 2014/15/B/HS1/03851 funded by the National Science Centre (Poland).

² Unfortunately I haven't found amongst many studies the one which would give a comprehensive overview of the concept of time in the thought of Early Christianity. For example in the magnificent study of A. Jackelén (*Time and Eternity: The Question of Time in Church, Science and Theology*, Philadelphia-London 2005) we can find only a few mentions about the theology of the Early Church (of course there is mentioned Augustine's *Confessions* XI).

³ Not many studies are devoted to the issue of time in the writings of St. Ambrose. Some observations and studies on the Ambrose's concept of time we can find in the works of J.C.M van Winden: *St. Ambrose's Interpretation of the Concept of Matter*, in *VChr* 16 (1962), 205-215; Id., *In the Beginning: Some Observations on the Patristic Interpretations of Genesis 1,1*, in *VChr* 17 (1963), 105-121; Id., *Some Additional Observations of St. Ambrose's Concept of Matter*, in *VChr* 18 (1964), 144-145.

⁴ About Augustine's conception of time see H. Hausheer, *St. Augustine's Conception of Time*, in *The Personalist* 20/3 (1939), 267-279; E. Gilson, *Notes sur l'être et le temps chez saint Augustin*, in *Recherches augustiniennes et patristiques* 2 (1962), 205-223; W.B. Green, *Saint Augustine on Time*, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18/2 (1965), 148-163; J. Moreau, *Le temps et la création selon Saint Augustin*, in *Giornale di Metafisica* (1965), 276-290; J.M. Quinn, *The Concept of Time in St. Augustine*, Roma 1965; J. Guitton, *Le temps et l'éternité chez Plotin et saint Augustin*, Paris 1971⁴; J.L. Morison, *Augustine's Two Theories of Time*, in *New Scholasticism* 45 (1971), 600-610;

be subject of analysis. They met in a unique time of their lives and lived in an extraordinary period of time. Augustine, who was looking for a guide on his way of conversion, resented that Ambrose had not devoted enough time to him.⁵ Eventually they found enough time for Augustine to receive baptism from Ambrose on a peculiar day of the year – the Holy Saturday AD 387 – and then finally to raise in their correspondence the one issue that bothered them both – the issue of time.

The formula of a letter is in a special way related to the passage of time – usually short, discussing the latest events, intended to quickly reach the addressee. The letters are also an exceptional testimony to the development of the theological thought, because they often show – so to say *in statu nascendi* – the ideas that were later expressed in theological treatises. Augustine, anyway, gave such a broader lecture on time in his *Confessiones*⁶ and in his other works: *De Civitate Dei*⁷ and *De Genesi contra Manichaeos libri duo*, and Ambrose in his *Hexaemeron*. In addition, these two characters, living in the time when the passage and the peculiar end of time were experienced in an exceptional way, seem to be particularly representative for taking up the issues related to the time in their letters. It should also be remembered that it was at the time of their pontificates that the decisions of the Nicene Council regarding the date of the celebration of the Easter and the specific cooling of the discussions (still existing, as we have an example in their letters) about this subject were taken.

In a natural way, both authors use in their correspondence a number of time-expressions concerning, above all, the issues related to the sending of letters. They wrote in their letters: that they have “recently” explained a fragment of the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians,⁸ that they did not visit themselves “for a long time”,⁹ that Ambrose “immediately” started writing the answer,¹⁰ that “without hesitation” he would like to reply to the letter and explain the issues mentioned

P. Janich, *Augustins Zeitparadox und seine Frage nach einem Standard der Zeitmessung*, in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 54 (1972), 168-186; S. Böhm, *La temporalité dans Saint Augustin*, Paris 1984; E.A. Schmidt, *Zeit und Geschichte bei Augustin*, Heidelberg 1985; J.W. Carter, *St. Augustine on Time, Time Numbers, and Enduring Objects*, in *Vivarium* 49/4 (2011), 301-323. As in the case of St. Ambrose, these studies are usually based on other works than letters. The letters of both Fathers, therefore, remain off the beaten track of the interests of researchers, what is a special incentive to take up this topic.

⁵ Aug., *conf.* VI 3.

⁶ Aug., *conf.* XI-XII. See K. Gloy, *Die Struktur der Augustinischen Zeittheorie in XI. Buch der Confessiones*, in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 95 (1988), 71-83; K. Flasch, *Was ist Zeit? Augustinus von Hippo, das XI. Buch der Confessiones. Historischphilosophische Studie*, Frankfurt am Main 1993; D.L. Dusenbury, *New Light on Time in Augustine's Confessions*, in *St. Augustine and His Opponents*, vol 24, ed. M. Vinzent, Leuven-Paris-Walpole 2013 (*Studia Patristica* XCVIII), 529-544.

⁷ Aug., *civ. Dei* XI.

⁸ Ambr., *ep.* 10, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.* 43, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 61, 1.

in it,¹¹ that “the day after” receiving the letter from his sister the riots began in Milan,¹² about “a long” hesitation of Augustine in replying to the letter,¹³ that Augustine wanted the recipient to receive his letter “as soon as possible”,¹⁴ that he has awaited for Paulinus’ letter “for two years”,¹⁵ that thanks to the letters exchanged with the Donatist bishop Crispin, misunderstandings can “quickly” be removed,¹⁶ that the letter from Severus has arrived Augustine “very late”.¹⁷ Such and similar mentions of time and its passing in their letters we can find, of course, a lot, as well as terms regarding the time of events, their duration etc. However, apart from such ordinary descriptions of time, we can also find in them deeper considerations regarding time – both in its theological-liturgical dimension as well as in the daily human life. It is worth to see how these two Church Fathers in their letters discussed on time and its passing.

For Christians, it is obvious that only God is the creator and master of time, God who is timeless at the same time and who allots to all the several periods of time according to their diversity.¹⁸ God as timeless and over time is not subjected to changeability and whatever new appears in time it is not new with him.¹⁹ In the letter 177 Augustine states that «division of times belongs to the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God». ²⁰ This creative act of time, like the entire creative act, is a reason for admiration on the part of human beings and forces them to believe. Therefore, in the letter 137 to Volusianus Augustine asks:

Who would not be moved to believe by the impressive order of creation from its beginning, by the interlocking of time, giving credibility to the past by the present, giving authenticity to earlier happenings by later ones, and to ancient events by those more recent?²¹

Everything, therefore, pervades each other in time and changes. However, as noted above, only God is not subjected to this process of change over time and of the passage of time. According to Augustine, the body is changeable in time and in space, the soul only in time, and God is immutable, neither in space nor in time.²² With time, everything changes: the seasons follow each other, childhood passes

¹¹ *Ibid.* 68, 1.

¹² *Ibid.* 76, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.* 22, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 31, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 42; 45.

¹⁶ *Aug., ep.* 51, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 52, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 138, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 177, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.* 137, 15.

²² *Ibid.* 18, 2.

into youth, manhood succeeds to youth, and old age is itself ended by death. «All these are changes, yet the method of Divine Providence by which they are made to change does not change».²³ The matter and the creatures are therefore changeable, not God and everything that belongs to him, including his way of acting. He, the unchanging Creator and Governor of the changing world (*immutabilis mutabilium, sicut creator, ita moderator*), knows best what and when to give, to add, to take, to enlarge or to reduce, and which the individual parts are suitable each for its own time.²⁴ Augustine emphasizes that changeability and temporality are governed and conditioned by God's wisdom, which has long ago established them at the beginning of history.²⁵ Similarly, Ambrose, writing about the meaning of the number seven, indicates that «the adorable Trinity of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, without time or order, is the origin of number, being not bound by the law of number».²⁶ So these preliminary remarks about time, which appear mainly in the letters of Augustine, who certainly as more involved in philosophical disputes paid more attention to the explanation of such phenomena as time, show above all that time is a feature of created things, and God as a creator is beyond a time.

So only by analogy we can speak of God's time and its measurability. Both Fathers, however, recall in their letters the specific "time" of God, referring to the history of salvation, which was initiated by the act of creation and completed during the Passover of Christ – the time of his passion, death and resurrection. Ambrose, first of all as a shepherd, in letter to Orontianus, speaking of creation, emphasizes that God had created the world in six days, not because he had needed this time to create it, but because «things which are made require an order and order generally requires both time and number».²⁷ God does not need time and number, but Ambrose, guided by the words of the Bible says about the six days of creation and the seventh day, when God rested from all his works.²⁸ He refers the number seven to the Holy Trinity and interprets it not in accordance with the principles of philosophy, that is human time, but in a spiritual way, «according to the form and divisions of spiritual grace».²⁹ He points to the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are the interpretative key to the seven-day act of creation, but also to the daily maintenance of it in existence. He therefore emphasizes not the measure of earthly time, but the time of God, which is measured not by days, because God is not bound by the law of numbers as we said, but by eternal grace, spiritual virtues

²³ *Ibid.* 138, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 138, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 138, 7.

²⁶ Ambr., *ep.* 31, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 31, 2.

²⁸ About the seventh day (Sunday) see A. Di Berardino, *La cristianizzazione del tempo nei secoli IV-V: la domenica*, in *Augustinianum* 42 (2002), 97-125.

²⁹ Ambr., *ep.* 31, 3.

and perfecting. The time of God, for Ambrose, starts with the moment of the beginning of the time of grace, that is, in the act of creation.

Augustine, more familiar with philosophical explanations, in letter 137 to Volusianus, discussing the incarnation, shows God's entry into time and writes:

He who, without any change in Himself, has woven the course of centuries by means of change submitted His Body to the sequence of time and the limitations of age. What began outside of time took growth in the course of time, but in the beginning the Word by whom all time was made chose the time when He was to take flesh; He did not wait for the time that He might become flesh, for, in truth, it was man who drew near to God, not God who went far off from Himself.³⁰

So God, to enter into time, chose time: the incarnation. Therefore, Augustine, speaking about the time of God in his letters, first of all draws attention to this event. For him, the time of God is above all a time of salvation initiated by the incarnation and ending with the second coming of the Messiah. God had chosen this time and had found it most convenient and had established it even before the time started at the moment of creation, so that the Lord and the Help would come to man offering him eternal salvation.³¹ The time of salvation will eventually end with the time of *parousia*. This is God's time, because only he knows the proper time and the moment in which it will happen. That's why Augustine states:

I do not venture to calculate the time, and I do not think that any Prophet has defined the number of years in that matter, but that special weight is to be given to what the Lord Himself said: «It is not for you to know the times and moments which the Father hath put in his own power».³²

Augustine then reflects on the meaning of these words of Christ, and thus on the measurement of time. By distinguishing the Greek words *καρπός* and *χρόνος* and their meaning, and also recalling Christ's words of proclaiming the Good News to all the nations, he unambiguously shows that no one except God knows the time of the end of time.³³ Even the signs indicated by God conceal his time. In letter 199, to Hesychius, he tries once again to face the end time of the world and he analyzes and criticizes the methods of its measuring.³⁴ However, he always concludes that it is impossible to count a time.³⁵ Since it is the day of the Lord – the time of the Lord. He states, making his thought similar to Ambrose's understand-

³⁰ Aug., *ep.* 137, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.* 137, 12.

³² *Ibid.* 197, 1.

³³ *Ibid.* 197, 3-4.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 199, 17-18, 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 199, 16.

ing of God's time as a spiritual development and improvement, that this time will only be fulfilled and measured when "peace and security" comes.³⁶

So we can see two different approaches to understand the specific time of God – Ambrose perceives it more in pastoral and spiritual way, while Augustine, not specifying, perceives it rather polemically, showing what it is not and pointing to the philosophical ways of understanding it.

God's time, however, is inextricably linked to the time of human beings. As noted above both authors indicate that the time of God is the time of the saving actions in favour of man. St. Ambrose emphasizes that this saving time for man began with Christ's entry into this process of salvation, from the days of eternity, when God gave Israel the days of salvation.³⁷ God, creating a time, creating the world, giving the number of days and seasons, gave us a pattern of action, because «we, too, need time to do something well, so as not to hurry, our plans and works, or fail to keep a proper order».³⁸ The time given to us by God is our task and help. The above mentioned spiritual dimension of time has its significance for man as well. Therefore, when Ambrose reveals the division of human life into periods, following the ideas of Hippocrates and Solon, into seven periods or seven-year periods, he emphasizes the importance of the octave, because it «introduces one continual period in which we grow up into a perfect man, knowing God, possessing the fullness of faith, wherein the measure of genuine life is fulfilled».³⁹ Also, using the numbers seven and eight to divide the history of the world, not just of the individual man, he writes:

Now that the seventh age of the world has been concluded, the grace of the eighth has dawned, and made man no longer of this world but above it. No longer do we live our life, but we live Christ: «For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. [...] I no longer live in the flesh, but in the faith of Christ». The Apostle has spoken and we know from this that the day of the world has drawn to a close. At the last hour, the Lord Jesus came and died for us. And we are all dead in Him so that we may live to God. We who were do not live, but Christ lives in us.⁴⁰

Again and again Ambrose, therefore, gives the time of man and of the world a spiritual and moral dimension. The time of Christ is the time of faith and living for Christ, not for the world. This dimension of improvement reaches its peak in the period of old age, which he wrote about when he mentioned bishop Acholius:

[...] old age is truly venerable when it grows hoary not with grey hairs but with good deeds. This hoariness is revered, hoariness of soul, gleaming with shining thoughts

³⁶ *Ibid.* 199, 16.

³⁷ *Ambr., ep.* 18, 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 31, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 31, 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 31, 16.

and deeds. What truly is old age if it is not a spotless life which is measured not by days or months, but by ages whose durability knows no end, whose longevity knows no weakness? The older it is, the stronger it is, and the longer he has lived that life, the more vigorously does he grow into the perfect man.⁴¹

The time of old age is the time of maturity to which one should head for.⁴² That is why Ambrose calls to win virtues and, what's more, to be in this violent, eager and diligent. One cannot put off acquiring perfection in the virtues, but one must use every day of one's life, and even every hour, because «one hour is a portion of a whole life».⁴³ However, one must keep the natural course of time in this, one has to go through all periods of life, through the time of youth and the time of old age, to reach maturity, because «not age so much, but discipline, brings a betterment of habits» – Bishop of Milan admonishes pointing at the same time – «how much more, then, should we raise our hopes toward the kingdom of God where there will be newness of life, where there will be a change of grace, not of life».⁴⁴

Speaking of the time of man, St. Augustine first of all draws attention to the fact that God is the giver of the time of human life and «He gives a lovely and ordered course to all things that pass with time, among which are the birth and death of living creatures».⁴⁵ Therefore, he emphasizes the transitoriness of man and of a time, which inevitably passes from a birth to a death. This is the main feature of the theology of man's time in Augustine's letters. In the letter 127 to Armentarius and Paulina he clearly states that «we can make our temporal life into an ever-ready handmaid to serve us in attaining eternal life, if we do not bind it with the fetters of useless adornment or load it with the burdens of harmful cares».⁴⁶ The time of a human life is therefore the time to acquire eternal life. In the same letter Augustine indicates that all temporal goods should be sacrificed to obtain eternal life, just as so many things are sacrificed to prolong the time of prosperity and pleasure in this world.⁴⁷ Referring in letter 55 to the symbolism of a week and its first and last day, he presents this ordinary period of human time in eschatological terms. The seventh day, the last day of a week, has no evening, because it signifies the endless peace that completes on the eighth day, which will contain eternal happiness, eternal rest and on this day, which is the same as the first day, the first life will be restored, but this time – eternal one.⁴⁸ Augustine sees the time of human life as a path leading to eternal life, to which everything must be subordinated.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 52, 5.

⁴² *Ibid.* 28, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 14 extra coll., 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 14 extra coll., 98.

⁴⁵ *Aug., ep.* 166, 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 127, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 127, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 55, 17.

As mentioned above, the salvific events were a special time of God. They took place at the time when God became man and entered into time. Both authors in their letters consider these events, showing their temporality and their place in the life and calendar of the Church. Interestingly, St. Ambrose devotes his attention to them in letter 13 *extra collectionem*, addressed to the bishops of Emilia province and written at the request of Emperor Theodosius the Great to set the date of Easter.⁴⁹ So Ambrose was put to the necessity of dealing with time and the special time – the time of celebrating the events of salvation.⁵⁰ He realizes, however, the difficulty of establishing the day of celebration of the Paschal solemnity in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures and the traditions of the Fathers.⁵¹ Nevertheless, he tries to explain to the addressees how to calculate the time of Passover celebration and refers to the statements of the fathers of the Council of Nicaea on the nineteen-year cycle and encourages them: «we should not waver amid foolish ideas regarding a celebration of this kind. Having found a true method of calculating, let everyone be of one opinion, so that the Sacrifice [of the Mass] for the Resurrection of the Lord may be offered everywhere on one night».⁵² Especially that Lord himself chose that day to celebrate the Passover.⁵³ Although he presents calculations regarding the nineteen-year cycle, the fourteenth of the lunar month and the first month of the new ones, according to the Old Testament, he emphasizes strongly that these calculations and dates are not of the greatest importance, but the most important is the spiritual reality of this celebrations – the perfection of the Church and fullness of clear faith.⁵⁴ Once again, therefore, Ambrose points to the spiritual and moral dimension of the time, what is well linked with the perfection towards which the Christians drive in with the time. Although making all these calculations, he still keeps his pastoral point of view.

St. Augustine to a lesser extent raises issues related to the time of celebrating the feast, and amongst them the Passover, but wherever he writes about them there is clearly visible, so different from the Ambrosian, philosophical, theological, so to say – scientific point of view. For example in letter 55. Augustine draws attention to the essence of the Christmas celebration:

The first thing which you must know and remember here is, that the observance of the Lord's natal day is not sacramental, but only commemorative of His birth, and that therefore no more was in this case necessary, than that the return of the

⁴⁹ See R. Cantalamessa, *La concezione teologica della Pasqua in sant'Ambrogio*, in *Paradoxos politeia: studi patristici in onore di Giuseppe Lazzati*, Milano 1979, 361-375.

⁵⁰ See A. Di Berardino, *Sant'Ambrogio e l'origine del calendario cristiano*, in *Synthesis* 3/1 (2014), 50-66.

⁵¹ Ambr., *ep.* 13 extra coll., 1. See A.A. Mosshamme, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era*, New York 2008.

⁵² Ambr., *ep.* 13 extra coll., 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 13 extra coll., 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 13 extra coll., 4.

day on which the event took place should be marked by an annual religious festival. The celebration of an event becomes sacramental in its nature, only when the commemoration of the event is so ordered that it is understood to be significant of something which is to be received with reverence as sacred. Therefore we observe Easter in such a manner as not only to recall the facts of the death and resurrection of Christ to remembrance, but also to find a place for all the other things which, in connection with these events, give evidence as to the import of the sacrament.⁵⁵

The most important, therefore, is not the date and time, but the saving reality that is present in every celebration of the feast. In the same letter Augustine shows the importance of dividing the world's history into three periods (before the Law, the period of Law and the period of grace we live in) and emphasizes the dimension of grace and perfection which these periods signify.⁵⁶ Explaining in the same letter, the length of Lent and its location in time of the year, he emphasizes the connection of this time of Church and human life with the events of Christ's life – the Passion, the Resurrection and the period of forty days after them, the Ascension, the Pentecost through which man heads to the final peace and joy and glory of God.⁵⁷ And this is the most important application from reading the letters of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine and the purpose to which they call us.

⁵⁵ *Aug., ep.* 55, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 55, 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 55, 28.