

# THE DEFENSE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE FREEDOM OF GOD REFLECTED IN THE THOUGHT OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

**Av. Dr. Drd. Florin LUDUȘAN**

*Casa de avocatură „Ludușan”, Târgu Mureș ;  
Universitatea „Aurel Vlaicu” din Arad, Romania  
Școala Doctorală Interdisciplinară,  
Programul de Doctorat „Teologie Evanghelică”  
av.florin.ludusan@gmail.com*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The defense of the Christian faith and the freedom of God reflected in the thought of Saint Augustine.*

St. Augustine of Hippo was a prominent Christian theologian and philosopher whose apologetic works had a profound impact on the development of Christian theology and Western philosophy. His apologetics is characterized by a profound and systematic approach to the Christian faith, combining reason with divine revelation. One of his best-known works is “Confessions”, a spiritual autobiography in which Augustine describes his journey from a life dedicated to worldly pleasures to his profound conversion to Christianity. This work not only provides an insight into his personal life, but also serves as a defense of the Christian faith, highlighting how divine grace can transform people’s lives.

Through his works, St. Augustine offered a robust defense of the Christian faith, addressing both external criticisms and the internal questions of believers. His apologetics profoundly influenced later theological and philosophical thought, strengthening the doctrinal foundations of Christianity and providing answers to the intellectual challenges of his time.

In St. Augustine’s view, divine grace: is God’s freedom to act absolutely free from any external constraint; it is the freedom to act out of love beyond human understanding and control; it is the freedom to create, to judge and to save.

**Keywords:** *God, freedom, Christian faith, grace, apologetics.*

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## Introduction

St. Augustine of Hippo was a prominent Christian theologian and philosopher whose apologetic works had a profound impact on the development of Christian theology and Western philosophy. His apologetics is characterized by a profound and systematic approach to the Christian faith, combining reason with divine revelation. One of his best-known works is his *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography in which Augustine describes his journey from a life dedicated to worldly pleasures to his profound conversion to Christianity. This work not only offers an insight into his personal life, but also serves as a defense of the Christian faith, highlighting how divine grace can transform people's lives.<sup>1</sup>

In "*De civitate Dei*" ("*On the City of God*"), Augustine responds to pagan critics who claimed that Rome's downfall was due to the abandonment of the traditional gods in favor of Christianity. He argues that there are two cities: the earthly, characterized by love of self, and the divine, defined by love of God. This work offers a profound insight into the history and destiny of humanity from a Christian perspective. In '*De Trinitate*' ("*On the Trinity*"), Augustine explores and defends the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, seeking to explain the mystery of a God who is one in essence but three in persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He uses analogies from human experience and reason to make this doctrine more accessible and to demonstrate its logical coherence.

Through these and other works, St. Augustine offered a robust defense of the Christian faith, addressing both external criticisms and the internal questions of believers. His apologetics profoundly influenced later theological and philosophical thought, strengthening the doctrinal foundations of Christianity and providing answers to the intellectual challenges of his time.<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine's theology of grace occupies a central place in his thought and profoundly influenced Western Christian doctrine, especially with regard to predestination, free will and salvation. Augustine, drawing

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1 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Istoria filosofiei, de la începuturi până la Renaștere* (*History of philosophy, from the beginning to the Renaissance*). Cluj-Napoca, Cluj University Press, 2005, p. 231.

2 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Anthropological aspects in Blessed Augustine's thinking", in *Proceedings QUAESTI (QUAESTI - Virtual Multidisciplinary Conference)*, Publisher: EDIS - Publishing Institution of the University of Zilina, Thomson Ltd, Slovakia, ISBN: 978-80-554-0826-2, ISSN: 1339-5572, vol. 1, issue 1, 2013, pp. 104-108.

on Scripture and his own conversion experience, emphasized that divine grace is absolutely necessary for salvation and that man cannot save himself by his own efforts. Augustine's apologetics combines reason and revelation to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith over paganism and heresies. Through his influence he profoundly shaped Western Christian theology, and his ideas continue to be relevant in modern apologetic debates.

### **Apologetics - Definition of the notion**

Apologetics is the theological discipline that has as its object: the exposition, defense and justification of the fundamental truths of the Christian religion by means offered by reason. The term apologetics is derived from the Greek *apologhia*, a word meaning: defense, justification of a belief or of a person alone. Christians defended themselves by justifying their faith, not with quotations from scripture, which pagans would not have understood, but with data from reason, which they used to support their faith.

At the same time, apologetics defines a certain *modus vivendi*, confirmed by the Savior Christ Himself, who says: „Therefore whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven; and whoever denies me before men, him will I deny before my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>3</sup> The object of Apologetics is linked to the essential truths of the Christian faith, namely the existence of God, the reality of the supernatural world, revelation, the divine-human person/nature of Jesus Christ, while the aim of Apologetics is to respond rationally and objectively to challenges from outside.<sup>4</sup>

According to the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Apologetics attempts to convince the contemporary individual of the Christian faith, for unbelievers as faith-forming and for believers as faith-supporting. Apologetics nourishes the Christian faith by calling believers to love God with all their mind;<sup>5</sup> „Jesus answered him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”<sup>6</sup>

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3 A se vedea: Matei 10:32-33; Ioniță Apostolache, *Apologetica Bisericii Primare*, Craiova, Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 2021, p. 12.

4 Ioniță Apostolache, *Apologetica Bisericii Primare*, Craiova, Editura Mitropoliei Oltenia, 2021, pp. 13-14.

5 Walter A. Elwell, *Dicționar Evanghelic de Teologie*, Oradea, Editura Cartea Creștină, 2012, p. 60.

6 C.F. Matei 22:37.

The two main apologetic approaches are called autopistic and axiopistic. In the autopistic approach, apologetics aims to present the Christian worldview as the only correct and true expression of reality, and to point out the epistemic and moral discrepancies in non-Christian world and life views; the Christian faith is self-authenticating and trustworthy in itself. In the axiopistic approach, God is considered to have structured reality in such a way that all his creatures can know the truth; Christian faith is considered trustworthy by appealing to external criteria such as reason and evidence.<sup>7</sup>

### Conversion of St. Augustine

After the biblical period, the challenges to the Christian faith were numerous, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Origen and Augustine<sup>8</sup> were the first apologists who, dealing with different subjects, sought to develop a comprehensive Christian worldview. St. Augustine is the first in a long line of thinkers whose purely speculative views are influenced by the need to be in accord with Holy Scripture.<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine's conversion took place in the year 386, following preparation and likened to a pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> He hears the voice of a child in the garden, he opens at random the book of the Apostle Paul, the book of Romans, and his eyes remain fixed on verses 13-14 of chapter 13: „Let us live as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in whoredoms and shameful deeds, not in quarrels and wrath, but let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and let us not be careful of the flesh, that we may stir up the lusts of the flesh”. In his *Confessions* (VIII, 29), St. Augustine describes the moment immediately following his conversion as follows: „I did not wish to read any further, nor was there any need. As soon as I came to the end, something like a light filled with peace and confidence spread in my heart, which dispelled all the darkness of my doubts”.

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7 Walter A. Elwell, *Dicționar Evanghelic de Teologie*, Oradea, Editura Cartea Creștină, 2012, pp. 61-62.

8 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Aspecte antropologice în gândirea patristică și a primelor secole creștine*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2005, pp.147-156.

9 Bertrand Russell, *Istoria filosofiei occidentale*, Vol. I, București, Editura Humanitas, 2005, p. 368.

10 Anton I. Adămuș, *Filosofia Sfântului Augustin*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2001, p. 57.

St. Augustine's defense of the Christian faith is a complex and fundamental subject for understanding his theological and philosophical thought. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) is one of Christianity's most influential theologians and philosophers, and his works have had a significant impact on the development of Christian doctrine.

### **Augustine's main themes in defense of the faith**

**Faith and reason.** Augustine emphasized the importance of harmonizing faith with reason. In his works, such as „Confessions” and „On the Trinity”, he demonstrates that faith is not at odds with reason. On the contrary, he believes that reason can help to understand divine truths in depth.

**The concept of truth.** Augustine argues that truth is an absolute reality that can be found in God. He is known for formulating the idea that ‚we believe in order to understand’, implying that faith is an essential step before we can reach a deep understanding of the divine.

**The problem of evil.** One of the greatest problems Augustine faced was the problem of evil. In „*De Civitate Dei*” (*On the City of God*), he explores how evil is not a substance, but an absence of good. This insight helps him defend the Christian faith against accusations that God allows evil to exist.

**Grace and free will.** Augustine elaborated the teaching of grace, emphasizing that salvation is a free gift from God, but at the same time he affirmed that humans have free will. This view is central to explaining the relationship between divine will and human choice.

Augustine was embroiled in various theological disputes, including those with the Pelagians, who argued that people can achieve salvation by their own efforts. In the face of them, he argued that salvation comes exclusively from God's grace. Augustine's writings had a profound impact on later Christian theology and laid the foundations for many of the modern concepts in approaches to faith and reason. His thought influenced both the Catholic Church and Protestant traditions. St. Augustine's defense of the Christian faith is based on a deep integration of faith and reason, a nuanced approach to the issues of evil and the nature of divinity, and a clear doctrine of grace and free will. These themes continue to be relevant and studied in contemporary theology.

## De Doctrina Christiana

In order to capture the essential features of Christian culture, Augustine wrote a work to which he gave precisely this title - *De doctrina Christiana*. St. Augustine's main themes in this famous work are: <sup>11</sup> (i) the things that man enjoys and the things that man merely makes use of; (ii) the true source of joy for man is the Trinity, the truth of faith and morals; (iii) these things we must make use of guided by the evangelical precept of love of God and neighbor; iv) Augustine's aim was to exhort every Christian to strive to understand the sacred text; v) the believer must know how to choose between the many versions of Scripture circulating among Christians and to prefer the one which enjoys an established prestige; vi) there are certain profane sciences which are useful for human life; knowledge of some of them, such as pagan history and philosophy, should be acquired by Christians in order to acquire a deeper knowledge of the Gospel and of the authentic Christian life; vii) how we should expound to others what we have learned; eloquence should not be an end in itself, as in pagan works, but should always be associated with Christian wisdom.

In „*De doctrina Christiana*”, Augustine wished to delineate a Christian culture which would not be based exclusively on the knowledge of the ancient authors, but on that of the Christians, and which would nevertheless preserve what the ancients had discovered, not only in the sphere of literature, but also in that of science and philosophy, all these disciplines having as their aim the understanding of Scripture and, as such, the knowledge of God. <sup>12</sup>

## Confessions

„*Confessions*” is, if not Augustine's most important work, at any rate his most artistically accomplished, the writer managing to combine the ornate style he acquired with his rhetorical education with the biblical style, all caught in a web resembling the Psalms. <sup>13</sup> Augustine thus wanted to appeal

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11 Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Norelli, *Istoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. II/2, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2004, pp. 26-28.

12 Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Norelli, *Istoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. II/2, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2004, p. 28.

13 Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Norelli, *Istoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine*,

not only to the educated, but to anyone who was able to read, wanting his work to be read and understood by as many people as possible.

The Confessions are the story of a conversion, an autobiography of St. Augustine, as well as a dialog without an interlocutor in which the dialogic expression addressed to God - „You know this” - frequently appears. The term „confession” had various meanings in Latin, including: a) confession of sins; b) praise; c) confession of faith; scholars believe that all of these are present in Augustine’s dialog with God.<sup>14</sup>

In this wide-ranging work Augustine: extols the divine mercy to which he constantly expresses his gratitude; he shows how God and the divine mercy traced his itinerary from paganism to Christianity; he confesses his own sins which is nothing other than the unrestrained repetition of what God already knows; nothing escapes God, not even the feelings in the human heart; he believes that man, when confronted with God, realizes not only his own sinfulness but also his own lack of harmony, losing faith in the power of reason, which dominates pagan philosophy; he also believes that God is not the God of the philosophers, imagined as an absolutely transcendent entity, so that man is incapable of imagining him - for Augustine, God is so present and so personal that the human soul can find peace and tranquillity in God; emphasizes and invites his fellow men to look not to man’s personal effort, but to the divine goodwill, which leads, step by step and mysteriously, the thread of every man’s existence; he warns that confessing one’s errors must not become an occasion for self-satisfaction and self-glorification - they must be seen as uninterrupted prayer, a dialogue with God, full of love, reverence and gratitude;<sup>15</sup> constantly asking who am I, what is the reason for my existence, where do I come from and where do I have to go - these questions are implicit in a discourse that is apparently monologic, but which is in fact a dialog with God; God is present in almost every sentence; he wants his fellow men to understand very clearly what Providence’s plan is as far as He is concerned - the tormenting road to truth, with its great theistic, stoic, skeptical, neoplatonic stages and avatars, is of interest not in itself, but as the milestones of a path that He had to traverse.

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Vol. II/2, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2004, p. 34.

14 Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Norelli, *Istoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. II/2, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2004, p. 30.

15 Sfântul Augustin, *Confesiuni*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2018, pp. 22-30.

Likewise, for Augustine in his *Confessions*, God is praised for His greatness and omnipotence, God is described as loving and forgiving, knowing Him will make man happy, God is the truth and is the only joy, man needs God's help to know himself, concluding with a confession/statement that resembles the Psalms of David: „I love you Lord, with a sure and not doubtful knowledge. You pierced my heart with your word, and from that moment I have loved you. But behold, nevertheless, heaven and earth and all that is in them, from everywhere, told me to love you, and they do not cease to tell it to all.”;<sup>16</sup> „The happiness of life is to base your joy on the truth. For joy in the truth is the joy that comes from you, who are the Truth, my God, my light, and the salvation of my face, you my God.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The doctrine of grace and freedom**

In „Augustine of Hippo”, Western Christianity found its most influential spokesman and its most skillful exegete of the doctrine of grace.<sup>18</sup> The Western Church called Augustine „doctor of the Church” and „doctor of grace”, since the central theme of his writings is the sovereign God of grace and the sovereign grace of God. If there is any doctrinal emphasis to be found in all that he wrote and said, it is divine grace.

For St. Augustine, Divine Grace:<sup>19</sup> it is God's freedom to act without any external constraint whatsoever; it is the freedom to act out of love beyond human understanding and control; it is the freedom to create, to judge and to save, to willingly give the Son as Mediator and Savior.

Freedom for St. Augustine is a complex concept, closely linked to his thinking about human nature, evil, grace and salvation. As one of the most influential theologians of Christianity, Augustine approached the subject of freedom from multiple perspectives, integrally linked to his view of God and man's relationship with the divinity. For Augustine, freedom is not de-

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16 Sfântul Augustin, *Confesiuni*, capitolul X.11, București, Editura Humanitas, 2018, p. 447.

17 Sfântul Augustin, *Confesiuni*, capitolul X.33, București, Editura Humanitas, 2018, p. 485.

18 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Tradiția creștină – o istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei – Nașterea tradiției universale (100-600)*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2004, p. 302.

19 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Tradiția creștină – o istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei – Nașterea tradiției universale (100-600)*, Editura Polirom, 2004, p. 304.

fined simply as the absence of constraints. Instead, he sees it as the capacity to choose the good, to act in accordance with the divine will. This view aligns with the idea that man was created „in the image of God” and thus has an innate potential for virtue.

Augustine distinguishes between the freedom to do what you want and the freedom to do what is right.<sup>20</sup> He argues that, because of original sin, the human will is impaired: people have the freedom to choose, but the choice of the good is hindered by the sinful nature. Thus, in the absence of divine grace, humans cannot fully exercise their freedom in the sense of virtue. Augustine believes that original sin, resulting from the fall of Adam, led to the corruption of human nature. This means that, of their own free will, humans are predisposed to choose evil. This state of sin is not a total loss of the will, but a weakening of the capacity to choose the good.

A central aspect of Augustine’s thought is the idea that salvation and the choice of the good depend essentially on God’s grace. This is a restored freedom in which people can choose to return to God through divine intervention. Without grace the human will is limited, but through God’s grace the individual is given the power to choose the good. Augustine sees freedom not only as an inalienable capacity, but also as a gift from God that enables people to choose the good and live in accordance with the divine will.

Augustine emphasizes the importance of community in the exercise of freedom. Christianity, as a religion of love and communion, teaches people to use their freedom for the good of others, thus helping to build the Christian community. Augustine had a significant influence on the free will debate, especially in opposition to the Pelagians, who argued that humanity can achieve salvation through its own efforts. Augustine argued that salvation is impossible without grace and that genuine freedom cannot be exercised without divine intervention.

Freedom for St. Augustine is a profoundly theological notion that transcends the mere capacity to choose. It is rooted in the teaching on sin, grace and salvation. For Augustine, genuine freedom is restored by divine grace, enables the choice of the good and is essential for communion with God. This vision had a lasting impact on Christian theology and continues

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20 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Om-Demnitare-Libertate*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Riso-print, 2019, p.198.

to influence contemporary philosophical and spiritual thought.

Grace - is God's undeserved love, unconditional and fully manifested; it reaches the depths of the human heart and will; it guides and energizes the pilgrimage of those called to faith; it urges and uplifts the soul; It transforms the will of man so that it is capable of good works; it soothes religious anxieties through forgiveness and the gift of hope; it lays the foundation of Christian humility by shaking human pride to its foundations; Grace is sovereign because God is sovereign; if grace is not free, then it is no longer grace.<sup>21</sup>

## Concluzii

St. Augustine was one of the most important apologists of early Christianity, and his thought has profoundly influenced Western theology and philosophy. His apologetics can be summarized in a few key ideas: reason and faith are not opposites - Augustine argued that reason can support faith and that man must seek understanding („Believe in order to understand and understand in order to believe”); the problem of evil - Augustine argued that evil is not a substance in itself but a lack of good, so God is not the cause of evil; man needs divine grace - human nature is affected by original sin and cannot be saved without the intervention of God's grace; history is a struggle between the love of God (the city of God) and selfish self-love (the city of the world); absolute truth is found only in God - pagan philosophies may contain partial truths, but only divine revelation provides complete knowledge and salvation. In conclusion, Augustine's apologetics lays the foundations of a rational theology, emphasizing the compatibility between faith and reason<sup>22</sup> and stressing man's need of divine grace for salvation.

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21 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, „Natura și scopul Legii Morale a celor sfinte Zece Porunci” („The Nature and Purpose of the Moral Law of the Holy Ten Commandments”), In *Păstorul ortodox*, edited by Daniel Gligore, Curtea de Argeș, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Argeșului și Muscelului, 2015, pp. 318-322.

22 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, „Aspects of Biblical Philosophy on the Development of World Civilizations,” *Scientia Moralitas. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8, 2023, 1, pp. 62-79.

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