

The Story of Then

This piece of fiction arises out of a way to use art – literature – as the introduction to my PhD project with the Taos Institute and Tilburg University (Humanities). The use of story is intended to offer some context to a very old Christian debate, which occurred between two church leaders in the 4th century CE: Pelagius and Augustine. Central to the tension was whether or not the human species should be seen through the lens of *Original Blessings* or *Original Sin*.

The intention of the story is not to convince or sway the reader that one perspective was or is right. Rather, the use of fiction will hopefully allow the reader an opportunity to better appreciate a different time during the Christian church's history. It is by hearing a story that we might begin to imagine how *Then* was, in order to explore generative ways to better understand our *Now* ...

[The Rock burned](#) – it wasn't supposed to. The dream for which we'd all longed, for which so many had been martyred, seemed tangible, touchable, and attainable. And now, it's fallen. Perhaps that's too dramatic, but there it is, nonetheless.

You might be wondering – depending how long it is from now when you are reading this: what's the Rock? For some, it's simply [Roma](#) – once the seat of the [Pax Romana](#). A city where the once pagan Empire expanded into a world of violence and disarray and offered a semblance of stability – of order. But for those of us who have inherited the teachings of Jesus and continue to learn from those who endured [The Way](#), the Rock is so much more. Hopefully, as this diary unfolds, that will become clear: simply know that the Rock – the place where [Peter](#) brought the Gospel – was supposed to mark the culmination of such a long journey.

The Rock blazed and since then we have been scrambling – trying – to understand the meaning. Is it to also be our fate to be once again exiled as happened after [Jerusalem](#) was torched? From that came such change. So many of us left the synagogue to follow the One, the Way, the Christ ... but wasn't that supposed to be the beginning of the New World? Wasn't [Revelation](#) the map that brought us– finally – to the Kingdom? Well, it's gone now and I can see it in his eyes. As he writes his [City of God](#), there's a light gone, and the Sin about which he has constantly warned us presses upon us from every corner. The Serpent is in our midst!

I have so many thoughts – they're varied and scattered – and I am not even sure why I am writing this. At one time, I might have been allowed to write a biography – when women like [Lydia](#) and [Phoebe](#) helped [Paul](#) build the church. But it seems like that moment – when gender was not a barrier – has come and gone like so much else. When did it all change?

I know that there have been debates and arguments. Oh, such arguments! I wonder if Jesus would have approved of how rhetoric seems to have replaced parable? I wonder what he would think of the rights and wrongs we have embraced. I wonder if I am simply romanticising a church that seems to be slipping away. Perhaps, which never really was?

I also realise that I'm penning these words as my own lament. I've wrestled with trying to understand fully the musings, thoughts, and theology of the [Bishop](#). In moments, he seems to be open to our – women's – ideas and then it's gone. All too often the promise of equality becomes tempered.

At one moment we are almost equals, and then he sees the Fall, the Serpent entwine the Rock, and everything crumbles. It's been like that since we all fled Roma: it's been that way since we arrived in Hippo. Sometimes I wonder to which Bishop I am speaking: the inspired or the fearful one? I also wonder for which Kingdom does he long – Roma or the Promised One?

Am I getting ahead of myself? I have read, re-read, even asked Miriam to take a moment to edit – in between her own work with numbers – to see if this is the right way to record this moment. Because – trust me – this moment will change everything. Perhaps not the moment – exactly – but the completion of the *City* will set a course – I believe – that will reach well beyond the Bishop's own intention. If I do not speak now, then I am lost to the Call to which I, myself, have responded.

Sin, the Garden, the Fall, and the Rock, as far as I am concerned, were explored in debates that I had wished would lead to agreement, not defeat for one idea, and the idolatry – yes, I use that word most intentionally – of another. It's already begun: if we are all inherently sinful – even though Grace exists – then I fear what that means for us. What does a church built upon human brokenness mean when it tries to understand the Christos as one who loves all, not because of piety or privilege, but as fellow children of God?

If only the [Monk](#) had softened, if only the Bishop had listened ... and I guess that is the story I will share with you ... I pray you will hear a tale that was grounded in creativity and dialogue, but which ultimately failed to help people reach a mutually acceptable way of seeing our human relation to our Loving Father. Perhaps you will begin to imagine new ways to continue a conversation that will eventually need to be explored once more – for all of our sakes ...

As I continue to tell this tale, one in which two ideas of what it means to be human competed without the possibility of compromise, it feels important that you know something about us, our time, and the way we write. I do not know if this will survive the years, but it is our tradition when we speak or write to try to convince and to sway: not those with whom we are in debate, but those who are listening or reading. Whether a treatise or history, poetry or myth, there is always

a sense of competition in which one must convince or withdraw. Some might call this invective, but [rhetoric](#) has been what has served the Empire.

Another thing that feels important to share is that the church, the one from which I write and the one found in those first letters of Paul is ... the same, yet different? We are no longer pursued, executed, or ridiculed. Even more important to note is that there are few, if any, who are called to martyrdom. The irony is that we now occupy the seats of authority that were once used to shackle and torture those of The Way.

I know that some have claimed the Monk was a martyr, but I do not want to get ahead of myself. I guess what you may need to know is that the church of my life today, though hearkening back to the first, is rooted in a very different context. As such, it seems difficult – at times – to reconcile the two.

I have consulted with Miriam, before proceeding, and I have decided to try to do this differently. I know I am not objective, especially after the barbarians violated the Rock. I will, nonetheless, try to present the Monk and the Bishop as dispassionately as I can. If you are to learn what you need, whenever you are reading this, it seems necessary to try to describe our time with you, while attempting to remain impartial. A goal that I am not completely certain is attainable, should I be honest with both myself and you.

[Theodosius I](#) was Emperor when he arrived in Roma. As Emperor, some even attributed the title of “the Great” to him. I’m still not sure that he earned that. The Empire began to crumble around him and – finally – was broken into two: east and west. I do not presume to understand the ways of politics and how to balance matters of states with Goths and barbarians, but in hindsight, it seems to me that we should have seen the plaster falling from the frescoes then.

I have no doubt the Bishop would disagree: from his perspective, it was Theodosius who finally established the needed orthodoxy that the church required to be the Empire’s spiritual centre. To the Bishop’s delight, [Nicaean Christianity](#) was finally entrenched and – as a result – less room was made for others for whom Christianity might be explained in other ways.

It was to this political reality and warring diplomacy that the Monk arrived. He was already known as a moralist and – if memory serves – there was initially even concord between them. His exploration of Paul’s letters was exciting, and it also highlighted the changing reality of the Church. It had been almost a hundred years since the last martyrdom and almost seventy years since [Emperor Constantine](#) was converted during the Battle of Milan.

For Constantine, having seen *Ἐν Τούτῳ Νίκα* blazing in the sky, it was enough for him to recognise in that sign that victory lay before him if he would, but submit, to the will of God. On that very

day, his soldiers placed Christ's Chi-Rho – ✠ – upon their shields, and that action changed everything. Even now – when that tale is told in house churches – I am not sure if the battle or Constantine's deathbed baptism excites those new to The Way more! I wonder, sometimes, shouldn't that worry me more?

As for Pelagius, however, people whispered that he had come as one of the old prophets from Britannia. Dressed in his simple asceticism – both literal and figurative – he carried with him an air some likened to the [Baptiser](#). He had come to assess the state of the Rock and already people were sympathetic to the message he brought.

At first, his message was challenging, but not ... threatening? But that quickly changed. Already sects had appeared in Spain. They had about them a missionary fervour that some said had not been seen since before Milan – in fact, some went so far as to claim that their zeal went to (went to seems awkward) the very heart of the church. These were gossiping whispers in 380 ... they would become much more than mere whisper.

It is difficult to fully describe the church at this point. There were no barbarians threatening the Eternal City – Theodosius was able to create an illusion that remained well entrenched for too long. Already the church had made great strides – in fact, some contended that the new age was Golden because of the adoption of The Way – Christianity – as the state religion. Due to their organization, our early forbears soon found their way into the governance of the Empire. This merging of Empire and Christ's ministry was the sign for many that now the Kingdom was becoming (becoming or coming?) and Christ would certainly soon reveal that which was promised!

For the Monk, however, such certainty and confidence was not the true teaching. Though, at first, he was less articulate, some already saw the beginnings of a [Priestly](#) revival. What does that mean, you might wonder, if you were not here at the time?

It is the oldest tension; the Bishop would contend. Of course, he tries to make that clear, but his deference to [Plato](#) and [Aristotle](#) often seem more confusing than illuminating. I think Miriam explains it much better – at least for the newly baptised. In her own way, she cuts through all of the debate.

For her, it was as simple as “who was in and who was out.” The Bishop believed everybody was invited and longed for Christ's message of the Father's universal love. The Monk, however, was never convinced of that (in the same way) and the ensuing debates were – even then – already demonstrating that the Good News could be wielded – with sad irony – like a weapon.

I know that I have mentioned this, but you have to remember the year 410 in all of this. In every word that I write and in every attempt to try to explain to you the swirling ideas that threaded between the Bishop and the Monk, there was the Rock's burning ...

There are points in time and space when everything changes. One of those moments that we celebrate is [Moses'](#) acceptance – even if reluctantly – to free us from Pharaoh. And though that decision is certainly remarkable, it is the moment when choice and God's action in the world mark a miracle.

That point would be the parting of the seas to allow the exiles to follow the Spirit. Without that moment, that particular action, I would not be writing as one who was born into a house church, thrived in the Eternal City, enjoyed the freedom that came with the loss of my dear Lucius, and who will likely live out her days in Hippo, hoping that the church that is being fashioned by the Bishop will remain tolerant, even though each passing day feels more confining.

And obviously the mystery and wonder that is the resurrection of the Christ is central to our identity, our sense of whom we are. That moment – miracle – which remains so difficult to understand has led men and women to choose death to be free.

As it was then, we still long to see Christ in one another. Just imagine what it must have been like for [Mary](#) – years after the miracle as she reflected on what she had seen that day. How do we reconcile that it is in strangers – as in the gardener – that Christ can be experienced? A gardener who likely was not of The Way, perhaps did not even know who Jesus was, was just going about a normal day though all around him was awash the extraordinary. And – in him – Mary saw the Risen One!

How do you explain faith? How do you share it? Early on, we simply did what Paul told us: go out, help others and – when asked – share the Good News with those who wondered why we did what we did. When asked, we offered that our freedom came in sharing the bounty that is God's in the world with one another. That our freedom came in simply letting go of the constraints of Empire and following Christ. And, in turn, we were able to respond to our needs as well as others. Spreading the word occurred in relationship, not in mandate or doctrine. There were no letters flying from Hippo to Bethlehem. There was no politicking to establish orthodoxy. I apologise. In the zeal of remembering the past, I believe I have been distracted. Simply remember, please, as I continue that in the year 410, there was a shift from what had been moralistic and theological debates and discussion to a battle for what it meant to be a follower of Christ.

For the Bishop, this was no longer an intellectual exercise. It was an exorcism of a taint that threatened the very church he loved, the very structures to which he had devoted his life. If Pelagius' response to the Bishop's [Confessions](#) was confrontational, perhaps even personal,

Augustinus' response to the Monk's belief in Free Will was violent. For the Bishop – therefore – the central thing that was threatened was the church itself and – as you know and I hope is becoming clear – church and Empire were now intimately entwined, and for Pelagius that was a heresy!

When would I say this escalated? I have thought about this for some time. There is no question that the expanding trauma we experienced followed by the barbarians' violation of Roma affected everyone. But I think the spark, the catalyst, was in Bethlehem. The riots that occurred around the monastery were like the wicker on the pyre that the northern pagans use in their idolatries. More specifically, the fires opened the way for [Jerome](#) and the Bishop to finally reconcile. Though there remained strain in their reunion, it established a commonality that allowed the two to look in the same direction for the first time, as opposed to them being like two war dogs on the field. And that focus was upon those who were enamoured with the growing purity movement: the Pelagians!

Jerome was not unlike Augustinus. His youth was spent in revelry. He was attracted to the vagaries that Roma offered to those misguided by the Greek drink and orgiastic cults. Those experiences during his years of study constituted the major sources of repentance he sought after his hearing Christ's call to the fold. I cannot imagine what lascivious and wanton pursuits would have been so ingrained that he continues to experience guilt, but for many, this devotion has only increased the esteem with which he is viewed. His commitment to visit places of honour for the Martyrs the catacombs of the Apostles while he was in Roma continues to be a model of repentance.

Before the Monk created an opportunity for Jerome and the Bishop to put aside their disagreements, I understand that part of the tension between them was Jerome's use of the Hebrew texts to translate the Holy Testaments. Augustinus – and others who supported him – argued that the Greek version was far superior. For the Bishop, the depth and richness of the Greek were much preferred as his own ongoing commitment to reconcile the Platonic schools with Christ's teaching well illustrate.

Even then, the Hebrew language was tainted and now perceived to be an inferior language because of Jesus' betrayal by those in the synagogue. There can be no doubt that for many this reinforced a growing sense of antagonism to the Jews, which many of us feel does not bode well as the church becomes further enmeshed in the politics of Empire. We whisper these concerns, lest we are further disregarded by the writings of Timothy. As I have mentioned, though, there was a time when women could discuss theology equally. That freedom has become more precious, guarded, and tentative. And that uncertainty is only increasing as certain interpretations of Paul's letters become more accepted.

As I review what I have written, I feel I need to pause. Before I do, however, I am aware that there is a growing – perhaps even dangerous – tension with those who have remained in the synagogue. As we move away from Paul’s egalitarian message, I wonder if Roma’s fall might even be judgement? In fact, perhaps for some, the Monk’s own challenges and the events in Judaea simply mark that change. In fact, I am only recognising this possible connexion now as I write upon this parchment in the waning evening light!

Riots – that’s how it started. I don’t think anyone would have known, least of all the Bishop, that he would find himself having to confront another heresy. So many had arisen around the time of the barbarian Alaric’s violation that many of us thought the second coming – as was prophesied – was about to happen. Of course, that was not to be, and it still feels like we are trying to reconcile ourselves to such hubris, or this is what I have come to believe. I am not – however – so sure what the Bishop feels anymore.

This heresy, of course, would eventually lead directly to the Monk. But the violence that occurred at Jerome’s monastery and the subsequent correspondence between him and the Bishop made it inevitable. Regardless of who was right, when Augustinus realised that there was another potentially divisive theological idea that was competing with his own work, the die was set.

I realise that you may wonder about such conflict occurring between Christians – especially of a violent nature. I pray that from your vantage, such unfortunate situations as this are no longer the case. I pray that the church has found ways to embrace one another in that metaphor that still touches me deeply: one body made up of equal and necessarily different constituents.

But for us – and I have discussed this with Miriam and the others Sisters – it seems that once The Way was adopted as the Empire’s religion – Christianity – we went from being persecuted to endeavouring to make sure that all the threads in the tapestry were complementary and no longer frayed or tangled. What this meant, of course, was that we moved from a place of freedom in struggle to the constraint of power. Once again, the irony is not lost on us.

And what, do you wonder, might have been the cause of this fray in front of Jerome’s hermitage? Remember, that it is shortly after the year 410. Everywhere there seems to be an unravelling, and the Bishop was dealing with ongoing debates and controversies. Usually, he addressed these through his correction of choice: epistles or letters.

I believe that he had no idea what was happening in Bethlehem, however. I also do not think that he was aware that Pelagius was a threat to the order toward which he was striving. Jerome, however, was indeed aware, and this became clear the moment that Augustinus had his report from [Orosius](#). Jerome and the Monk had been at odds for some time, perhaps years, and possibly

decades. Regardless of the duration of the disagreement, Orosius' arrival was indeed fortuitous. If he had not come, who knows what theology might now be prevalent: the Bishop's "sin" or the Monk's "blessing"?

I realise there are so many names and people involved that I am worried I may either miss something important or overwhelm you with all of the characters and voices, debates, and snares that constituted the Pelagian Debate. I will, therefore, side with caution and name only those who seemed to directly connect the Monk and the Bishop. Should such a gloss, however, prove to have been a mistake, I pray I will have your leave of pardon for trying to present a cohesive tale, as opposed to a litany of names and dates.

Orosius was many things, but for the sake of this story, he is best appreciated as the Bishop's collaborator – especially in the writing of *The City of God* – and perhaps more importantly his confidant abroad. The Bishop was often too busy to travel due to his many responsibilities and projects. From his ongoing use of letters to bring the church into a semblance of conformity, his regular ecclesiastical duties to his writing, and his attempted reconciliation of the Platonic and Aristotelian schools with Christ' teachings, it is any wonder he had time to enjoy the gardens and Sabbath offered at Hippo! And yet, it was important for him to know what was happening throughout Christendom. Where Paul could travel and write when the church was much smaller, so many years ago, Augustinus did not have that luxury. As a result, Orosius was often his eyes and ears, listening and watching for the Spirit's revelation and also wary of lurking heresy.

Some have been less kind to Orosius and, in turn, the Bishop. Some have tried to frame their role and relationship as an oppressive enterprise intent on purging, even suppressing, creativity in Paul's church. Some have claimed that it was in Palestine and in the streets of [Jerusalem](#), particularly, that the church continued to dance sublimely, in order to avoid what some believed was an inevitable schism between east and west. Such a potential rift overlooked a chasm of competing views about the nature of God and the relationship between the Spirit and Son. Often, and hopefully rightly so, such voices of discontent were most often those found guilty of heresy. And in this regard, the Pelagians' actions and choices were of concern to those in Jerusalem and to Jerome in particular. Upon his arrival, they would also become those of Orosius'.

Orosius had been dispatched to Palestine, so the Bishop might be able to learn from other Christian intellectuals in the Holy Land. Specifically, with an increasing, though usually unspoken, division between the Latin and Greek churches, Augustinus was keenly aware that his letters alone would be insufficient to maintain the integrity of his beloved church. Orosius, therefore, arrived in Jerusalem several years after the fall of the Eternal City with two objectives: nurture

and establish a new relationship with the up-and-coming Greek Christian thinkers and assess to what extent there were fermenting threats to the church.

As I have mentioned, the concern was not external any longer, but internal due to aberrant theologies or philosophies that might be festering. For the Bishop, he often berated himself, claiming that the failure was his owing to the limitation of his reach that far from the Latin centre of the church. Even then, I would hear him say, sometimes even yell, that the divisions between Peter and Paul still ran too deep! He believed that it was only through intentionally maintaining relationships and enforcement, preferably through the writing of letters, that he could ensure the integrity of all that had been achieved. He admitted, however, that at times the final arbiter had to be a Council of Bishops, which had the power to condemn heresy & even excommunicate – could the integrity of all that had been achieved thus far be maintained?

In his eyes, at these moments of bluster, I could see him hearing Roma fall. And that haunting vision now drove him to the point that sometimes his very health was of concern. Others may not see it, but for the Sisters and me, we see the toll and pray that there may be reprieve from what the Greeks once called his inner daemon, though we knew it to be the Spirit driving him toward a goal that perhaps one day might become clear.

What finally caught Orosius' attention – not that Jerome was not persuasive – was the Monk's public use of one of the letters of correspondence with the Bishop. Their letters were familiar and cordial, but in general, they lacked the depth that occurred in those exchanges Augustinus had with those engaged in more serious reflection. The letter, in and of itself, possessed little substance, but the way that Pelagius was using it, however, incensed Orosius!

One of the traditions that the Greek church had adopted from the pagan philosophers was public testimony and debate. In the agora and markets, in the public spaces, the various schools would gather and, as I have mentioned before, endeavour to convince the listeners, those passing by, of the validity of their perspective, philosophical trajectory, and school of thought. This tradition would become the purview of Christians in many of the Greek centres. And, in like manner, the nuances and nature of faith would be openly discussed and debated. Often, too, it was in this formative soil that new and exciting developments – for which the Bishop was always seeking – would occur. And, unfortunately, so, too, could the deviant be found.

Imagine a wide, open space, filled with stalls of wares and goods, and in the midst, on the sides and along the entryways, people are clustered, often sitting around someone who is talking. The speaker stands on a wall, a pedestal, or a box, in order to address both the engaged and those passing by. And the speaker is addressing anyone who will listen. Often, there might be two groups, three or more, and each group's teacher or envoy is talking – well more like yelling – at one another: fine tuning their rhetoric. And, remember, the intention is not to convince the

other; it is to entice the listener, those passing by, that their argument is the more refined, the more convincing: the true!

Often these clusters are made up of men, and civility is often balanced tentatively. Some of the more ardent and passionate of any particular school may even be armed, usually concealed, with an item or two should the debate turn quickly from simple rhetoric to the use of violent emphasis. And it is in such a venue that the Monk finally came to the attention of Orosius, and ultimately the Bishop. On an innocuous day, in the agora of Jerusalem likely, Jerome had advised Orosius to attend the daily banter and debate. The rest unfolded as it was wont to do.

As Orosius listened, his disgruntled acceptance of Jerome's direction quickly turned to what ... anger? Shock? At the very least, dismay. As Pelagius addressed the growing crowd, he held a letter aloft for emphasis. Holding it in this manner implied to all who were listening that the Bishop, himself, supported Pelagius! I can only imagine Orosius' face, but I have no doubt he was internally fuming.

The ire that Orosius experienced in the agora, on that day, might have been less – though no doubt just as concerning – had it been anyone other than the Monk. Pelagius had clearly become more effective in communicating his theology and ideas both through the spoken and written word. While he was in Roma, he had already demonstrated his ability to convince and had begun to establish effective sects in Spain. But now – for Orosius – Pelagius seemed more brazen ... but even more concerning was the new tenor of confidence with which he spoke.

While Pelagius was still in the Eternal City, he certainly had the attention of the nobility. While he talked about the establishment of the holy elite that comes with a pure discipline, many, though perhaps not yet swayed, were paying attention. And as the illusion of the Empire's safety that Theodosius was painting – especially in respect to Roma – began to fade, more were drawn to the Monk's ascetic arguments. In particular, he contended that if humans were unable to protect the Rock, then perhaps a commitment to an ascetic discipline could.

As with many of us, the Monk left the Rock after it had fallen. Though his ideas and theology were provocative, perhaps even exciting for some, it was not (at least at the time did not appear so) heretical. For the Bishop, all were welcome into Christ's church. Regardless, he would argue, we are all sinners and it is only through God's grace that salvation might be found. The church, therefore, was the Body and instrument for such universal invitation. And – on the day when that universality was established – all might experience the healing of our sinful nature through God's act of love.

During those early years, as the Monk preached and critiqued the culture in the Eternal City, he seemed to echo that sentiment. He argued further that commitment must be central to a Christian's call. In other words, a promise of a blanket universality was inadequate without

evident devotion. For the Monk, therefore, it was not just an open policy that was important for healing, but the act of committing to it and letting go of the trappings that held one back. It was provocative, indeed, to talk about relinquishing worldly things in order to attain salvation, but not heresy ... then.

But what Orosius heard from Pelagius was not a provocative or challenging argument as much as heresy. And – so far from Roma and with no way to transmit that concern in time to Hippo – Orosius' next actions set in motion a confrontation that none had anticipated.

If, as I write this now, the implications of this debate between the Bishop and the Pelagians are any indication, I can only imagine what the church looks like for you as you read this. You likely already know that eventually the Bishop and his allies took the day against the Pelagians, but this old debate, much older than the two of them, does not simply quiet because an edict was past, someone was excommunicated or – as has begun to happen – a Christian has been executed by another in the name of Orthodoxy!

But – again – I get ahead of myself. Too many threads to try to weave together. It is much too easy to get distracted by the tale I have promised to tell you. Once again, I apologise. Let me return to the agora on that day sometime in 416 AD.

As Orosius listened with countenance paled in the Greek sun, how could he have imagined this? I wonder what he thought he might find. He had been sent, after all, to network for the Bishop and address another controversy that arose in the preaching of [Caelestius](#). About this heresy, the Bishop was already aware. And, as such, an informal hearing would likely be required. Orosius knew that Jerome and the other Greek leaders would be amenable to that.

It was known that Caelestius was arguing that Adam's sin was his and his alone. As a result, there was not universal brokenness in humanity. Yes, he acknowledged that human fallibility could and does often lead to transgressions, but he was most persuasive in disputing the Bishop's maturing theology of sin.

What was most concerning, however, was Caelestius' sympathy for the [Rabbinic](#) tradition of the Jews. For them, the creation stories were not moral commandments, but allusions to a larger story of choice and responsibility as those anointed as Stewards. These nuances, which became more cumbersome for the laity, incensed the Bishop. I believe, as Miriam reminds me, the creation stories were exciting because they carried a similar pathos to Augustinus' own work. And, as a result, they were dangerous!

What everyone whispers, though never loud enough for the Bishop to hear, is that while Orosius has always been loyal and possesses the intellect to articulate and – in his own way – contribute to the Bishop’s unfolding work, he has never been ... what’s the word ... subtle? Nuanced?

Where the Bishop can and does engage conversationally with those whom he is in dispute, some even say collaboratively, Orosius tends more toward the blunt. And, as his nature, this would prove to be no different with the Monk, and that remains something to lament and upon which I certainly pray you will remember.

I can imagine Orosius storming out of the agora to seek the Jerusalem leaders to share his revelation. And in his passion, likely they were convinced that he spoke FOR the Bishop – at least that is what the Monk and his Pelagians were to come to believe. Orosius explained to the council in Jerusalem his insight: one that was explosive.

Orosius had been challenging and debating Caelestius’ teaching for some time. From councils in Spain to ones in Carthage, again and again, his heretical tendencies had been well illustrated and proven. He continued to present his connexions with Pelagius by pointing out that at Jerome’s direction, he should go and listen to the Monk in the agora. As he conveyed to those gathered on the day, Jerome had made it clear that Orosius’ time would be well spent.

Of course, one wonders – even now – why perhaps Jerome was not more forthcoming. Why not write to the Bishop about connexions only those in Jerusalem might see? Why not take advantage of the knowledge that he had and improve the relationship directly between himself and the Bishop?

As I have mentioned, Jerome and Augustinus often corresponded but were not always in agreement. As opposed to the heretics, their relationship was more competitive than it was confrontational.

It is my belief – and do with this as you will – I think Jerome wanted to make sure that his point, his perspective, was reinforced by Orosius’ bearish tendency. The Bishop might not want to believe Jerome, but he certainly would listen to Orosius. And, as a result, Jerome tactically waited for one of Orosius’ pending visits to ensure that the Monk’s “debut” was viewed, critiqued, and judged by none other than the Bishop’s man.

So, before John, the Bishop of Jerusalem, Orosius made the case that a hearing must be ordered immediately against the Monk. And – in his direct manner, whether intentionally or not – he implied to all who listened that *in absentia*, he was the Bishop. A claim that he would explicitly use against the Monk shortly, but in John’s presence, however, Orosius had enough tact not to overstep. After all, speaking with authority on the Bishop’s behalf was one thing; claiming he was the Bishop was totally different. And that subtlety would prove explosive shortly!

I only met John once. Well, more accurately, I was only ever in his presence on one occasion. He was visiting Hippo and meeting with the Bishop as he returned from a trip to Spain. He took the opportunity to meet with Augustinus, and, in the short time he was here, they could be seen walking intimately through the gardens. They walked what must have been miles, passing the same ivy, the reaching roses, and skyward arching hibiscus many times. Miriam later told me that they were parsing and dividing, quantifying and qualifying, the nature of the Trinity. I am not sure that you can ever claim to know whether men of their stature in the church were ever friendly; their responsibilities and schedules often precluded meaningful relationships, or so it seems to me, but I have no doubt they had great respect for one another.

One of the things that continually drew them together was their ongoing struggle to find a way to reconcile the growing divide that continued to unfold between the western and eastern church. This division, which I think I have already mentioned, often found the fault line drawn between Greek ideas of the esoteric or mystical and, on the other hand, the Latin tendency toward the literal and quantifiable.

For the Bishop – as one of the apologists for the Latin faction – there was a strong sense that the greatest goal of the human endeavour, as a people of faith, was the goal to be able to fully describe God’s desire and intention for his people. To completely – as much as is possible – describe the nature of God, and, in turn, what it meant to be human. In such an endeavour, if done faithfully and properly, he believed the church could be the great mother to all, those known now, and those beyond the oceans to the east, and beyond the mountains and lands west of Persia.

As the bishop shared these grand aspirations and plans, John listened intently. All the while, if I recall correctly, smiling. I remember. I do not think John’s smile was either dismissive or judgemental. I do recall, however, that it was amused: almost in a manner akin to a father as he watches his children refine a not yet acquired skill.

There seemed to be only one pause – in that long ago walking visit. They abruptly stopped and seemed to be staring, not at one another, however, but they watched intently as a bird energetically tried to extract nectar from a flower. They were, I believe, mesmerised.

That sunbird’s action and motion, almost a blur in its crimson regalia, must have emphasised something that one of them had just said, reinforced a nuance that was shrouded in whispers. It struggled, at first, avoiding the other diving and defending feathered kin, while struggling to maintain a hovered balance that would allow it to reach into the deep reservoir from which the rich syrup beckoned.

The silence was finally broken, with a deep laugh from John. Gently, he laid his hand upon the Bishop’s shoulder. With that same affectionate smile, (yes, I think that would be the right word),

I remember him saying, “My dear Augustinus, your desire for finitude and your endeavour to quantify the Trinity will – I am sorry to say – not only lead to further talk of heresy and the need for punishment, but also I must ask: where is there space left for mystery? Where Latin imagines a formula – a key – we see a dance; where you want certainty, we imagine improvisation. God in the Three cannot be harnessed; it is the poetry that inspires the Good News, not doctrines and edicts.”

They continued their walk after that. I am not sure how long they continued to circle the grounds, but it was well past the sun’s setting. The next morning, John left well before most had begun to stir. The return to Jerusalem was generally safe at the time. The weather was usually calm, especially with an early morning departure. The waters often were calm too, but the seasons, on the cusp of transition from one to another, were not always predictable. I imagine they could very well have visited longer. No doubt they may even long for such an opportunity, but prudence dictated respecting the coming storm season. And, as such, as the household was made ready for another day, there were no farewells: as the garden now lay silent, so, too, did the Bishop.

It seems to me that personally and intellectually, the Bishop was moved by John’s visit. I also sense, in his silence, something akin to melancholy? A churning doubt? Perhaps it was simply his way to begin to integrate the intense exploration.

What I knew – and Miriam also confirmed– is that central to his withdrawal (following John’s visit) was his awareness that there seemed to be no way to reconcile the growing division. The difficult reality is that it was less a matter of governance, as it was a theological discord. One that did not dissuade the Bishop from his own call and pursuit to mould the church into the universal body he felt it was called to be, but it, nonetheless, weighed so very heavy upon his soul. Though the burden might be light – or so I wish I could have told him – it clearly was not easy at times ...

If John and the Bishop were cordial, perhaps even shared an affection, the same was in no way true in respect to Jerome. As Orosius began to make his case that a council must be called against Pelagius, it was Jerome who must have been confidently pleased with the outcome. For Orosius, though he had initially come to further prosecute Caelestius’ heresy, Jerome shared a similar concern regarding John, one that had already been made quite public, which is a further part of the story that likely most will forget.

If I have been able to impart the respect John and the Bishop had for one another, even though (in many ways) their own understanding of church was informed by their differing Latin or Greek outlooks, Jerome had no such esteem. If the Bishop was afforded less immediacy of concern owing to his distance – which allowed (perhaps) for a more thoughtful reflection about the east

and west – Jerome was in the centre of the stewing pot. As a Latinist, Jerome saw John’s particular evolving Greek theology as problematic indeed!

Before the Rock’s fall, Jerome had begun to see the eastern church’s shift in respect to the [Trinity](#) – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as worrisome. He believed that the implications of this shift would likely divide the church, and, as such, he chose to challenge his Bishop, John. Such action – as I am sure you can imagine – is either most courageous or dangerously foolish. Perhaps, it’s not either/or, but it was just one action that indicated this larger growing disconnect.

There are many nuances and theological niceties that Jerome issued against John. They included the nature of one’s soul, whether or not the Devil could be saved, and questions of how the Trinity is to be understood, especially in the context of the Creation stories. Even more pointed, John had great misgivings about his Bishop’s understanding of Adam and Eve, which ultimately would also have implications for the role of sin.

All of these theological shades and differences, however, were not what finally led Jerome to challenge John. It was – ultimately – the nature of how he (and in turn those who were of the Greek persuasion) preferred a particular reading of Scripture. John – borrowing from the growing Rabbinic tradition in [Alexandria](#) – saw the stories of the Holy Texts as allegory and metaphor. As ways to more fully ruminate about the nature of God, as opposed to literal direction and description of God and, in turn, our human relationship to Him.

I am unsure whether this distinction makes any sense to you. Perhaps it is a moot point for you. I have asked Miriam how I might share this more precisely, so let me try to explain what this might mean for the Latin church by sharing one piece of our cultural tradition.

The poet Virgil’s writing of [The Aeneid](#) is more than a pastoral or Roman artistic endeavour, at least for us. The relationship that our pagan forbears had with this book – and which continues still with some of the older nobility – is foundational. This book was not just an exploration of from whence we had come and the extent to which we have prospered, but it was an outline of how to live with *pietas*.

The Aeneid defined not just what it meant to be Roman, but how to be Roman. For some, waking began with opening the book for that day’s direction, and as slumber arrived, once more, it would be revered as the last thing one touched before sleep.

As pagan romance and idolatry gave way to the Good News, the Bible took on this same role within the Empire. In particular, for a Roman Latinist, deference to Scripture was never in question. As such, the Books of the Bible were not mere tales or stories, but fundamental in how to make choices and how to live. And, as such, there was an inevitable clash with the different readings of the sacred texts.

Jerome's first public challenge of John did not resolve the issue. In fact, if anything, it only further complicated the growing divisions in Jerusalem. As an abbot, John was afforded a ruling that allowed him to shift his accountability to another Bishop, [Theophilus](#). At least that is how some interpreted the outcome.

There was no question during this public ordeal that Theophilus was Greek in his leanings. How could he not be? He was, after all, Bishop of Alexandria! He was, however, sympathetic to the shifting of the church into two camps. I would even say he lamented it, from what I have heard, at least.

It is hard to explain, but during those years of debate, much was done that was questionable, in particular, by Jerome and his supporters. Rumours of violence and intimidation were, of course, standard charges by John and his supporters. As this went back and forth, Theophilus continued to try to find a way to reconcile Jerome with John, but it was not to be.

As a result, Jerome was able to operate with a certain freedom that most could not. Since he could not – and would not – defer to the authority of John, some sort of agreement had to have been made with Alexandria.

The nature of that agreement, however, has never really been made clear. Obviously, the basic functions of accountability must have been expected of Jerome to Theophilus, but for all of that he was basically free to pursue his own agenda without recrimination. And, with Orosius' arrival, he once again began his persecution of John.

I'm pausing again in this diary: I am still unsure what this kind of writing might be called. Part of me does not – if I am to be honest with myself – want to finish or describe how this concludes. You probably already know what happens. You likely have the facts and the history, who won and who lost.

So why should this matter? Why should my writing have any bearing? I was rarely, if ever, present, for any of the debates or events I have described, and has never had much influence or power when it comes to theological trajectory or doctrinal dictates, with what hubris do I write any of this?

Why am I resisting finishing this tale, into which I have invited you? I think part of it is the realisation that I am beginning to see connections that are worrisome. And do these binding threads make something that is actually real or tangible?

For instance, is it possible that Jerome – all along – was, in fact, intentionally leading John in this manner, as I have implied? How am I to reconcile the use of violence by one Christian against another? What do I do with my own growing sense that in all of these lofty ideas of God, of theologies that seem distant to the children suffering in the street or the widow left destitute,

that we have moved away from *pietas*? What do I do with the sense that the way we have begun to talk to one another – where one inevitably is vanquished by the other – may very well mean we might not hear the opportunity to note wisdom or learning? What might all of this have looked like, what might the outcome have portended, if rather than being so convinced of our rightness and the other's wrongness, we collectively – perhaps even collaboratively – tried to see how our differences were speaking of God's intention to fashion through us a new thing? Should I continue to try to speak honestly, I am also worried about the implications that seem evident and which I hope to share with you. I know I have already asked what it means if we are a church grounded in a vision that we are all broken – sinful? But it is becoming clear to me that there is something even more concerning. Something I am unsure I can fully impart to you. Whatever church looks like for you – and I have no doubt that the universal invitation the Bishop believes the church offers will continue and likely in spite of our own tinkering and politicking – what is its relationship to power? What, ultimately, does it mean not only that we are all broken and are unable – on our own – to heal except for God's Grace, but that it is the church that becomes the arbiter of our flaws, our blemishes, and infractions? If we are all damaged, and then rely on an institution composed of the same defect, then I, indeed, pray such Grace is freely offered. Otherwise, the damage we might possibly do to one another, to God's Creation, is frightening. I find – as I name this – that I worry so much for you, my Sisters and Brothers. I have meditated and prayed – as Miriam has suggested – and I believe these doubts are indeed a test. I will, therefore, take a deep breath and endeavour to share the rest of this tale. Though there is not much more to share, I sincerely hope this is, nonetheless, a helpful resource for your own reflection, wherever you may be.

I am sure that the gathering was anything but somber. Pelagius was likely energised to further his theological argument. He knew that his friend and ally John would be convening it. Likely he thought this was simply another opportunity to further his sense of the need for the church to embrace asceticism in the face of growing privilege, which he continued to critique. I wonder whether or not he, too, was aware of the deeper currents into which he was being swept.

I also suspect that Orosius did not fully appreciate the import of the gathering. He was focused on discrediting Pelagius, but again this was, for him, connected with his ongoing goal to finally have Caelestius removed from the church. If – in the process – he could also have Pelagius connected and committed to the same fate, he would be well pleased! After all, the sense of violation he had experienced as Pelagius held the Bishop's letter continued to distract him from the larger swirling eddies.

I cannot imagine that the others who were both officiating and attending were not aware of the larger tensions present. No doubt Jerome saw in the forthcoming council an opportunity to finally address the errant Pelagius and – in the larger picture – also correct John’s ongoing theological trajectory that was furthering the divide between Greek and Latin. I cannot imagine that he thought he could unseat John, but I can infer he, at least, believed he would be able to reinforce the growing Latin orthodoxy, for which he and the Bishop longed and endeavoured.

As for John, I am sure he was also aware of the troubled waters in which he now found himself. As Pelagius was a friend, he knew of the enmity with which Jerome held him. He knew that Pelagius had grown more brazen – and likely this was both well received and also a source of worry. As a hopeful development, John could see Pelagius’ growing confidence as being further influenced by the eastern ideas that were percolating among the Greeks. Though Pelagius’ early thinking might have been complementary, it was now borrowing heavily from Greek thought that proved both compelling and accessible. For John, Pelagius’ theology was showing a maturity that bode well for further revelation and learning.

John was also aware, however, that the very fact that Pelagius was gaining in both voice and followers was problematic because Pelagius was not Greek – he was, in actuality, considered a Latinist. And this fact, therefore, had serious implications for the east and John.

This distinction, John must have known as he entered that council (even if it was only considered “informal”), was of great consequence. As the presiding authority in Jerusalem, he was representative of the church in the east. His role and his theology – everyone knew – was influenced by his eastern position. This location, as I have tried to explain and will attempt to remind you, highlighted several divisions in the church, divisions that had been with us for some time, some stretching back to the very beginning. The disunity only became more apparent as time passed. With lament and regret, it is difficult to recognise that the burning of the Rock was simply a horrible emphasis – a point of fracturing that so many had hoped would stretch – yes – but never break.

These divisions – as they appear to me – seem to be threefold:

- 1) Geographic, the east-west reality of the church;
- 2) Cultural, the Greek-Roman divide; and,
- 3) Theological, the Paul-Peter traditions. And between these two traditions was a struggle for authority and power. And it was this – I believe – that continued and continues to perpetuate the growing rancour within the church. Our leadership seems too often to focus inward these days. I often pray such divisions will end. I know that the Bishop believes this fraying will cease once there is agreement on what is clear and true teaching, as opposed to those who choose not to conform to the work to which he is committed.

Though these turbulent realities were often present and had brought John – as I have described with Jerome – into conflict with developing western orthodoxy, he was afforded a certain privilege or freedom. Though John could visit, perhaps even collaborate with Augustinus about how the growing divide might be navigated mutually, he was not able to do that in Jerusalem, itself.

Without seeming overly dramatic, the heart of the church always finds – and I imagine always will – its life-force in Jerusalem. Where distance might allow for more sober reflection, John knew that Aelia Capitolina – as the Romans called it – was often a place where reason was easily subsumed by passion. As Bishop, therefore, John had to endeavour, often, to navigate this as well as he could. As time proceeded, it was likely becoming clearer that this was less tenable since 410. There was a breaking point – he must have known – the only question hovering before him was whether or not this hearing would be that milestone.

As Orosius began to present his charges against Pelagius, John must have been trying to imagine some way, some strategy, out of this mounting pressure. As the hearing commenced, all that John must have hoped for was a moment of grace. And – with Jerome seated with the other Latinists and watching singularly focused Orosius – such a possibility would likely take a miracle, John must have mused. As he began to listen, therefore, one cannot but picture that the various threaded tensions that bound Britannia to Roma, and Spain to North Africa, and all to Jerusalem was about to become untethered – the question was whether it would begin slowly or tear asunder what so many had attempted to avoid.

Orosius presented his case. As he did so, two things became clear. One – simply put – Pelagius' theology was in conflict with Augustine's. Where once there might have been some connexions that could allow the Monk some semblance of orthodoxy, his ideas about sin, namely that we could not only be without it, but that it was not inherited as Original stretching back to Adam and Eve, reinforced the charge against him. Obviously, this did not bode well, and John must have noted it.

The other matter that became clear, as Orosius pressed Pelagius during the hearing, was that his mastery of Greek was less than helpful for his presentation. Where he might be able to use Latin and Rhetoric in an aggressive manner, it did not translate well as a strategy in the east. Orosius might be able to compel others to his point of view in Latin, but as he spoke Greek, he seemed more of a bully than an orator. I wonder if John thought this might be the grace for which he longed?

Regardless of what the Bishop of Jerusalem might have hoped, Orosius' aggressive nature proved useful, nonetheless. As he began to push Pelagius further – in the minutiae of a theology of Sin – he asked him, “Do you not see your errancy in light of Bishop Augustinus' teachings?”

The question hung ... likely not long ... but it must have felt otherwise. Orosius' question cut through the debate to the central tension. Well, it did for me: this was not a debate of faith's confidence, but of ego's intrigue. Where confidence might have allowed both men – gifted with insight and creativity – space to imagine something new together, ego led them, east-west, Greek-Latin, into a trap of right and wrong. Pelagius' silence broke open the mounting tension. Standing now, clearly incensed, the Monk rejoined Orosius' challenge. In no uncertain terms, he proclaimed, "What do I care about Augustinus?"

That a shock could be felt to ripple through the assembly, I suspect, goes without saying! John quickly attempted to calm the gathering. The whispering, the yelling, the anger from Jerome, the clear satisfaction from the Pelagians was not a helpful development. Though a hearing had yet to devolve into violence, John must have known that the nature of such hearing possessed such a possibility.

As John began to quiet the crowd, Orosius must have pruned; he must have known that the day was his. In turn, I wonder if Jerome, too, felt the tide turn, even if only moderately, but just enough that the Latinist cause was finally finding a favourable turn?

What could John do? He used what he had on hand, and his choices only reinforced what had occurred and likely prophesied what was to come.

Standing – arms raised beckoning restraint – he looked to Orosius and charged that he – John – would speak for the absent Bishop. To which, without pause or hesitation, Orosius replied, "If you take on the role of Augustinus, also follow his opinion."

If John were to speak for Augustinus, Orosius made explicit, then the outcome was clear: though John might have found a way to calm the assembly, he was now cornered, with no options to resolve the clear rift. He could, however, postpone what was now inevitable. Optics and appearance were now of concern as to how John proceeded. The underlying debate between the Monk and Bishop now brought to the fore the East-West divide.

The rest of the hearing was no less tense, but there were no further outbursts. Orosius was able to press Pelagius, who must have realised that something had shifted. Even if John wanted to help, he no longer could. The Monk was on his own and that was clear from John's new support of the Latin charges. When Pelagius began a long theological response, John was forced to press him to simply answer, "yes or "no.

The rest of the hearing was long – perhaps too much so. The games we play, sometimes, require us to remain in character even when the outcome might seem clear. Again, however, John was able to frustrate any assumptions. As the Greek Bishops conferred, Orosius and Jerome spoke in assured whispers. Jerome had John and Orosius, through Pelagius, had Caelestius. And, of course, the two prizes were not mutually exclusive.

Pelagius and his supporters also gathered, though with much less exuberance than when they arrived, and he had issued a challenge by naming Augustinus. As their whispered concern continued, I wonder if the Monk was aware that the freedom that was afforded to him in the east was likely no more? I wonder if he knew his friend and patron – John – could no longer help him, but that his own position as Bishop of Jerusalem was now jeopardised? So many questions arise in a tragedy and – too often – they remain unanswered as hindsight threads what were once disparate tales.

While both east and west conferred, planned, perhaps even plotted, it became clear that the deliberation of the Bishops was not going to conclude as promptly as everyone had assumed. In the pause, the Latinists were evidently becoming uncomfortable as they imagined that perhaps the Greek Bishops would find no cause, that perhaps the decision might even exonerate Pelagius. The implications of such an imagining were rife with discord. Such a decision would be much less about this particular heresy and much more about which lens or worldview was right: east or west. Though no one could deny that the Latinists had been ascending – in the theological sphere owing particularly to the claim of authority through Peter in Roma – it would not bode well for the union of church for a decision that might absolve Pelagius. It would likely lead to the potential for formal division, perhaps even revolution, both ecclesiastically, as well as possibly for the Empire itself!

I do not want to diminish the Monk or the Pelagians, but I am not sure they were aware of the larger concerns. Perhaps they were but saw their particularity as a metaphor for the larger? Pelagius's teachings and challenges were often focused on the pure and ascetic that maybe it simply did not matter for him? It's conceivable – and admittedly consistent with the course he seemed to be following – that the church could only be reformed by an individual commitment to an almost austere form of discipleship and commitment to Christ's call. In turn, he would argue, it is the few who are pure and come together who will model whatever the church might be. That church, however, would likely always be smaller, less universal, and inclusive than the one imagined by the Bishop. Regardless, I think he and his followers simply saw the delay as a possible affirmation of their rightness in respect to what they believed was an ongoing and inappropriate western persecution. Both of the waiting factions were to be surprised.

John and the other Greek Bishops processed back into the assembly. As they proceeded through their rationale, it became clear that they had chosen – strategically – to divest themselves of the problem, to hand off the ornery, divisive, and unsolvable dilemma. Though it was clear that they were aware of the implications that arose in this hearing, they were unwilling to either take a stand or – ultimately – press the Latinists toward an inevitable confrontation and ultimatum. As

such, they concluded that regardless of the theological niceties, they could not determine whether the case justified a finding of heresy against Pelagius.

The final reason they provided was that – as a Latinist himself – though his ideas and arguments may look Greek, the Monk did not fall under the authority of eastern jurisdiction. As such, they found that the case – though occurring in Jerusalem – would have to be decided there, not by them, but by Latin Bishops. And, with that, the inevitable was paused, leaving no one satisfied. Like the air released from a boiler, all that remained was an unsatisfied deflation. Maybe that was enough, in the end. Both egos had been bruised, and space had once again been made for reason and grace. That would have to be enough ...

There are more skirmishes that will occur in this larger story – but for me – I think this is where it ends. There is no dramatic confrontation, no wisdom learned, just one loses and the other wins. I am aware that I use battle imagery as a way to frame this ending. It seems, once again, ironic. Pelagius would have another day, perhaps two, in which he took the field. In the end, however, he lost. After finally failing to convince others of the rightness of his ascetic theology of purity, he disappears into obscurity in Judea, a wandering exile who was found – finally – to be a heretic. As for John, by the grace of death, he was spared being a victim in the larger disunity, as the conflict between East-West, Latin-Greek, Blessing-Sin swept through the church. Jerome and the Latinists – emboldened by Pelagius' ultimate sanction – sought to formalise their orthodoxy in the heart of our Christian experiment: Jerusalem. As such, sympathetic Greeks were nurtured and the outspoken, even if amicable such as John, became a liability to further entrenchment of Latin canon.

The Bishop continues his work: to help fashion and mould a church in which all are welcome, a place where we might collectively find ways to be God's people, in spite of our shared brokenness. As this church begins to put down roots and structures--which seem removed from those smaller, more intimate house churches that were once the norm and that now seem to elicit nostalgia for what was – it is only grace that we believe spares us from the taint of sin that we have inherited.

There is no place – it seems – any longer to explore or discuss what it might mean to have our own agency as God's people, without a reminder that once our ancestors, Adam and Eve, turned away from God, we are all now found guilty. And though I see how such a gospel throws wide the net, perhaps even wider than the stories of Jesus with the fishermen once promised, I admit (when I am alone and praying) I wonder about Pelagius, less about his tendency to want to be right or his Pelagians who continue to challenge the church since his banishment, even though it

is a losing cause. I wonder about the depth of his ideas, however, that were equally banished and deemed heretical.

Can an idea exist beyond its creator? Can that which we bring into being, imply, even become something other than what – in our human moments of thinking we're right – we had intended? And such wondering often leaves me troubled.

Both the Bishop's and the Monk's treatise and philosophy, theology and doctrine, often seem too dense to understand. I know they are hallmarks of our evolving church, but frequently they seem less about today and what happens in my life. Likely that is my own failing. Yet I will leave you with that whispering I hear from the Monk's ideas, murmurings that just will not be silent. This beckoning often seems to want to dance with the Bishop's idea of salvation and sin. And I like to imagine that in that dance, something new might emerge. I know that it is blasphemy, and likely this is simply part of the taint that touches me and for which I will have to pray for forgiveness. But ... but I remain uncertain what to do with this:

In all of the debates, about sin and whether it is inherited, the Monk brought one argument from Britannia that I cannot let go. He talked about – the only time I actually ever heard him speak in Roma – intimately holding a child, a new born babe that he mimed embracing before him. He looked into its eyes, noting its dependency and vulnerability. Whether a parent or a community was good or bad, Christian or pagan, violent or peaceful, he asked whether a child could truly be tainted? How could God – the Holy Father, Creator and Parent – allow such a babe to be born broken and in need of grace only available through an act independent of any choices she might eventually make?

As he continued to mimic tender caresses, placing the child into an imagined basinet, he looked at those of us who were enraptured. Were there tears in those striking eyes? Was he as moved as we were? Or was he simply holding us in place as any good actor might when he has cast a thrall? When the listened longs for the promised crescendo?

Sin, he began to conclude, is certainly always present, always possible. Our choice can lead us to harm one another, God's creation, in ways we would rather not and which could never be imagined when but a child. And as the taint grows, he suggested, we begin to hurt ourselves and our communities. Certainly, our choices can help us address those hurts and harms, and grace certainly has the potential for one to be born anew, especially when we embrace the glory that the Christos promises.

But – and here he paused – holding up to us the imagined child whom we could see, perhaps even hear cooing that song of innocence. In this wee one, he continued, there was no guile, no need for grace: this child was simply love's longing. We simply lose our way, and it is by grace that we might find our way home once more when temptation takes us astray ...

If only the Monk and Bishop had danced, as opposed to debated. I wonder what that might have portended. Rather than exile for one and trapping of certitude for the other, what might they have begun as partners, following a new harmony, as opposed to combatants seeking victory, and inevitable defeat ...

Want to know more?

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- Wikipedia: Augustine of Hippo https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo
- Wikipedia: Caelestius <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caelestius>
- Wikipedia: Confessions (Augustine) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessions_\(Augustine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessions_(Augustine))
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- Wikipedia: John the Baptist https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Baptist
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- Wikipedia: Mary Magdalene https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene
- Wikipedia: Moses <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses>
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