

EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Early Catholicism and Public Life
Convener: Alexis Doval, St. Mary's College of California
Moderator: Dolores Greeley, St. Louis University
Presenter: John C. Cavadini, University of Notre Dame

Cavadini's paper, "At the Limits of the Civic Imagination: Martyrs and Heroes in the *City of God*," began with a contrast between Roman civic "heroes" and Christian martyrs, which Augustine sets up in *City of God* 10. Calling the martyrs "our heroes," Augustine suggests that they serve a function for the political imagination, just as the ancient Roman heroes did. The heroic invites reflection on the course, the nature, and the end of excellence or "virtue." The heroes' virtues won glory for themselves and for Rome. The motivation for excellence was the desire for praise. We have here reached a limit of the imperial imagination, which found praise or glory as the only imaginable motivation for excellence. The martyrs, however, ascribed their excellence to the grace of God, and so their glory redounded not to the glory of the Empire, but to God. The martyrs' refusal to take ultimate credit for their excellence returns human excellence and all it presupposes—"nature"—to its proper reference to God and not the Empire, and so releases human achievement from the imperial hegemony over meaning and identity. The stories of the pagan heroes remain as a warning against Christian triumphalism, i.e., the establishment of a new version of the old heroics, only with Christian characters. In the end, the possibility thus emerges of a social order that has the capacity to be self-critical, even to the point of the previously unimaginable—a critique of its own highest ideals. The paper thus emphasizes the connection between the doctrine of grace and the capacity of a culture to reinvent itself.

Following the presentation of the paper, Cavadini, with masterful knowledge of the writings of St. Augustine, delighted and engaged other scholars. One point for continuing reflection: "Only charity frees us from the love of power over justice." Surely both secular and religious authorities do well to meditate on this required key to passage from the City of Man to the City of God.

DOLORES LEE GREELEY R.S.M.

St. Louis University

St. Louis, Missouri