



[Augustine, Letter 138.17](#)

Rome's virtues as a state, and the citizenship of the heavenly commonwealth

Name of the author: Augustine of Hippo

Date: 411 CE to 412 CE

Place: Hippo

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: Letter 138

Reference: 138.17

Commentary:

For an introduction to Augustine, please see the commentary on [City of God II.16](#).

Augustine's *Letter* 138, which is lengthy in its entirety, provides his reply to Marcellinus (on whom see below) regarding issues with Christianity raised by Volusianus (again, see below) both to Augustine himself (see *Letter* 135) and to Marcellinus (see *Letter* 136). Augustine's intention is that this letter will supplement his earlier response to Volusianus in *Letter* 137. *Letter* 138 addresses the issue of how ordinary citizens ought to act with respect to their duties to the political authorities. Marcellinus was a tribune and imperial notary, and also a Christian friend of Augustine's who was the recipient of six letters from the bishop and the dedicatee of three works (including the opening books of the *City of God*). The emperor Honorius tasked him with presiding over the conference of Carthage in June 411 CE, where the Donatists were condemned. However, he and his brother, the proconsul Apringius, were suspected of colluding in the revolt against the emperor by Heraclian, and subsequently executed on the 13th of September 413 CE, despite Augustine and other African bishops attempting to intercede (see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 336-337). Volusianus was the proconsul of Africa, who resided in Carthage up until around 411 CE (see also *Letter* 139 for further correspondence between him and Augustine). He was a pagan for most of his life, refusing baptism because of doubts about doctrine and a worry that a Christian-led empire could not defend itself from its enemies due to its non-violent teachings. This is dealt with in the present letter. Volusianus was friends with Marcellinus, and served also as prefect in Rome (417-418 CE) and praetorian prefect of Italy and Africa (428-429 CE). He was eventually convinced by Melania the Younger, a Christian ascetic and friend of Jerome, to undergo baptism some time before his death in 437 CE. Volusianus had expressed concern that Christianity's teachings of forgiveness and pacifism were incompatible with citizenship in Roman society, and the present letter contains Augustine's rebuttal of this claim. The extract is of particular interest for our purposes in that it contains Augustine's reflections on the differing citizenships of the "earthly city" (which as we will see below refers to earthly, and in Augustine's context, Roman, society) and that of heaven, along with his comments on the value of Roman civic virtues.

Augustine argues that prior to its acceptance of Christianity, the Roman empire was suffering from a complete deficit of morality, with ineffectual religious cults. At this point in time it was necessary for God to rescue the empire from its miserable fate by teaching its inhabitants the virtues of Christianity: poverty (*paupertas*), continence (*continentia*), benevolence (*benevolentia*), justice (*iustitia*), concord (*concordia*), and piety (*pietas*) towards the one supreme God. This would not only promote the best possible way of life, and ensure that society—the "earthly city" (*civitas terrena*)—enjoyed peace, but more importantly for Augustine, secured people a place in heaven—the "divine commonwealth"—, which was eternal. This heavenly commonwealth demanded of its citizens faith, hope, and charity. While on earth, Augustine states that the citizens of the heavenly commonwealth, who are pilgrims, temporary residents on earth, must tolerate the fact that the Romans do not properly punish vices. Furthermore, the early Romans used their virtues to found and expand the new commonwealth, even though they did not know at that time the true God, and failed to realise that Christianity, the true religion, would grant them entry to the "eternal city." Still, Augustine concedes, these founders of Rome had adequate enough integrity to establish their city, and indeed, civic virtues are not un-valuable. This is confirmed by the fact that God granted the Roman empire great wealth and fame, even when it did not recognise him. God did this, it is claimed, in order to make clear that with the true religion (Christianity), human beings can become citizens of the heavenly city, where truth is king, love is the



law, and where there are no limitations.

First of all, we must briefly outline some key terminology which Augustine employs, beginning with *res publica*. As Margaret Atkins in her notes for the translation used above states, translated literally *res publica* means something like “public thing/affair.” For his understanding of the term Augustine draws upon Cicero’s well-known definition from his *De re publica* (*On the Commonwealth*). For Cicero, the *res publica* was what an assembly of the people in significant numbers held in common with respect to justice and the common good (I.39, 41-42; see Augustine’s words which echo this definition in chapter 10 of the present letter). This was the case no matter what form of government was in place. Depending on context, the term can be rendered as “public life,” “government,” “republic,” “state,” or even “empire,” but here in *Letter 138*, with Augustine’s usage of Cicero taken into consideration, Atkins settles on “commonwealth” (*Political Writings*, p. xxviii; see also Elizabeth DePalmer Digeser, “Citizenship and the Roman *res publica*,” p. 5, 9). Continuing with Cicero’s characterisation, citizens within the *res publica* had responsibilities to it just as it had responsibilities to them, and this was mainly expressed by them obeying its laws (see his *On the Laws* III.6). As we will see below, for Augustine, the only laws which citizens of the “heavenly commonwealth” need be concerned with are those of love (*caritas*). The other important term which appears is *civitas*, a term which forms part of Augustine’s famous work *De civitate Dei*, commonly translated in English as *City of God*. For Catherine Conybeare, “city” is an insufficient rendering of the term when Augustine’s actual meaning both in the *City of God* and his other works, including the present letter, is taken into account (“The City of Augustine,” p. 139). As Conybeare points out, the beginning of book XI of the *City of God* makes very clear that the *civitates* are not material “cities” in a “sovereign sense.” Moreover, they are intermingled, but while the city of God functions also on the earth, the earthly city has nothing at all to do with heaven (“The City of Augustine,” p. 140-141). Conybeare demonstrates through consideration of Augustine’s discussions in the *City of God* and his sermons that he understands a *civitas* in the earthly sense as constituted from and characterised by its people (*cives*). In his sermon *On the Sack of the City of Rome* VII.8 he states that before the sacking of Rome God had already spared it, which does not immediately make sense. However, in III.3 of the same sermon he compares the relationship of the *cives*, the people, to the material city like that of the soul to the body: once the former leaves it matters not what happens to the latter. So, *civitas* for Augustine is largely about citizens, people, and less about physical space. This notion is again dependent on Cicero, whom Augustine names explicitly in our letter, first in chapter 9 (“The City of Augustine,” p. 140-144, esp. 144). Augustine then proceeds in chapter 10 of our letter to ask what the *civitas* is, and from this point onwards uses *civitas* and *res publica* interchangeably. For Augustine, as for Cicero, then, the *civitas* is really the people, who are bound together by common concerns and *concordia*, the importance of which is emphasised both in the present passage from *Letter 138* as well as *City of God* II.42 and XIX.21, where its function for maintaining the *civitas* and restraining the lust for power which dominates the earthly city is described (see Conybeare, “The City of Augustine,” p. 145-146). Augustine’s understanding of both *res publica* and *civitas*, then, in the present letter and elsewhere can be understood as having citizens at their centres, who are bound by common concerns, justice, and concord, and have obligations to uphold the laws of the “commonwealth” which sustains them. As we shall see in the discussion that follows, Augustine, as Cicero, sees virtues as absolutely central to the way in which the *res publica/civitas*, be it that of the divine or the earth, is maintained, and it is here that we see in the present passage both his appreciation and critique of Roman values (for further discussion of the issues laid out above, see also the entry by Claude Lepelley on *civis*, *civitas* in the *Augustinus-Lexikon*, Vol. 1, col. 942-947).

The extract from *Letter 138* quoted above raises several important points. Firstly, the notion that Roman society was morally deficient from its very origins up until its acceptance of Christianity. Augustine’s language is strong, describing Roman society as a “cesspool (*colluvies*) of evil (*malus*) characters, where the ancient ethos has been abandoned.” That Roman society specifically is referred to is not only inferable from the fact that this was Augustine’s social reality, but from his comments elsewhere in the letter. In 138.10, for instance, Augustine prefigures his argument here related to the value of Christian virtues for the Roman people: “If we gave ear to this precept (in this case the Christian command not to return evil with evil) as it deserves, it would establish, consecrate, strengthen and increase the commonwealth far better than Romulus, Numa, Brutus and the other famous heroes of the Roman nation.” Moreover, in 138.16 Augustine also hints at the fact that the empire is suffering: “What am I to reply to the charge that the Roman empire is in a very bad way because of certain Christian emperors?” (the translations are those of Atkins, *Augustine: Political Writings*, p. 35, 39). Contrary to the anti-Christian sentiment that Augustine rebuts in the latter quotation, his argument is that Christianity can remedy the moral ills of the empire, which by implication include a love of wealth, sexual immorality, selfishness and greed, injustice, conflict, and lack of recognition of the true God (as much can be assumed given that Augustine lists the Christian virtues of poverty, continence, benevolence, justice, concord, and piety as being of notable value). Poverty in particular is discussed in 138.16, where Augustine draws upon the words of Juvenal, *Satires* VI.11.287-295, to argue that the Roman people have been corrupted by wealth. That the Romans were an immoral



people is an argument which we see repeated throughout the centuries by Christian authors, often in connection to discussions of Rome's origins (for examples of Christian authors attacking Roman immorality in various ways, see for example, [Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius XXV](#); [Cyprian, On the Vanity of Idols V](#); [Arnobius, Against the Pagans I.64](#)). Despite the current state of society, however, Augustine concedes that the earliest Romans, the founders of the Republic, were of good enough character that their commonwealth (*res publica*) grew, even though they worshipped the wrong gods. While insufficient to grant them entry into heaven, Augustine notes that the "civic virtues" (*civiles virtutes*) of these early Romans were good enough to establish a strong and stable earthly city and state. This was evidenced by the fact that Rome enjoyed great wealth and fame. As has been highlighted by Conybeare, this emphasis on the power of civic virtues is very Ciceronian. In the prologue to *On the Republic* (I.2), Cicero states that virtue (*virtus*) is pointless unless it is used: its value is determined by its use. One of the greatest uses of virtue, Cicero argues, is in the government of the *civitas* (Conybeare, "The City of Augustine," p. 145-146). This is what Augustine seems to admire about the founders of Rome. Despite the many moral failings of Rome, it was at least built by men who succeeded in building a state which was both powerful and prosperous. Their civic virtues are therefore those qualities which promoted the expansion of Rome, and enabled its evolution as a state. In this sense, its founders used their virtues wisely. For Augustine, then, the Roman empire is a fine example of a commonwealth which has had great success within the earthly sphere, and many of the virtues promoted within Roman culture are valid and powerful. Moreover, the civic virtues of Rome are themselves a tool of God, serving to illustrate the fact that the significant power which they have generated on their own pales in comparison to the greatness of heaven which human beings could experience if they accepted Christianity and its teachings. In other words, the Roman state is something to be admired, but it offers only a fraction of that of the heavenly commonwealth.

God had left the Roman people to its fate long enough, Augustine states, and eventually decided to teach it the virtues of Christianity and the idea of devotion only to one God, rather than several. This had two benefits: firstly, a Christian way of life was something admirable and exemplary anyway, as it promoted concord amongst society. This of course was something which the Romans also claimed to have brought through the Pax Romana, and indeed various Christian authors writing after the Christianisation of the empire conflated the peace among the numerous peoples brought under Roman rule during Augustus's reign with that of Christ, viewing the Pax Romana as part of God's global plan to spread his word to all peoples (see, for example, [Origen, Against Celsus II.30](#); [Orosius Seven Books of History Against the Pagans III.8](#)). As far as Augustine is concerned, however, the virtues of Christianity are what will secure people eternal peace in the "divine commonwealth." Augustine does not say this explicitly, but the implication is that any peace that the Romans bring to society, whether on a wider scale between the peoples of the empire, or more locally in the sense of social order, is ultimately inferior to that which results from a lifestyle following the tenets of the "true religion." Regardless of the wealth and power that the Roman state brought, without God it had been corrupt and riddled with vices, preventing its inhabitants from an eternity in heaven.

The final important point raised by this passage concerns the way in which Augustine's ideology challenges an important and longstanding feature of Rome's presentation of itself. Augustine's argument juxtaposes the "eternal city" (*civitas aeterna*) of God with that of "earthly city" (*civitas terrena*). This is significant not only for the contrast which it draws between that which is focused on the divine and that which is entirely focused on human pursuits, but also when we consider that the city of Rome became known in Roman ideology from the first century CE onwards as the *urbs aeterna* ("eternal city"). The first occurrence of this term in Latin literature appears in the first century CE author Tibullus, in his [Elegies II.5.19-26](#). This characterisation became absolutely central to the way Rome was understood as a long-enduring world power, celebrating the notion of its constancy and permanence. A few years later, Ovid in his [Fasti III.59-78](#) names Romulus the father of the "eternal city." However, we see Rome described as something endless already in Virgil's [Aeneid I.275-279](#), where Jupiter promises that Rome will be a great military and civic power, with no temporal limits. As Hervé Inglebert discusses, the notion of Rome as the *urbs aeterna*—later the term *Roma aeterna* also developed from this ideology—held a prominent place for several centuries after Augustus, with the Roman empire understood as having surpassed all others, thereby marking the end of history (see Inglebert, *Le Monde, l'Histoire*, p. 252). The irony of course is that for Augustine, the city of Rome and the empire built around it are anything but permanent and eternal. Just like the rest of the physical world, Rome will eventually be subject to decay and destruction, and its citizens must look towards the "divine commonwealth" of the true God, rather than solely clinging to an earthly institution. In this perspective, Conybeare argues that in the opening of the *City of God*, which speaks of the "glorious city of God," Augustine's words must have seemed provocative and defiant given that Rome, the city seen as glorious and eternal, had just been sacked ("The City of Augustine," p. 143).

To conclude, we see in this extract a juxtapositioning of the values of the "earthly city" with that of God. While



Augustine is not engaging in anti-Roman polemic specifically, he emphasises that the values at the heart of the empire lacked for a long time what is most important: knowledge of and pious devotion to the true God. While the very first Romans provide an example of how a successful earthly commonwealth can be built, their “civic virtues” are ultimately inadequate without the addition of Christianity, the “true religion,” which shows humanity how to become citizens of the even greater divine commonwealth in heaven. Here, there are laws, justice, and peace, just as the Roman empire understood itself to have provided. However, they are characterised by divine love, and unlike those of Rome, whose temporal nature was evidenced by the fateful events of 410 CE, are truly eternal.

Keywords in the original language:

- [auctoritas](#)
- [benevolentia](#)
- [caelestis](#)
- [caritas](#)
- [civiles virtutes](#)
- [civis](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [civitas aeterna](#)
- [civitas terrena](#)
- [colluvies](#)
- [concordia](#)
- [concordissimus](#)
- [continentia](#)
- [disciplina](#)
- [divinus](#)
- [fides](#)
- [imperium Romanum](#)
- [impunitas](#)
- [iustitia](#)
- [lex](#)
- [malus](#)
- [opulens](#)
- [paupertas](#)
- [perdo](#)
- [peregrinor](#)
- [pietas](#)
- [populus](#)
- [praeclarus](#)
- [religio](#)
- [res publica](#)
- [rex](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [salus](#)
- [sempiternus](#)
- [societas](#)
- [Spes](#)
- [valeo](#)
- [veritas](#)
- [virtus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [citizen](#)
- [citizenship](#)
- [civic virtue](#)



- [commonwealth](#)
- [divine authority](#)
- [eternal city](#)
- [justice](#)
- [peace](#)
- [piety](#)
- [pilgrimage](#)
- [Roman immorality](#)
- [Roman imperialism](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman Republic](#)
- [Roman state](#)
- [Roman virtue](#)
- [virtue](#)

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