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## City of God: A Metaphor for Humanity

### International Symposium Discusses Relevance of St. Augustine's Book in Interreligious Dialogue

By Edward Pentin

ROME, SEPT. 27, 2012 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org))- Is intercultural and interreligious dialogue really possible? Or is there only really controversy and conflict between religions and cultures?

This timely question was the subject of a four day Rome conference this week, held in the context of a book that played a major role in shaping Western civilization: St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* – The City of God.

Given the recent upheavals and protests in the Islamic world, the conference, though naturally organized long before that violence erupted, explored the kind of response St. Augustine would give to such intercultural tensions.

The international symposium, hosted by the Augustinianum, drew together 150 participants from three Augustinian organizations in Italy, Germany and the United States.

Participants noted that in *De Civitate Dei*, St. Augustine speaks of all men who have one of only two perspectives: a city founded on human selfishness, destined to dissolve (a City of Man or Earthly City), and a city founded on love of God, focussed on human love, and destined to live eternally (City of God).

With that in mind, the conference asked if there can be real dialogue between different religions, or only conflict between them. St. Augustine recognized that in fact both cities desired peace, as this desire is inscribed on the human heart, so it was possible to find a common ground and to live together with this common desire. Cooperation towards peace was also possible, even though true peace will never be fully realised in this life.

“These two kinds of people, two different ways of living, have to come together,” said Professor Giovanni Catapano, lecturer in the history of medieval philosophy at the University of Padua .  
“They can be linked together and that, too, is one aspect of the City of God.”

Indeed, St. Augustine believed it was “not only possible to dialogue between different religions but a duty, so to say, of religions to dialogue with each other,” Catapano explained. “But they can do this only if they refer to a paradigm, a common model, which is the City of God.”

But St. Augustine was no multiculturalist, Catapano said. Instead, the 5th-century Early Church Father advocated comparisons between different cultures and religions, and believed it was possible to say that one culture, one religion, was better than the other.

Catapano stressed that the City of God cannot be fully realized on Earth, but in the afterlife. “At present, it functions as a model,” he said, “and by looking to this model, we can say this kind of behaviour or that kind of practice is better or worse.”

For Augustinian Father Vittorino Grossi, the City of God is a “metaphor for humanity,” and he explained that St. Augustine observed that the passions of all men are equal, whether they were Romans, Barbarians, or Christians.

“Although they may not all know it,” he said, “they all have a common passion and desire, one which tends to the same end, which is God.”

“Humanity must be helped to understand this,” he said.

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To make a film about the persecution of the Church during the French Revolution would be a major challenge on its own, but what if the movie’s cast of characters were all children?

That’s what Catholic filmmaker and actor Jim Morlino has attempted to do, and with notable success, in his award-winning new movie called “The War of the Vendee”.

Drawing on the talents and enthusiasm of 256 children from Connecticut, aged from 2 months to 20 years, the film realistically takes the viewer back to 1793 and the height of the French Revolution when a band of faithful peasants and nobles valiantly resisted the bloody persecution of the Church.

A largely unknown story, it deals with the six-year struggle in the Loire Valley of western France to restore the Catholic religion and their king. Their sacrifices led to countless martyrdoms, but ultimately won the restoration of religious freedom for all of France. Morlino describes the film as “a love-letter to the Vendean people” that was produced “to honor the memory of these brave men and women who willingly sacrificed their lives.” It also aims to “inspire audiences of all ages with its timeless themes of courage, faith, and love.”

Moreover, by having a cast of children, the movie manages to convey a powerful sense of child-like innocence among those who sacrificed their lives in this Catholic “counter-revolution”.

“Young people have an innate creativity, written on their souls,” Morlino tells me, “and there is something divine about the best expressions of art that comes from innocence itself.” With this in mind, his company, Navis Pictures, has already made a number of similar feature-length movies with child casts. Until *The War of the Vendee*, its most famous was a biopic of St. Bernadette of Lourdes that has been subsequently broadcast a number of times on EWTN.

In his approach to film, Morlino says he always strives for perfection and to produce each one as professionally as possible. “People have a preconception that it’s a bunch of teenagers out in the woods with a camcorder, making a movie on a Saturday afternoon, but that couldn’t be further from truth,” he explains. “We try to make them look as good as possible, taking great care in detail so

that the communication of the actors comes through.” He added: “We remove those obstacles that people might expect to find in a non-traditionally cast film.”

The story came to Morlino via a friend who presented him with a book on the war by a French historian. Morlino stresses the true tale, which cost the lives of 400,000 people, is one of the first examples of state-sponsored genocide but that without it, the religious liberty that France enjoys today would not have been possible.

The War of the Vendee naturally has parallels with today and growing restrictions on religious freedom in the United States and Europe, but that was not Morlino’s original intention. “I had no idea when I made this film that we’d be experiencing the beginnings of religious persecution by our own government,” he says. “I really didn’t set out to make political statement.” But he adds that if the movie “helps to keep young people vigilant, then that’s a real success for us.”

But by giving children key starring roles, the film also has lessons for adults, reminding them of the power of innocence in defeating evil. “There’s something very simple and disarming about the way young people view the world,” he says. “Things don’t become nuanced until you get older and become wearied with the struggles of our fallen existence.”

Navis Pictures is now continuing with its day-to-day work, making training videos, promos and documentaries. Meanwhile, its movies with child actors are becoming increasingly ambitious. Following the success of The War of the Vendee, the hope is to produce a new movie next year, possibly focusing on a true Catholic story in the United States or Britain.

“We will see what Lord has in store for us,” Morlino says. “Hopefully Our Lady will continue to watch over us and bless us, and we’ll get the go ahead to make another film next spring.”

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On the NET:

The War of the Vendee is available on DVD and can be ordered here: [http://www.navispictures.com/category\\_s/34.htm](http://www.navispictures.com/category_s/34.htm)

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