

Augustinian Friends Prayer Resource Guide

Contemplation in Action – A wonderful gift from St. Augustine

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I'm sure we all find when reading Augustine or reflecting on his incredible body of work that he is a man of exceptional gifts. Many scholars focus on his incredible intellectual legacy. However, there is warmth of heart in all of Augustine's writings that points to a different gift. His is the gift of the Holy Spirit that binds gifts of mind and body together and amplifies these gifts in a way that is almost beyond imagination.

But how is this gift found and how is it expressed in Augustinian spirituality?

A useful phrase is one used by many Augustinian writers - 'Contemplation in Action'. In essence, this is that deep foundation in God built by waiting on God in silent prayer and expressed in awe at the beauty of creation and at the creative potential within each and every person. In Augustine, this deep relationship to God is bound to his natural warmth and love of friends.

One of Augustine's unique, but often overlooked contributions, to the Church and the world is his ability to bring the contemplation of 'the desert tradition' into the city. How did he do this?

- By building a community of Christian friendship
- By reluctantly accepting a role as Bishop but then transforming this role into a teaching role for people from all stations in his society
- By establishing many of the central tenets of our faith in public debate with leading religious and secular philosophers of the day, many of whom were well intentioned heretics.

Of course, such a magnificent legacy is the result of Divine Inspiration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Augustine manifests the fruits of an intimate relationship with God built on a deep life of prayer. Without these foundations, he would be a respected philosopher and public figure of his time, but not a man who still speaks to the hearts of millions nearly 1600 years after his death.

On the surface, Augustine's legacy does not seem unique. However, through a reasonable knowledge of church history and of the teaching tradition of prayer in the Church, a special gift can be recognised. In Augustine's time and region, the great Fathers and Mothers of the Desert (the latter generally being anchorites who lived in a silent cell attached for safety reasons to a church in a town or city) were considered to be the authorities on prayer and spirituality. Those of you who have read the 'Conferences of John Cassian' - a compilation of discussions with the great masters of prayer of the 4th Century - and understand his influence on the Western Church, will be aware of this tradition. What is unique about Augustine is that he couldn't live the desert life. He had to express his contemplative spirituality through friendship and engagement at the very centre of Roman life.

The Purpose of the Prayer Resource Guide

Each of us is on a journey to God like our patron Augustine.

The Friends prayer resource is offered to you as a support in your day to day prayer and will be sent to you 4 times a year.

It is centred on the Gospel readings for coming Sundays and quotes from Augustine. It also contains a prayer orientated letter from our Chaplain and some tips on Lectio Divina - the traditional Augustinian method of scriptural reflection and meditation.

As we know, Augustine's life was not always busy by choice, particularly in his role as Bishop, but there is no question his spirituality was very engaged with the realities of his society. For us, as lay Augustinians, this is a wonderful and very relevant legacy. Augustine was a parent, a teacher and a man of prayer. Like us, he had children to attend to, staff to manage and he was caught up in the business of life.

Augustine gives us a way of developing a deep spirituality in the midst of the throng. Who can read *The Confessions* or any of his *Sermons* without recognising in them mystical insights that could only be the fruit of a deep life of prayer? These writings also reflect the groundedness and simplicity of the true mystic. This is why Augustine's Church was filled with people from all walks of life who came to hear his sermons.

Spiritual balance in Augustine was founded on three key pillars:

- *Interiority - a deep inner life of prayer and intimacy with God*
- *Fraternity - friendship and participation in the Church community*
- *Community - outreach to general society and those who were disillusioned with the Church*

These foundations of Augustinian spirituality are well worth reflecting on in the context of own lives.

How do we nurture an inner life of prayer when we are attending to the needs of children, balancing heavy work commitments and trying to keep pace with the mountain of information thrust at us today? How do we build and maintain relationships of mutual support with like-minded Christians in genuine warmth and friendship? How do we reach out to our society and our world to meet Christ in the marketplace and on the byways of our modern cities and towns?

We can find many of our answers in the teaching and example of Augustine. His *Confessions* expose a deep inner life of prayer and intimacy with God, which interior relationship sheds lights on relationships and moral dilemmas faced by people throughout the ages. His *Sermons* are always relevant to lay life and issues. His *Actions* as parent, partner, friend and Bishop are examples for us.

In short, Augustine is a model of holiness/wholeness, which properly understood, is the full illumination of our individual gifts by the Holy Spirit.

Our first step then, as in Augustine's time, is to reflect deeply on the Scriptures via the practice of *Lectio Divina*. This practice is common to Christians of East and West and is used by all of the religious orders in the world today, albeit in many different ways. Augustine, like all the great teachers of prayer, would insist he simply points to God and would be appalled if we simply stopped at Augustine - this is almost impossible as Augustine's writings are overflowing with biblical references.

Like most of the saints, when Augustine writes, the Word of God seems to be always in his thoughts and on his lips. This is the fruit of *Lectio* - constant recollection in the Word that centers a person in God. As a member of a Benedictine, contemplative spiritual community since 1995 I have been fortunate to receive excellent teaching in the practice of *Lectio Divina*. However, I have also struggled with the fact that I live in the midst of a busy city, with a young family and work responsibilities. Finding space and silence is not always easy. Saint Benedict, unlike Augustine, withdrew from Roman society, and created an enclosed community where the members could focus totally on prayer. Perhaps many of our Friends can relate to this struggle.

Augustine, and a deepening awareness of his spirituality, has provided a wonderful bridge between the Desert (the traditional Christian metaphor for the contemplative search) and the City.

Lectio is a common thread between the Benedictine and Augustinian traditions passed down from the desert through the centuries. The fruit of this twin heritage is the opportunity to bring the wonderful, reflective depth of enclosed life to bear on life in the City.

Paul Griffiths

From our Chaplain

April 10th, 2003

Dear Friends,

Recently I was a guest in the home of a married couple whose children had all grown up and moved to various parts of the world where they were happily bringing up their own families. I was given a guest room where there were many books which had been left over from the days when reading was more of an occupation than watching T.V. has become in ours. In fact, in this house there was no T.V. at all, so for a few days I was released from the agony of watching endless reports on the war in Iraq being delivered with the same enthusiasm as a football commentary, except that the numbers on the scoreboard were lives, not goals.

On one of the shelves I found a book I had read many years ago by Nikos Kazantzakis which tells of his life on the island of Crete and his subsequent travels. It is called Report to Greco, which is the name of Nicos' grandfather. In one of the chapters he describes the liberation of Crete in 1898 by Prince George of the Hellenes from many years of Turkish domination.

In church the elderly Metropolitan stood with raised arms beneath the dome and gazed at the Pantocrator. He wanted to preach but his throat was blocked. Parting his lips he cried, "Christ is risen, my children" — unable to utter anything else. "He is truly risen!" resounded from every breast, and the cathedral's great chandeliers shook as though from an earthquake." (p. 107)

The only way the people could express the joy of knowing that Crete had risen from oppression was the triumphant resurrection greeting of Easter. Later, the boy is taken to the grave of his grandfather by his own father who falls face down on the humble mound and scrapes with his fingers a small hole like a megaphone. He places his mouth as closely to the earth as possible and cries out three times "Father, he came! Father, he came! Father, he came!" Removing a small bottle of wine from his pocket, he poured it drop by drop into the hole and waited each time for the earth to drink it. Then he bounded to his feet, crossed himself, and looked at his son. "Didn't you hear? He asked, with a voice hoarse with emotion. "His bones rattled."

That is the kind of response St. Augustine would like to have us give when the Easter greeting sounds in our ears this year — our whole bodies, both of the living and the dead, to reverberate with wonder at the news that "He is Risen!"

"Here we have such joy, my brothers and sisters, joy in your coming together (this Easter Sunday morning), joy in the psalms and hymns, joy in the memory of Christ's passion and resurrection, joy in the hope of future life. If what we are still hoping for fills us with such tremendous joy, what will it be like when we actually possess it? Just look how these days, when "Alleluia" is ringing in our ears, our spirits soar! . . . If these days fill us with such tremendous joy, what will that day be like when all the saints are gathered together there in unity in such a way that a friend is never lost, an enemy never to be feared?"
(Sermon 229B, 2)

Easter joy can permeate our lives even in the face of what seems to be the darkest hour of our new century. No matter how shoddy the reasons for this present war or how overwhelming its use of military power, it may bring the possibility for the citizens of Iraq to experience Liberty, just as the people of Crete, or the people of France, or the people of East Timor achieved it each in their own time. The age-old struggle for this freedom is truly an uninterrupted sacrament achieved in the face of seeming defeat as generation after generation of the human race live out the deepest longing of our God to free us from all that limits or oppresses us. We have to constantly be reminded that victory over the consequences of sin and death has already been gained in the triumph of Jesus Christ. It is a fact that "He came, he came, he came!" and, as a result, the world will never be the same again. But this does not excuse us of playing our part in making sure that every person has the right to food and clean water, education and freedom, the right to be the fullest human beings they are capable of becoming. Our task is to be witnesses in word and in very concrete deeds to the saving reality we have experienced of being liberated by the Risen Christ just as surely as the people of Crete were liberated by their Greek Prince on that fateful day in 1898. May our Easter Joy reverberate as surely as theirs did into our broken world,

With much love,

Paul

Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

April 27	Second Sunday of Easter	John 20: 19 – 31
May 4	Third Sunday of Easter	Luke 24: 35 – 48
May 11	Fourth Sunday of Easter	John 10: 11 – 18
May 18	Fifth Sunday of Easter	John 15: 1 – 8
	<i>Dwell in me</i> , said Jesus, <i>and I will dwell in you</i> . His disciples, however, do not dwell in Christ in the same way as Christ dwells in them. In either case, the benefit is theirs, not his. If branches are attached to a vine, it is not to confer any advantage on the vine; it is rather that the branches themselves may draw their sustenance from the vine. In the same way Christ's presence in his disciples and their presence in him both profit the disciples rather than Christ. (Homilies on the Gospel of John 80, 1;81.)	
May 22	Feast of St. Rita of Cascia	Romans 12: 19– 21
May 25	Sixth Sunday of Easter	John 15: 9 – 17
	When, therefore, Christ says to us: <i>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love</i> , he is telling us that the observance of the commandments is not the source but rather the gauge and touchstone of our love. That is to say, your observance of his commandments is the proof, the outward manifestation, of the fact that you abide in his love. (Homilies on the Gospel of John 82, 1-4)	
June 1	The Ascension of the Lord	Mark 16: 15 – 20
	He is in heaven, we are on earth. As though he were far away from us, is that it? God forbid! If you question space, he is far away; if you question love, he is with us. I mean if he were not with us, he would not have said in the gospel, <i>Behold I am with you until the completion of the age</i> . If he is not with us, then we are lying when we say, <i>The Lord is with you</i> . (Sermon 395,2)	
June 8	Pentecost Sunday	John 15: 26-27, 16: 12-15
June 15	Trinity Sunday	Matthew 28: 16 – 20
June 22	Corpus Christe	Mark 14: 12 – 16, 22 –26
	If you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the apostle telling the faithful " <i>You, though, are the body of Christ and its members.</i> " (1 Cor. 12.27) So if it's you that are the body of Christ and its members, it is the mystery meaning <i>you</i> that has been placed on the Lord's table, what you receive is the mystery that means you. (Sermon 272)	
June 27	Sacred Heart of Jesus	John 19: 31 – 37
June 29	St. Peter and St. Paul	Matthew 16: 13 – 19

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SHARING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AUGUSTINE

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