

Augustinian Friends Prayer Resource Guide

Befriending the Desert in Ourselves and in Others

At different stages in our prayer life, we may enter periods of dryness. We will experience 'the desert'. These periods are opportunities for growth and for a deepening of our spiritual life, but quite often they are misread.

In the Old Testament, the desert is the place of escape from Egypt and of preparation for entry into the Promised Land.

Inside this issue:

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| Befriending the Desert
In ourselves and in | 1 | If we look at the example of Christ, we see that the desert is a central place in Christ's life. It is the place where he prepares for his ministry, but it is also a |
| Others. By Paul Griffiths | 2 | place of trial and temptation. As followers of Christ, we must undergo a similar journey to deepen our relationship with God and prepare for our ministry. |
| Chaplain's Letter | 3 | |
| Tolle Lege: Take and Read. | 4 | Thomas Merton, the great Cistercian spiritual master of the last century, teaches that 'it is in periods of dryness, in the desert, where nothing seems to be happening in prayer that the Holy Spirit is most at work'. He observes that this dryness is teaching our soul to thirst for God and not to be preoccupied with fleeting pleasures. |

Merton also writes that many of us get caught up in 'the consolations of spiritual life' — visions, miracles, ecstasies and such.

Our great Christian teachers of prayer throughout the centuries have always taught that such consolations are valuable in the early stages of spiritual life. Like Kindergarten students, we need lots of positive feedback and encouragement. We need very clear signposts on our journey

However, as we progress to secondary school and beyond God is more direct and open with us. We need to move past the signs/consolations to meet God face to face. It is a temptation to try to stay with these consolations and to see dryness and prayer as a negative. Such is not the case.

If we follow Christ into the desert, we will encounter God at a deeper level and will learn to use our gifts in progressively more generous ways. We will also learn to appreciate the gifts of others at a subtle and deeper level. We begin to see how the seeming contradictions in creation and in our society fit together. We develop tolerance and understanding.

The desert Fathers and Mothers of the early centuries of our Church dedicated their lives to the practice of Christian prayer. They literally followed Christ

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.

into the desert. While not of all us are called by God in this way, we will be called into little deserts of our own at key stages in our life.

The best approach to such periods is to demonstrate our faith by persevering with our prayer and trusting in God. This is not easy. In fact, it is necessary to have some guidance from an experienced and wise practitioner in such times. It is surprising how we find such guidance and how well tuned our souls are to detect which is good advice and which is not.

The wise guide is defined by their warmth. They share as equals and accept us as we are, if we are honest. If we are not they can be quite firm, much as a Doctor has to be firm with a patient in denial.

The poor guide is usually quick to point out their own mastery, to highlight their long hours of fasting and prayer. They are full of themselves and tend to prescribe the same formula ignoring the uniqueness of each soul that God has created.

One of the best comparisons of these differences, can be found in Dostoevski's great novel The Brothers Karamazov. The wise staretz, Zossima, and the cold asthete, Therapont, battle to guide a young man and help him develop his unique gifts. Their direction is described in some detail and highlights the need for wisdom and warmth in the area of spiritual guidance.

In my experience, "the Zossimas" are usually found within our circle of family, friends and local Church community. They tend to be humble, warm and very well grounded. They are honest about their own strengths and weaknesses. On this basis, they are easy to approach and will be ready to assist if we are humble and ready to listen.

It is clear that our Holy Father Augustine was such a man. In his Confessions, he is honest about his own sins, but demonstrates a great passion for life and a great love of friends. In his Sermons, he shows an ability to explain difficult matters of faith in simple terms that would have been accessible to people from all sections of his society that came to his Church. This is why his writings still speak to people today and his books are still best sellers over 1600 years after he lived.

So let us give thanks to God both for our little deserts (and for those Zossima's and Augustines who have helped us in our spiritual life). And like Christ, let us use these little deserts as places to listen and come closer to God so that we may minister to others filled with God's love and compassion.

Perhaps there is a family member or friend who needs our warmth and wisdom, to whom we can be a guide and an Augustine once we have befriended the desert within ourselves!

Paul Griffiths

POINTS TO PONDER

- * What does the idea of the desert mean to me?
- * Do I make space in my own life for "desert time" by myself?
- * Do I go off into the "desert" with friends to share the journey?
- * What action do I need to take for myself?



From our Chaplain

July 9th. 2004

Dear Friends,

recently I was waiting in a doctor's surgery to get some prescriptions renewed and found myself with plenty of time to observe the other patients in the room. One elderly lady with a walking frame was there with her daughter who had collected her from her nursing home to bring her to the medical centre. She was complaining that her hearing was so bad that she had to have the T.V. up really loud and this annoyed the staff and other residents "in that place". In his own time St. Augustine spoke with great understanding of the frailty of old age:

"Aren't we in fact more fragile than if we were made of glass? After all, even if glass is fragile, it lasts a long time if it is preserved, and you find goblets that belonged to grandfathers and great-grandfathers, from which grandsons and great-grandsons are drinking today. Such fragility, if protected, can reach a great age. But as for us human beings, not only do we walk around in our fragility among so many daily hazards, but even if sudden accidents don't happen, we are still not capable of living a long time. . . From infancy to decrepit old age, the whole of it is short". (Sermon 17.7)

The elderly lady I was observing so attentively then began to share with real warmth and enthusiasm the fact that later in the week it would be her birthday and the importance of such a special anniversary just shone from her face and in the tone of her voice. It was not simply a matter of clocking up one more year that gave cause for her joy, but rather a keen sense of the significance of celebrating the day she was born, even though, as St. Augustine puts it, "When it comes to being born, everybody is bound to die of that.. After all, from the moment we are born, we are bound to die." (Sermon 77, 14). The little span of time we are given begins on our birth-day and the anniversary of that date carries its own in-built excitement when we contemplate the richness of our existence up till now, and the high expectations of what is to come.

The first thing a person is meant to understand is that there is no such thing as being "born out of time." Our time is now. The era into which we are born is the era for which we have responsibility, the era for which we are meant to be a blessing. The implications are sobering. Whatever is going on now — ethnic slaughter, unjust international business policies, the false god of militarism, the sexism of the churches — is our affair. What we want to have happen in these arenas we must make happen in our own.

Just as it was Augustine's time in North Africa, Lech Walenca's time in Poland, Nelson Mandela's time in South Africa and Mary Robinson's time in Ireland — all good people who emerged to face impossible odds — so it is our time right now and right here in this country and culture to respond to the situations in which we are placed. What happens here and now, particularly in an election year, is our responsibility. What happens tomorrow is our legacy. My little glimpse into the life of that elderly lady in the waiting room showed me that it is not a matter of doing great things. No, it is far more challenging than that. It is a matter of doing small things courageously, and blessing the day you were born because it enables each to shape their way of "being" in the world.

As the next few months draw on, Augustinians on every continent will be celebrating the thirty-third Jubilee of Augustine's birth which took place on November 13th. 354 at Thagaste (now Souk Ahras) in modern Algeria. His "fragile" span of life lasted 76 years but we are still drinking from the glass goblet of his wisdom as he speaks to our era just as clearly as he has spoken to many in the intervening centuries. ("Such fragility, if protected, can reach a great age!") Just as our own birthdays give us an inherent sense of pleasure and excitement even if no one else knows about them, so may we find opportunity to share in Augustine's Birthday,

With much love,

Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

It is suggested that you reflect on the readings taken from the Sunday liturgy during a quiet time in the previous week. "Take and Read" the text and be open to Augustine's question "What is God wanting me to know now?" Let God's grace illumine your understanding.

July 18	Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 10: 38-42
	"In these two women two kinds of life are represented: present life and future life, toilsome and restful, miserable and beatific, temporal and eternal life. . . In Martha was to be found the image of things present, in Mary that of things to come. The life Martha was leading, that's where we are; the life Mary was leading, that's what we are hoping for. Let us lead this one well, in order to have that one to the full." (Sermon 104, 4)	
July 25	Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 11: 1-13
August 1	Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 12: 13-21
	"Recognise and love the one who made you, and he will fill you, not with something of his, but with himself. You will possess God. You will be full of God. That is the great wealth of the soul. The wealth of the body is superfluous, because our bodies require little enough to manage. The wealth of the soul is not superfluous." (Sermon 107A, 1,3-5)	
August 6	The Transfiguration of the Lord	Luke 9: 28-36
August 8	Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 12: 35-40
	"These three things, namely abstaining from evil, and doing good, and hoping for an eternal reward, are listed in the Acts of the Apostles where it is written that Paul was teaching them about <i>continence</i> , about <i>justice</i> , and <i>the hope of eternal life</i> . To continence you can refer <i>Let your loins be girt</i> ; to justice refer <i>and your lamps burning</i> ; to the expectation of the Lord refer <i>hope of eternal life</i> " (Sermon 108, 1-4)	
August 15	The Assumption of the Virgin Mary	Luke 1: 39-56
	"And so, just as Mary gave birth in her womb as a virgin to Christ, so let the members of Christ give birth in their minds, and in this way you will be the mothers of Christ. It isn't something out of your reach, not something beyond your powers, not something incompatible with what you are. . . Bring whomever you can along to the bath of baptism, so that just as you became children when you were born, you may likewise be able . . . to become mothers of Christ as well." (Sermon 72A,8)	
August 22	Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time	Hebrews 12: 1-4
August 28	Feast of our Holy Father Augustine	John 10: 7-18
August 29	Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time	Hebrews 12:5-13
September 5	Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 14:1, 7-14
September 12	Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 15: 1-10
September 19	Twenty-Fifth Sunday in ordinary Time	Luke 16: 1-13
	Why did the Lord Jesus Christ present us with this parable? He didn't approve, surely, of that cheat of a servant; he cheated his master, he stole from him, and didn't make it up from his own pocket — in order to prepare a little nest of quiet and security for himself after he lost his job. Why did the Lord set this before us? Not because the servant cheated, but because he exercised foresight for the future to make Christians blush, who make no such provision. He was insuring himself for a life that was going to end; won't you insure yourself for one that is eternal? (Sermon 359A, 9)	
September 26	Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 16: 19-31
* October 3 *	Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time	Luke 17: 5-19
LAY CONGRESS THEME: <i>Grant me O God to be mindful of you, to understand you, to love you!</i>		

**AUGUSTINIAN FRIENDS
SHARING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AUGUSTINE**

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