

# Augustinian Friends - Prayer Resource Guide

## An Augustinian Perspective on Ways of Living Out our Christian Spirituality

*This September delegates from all Provinces and regions of the Order are meeting in Rome for a General Chapter which takes place every six years. Our Provincial, Fr. Tony Banks and the elected superior from Korea, Br. Barnabas Kim, are representing our members. One of the issues that the General Chapter wants to look at is the way in which the Order throughout the world includes and involves the Christian laity. One very real way is the sharing of the Tradition of Spirituality handed on by Augustine. The following are some thoughts on this topic prepared by Fr. Mark Garrett OSA for the members of a variety of Augustinian Lay groups belonging to the Villa-nova Province*

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### What are the key ways for Augustine to express his spirituality?

In the first place, of course, **Christ**. St Augustine's own emphasis was always on Christ. Christ was the center of his teaching, preaching, and spirituality – the center of Augustine's conversion.

Augustine's thoughts on Christ were the cornerstone of his life as a Christian as a pastor and teacher. We could even say that Christ served for Augustine as the pattern of his thinking. It wasn't just that Christ was Augustine's favorite subject; Christ and his mission and ministry, his way of being God and his way of being human, his way of teaching and preaching, his way of self-giving – all these shaped Augustine's own way of thinking, his own method for life, for teaching, ministering, preaching, and leading the people entrusted to his care. Thus Christ was the source and also the method of Augustine's theology and philosophy, of all his thinking and spirituality.

After Christ and on account of Christ, Augustine placed emphasis on **Scripture**.

Remember how, for so long, he had found it hard to read and hear the words of the Bible with appreciation and understanding? God's grace changed that. Remember it was the words of Scripture that moved him to accept God's grace of conversion. Recall the scene of his conversion in the garden and the role Scripture played. [*Confessions*, book 8]

What would be next for Augustine?

Maybe next in importance is **Humility**.

There is a way in which Augustine approaches even Scripture with humility. That is, he grew to accept God's Word that way. At first, Augustine was so caught up in the style of impressive rhetoric that the Scriptures seemed too simple, too plain and basic, without much of the beautiful language of what Augustine thought of as good literature.

### 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 centered on the Gospel readings for coming Sundays and quotes from Augustine. Formation material is offered from different sources including a prayer orientated letter from our Chaplain.

It can be hard to appreciate the Bible if we are too full of ourselves, too full of pride. We could say, "I can't see the sense in this – this Biblical story, this miracle of Christ, this way of speaking or acting, this approach to reality – I can't see the sense in this, therefore it must be wrong." Sometimes people come at Scripture this way.

Another example, when we are really full of ourselves, we can even come up with the idea, "Jesus agrees with me here, so he must be right"! People don't usually say that out loud but the attitude can be there. Maybe we've met people like that. Maybe we've even met them in the mirror!

We must turn to Augustine once again: our focus must not be on ourselves, but on Christ. Jesus himself said, "The Father is greater than I." Why is it then that we have God neatly wrapped up – and all reality with him?

**Interiority** might be the next value to mention.

This is a way for us to reduce the "noise," the interference that dances around us in life, always seeking an entrée into our minds, our thinking, our serenity. It seems this interference, this noise, wants to determine our response to all the stimuli of life. It sometimes seems this is true now even more than it was in Augustine's times.

Turning the noise off and letting our minds and souls relax in meditation – this was important to Augustine. It could be for us now as well. Remember how the Bible passage that called to Augustine for conversion warned against dissipation - dissipating one's energy, especially one's psychic and spiritual energy on too much of the clamorous but less important aspects of human existence?

Thinking of the Scriptures and how they can lead us to Christ, we can find something that is pretty much the opposite of this distracted inattention. It's what they call *lectio divina* – the term theological and spiritual writers of the Christian Church use to describe the slow and meditative reading of Scripture that allows God and Christ to speak to us. In such a context Augustine calls Christ "the inner Teacher." Not in dissipation, but in the gentle, slow, meditative and loving approach to pondering the Scripture gives Christ, the inner Teacher, the opportunity to speak to us. We'll have to come back to this idea again sometime soon.

Two more qualities can't be left out of a list of what is important in Augustine's approach to spirituality – and these have to do with our relationship with our neighbor, our brother and sister human beings. We can't close this list without mentioning them! These qualities are on the one hand, "Compassion and Mercy", and on the other the importance of "Community".

Augustine would have us show **Compassion and Mercy** to all, even to ourselves, letting Christ, "the inner Healer," heal our pride, our habitual focus on self. Augustine stands out among writers on moral life because of his concern even for the perpetrator of evil, who would ordinarily be the last one we might be moved to care about. He intends that we look beyond ourselves and show the same mercy to others that we ourselves have received from an all-loving God.

It's unlikely that many of us interested in Augustine would forget the importance he placed on **Community**. Our friends and those around us can, by their words, but also by their life, speak to us of God and of grace-filled living. We can profit from the help of others for understanding Scripture and for coming to know Christ, coming to know God. These 'others' are our nearest manifestation of the Body of Christ and our link to the Church.

Indeed, in many ways community is really the key quality in understanding Augustine's approach to the living out of our Christian spirituality; it is the most important thing, because it is the living out of love toward God in and through our neighbor.

All over the world, we Augustinians are looking forward to even more chances to share our work, prayer and friendship with the laity who have done us the honour of seeking partnership with us in living out our lives as true members of God's People. Please remember in your prayers all the wonderful Augustinian Family of which you are a valued part.

Mark Garrett OSA



## From our Chaplain

September 27th. 2007

**Dear Friends,**

so much has been written about the early life of St. Augustine leading up to his conversion that we begin to think nothing much happened to him from that time on. He was literally at the half-way mark of his life when he finally surrendered to God's grace though the struggle was so fierce he almost didn't make it:

*"I anxiously reflected how long a time had elapsed since the nineteenth year of my life when I began to burn with a zeal for wisdom, planning that when I found it I would abandon all the empty hopes and lying follies of hollow ambition. And here I was already thirty, and still mucking about in the same mire in a state of indecision." (Confessions 6. 11, 18)*

Several times in the course of our lives we arrive at a moment when the identity we had carved for ourselves no longer seems to suffice, in fact it actually collapses, and the mystery of who we are has to find another shape, fashioned from our pain, from which we can begin to greet the world anew. We are familiar with the term 'mid-life crisis' - which is what was happening to Augustine in that garden in Milan - but it barely registers with us that there are at least two more watersheds which occur when we are entering our early and later old age and begin to view the world from an entirely new vantage point.

*"In this life we are all bound to die; and for everyone, his last day is always uncertain. Yet, as babies, we can look forward to being boys; and as boys, to youth; as youths, to being grown up, and as young men, to reaching our prime, and in our prime, to growing old. Whether this will happen is uncertain; but there is always something to look forward to. But an old man has no further stage of life before him." (Sermon 39)*

As Augustine moved into his seventies, he realized that his energy and time were beginning to run out. He named a younger priest, Eraclius, as his successor who was not consecrated a Bishop straight away, though he did take over courtroom duties. This left Augustine free to study scripture, re-read his entire library and write his 'Reconsiderations', by which he meant a review rather than a withdrawal of his life's opinions. He wryly commented to his congregation "Let no one envy me this leisure time, for it is well and truly occupied." When he was seventy-five he excused himself from attending the dedication of a church explaining: "I could come were it not winter. I could snap my fingers at the winter were I young!"

At this time a number of deaths of life-long friends and fellow bishops occurred, reminding him of the loss of his mother and son whose memory had remained with him throughout the decades. He came to realize that he might have all the immunity of eternity in his soul, but his spendable years were short. Whatever awareness of bewilderment and anxiety might have arisen in him, he overcame such feelings not by analysis or introspection, but by stepping over them to engage with greater industry in the constant quest of his life, the pursuit of God. This is what shaped and gave identity and wholeness to his old age. "My entire hope is exclusively in your very great mercy. Grant what you command, and command what you will." (Confessions 10. 29, 40)

To some extent at least, ageing releases people from the compunction to hurry, to compete, to succeed or to excel. There is a freedom to develop new ways of thinking, let go some of the old securities and deepen trust in who each has become and Who it is that accompanies us at every stage of the way. Augustine lived out his own advice to others:

*"It is necessary that we be always new, without permitting the influence of the old to subvert us, growing, progressing, renewing our interior being day by day; we should not progress by growing old, rather, we should let newness grow within us." (Sermon on Psalm 131)*

In a period of almost fifty years it is not surprising to find that Augustine's ideas changed and developed as he entered the different stages of his life. He was, in his own words, 'a man who writes as he progresses and who progresses as he writes'.

In a world so centered on youth, there are few who see mature age as a gift. But that is what it is—a gift brimming over with the possibility of a deeper, richer spiritual life. For this enrichment to happen we need to take time to reflect on our inner world and the journey we have taken over the years. May we continue to grow into the fresh possibilities and promise of each stage of our life,

with much love,

Paul

## Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

"We knelt side by side. I have always found praying very difficult. Nevertheless there is a prayer of St. Augustine, a fellow communicator who once called himself, as I must, a vendor of words, that I often said over and over, and did on this occasion, kneeling beside Mother Teresa:

*"Let me offer you in sacrifice the service of my thoughts and my tongue,  
But first give me what I may offer you".*

I once scribbled down my own version on the flyleaf of the paperback edition of Saint Augustine's "Confessions":

*"God, stay with me. Let no word cross my lips that is not your word,  
No thought enter my mind that is not your thought,  
No deed ever be done or entertained by me that is not your deed".*

Malcolm Muggeridge. Something Beautiful for God

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"God is established, if not evident,  
In the Good where He belongs,  
In the Bad where He is needed,  
And in the Indifferent where least suspected".

"Why not grasp this unpolluted moment out of Time?  
Any captured fraction of it has the quality of Infinity, so grab it now:  
You might have all the immunity of eternity in your soul  
but your spendable years are short".

Paul Radley. My Blue Checker Corker and Me

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It is central to Augustine's spirituality that humans are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26), but an image that has been defaced by sin. It is this 'image' that enables humans to remember, understand and love God. The image of God was marred at the Fall, but the capacity for friendship with God remained. From Plotinus he learned the idea of the inner spiritual journey, first from the exterior world of appearances to the interior world of the soul, and then to the superior realm of the divine. At baptism, the Holy Spirit enters the soul, bestowing his gift of grace and making it the dwelling place of the Trinity. For Augustine, the goal of the spiritual life is to have restored in one's self, and in community, the image of God. This is received by loving God and fellow humans, and by living in harmony and mutual regard.

That all this is the journey of a lifetime is expressed in Augustine's prayer at the end of *On the Trinity*: 'Lord God, Trinity,

may I be mindful of You,  
understand you, love you.

Increase these gifts in me until you have  
entirely reformed me'. (15.28.51)

A. Knowles + P. Penkett. Augustine and His World

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