

Augustinian Friends - Prayer Resource Guide

Reflection from Conamara

By John O'Donohue Ph. D.

This article was sent to me by Anne Halloway in late January and shortly after receiving her email I read in The Tablet of the sudden death of its author, John O'Donohue, at the age of 52. In his mid thirties he chose to live as a hermit, and from this secluded existence began to write books, essays and articles that touched the lives of many.

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Humans have an uncanny ability to domesticate everything they touch. Eventually, even the strangest things become absorbed into the routine of the daily mind with its steady geographies of endurance, anxiety and contentment. Only seldom does the haze lift, and we glimpse for a second, the amazing plenitude of being here. Sometimes, unfortunately, it is suffering or threat that awakens us. It could happen that one evening you are busy with many things and the phone rings. Someone you love is suddenly in the grip of an illness that could end their life within hours. It only takes a few seconds to receive that news. Yet, when you put the phone down you are already standing in a different world. All you know has just been rendered unsure and dangerous. You realize that the ground has been turned into quicksand. Now it seems to you that even mountains are suspended on strings.

If you could imagine the most incredible story ever, it would be less incredible than the story of being here. And the ironic thing is that the story is not a story, it is true. It takes us so long to see where we are. It takes us even longer to see who we are. This is why the greatest gift you could ever dream is a gift that you can only receive from one person. And that person is yourself. Therefore, the most subversive invitation you could ever accept is the invitation to awaken to who you are and where you have landed.

Plato said in 'The Symposium' that one of the greatest privileges of a human life is to become mid-wife to the birth of the soul in another. When your soul awakens, you begin to truly inherit your life. You leave the kingdom of fake surfaces, repetitive talk and weary roles and slip deeper into the true adventure of who you are and who you are called to become. The greatest friend of the soul is the unknown. Yet we are afraid of the unknown because it lies outside our vision and our control. We avoid it or quell it by filtering it through our protective barriers of domestication and control. The normal way never leads home.

Once you start to awaken, no one can ever claim you again for the old patterns. Now you realize how precious your time here is. You are no longer willing to squander your essence on undertakings that do not nourish your true self; your patience grows thin with tired talk and

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 and quotes from Augustine. Formation material is offered from different sources including a prayer orientated letter from our Chaplain.



Reflection from Conamara

dead language. You see through the rosters of expectation which promise you safety and the confirmation of your outer identity. Now you are impatient for growth, willing to put yourself into the way of change. You want your work to become an expression of your gift. You want your relationship to voyage beyond the pallid frontiers to where the danger of transformation dwells. You want your God to be wild and to call you to where your destiny awaits.

You have come out of Plato's Cave of Images into the sunlight and the mystery of colour and imagination. When you begin to sense that your imagination is the place where you are most divine, you feel called to clean out of your mind all the worn and shabby furniture of thought. You wish to refurbish yourself with living thought so that you can begin to see. As Meister Eckhart says:

'Thoughts are our inner senses. When the inner senses are dull and blurred, you can see nothing in or of yourself; you become a respectable prisoner of received images'. Now you realize that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty and you undertake the difficult but beautiful path to freedom.

On this journey, you begin to see how the sides of your heart that seemed awkward, contradictory and uneven are the places where the treasure is hidden. You begin to become true to yourself. And as Shakespeare says in Hamlet: *'To thine own self be true, then as surely as night follows day, thou canst to no man be false'*.

The journey shows you that from this inner dedication you can reconstruct your own values and action. You develop from your own self-compassion a great compassion for others. You are no longer caught in the false game of judgment, comparison and assumption. More naked now than ever, you begin to feel truly alive. You begin to trust the music of your own soul; you have inherited treasure that no one will ever be able to take from you. At the deepest level, this adventure of growth is in fact a transfigurative conversation with your own death. And when the time comes for you to leave, the view from your death bed will show a life of growth that gladdens the heart and takes away all fear.

A Blessing

May the light of your soul guide you

May the light of your soul bless the work you do
With the secret love and warmth of your heart.

May you see in what you do the beauty of your own soul.

May the sacredness of your work bring healing light and renewal
To those who work with you
And those who see and receive your work.

May your work never weary you.

May it release within you wellsprings of
Refreshment, inspiration and excitement.

May you be present in what you do.

May the day never burden you
May the dawn find you awake and alert
Approaching the new day with dreams, possibilities and promises.

May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.
May you go into the night blessed, sheltered and protected

May your soul calm, console and renew you.

(John O'Donohue: Anam Cara)



From our Chaplain

March 11th. 2008

Dear Friends,

Easter came early this year. We were expecting it in March but to our surprise it dawned in our hearts on the morning of February the Thirteenth 2008 with the words of the Prime Minister to the indigenous people of our ancient land when he simply said "We are sorry". These words made the opening of the Parliament a historic day for Australia - a true watershed in the Nation's journey towards Reconciliation. In the midst of the sorrow and shame engendered in those who once more listened to the historic tales of separation and bereavement experienced by the 'stolen generation' was a new sense of relief. As one commentator described it, there was a lifting of the 'toxic atmosphere' that had gathered around us because of our national hesitancy in seeking forgiveness. Surprise and exhilaration followed in knowing that our communal expression of regret had been received with relief and joy by those who had been most damaged!

Such a Resurrection experience is possible when we are able to apologize for hurts that we ourselves have perpetrated, let go hurts that have happened to us, and mutually learn to live as forgiven and beloved members of God's family. On 'Sorry Day' we as a nation were shown the true picture of ourselves that had been hidden in the attic over many decades. St. Augustine's words, which he speaks to God in the Confessions, applied to our experience individually and collectively: "*You took me from behind myself and showed me who I was. I cried out in horror!*" In a symbolic sense we had to enter into the darkness of the tomb and face the reality of our failure before we could comprehend that there can be no healing of hearts without unreserved sorrow.

James Baldwin, a black American writer, once wrote: "*Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*" The more we are in touch with reality and seek to cope with it, no matter how painful it may be, the better mental and emotional well-being we enjoy. The slightest degree of denial or trivialization on our part not only prolongs the injustice, it magnifies and continues it. By refusing to face our historic reality we could hardly expect our own wounds to be healed, let alone the wounds of those who had been abused. More than anything else, people who have been wounded by injustice want their suffering to be acknowledged and understood. Easter came early this year because we faced and named the reality of the long 'stony, stubborn and deafening silence' that had dominated the previous Parliament's approach to Reconciliation. After such a long Lent we have experienced a new Spring-time of healing as we begin to mend generations of broken trust.

Many researchers believe that forgiveness - a virtue embraced by almost every religious tradition as a balm for the soul - is medicine for the body as well. They have evidence that persons who are inclined to pardon the transgressions of others have lower blood pressure, fewer depressive symptoms and, in late middle age, better overall mental and physical health than those who do not forgive easily. Even more telling is the ability to forgive oneself. Men and women who are prone to self-recrimination are three or four times more likely to be clinically depressed than those who are highly self-forgiving.

Like many others within the Christian tradition Augustine too came to the point where he was able to acknowledge regret for past sins but only after he realized that he was deeply loved by God in a totally gratuitous way: "*By your grace and mercy you melted my sins away like ice . . . I acknowledge that you have forgiven me everything.*" (Confessions 2, 15) With the help of God's grace he was able to look honestly at himself without being destroyed by the insights he had gained. Quite the opposite, he found the freedom to change. The shock, hurt or shame we may feel when regret strikes can be the very thing God loves most about us, especially if it provides us with the courage to say "Sorry" and begin to make amends for the damage caused to others. When God reveals us to ourselves it is always done in a healing way: "*Thanks be to God who has enabled me to recall these things without fear. . . In your presence, Lord, I can remember it now and be at peace.*" (Confessions 1, 16, 26)

On that February day in Canberra, and in Australia all over, people were embracing one another and weeping tears of sorrow that soon turned to joy because a bitter journey was over and a new healing process had begun. May this 'Easter experience' which came late in our Nation's history, though early in the liturgical sense, continue to transform our hearts and relationships so that the image of the Risen Christ may be evident in all that we say and do.

with much love

Paul

Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 27 February 2008*

... But with the Easter Vigil of 387, as we have said, Augustine's journey was not finished. He returned to Africa and founded a small monastery where he retreated with a few friends to dedicate himself to the contemplative life and study. This was his life's dream. Now he was called to live totally for the truth, with the truth, in friendship with Christ who is truth: a beautiful dream that lasted three years, until he was, against his will, ordained a priest at Hippo and destined to serve the faithful, continuing, yes, to live with Christ and for Christ, but at the service of all.

This was very difficult for him, but he understood from the beginning that only by living for others, and not simply for his private contemplation, could he really live with Christ and for Christ. Thus, renouncing a life solely of meditation, Augustine learned, often with difficulty, to make the fruit of his intelligence available to others. He learned to communicate his faith to simple people and thus learned to live for them in what became his hometown, tirelessly carrying out a generous and onerous activity which he describes in one of his most beautiful sermons: "To preach continuously, discuss, reiterate, edify, be at the disposal of everyone - it is an enormous responsibility, a great weight, an immense effort" (*Sermon*, 339, 4). But he took this weight upon himself, understanding that it was exactly in this way that he could be closer to Christ. ***To understand that one reaches others with simplicity and humility was his true second conversion.***

But there is a last step to Augustine's journey, a third conversion, that brought him every day of his life to ask God for pardon. During the last part of his life he understood that what he had concluded at the beginning about the Sermon on the Mount - that is, now that we are Christians, we live this ideal permanently - was mistaken. Only Christ himself truly and completely accomplishes the Sermon on the Mount. We always need to be washed by Christ, who washes our feet, and be renewed by him. We need permanent conversion. Until the end we need this humility that recognizes that we are sinners journeying along, until the Lord gives us his hand definitively and introduces us into eternal life. It was in this final attitude of humility, lived day after day, that Augustine died.

He wrote: "I understood that only One is truly perfect, and that the words of the Sermon on the Mount are completely realized in only One - in Jesus Christ himself. The whole Church instead, all of us - including the Apostles -, must pray everyday: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (*De Sermone Domini in Monte*, I, 19, 1-3).

Augustine converted to Christ who is truth and love, followed him throughout his life and became a model for every human being, for all of us in search of God. In a beautiful passage, St Augustine defines prayer as the expression of desire and affirms that God responds by moving our hearts toward him. On our part we must purify our desires and our hopes to welcome the sweetness of God (cf. *In I Ioannis* 4, 6). Indeed, only this opening of ourselves to others saves us. Let us pray, therefore, that we can follow the example of this great convert every day of our lives, and in every moment of our life encounter the Lord Jesus, the only One who saves us, purifies us and gives us true joy, true life.