

# Augustinian Friends - Prayer Resource Guide

## From our Chaplain

December 21st. 2009

Dear Friends,

We are told in St. Luke's Gospel (New Jerusalem translation) that Mary gave birth to a son, her first-born, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the 'living space'. The owner of the house (or the Inn) would have had a lot on his mind as he looked after his guests and other visitors, and the presence of the young pregnant mother and her husband would not have been first on his list. Sure, he made the back shed available, but then he got on with the rest of his life in the living space crowded with lights, people and activity.

And a child was born, and the Glory of the Lord shone around, and the Incarnation DID take place and God's Word became flesh - and the world was never the same again! But the owner of the Inn was oblivious to all this and carried on without noticing what had happened, and so he failed to be present to the most transforming moment in history.

Perhaps we can recognize something of the Inn-keeper in ourselves as we make a final rush towards Christmas. Most of the time we, like the host, are quite proud to have the back shed of our hearts used as a dwelling place for this new-born child, but then we go off and get involved with parties and functions and forget that something very significant has happened and so we fail to allow it to deeply influence our lives.

In one of his Christmas sermons St. Augustine comments "*He found no place in the inn, but makes for Himself a temple in the hearts of believers*" (Sermon 190 3,4) God Himself wants to make room in the 'living spaces' of our lives for the Word to be made flesh in us so that we too might bring forth His life and love and show it to the world by what we say and do.

Christmas in Australia is such an extrovert feast with the lure of barbecues and beaches, camping holidays and Carols-in-the-park taking our attention away from that inner temple Augustine speaks of where we are called to reverence the Holy One dwelling there.

Let us make a little time in these next few days to take off our Inn-keeper's hat and become more like the shepherds. They heard the call of the angels to draw near so that they could reverence the peace and love surrounding the Christ child. They then returned home glorifying God for all that they had heard and seen. May this be true for each one of us,

With much love,

*Paul*

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### 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.

## Cassago Brianza: the town or community where Augustine spent time at a villa he familiarly called Cassiciacum

Cassago Brianza is a small town some sixty kilometers northeast of Milan, on the way to the Lake Como area. In September 2009 it was one of the first places we visited on our journey following 'in the footsteps of St. Augustine'. Its importance lies in the fact that it was here Augustine spent six or seven months with his mother and other family members and friends forming a community of faith in preparation for his entry into the Catholic church. It has always been my understanding that the days were spent with time to be together, time to be alone, time for meals and time for study, time for prayer and time for relaxation.

Roman politicians and merchants often went to the countryside, away from the wear and tear of their public life to find refreshment in the mountain air and peaceful surroundings. The Romans called this retired life 'Otium' (restful ease) as opposed to the public life of "Negotium" which they often found destructive to the peace of mind that goes with a good conscience. Augustine was lucky enough to have a friend called Verecundus who offered him the loan of his villa so that he could find the rest in God he needed away from the fever of the world.

He retired from his job of lecturer at the beginning of the 'vintage holidays' which took place each year around the 23rd. of August through to October 15th. Since he was not returning to the school again he was able to stay on into the Spring of the next year 387 before returning to Milan in time for his Easter baptism.

While at Cassiciacum, Augustine wrote a few small books in the form of discourses which took place between himself and the assembled community. At the end of his life he reviewed all that he had written and had this to say about one early essay "De Beata Vita" (On the Happy Life).

*"It was written not after but between the books "Contra Academicos" It originated on the occasion of my birthday (November 13th.) as is clearly indicated in the book itself; and was consummated during a three day conversation". Here is how he concludes the 1st chapter: "On the Ides of November fell my birthday. After a light breakfast enough not to impede our powers of thinking, I asked all those of us who, not only on that day but every day were living together, to have a congenial session in the bathing quarters, a quiet place for the season. Assembled there - for without hesitation I present them to your kindness, though only by name - were first, our mother, to whose merit, in my opinion, I owe everything that I have; my brother Navigius, Trygetius and Licentius, fellow citizens and my pupils; Lastidianus and Rusticus, relatives of mine, ... Also my son, Adeodatus, the youngest of all was with us, who promises great success unless my love deceives me". (De Beata Vita, 1,6)*

Not much remains of the physical site that was once Cassiciacum though the surrounding town has echoes of all the elements that Augustine recalls of his sojourn there. The source of the spring that filled the baths where Augustine discussed the nature of Good with his friends still flows. The mountains surrounding the town still inspires awe as they did for Augustine who saw in them reflections of the might and beauty of the Creator. The local people still offer a recipe for the cake Augustine provided to his guests when celebrating his birthday! And treading on the hill behind the sixteenth century parish church it was pointed out to us that beneath that soil, the old wall of Verecundus' villa is there, awaiting only for an archeologist to bring it into the open.

# A REVIEW OF THE PARLIAMENT OF WORLD RELIGIONS

which took place in Melbourne December 2009

I recently attended part of the Parliament of the World Religions (see entry on this title in Wikipedia) in Melbourne in early December. The significance of this event became more apparent as the week unfolded and, in retrospect, it could have been more prominently promoted within Australia than it actually was. Like the Olympics, the Parliament takes place in a different host city on each occasion. It traces its beginnings to the World Parliament of Religions that took place in Chicago in 1893. After a break of a century the Parliament was revived under its present name in Chicago (1993) then in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004) and Melbourne (2009). The announcement of the next host city is awaited.

The Parliament is a forum open to all where different religious faiths can enter into dialogue on issues of religious and human concern. According to one of the Melbourne news outlets around 8,000 people from all over the world had registered for the Melbourne parliament. Prominent figures from the various faiths were present. Each day began with religious observance and one was free to experience the prayer forms of other religious faiths. I attended an Islamic observance on one day which focussed on the Muslim call to prayer. Having recently been awakened each morning on the Augustinian pilgrimage to North Africa by the haunting chant of the muezzin broadcasted on loudspeakers I had a particular interest in this form of prayer.

Throughout the day there were four session-times scheduled with each session having many options. Choosing which sessions to attend was like the proverbial visit of a child to a candy shop with a limited amount of pocket money except in this instance the currency was time!. On several occasions, although I had worked out my options beforehand, a whim would take me in a different direction and I was grateful for my change of mind. Many of the sessions dealt head-on with issues of pressing concern to all of humanity – climate change (the forthcoming Copenhagen summit was very much on peoples' minds), ending poverty, Millennium Development Goals, world peace, respect for the indigenous peoples of the world and their spiritualities, gender issues, health including response the HIV/AIDS issue. In all of these was a clear understanding how these were matters of clear relevance to the interests of religious faiths and how the various traditions working together with all of humanity had the capacity to positively contribute to the hopeful future.

Other sessions focussed on the content of religious faith with sessions both looking within a particular faith tradition as well as addressing themes in the context of dialogue between different faith traditions. An example of the latter was a session on the place of Jesus and Mary in Islamic theology. I endeavoured through the sessions I chose to experience the various major religious faiths.

In the evening there would be plenary sessions. On one evening it was a presentation on various world interfaith organizations. It was encouraging to witness the positive good being achieved by these associations. On another evening a concert of sacred music from the various traditions profoundly moved the heart. It was one of those experiences of being able to appreciate the precious gift we have in the diversity of the human family.

Apart from the sessions a highlight was the ordinary conversations struck up with other participants as one awaited in queue for a coffee, sat down to take a breather or sitting together in a room or a hall waiting for a session to begin.

A number of influences awakened my interest to attend the Parliament when I first heard of it several months ago – a belief that religious faith and spirituality has a part to play in what is happening in the world of today; recent experiences of interfaith dialogue as part of the Augustinian Volunteers course held here at Greystanes; the multi-cultural nature of Australian society and the immediacy of these issues in living here in western Sydney; the fact that the Augustinian Order in the Asia-Pacific is taking conscious steps to enter into interfaith dialogue in our part of the world where all the great religious faiths are represented. For all these reasons I am glad I attended and have greatly benefited from the experience.

Peter Jones OSA

## *Extracts from some Christmas Sermons of St Augustine*

From Sermons translated by Edmund Hill OP

"..... We celebrate this day every year with great solemnity, because on it was fulfilled the prophecy which said, *Truth has sprung from the earth, and Justice has looked forth from heaven* [Ps: 85:11]. Truth, which is in *the bosom of the Father* [Jn 1:18] has sprung from the earth, in order also to be in the bosom of his mother. Truth, by which the world is held together, has sprung from the earth, in order to be carried in a woman's arms. Truth, on which the bliss of angels is incorruptibly nourished, has sprung from the earth, in order to be suckled at breasts of flesh. Truth, which heaven is not big enough to hold, has sprung from the earth, in order to be placed in a manger.

[Augustine, Sermon 185:1.]

"..... None of you should believe that the Son of God was converted and changed into a son of man; but rather we must believe that while remaining the son of God he became the son of man, and that the divine substance was not consumed, while the human substance was perfectly assumed. Just because it says, you see, *the Word was God, and the Word became flesh* (Jn 1:1.14), it doesn't mean that the Word became flesh in such a way that it ceased to be God; considering that in that very flesh which the Word became Emmanuel was born, *God with us* (Mt 1:23).

[Augustine, Sermon 187 4]

"..... What praises, then, should we be singing to God's love, what thanks should we be expressing! I mean, he loved us so much that for our sake he came to be in time, though all times were made through him; and he was prepared to be younger in age than many of his servants in the world, though he is older in eternity than all the world. He loved us so much that he became man though he had made man; that he was created from a mother whom he had created, carried in arms he had fashioned, sucked breasts which he himself had filled; that he lay squalling in a manger wordless in infancy, though he is the Word without whom human eloquence would be at a loss for words.

[Note: Augustine likes contrasting "wordless in infancy" and the "Word". This is clearer in Latin than in English. The Latin "infans", meaning "dumb" or "unable to speak", from which the word infant derives lends itself to this contrast. This appears several times in these sermons]

Observe, O man, what God became for you; acknowledge the teaching of such incalculable humility, even coming from a teacher not yet able to speak. You, once upon a time in paradise, were so fluent that you gave names to every living, animate, creature; yet for your sake your Creator was lying there, a speechless infant, and didn't even call his mother by her name. You there, in the broad acres of groves of fruit trees, lost yourself by neglecting obedience; he out of obedience came as a mortal to a cramped and crowded lodging house, in order by dying to look for you who were dead. You, though you were a man, wished to be God, and so got lost; he, though he was God, wished to be a man, and so find what had been lost. Human pride pressed down on you so heavily, that the only thing which could lift you up was divine humility." [Augustine, Sermon 188:2.3]

"Because Christ is truth and peace and justice, conceive him in faith, give birth to him in works, so that what Mary's womb did for the flesh of Christ, your hearts may do for Christ's law. How, I mean to say, can you have no part in Mary's child bearing, when you are members of Christ? Mary gave birth to your head, the Church to all of you, because she too is both mother and virgin; mother in her womb of charity, virgin in the integrity of her faith and piety. She gives birth to whole peoples, but they are members of one person, whose body and wife she is. In this respect too she resembles the virgin mother, because in all that multitude she is mother of unity." [Augustine, Sermon 192 2]