

AUGUSTINIAN FRIENDS - PRAYER RESOURCE GUIDE

LETTER FROM OUR CHAPLAIN

March 13th. 2011

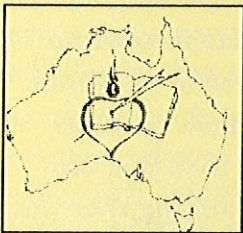
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Augustinians On-Line

www.augustinians.org.au

Stay in touch with the latest news from the Augustinian community through the Province's website. Details of upcoming events in Augustinian spirituality and in parishes and schools around the country can be found on this easy to use site.

Links to local lay Augustinian associations and the international community can also be found on this site.

www.augnet.org

Augnet is a website containing a total of 1,800 pages about Augustine's life and work, and about history and activities of the Order of Saint Augustine. It contains pages on Augustinian Friends in Australia and England.

Contacts

Paul Maloney OSA (02) 9631 0340
paulmal@bigpond.com

Sylvia Phillips (07) 3397 9758
syldavid@optusnet.com.au

Dear Friends,

at the beginning of each year a group of prospective 'Volunteers' gathers at Brookvale for a 3 week course which provides them with an understanding of Augustinian Spirituality as one of the surest foundations for acting justly in a world where many of our society hold out their hands in need but are left empty and bereft. The admonition of St. Augustine that we should "*honour God in one another*" propels us to care for everyone we meet, not just those who are closest to us in our family or local parish community.

The energy, enthusiasm and generosity of this year's group of 12 men and women of various ages, cultures, and careers - who in many real ways were removed from their own comfort zones - provided a heart-warming example of what the first community of disciples must have felt like when they were sent out by Jesus to comfort the lost and lonely of their times. Their first care and support was to be for one another.

We all need encouragement on our Christian journey and the opportunity to meet as friends and followers of Augustine at regular meetings throughout the year (where his wisdom can be gleaned and our own faith can be revived) is a gift not to be ignored. We may not be able to give 3 weeks of our lives to the challenge of becoming volunteers, but the chance to attend a meeting every six to eight weeks could refresh us with new insights as we share with laity around the world the riches of our Augustinian tradition.

Augustine constantly preached that by our baptism we are made members of the Body of Christ so, in a sense, 'volunteering' is not an option but a duty:

"When Christ has begun to dwell in our inmost being through faith, when we have confessed and invoked him, and he has begun to take possession of us, then is formed the whole Christ, head and body, one from the many. From now on listen to the words of Christ. . . Let us be his members, so that this voice may be ours as well".

(Exposition on Psalm 74,4)

In this coming year I hope to visit each of the parishes where our Augustinian laity meet so that I can share with you new resources that give insights from Augustine that could be helpful in dealing with the complexities of family life, work and modern society in a Christian way.

With much love,

Love of God As Love For One-another.

This is one of the papers delivered at the conclusion of a 3 week live-in 'Intensive' held in February at which twelve students uncovered for themselves how the Spirituality of Augustine can provide a solid basis for our acting justly in an often fragmented world.

To begin, I would like you to close your eyes and take a second to think about one interaction you've had recently that really challenged your patience. It might have been with someone who disappointed you or hurt you, or just someone who annoyed you.

It is so easy to think of that person with a grudge in our hearts, maybe even with a certain level of contempt. Today I am going to be looking at the challenge and, most importantly, the gift that St. Augustine brings to the forefront of our spirituality - a recognition that God's entire being is found in every person we encounter! We constantly find ourselves trying to fit those we claim to love into a mould, which is often self-seeking. When evaluating relationships, we often find ourselves asking what we can get from other persons. *How can this person make my existence simpler?* In actual fact, Augustine teaches us that we should approach relationships asking *How can I serve this person, in whom Christ Jesus is fully present?*

St. Augustine calls us to turn our lives into an active search for God in others. He became well known for his insight into the human heart acknowledging that the longing for holiness, often found in closeness to our Creator, is common to everyone. He also wrote that it is this very journey toward God that brings true peace and happiness to mankind. In the well-known opening paragraph of his *Confessions* he writes: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you". It is in this universal search that we can come to realize the truth of Augustine's understanding that the presence of God is in all persons. By initially looking inward, we recognise our own capacity to love *and* our desire for God. Augustine teaches us in his *Confessions* that to know God is to know ourselves, that the self is discovered in God while God is discovered in the self.

It is important to realize that Augustine's guidance in this area comes from a conversion that many of us could relate to. While his teachings are challenging - remember just a moment ago, as you thought about a person who offended you, how difficult it may have been to immediately see God's presence in them - he demonstrates himself that this is not out of any sinner's reach. Augustine admits that he was afraid to ask God to change his heart and allow him to become pure immediately. Instead, he preferred to ask to be changed "later".

In this exploration we make the realization that God and Love are one and the same, and that humans seek this truth above all else. . . . The late Augustinian scholar, Fr. Tarcisus Van Bavel, reminds us that it is only possible to love human beings selflessly when the love of people is at the same time the realization of love of God and trust in him. The statement from John's Gospel "God is Love" is asserted by Augustine to consequently mean that "Love is God", and that this *love* can only mean "our human love" with Divine love running through it.

In his *Confessions* he exclaims *"Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst; you touched me and I burn for your peace"*. Upon such words he is then able to come to the striking realization that God has been present all along in his life, which has been a pilgrimage of grace, even and especially throughout his struggles with lust and his involvement with the Manicheans.

Looking back upon the most difficult moments of our lives, we often fail to see where God was. We often fall into the trap of thinking that God in fact *caused* or *failed to stop* these difficulties, forgetting that, being Love, God is incapable of evil and could be found acting through the persons who reached out in love, even through small gestures. Augustine's conversion experience calls us to know of God's faithfulness and goodness even when we are not actively aware of it, and even when times are difficult.

Augustine makes it clear that serving others should never be an ego building activity. In the Rule it is stated that "pride lurks even in good works in order to destroy them". Once this happens then even the intention to act in selfless love is negated. Augustine suggests that we should love all the more genuinely a person to whom we have nothing to offer, as this love will often be purer and more sincere since we are avoiding the temptation to extol ourselves as greater than the other. While I am sure this was never to say that we should not reach out financially to the poor, Augustine encourages us to consider our equal friendship the greatest we can make in love to others. This is a demonstration of the equal presence of God in all, with God being the only worthy measure of goodness. In this way, no one truly loving the poor and needy brother or sister can claim to be any better because they themselves are not poor or needy. Fr. Thomas Martin OSA in his book *Our Restless Heart* describes Augustine's journey towards humility as a "bitter pill at first resisted which became life-giving medicine, curing the swollenness of his pride." (p 44)

The humility of the Incarnation is clearly the best starting point for the humility of the Christian. Knowing entirely about the sufferings of man, God willed to be present among us as one of us, simply to love us and reveal His forgiveness to us. In this way we can see that humility is truly the 'door of our heart' which is an opening for the Lord to enter. (T. Martin p. 45)

For Augustine, the door of his heart was also open in welcome to both friend and stranger. Hospitality was a touchstone to the way Augustine expressed his spirituality on a daily basis. According to Augustine, to be hospitable means to create a space where strangers can enter, feel free to be themselves and eventually become friends. This is a space where they don't need to conform to how *we* may want them to be. In our hospitality we are called to resist the temptation to impose our personal expectations upon others selfishly. We are called simply to love them as Christ did for us. When encountering people who challenge our patience, Augustine calls us to remember what Luke 6 tells us: *"Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. Instead, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be the children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked"*.

To conclude, I would like to say that learning about this aspect of Augustinian spirituality has made a permanent imprint on my personal spirituality. It has really given me new purpose, and will be guiding me not only in volunteering but in every relationship that is part of my life.

Catherine Rondeau

A Prayer of Love

(An edited version of a talk given at a Christian Meditation reflection day in Hobart.)

The practice of meditation leads us to something that is essential in loving - essential in love for one another and for our love of God - and is, I believe, present in God's love for the world. This 'something' is attention.

John Main says:

"Everyone who perseveres in meditation discovers that although during our time of meditation it might appear that nothing happens, yet gradually the whole of our life is changed. We have to be patient because we might like to be changed more rapidly. Our thought gradually becomes clarified, relationships become more loving, and this is because, in the process of meditation, we are made free to love by Love. . . . All this happens because we learn the courage to take the attention off ourselves. We learn to stop thinking about ourselves and allow ourselves to be. To be still, to be silent, is the lesson and in that stillness and silence we find ourselves in God in love".

(Way of Unknowing p. 11)

Our process of meditation teaches us to pay attention. In this process of learning to pay attention, we are learning slowly to take the attention off ourselves and to focus on *the other*. As we stay focused on our mantra we let go of our obsession with thoughts and emotions, anxieties and worries, successes and failures, our self image, our need for approval and our need to control—the hurly burly of self attention. We should not underestimate the power of the culture in which we live to make this process difficult. The success of a culture based on individual consumption, overwork and self-gratification, necessarily requires of us less genuine attention, less compassion or sense of community.

Our chronic distractedness in meditation is a symbol of what we experience around us. While this is not a new phenomenon - after all, the early monks and desert dwellers talked about this struggle with it - our surroundings make distraction inevitable. Laurence Freeman says that *"Imperceptibly, over the years, exposure to the media can erode our capacity for direct experience. Increasingly we experience events and emotions secondhand, through the views of others or the cult of celebrity."* When we continue to persevere in meditation, we are being quite counter-cultural. He goes on to say that *"[meditation] trains discernment and limits intolerance. Each time we sit to meditate we carry our own and the world's baggage into the work of attention. It is a way of loving the world we are part of and contributing to its well - being."*

Learning to pay attention is the first step in the path to love. Paying attention is the only way to be present to the *now*. As Jesus explained to Martha - it is the one thing necessary. But, of course, we find it incredibly difficult. It is much easier to follow the distractions, to be dreaming of the future, remembering the past, to be not present to ourselves, to others, to God.

The marvelous gift that meditation gives us is the first step on that path - we learn to pay attention. Slowly, painfully, we are aware of our lack of presence, the hooks that keep us from being attentive. When we are fully present, when we give the other our attention, we begin to know them - not as a projection of ourselves, or as someone to be changed, but as themselves. It is hard for us to maintain attention, but when it happens even for a short moment, we feel the difference. Our lives are irrevocably changed by the experience. Giving another our complete attention is giving them our love.

Why is this attention so powerful? As John Main said, *"it is because in the act of attention we transcend the ego. Fully absorbed in our attention, we leave self behind. Without such attention, we can never fully hear or see or experience what is. We become like the eye that cannot see itself, that sees all. We begin to see everything as Christ sees it. In other words we begin to see with his light."*

(The Hunger for Depth and Meaning, p. 196)

And, of course, we may gradually begin to love with his love.