

Augustinian Friends - Prayer Resource Guide

From our Chaplain

November 30th. 2011

Dear Friends,

In a few days time I am invited to speak at a Christmas School Assembly to a large group of students belonging to various Christian denominations in the Hunter Valley. In preparation for this occasion the senior pupils who have been studying Comparative Religion as an HSC subject have interviewed the little kids in Grade Two to find out what it is that they look forward to most at this time of the year. As you can imagine, the overwhelming vote is given to the getting of presents, though one little boy goes so far as to say it is just as much fun to give presents as to receive them.

Seeing the video clip of these eager little faces prompts me to want to tell them that the reason we give gifts at Christmas time is to remind ourselves of the great gift God has given us of 'Love made visible' in the person of Jesus. The gifts we receive and the gifts that we give are our way of celebrating the gift of new life God came to share with us that enters gently into our lives, as it did for the shepherds, when they were told "today you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger"; and love went out from their hearts to his and they bowed down to reverence him.

"He lies in a manger, but contains the world. . . . He is wrapped in swaddling clothes, but vests us with immortality. He found no place in the Inn, but makes for himself a temple in the hearts of believers. In order that weakness might become strong, strength becomes weak".

(St. Augustine, Sermon 190, 3.4)

In this Advent of looming recession in the wider world it might mean for adults, as well as children, that we rely less on financial security and the gifts this can buy and more on the wealth of human relationships that warm and support us against adversity. When we learn to live with the basics (rather than to hoard more than we need) we can never be made bereft by the loss of life's little baubles because we never depended on them in the first place. We can use this waiting time leading up to Christmas, for example, to become more attuned to discovering the Christ-child in the lonely, the elderly and the sick, those we have taken for granted.

Perhaps it is true to say that we can only love what we can get our arms around. At Christmas time we have a name, a face, an infant to spontaneously love who calls forth tenderness, protectiveness and care from the hardest of hearts. This is God's gift to the human race to convince us how much he wants to put his arms around us

With much love,



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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.

The Spirituality of St. Augustine expressed by his choice of Language

By Fr. John McCall OSA

A study of the language of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas reveals at least one significant difference. St Thomas invariably uses *either/or*, whereas St Augustine uses *both/and*. At first glance this information may seem to be interesting and nothing more.

What it can do for us as Augustinians and those we minister to is to invite us to reflect on how we ourselves use equivalent language in our daily lives. We may find that we hardly ever use *both/and*, or *and* by itself. Rather, we use the language of *but* in our general conversation. When speaking about ourselves or others we might say such things as, "He is a very good parish priest and has a wonderful parish, but he is no good at finance" — and we put greater emphasis on the second part of the statement. What the word *but* does is to neutralise the first part of the statement where very significant gifts are mentioned and focuses the attention on the negative or limitation of the person in the second part of the statement in a totally unbalanced way. It causes a significant split in how the person sees others or themselves. They own their faults and sins and downplay their gifts.

It may be a characteristic of our own language about ourselves, where we briefly acknowledge some gifts we have and insert *but*; this, as it were, puts a line through the gifts and focus our attention solely on own weaknesses. In a sense we put ourselves down, just as we put others down at times. Even though it might seem to be only a matter of words, it is in fact much more than that. It reveals a mind-set that can do considerable damage to our perception of how we allow God to relate to us, and in fact, can be a symptom of a real block to our spiritual growth. It is my experience that this may be a crucial adjustment that may need to be made if we are to continue to experience God's love and presence in a way that is wonderfully modelled by Augustine.

If we can let go of the use of the word *but*, and in its place use the word *and*, as Augustine does, then the way we speak and think about ourselves, or others, is much more whole and forms a community of inclusion, where we can hold both our gifts and our sinfulness together. Holding the truth of both gifts and limitations together, with truth and honesty, which is true humility, can make a profound difference to our stance before God. When we do this it feels right and our image of a God who loves me can now include *the all of who I am*, the good and the not so good. In the Confessions, Augustine is able to hold the truth of God's wonderful bounty *and* his own sinfulness with an at-homeness that reflects both God's gifts and Augustine's awareness of his absolute need and reception of God's love and forgiveness.

When companioning others who are experiencing God's consolation and a deepening of God's enfolding love to then introduce *but* into the conversation may be a block to any further grace that is being offered. The *but*, as it were, says "I am not worthy" and thwarts God any further room to go further, not in any real way, but that is the implication and result. If the person can change that *but* to an *and*, holding the all of who they are together and owning the all of who they are, then there is a release of any hindrance to God's action of grace, for they know that the enfolding experience of God's love includes the all of who they are.

If the person is advancing in the spiritual life and is experiencing a state of desolation the *but* tends to separate the gifts of the person from the faults. When there is an experience of absence of God's presence there is a tendency to want to leave that state of waiting in the darkness (or emptiness) and attempt to quickly move into activity in order to try and fix up the faults so as to earn or better prepare for God's grace, instead of staying in the waiting. This involves much activity that generates a real block in our response to God's apparent absence, for it takes the centre of attention from God and focuses it on faults and failings. Again the invitation is to let go of the *but* that separates the way we see ourselves and change to the *and* that unites us into wholeness. With the *both/and* we become real, grounded, truthful and whole.

Of course the words we use are just the external manifestation of a deep interior attitude. This can be illustrated by a remark of St Thérèse of Lisieux; when she states "I have my faults, *but*, I have my courage" She reverses the usual way we speak, placing the faults first and hence downplaying their importance and moves the focus to the second part of the sentence with the *but* which speaks of her gifts. This is a much healthier and positive way of speaking, yet it is still divisive. The call is still to hold both gifts **and** failings together, to be totally inclusive, to claim our wholeness, to be the one who we are.

The invitation in this reflection is for us to get off our *but(t)s* and speak with a real sense of the community of inclusion that uses the word *and*, rather than speak with a sense of exclusion using the word *but*. Augustine has set us both an example and an invitation to come *to be the whole of who we are* as he so wonderfully models when holding with peace and love both the sinfulness of his life in close union with the giftedness of his life, — holding them as one.

The union of love between ourselves and God is a matter of memory, of understanding, of will. 'of being taken up with God, especially of the will'.¹ Augustine does just that. Augustine's understanding was that God was with him even when he was wandering away from God and not only when he finds his way home to God with tears. He does not just remember the things of his past, but allows them to speak and responds with the "Thanks" of his will for God's compassion and healing, and, the "Yes" that takes away fear of God and the fear of the future. "Thanks" the overcoming of regret, and "Yes" the overcoming of fear, are not possible, it seems, without an understanding of the past that enables him to see his way into the future.² With this understanding he is able to grow in peace and love. In a beautiful summary he states "Leave the past to God' Mercy, the present to God's Love and the future to God's Providence".

We need a similar understanding of our own past, and the past of our companions to see our way into the future. There is a wholeness about Augustine, a wonderful humanness, a realness, a truthfulness, an honesty that still touches people in our day. His use of the language of the *both/and* is but one external reflection of his profound spirituality.

[The most common word in the Confessions is the word 'and', used 4673 times]

¹ St Teresa of Avilla

Complete Works Of St Teresa of Jesus, Vol.1, p109-111, Sheed & Ward, 1946

² Dunne, John S.

Love's Mind, An Essay on Contemplative Life, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1993.

**A beginner's path into
THE CONFESSIONS of St. Augustine.**

An overview of Gary Wills Augustine's Confessions: a Biography
Princeton University Press 2011.

Gary Wills estimates that St. Augustine is responsible for over five million words creatively poured forth in letters, sermons books and discourses in the course of his long career - without ever putting pen to paper himself. The reason why Augustine kept careful track of how many lines were written at any time was so he could pay the army of scribes who were at his beck and call to take down in shorthand (on tablets of wax or wood) the words he would dictate to them. Then, with the help of others to hold the scroll at the ready, the amanuensis would write out the finished text in longhand using reed pens and an early form of ink. After that, copies would be made by having the text read out slowly to multiple scribes and their assistants who took down the words without any spaces to separate them and no paragraphs, chapters or punctuation to assist future readers. His was an aural age, and people would gather to hear his words read aloud rather than read them alone and in silence.

Augustine began his *Confessions* in 397 at the age of 43, ten years after his baptism, six years after his priestly ordination and a little over a year since being made a bishop. He was bedridden with painful haemorrhoids and this gave him the time to recount his story without interruption. There is a meditative mood that maintains throughout the first ten Books (divided by later editors into what we now call Chapters), so that a single sustained contemplative tone pervades the work. He addresses himself to only one hearer, God, and we as privileged audience are allowed to eavesdrop. The whole work is one long prayer to God as his brilliant mind acknowledges the graces that have made his life part of the larger tale of sacred history. He relives the drama of sin and salvation common to all the ages of human history and selects incidents in his own life that illustrate our common journey towards God.

In his recalling of the incident with the youthful gang of marauder's of their neighbour's pear tree Augustine sees himself re-enacting, in his own small way, the fall of humankind. He discerns that the motive for his joining in their mischief was so that he could stay in partnership with the gang of other boys (consortium) in the same way Adam stayed in partnership with Eve even though it would mean breaking God's command.

Book 10 brings us up to the present (Augustine the bed-ridden bishop) and takes us on a long examination of conscience via his discourse on Memory which he sees as a means of self purification before entering into the deeper discussion in the last three 'Books'. Augustine puzzles out the mysteries of Memory at great length because it is the only way he has to know himself (10, 26). Memory is the means by which events in his life are connected over time to give him a sense of his own identity. He then chooses to examine his conscience by using three criteria from the First Letter of John: "*The things of this world are the urges of the flesh, the urge of the eyes, and worldly designs*". Once he has examined (purified) himself on all fronts is he ready, with the help of grace, to plunge into the depths of life's mystery, to open the Book of Genesis and find God's purpose there.

Though some readers give up on the *Confessions* when Augustine's life story seems to end he tells us that this is the part he has been waiting for and he cannot hold back from the explanation of Scripture which is his real goal. His task is to unpack the meaning of Genesis in these last three Books in such a way that *God the Father the Creator* is the subject of Book 11 along with a discussion on Time as the accompaniment to all material reality. Book 12 speaks of *God the Son, the origin* of all that has come to be with the first Word spoken into the void of unfolding reality. Finally Book 13 focuses on the *Holy Spirit as the Protector* hovering over the waters and present at each of the seven days of creation in turn. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the three persons and between humanity and God, drawing us to the rest and peace toward which the whole of the *Confessions* has journeyed from its opening page.

Paul Maloney OSA