

Friends of St. Augustine - Prayer Resource Guide

From our Chaplain

March 10th. 2015

Dear Friends,

perhaps it's the pace of parish life, but Lent seems hardly to have begun and now we are half way through the penitential season as the tug of Easter draws us towards the great events of Holy Week! This prayerful time also joins together the two themes I have in mind for our consideration, namely, Augustine's thoughts on Prayer (our on-going topic for the year), and his sense of the joy and triumph of Easter.

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (and Augustine's model and mentor), in one of his Easter sermons could say "In Christ's resurrection the earth itself arose" - and the words of Augustine echo this in his commentary on Ps 148 (see page 2).

We have an umbilical connection with the divine that joins us not only to heaven to come, but how we live our lives in this here and now world. All of our material world in its endless permutations is not meant to be left behind but will also be transfigured, and is being transfigured, by the resurrecting action of God's creative Spirit. This marks the beginning of the redemption of the whole physical cosmos. Such a transformation can only take place with our cooperation so that the task of caring for the world becomes even more of an imperative not only for ecological reasons, but in fulfillment of God's unfolding purpose.

*My God, let me know and love you,
so that I may find my happiness in you.
Since I cannot fully achieve this on earth,
help me to improve daily until I may do so to the full.
Enable me to know you ever more on earth,
so that I may know you perfectly in heaven.
Enable me to love you ever more on earth,
so that I may love you perfectly in heaven.
In that way my joy may be great on earth,
and perfect with you in heaven.
O God of truth, grant me the happiness of heaven
so that my joy may be full in accord with your promise.
In the meantime let my mind dwell on that happiness,
my tongue speak of it, my heart pine for it,
my mouth pronounce it, my soul hunger for it, my flesh thirst for it,
and my entire being desire it until I enter through death
into the joy of my Lord forever. Amen.*

Paul

May the light of Easter joy illumine you,

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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 Easter Alleluia

Saint Augustine of Hippo
Early Church Father and Doctor of the Church



This excerpt on the Easter Alleluia from St. Augustine's discourse on the Psalms (Ps. 148, 1-2: CCL 40, 2165-2166) is a wonderful explanation of the joy of the Easter Season. Just as Lent was a season of penance, so the fifty days of Easter is a season of praise, anticipation for the age to come in heavenly glory. This meditation is used in the Roman Office of Readings for Saturday of the 5th week of Easter with the accompanying biblical reading drawn from Revelation 22:10-21.

Our thoughts in this present life should turn on the praise of God, because it is in praising God that we shall rejoice for ever in the life to come; and no one can be ready for the next life unless he trains himself for it now. So we praise God during our earthly life, and at the same time we make our petitions to him. Our praise is expressed with joy, our petitions with yearning. We have been promised something we do not yet possess, and because the promise was made by one who keeps his word, we trust him and are glad; but insofar as possession is delayed, we can only long and yearn for it. It is good for us to persevere in longing until we receive what was promised, and yearning is over; then praise alone will remain.

Because there are these two periods of time - the one that now is, beset with the trials and troubles of this life, and the other yet to come, a life of everlasting serenity and joy - we are given two liturgical seasons, one before Easter and the other after. The season before Easter signifies the troubles in which we live here and now, while the time after Easter which we are celebrating at present signifies the happiness that will be ours in the future. What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life; what we celebrate after Easter points to something we do not yet possess. This is why we keep the first season with fasting and prayer; but now the fast is over and we devote the present season to praise. Such is the meaning of the *Alleluia* we sing.

Both these periods are represented and demonstrated for us in Christ our head. The Lord's passion depicts for us our present life of trial - shows how we must suffer and be afflicted and finally die. The Lord's resurrection and glorification show us the life that will be given to us in the future.

Now therefore, brethren, we urge you to praise God. That is what we are all telling each other when we say *Alleluia*. You say to your neighbor, "Praise the Lord!" and he says the same to you. We are all urging one another to praise the Lord, and all thereby doing what each of us urges the other to do. But see that your praise comes from your whole being; in other words, see that you praise God not with your lips and voices alone, but with your minds, your lives and all your actions.

We are praising God now, assembled as we are here in church; but when we go on our various ways again, it seems as if we cease to praise God. But provided we do not cease to live a good life, we shall always be praising God. You cease to praise God only when you swerve from justice and from what is pleasing to God. If you never turn aside from the good life, your tongue may be silent but your actions will cry aloud, and God will perceive your intentions; for as our ears hear each other's voices, so do God's ears hear our thoughts.

Four principles on Prayer from St. Augustine

Anicia Faltonia Proba, who died in AD 432, was a Christian Roman noblewoman. She had the distinction of knowing both Augustine, the greatest theologian of the first millennium of Christian history, as well as John Chrysostom, its greatest preacher. We have two letters of Augustine to Proba, and the first (Letter 130) is the only single, substantial treatment on the subject of prayer that Augustine ever wrote.

I had the chance to read the letter recently and was impressed with its common sense and some of its unusual insights. Proba wrote Augustine because she was afraid she wasn't praying as she should. Augustine responded with several principles or rules for prayer.

The first rule is completely counterintuitive. Augustine wrote that before anyone can turn to the question of *what* to pray and *how* to pray it, he or she must first be a particular kind of person. What kind is that? He writes: "You must account yourself 'desolate' in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be." He argues that no matter how great your earthly circumstances, they cannot bring us the peace, happiness, and consolation found in Christ. The scales must fall from our eyes. If we don't see that truth, all our prayers will go wrong.

Second, Augustine says, you can begin to pray. And what should you pray for? With a bit of a smile (I think) he answers you should pray for what everyone else prays for: "Pray for a happy life." But, of course, what will bring you a happy life? The Christian (if following Augustine's first rule of prayer) has realized that comforts and rewards and pleasures in themselves give only fleeting excitement and, if you rest your heart in them, actually bring you less enduring happiness. He turns to Psalm 27 and points to the psalmist's great prayer: "One thing have I desired of the Lord, one thing will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord to behold the beauty of the Lord."

This is the fundamental prayer for happiness. Augustine writes, "We love God, therefore, *for what he is in himself*, and [we love] ourselves and our neighbors for his sake." That doesn't mean, he quickly adds, that we shouldn't pray for anything else other than to know, love, and please God. Not at all. The Lord's Prayer shows us that we need many things. But if God is our greatest love, and if knowing and pleasing him is our highest pleasure, then we'll be transformed both in what and how we pray for a happy life.

He quotes Proverbs 30 as an example: "Give me neither poverty nor riches: Feed me with food appropriate for me lest I be full and deny you . . . or lest I be poor, and steal and take the name of my God in vain." Ask yourself this question. Are you seeking God in prayer in order to get adequate financial resources—or are you seeking the kind and amount of resources you need to adequately know and serve God? Those are two different sets of motivations.

In both cases the external action is a prayer—"Oh, Lord, give me a job so I won't be poor"—but the internal reasons of the heart are completely different. If, as Augustine counseled, you first became a person "desolate without God regardless of external circumstances" and then began to pray, your prayer will be like Proverbs 30. But if you just jump into prayer before the gospel re-orders your heart's loves, then your prayer will be more like this: "Make me as wealthy as possible."

As a result, you will not develop the spiritual discretion in prayer that enables you to discern selfish ambition and greed from a desire for excellence in work. And you will be far more crestfallen if you suffer financial reversals. A Proverbs 30 prayer includes the request that God not give you too much, not only that he not give you too little.

The third rule was comprehensive and practical. You will be guided, he said, into the right way to pray for a happy life by studying the Lord's Prayer. Think long and hard about this great model of prayer and be sure your own appeals fit it. For example, Augustine writes: "He who says in prayer . . . 'Give me as much wealth as you have given to this or that man' or 'Increase my honors; make me eminent in power and fame in the world,' and who asks merely from a desire for these things, and not in order through them to benefit men agreeably to God's will, I do not think he will find any part of the Lord's Prayer in connection with which he could fit in these requests. Therefore, let us be ashamed to ask these things."

The fourth rule is an admission. Augustine admits that even after following the first three rules, still "we know not what to pray for as we ought in regard to tribulations." This is a place of great perplexity. Even the most godly Christian can't be sure what to ask for. "Tribulations . . . may do us good . . . and yet because they are hard and painful . . . we pray with a desire which is common to mankind that they may be removed from us."

Augustine gives wise pastoral advice here. He first points to Jesus' own prayer in Gethsemane, which was perfectly balanced between honest desire ("Let this cup pass from me") and submission to God ("Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done"). And he points to Romans 8:26, which promises that the Spirit will guide our hearts and prayers when we are groaning and confused—and God will hear them even in their imperfect state.

Anicia Proba was a widow by her early 30s. She was present when Rome was sacked in 410 and had to flee for her life with her granddaughter Demetrias to Africa where they met Augustine. Augustine concludes the letter by asking his friend, "Now what makes this work [of prayer] specially suitable to widows but their bereaved and desolate condition?" Should a widow not "commit her widowhood, so to speak, to her God as her shield in continual and most fervent prayer?" There is every reason to believe she accepted his invitation.

See Augustine's Letter 130 (A.D. 412) to Proba found in Philip Schaff, ed., "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers," First series, vol. 1, 1887. Christian Classics Ethereal Library pp. 997–1015.

Editors' note: This article [originally appeared](#) on Redeemer Presbyterian Church's website.

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