

Augustinian Friends - Prayer Resource Guide

Letter to the Augustinian Order

On the Occasion of the Beatification of Blessed Thomas of St. Augustine

Nagasaki, November 24, 2008

Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.^[1]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Beatification of our Augustinian confrère Thomas of St. Augustine, along with 187 other martyrs (four Jesuits, 183 laity) in Nagasaki, Japan, on November 24th, is an inspiring occasion on which The Augustinian Order celebrates in communion with the whole Church, and especially with the Church in Japan. Blessed Thomas was the first Japanese friar ordained to the priesthood in the Order, and his witness in life and in death is a source of inspiration for all followers of Jesus Christ, and in a particular way, to those of us who are committed to living our lives in the spirit of St. Augustine.

Thomas was born into a devout Christian family around the year 1600 in Omura, Japan, near Nagasaki, when the shadows of a violent and systematic persecution were gradually encroaching upon the faith community after the ban on Christianity in 1587.^[2] He came from a simple family, distinguished, nevertheless, by the nobility of Christian martyrdom: Thomas' parents were both killed for the Faith, as were all his siblings.

As a young boy Thomas was expelled from his native land and was sent to Macao, where he continued his studies. He returned to Japan in 1620, at which time he began to work as a catechist and preacher. It was during these years that he first experienced the danger inherent in a missionary's life. This same experience aroused within him a burning desire to dedicate his life to God as a priest, because he learned for himself how the sacraments were so important in strengthening Christians who lived in times of persecution.

It was then that he met an Augustinian whose life inspired him so much so that he decided to join the Order. Thus Thomas went to Manila in the Philippines in 1622 and requested to join the Order at the "Convento San Agustin", Intramuros, Manila. Thomas was the first Japanese ever to request admission to the Order, and on November 26th, 1623, Thomas received the habit as a novice; a year later he made his profession of vows as an Augustinian. He was then sent to Cebu, where he completed his study of theology and was ordained a priest either in 1627 or 1628. Although he was originally assigned to communities in the Philippines, Thomas desired to be near those who were suffering persecution, and in spite of numerous difficulties, including two shipwrecks, Thomas was finally able to return to Japan in 1631.

Shortly after his return, he found out that Father Bartolomé Gutiérrez, the Augustinian superior at the time, was in jail. To make contact with him, he took a daring step: he got himself hired as a groom taking care of horses in the magistrate's headquarters, and thus visited Padre Gutiérrez in prison everyday, encouraging and supporting him.

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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.

By day he played the role of a stable master, while at night, as Father Thomas, he moved secretly from house to house, strengthening the weak, encouraging the downhearted, celebrating the Eucharist, hearing confessions, and even making new converts. Following the martyrdom at Nishizaka of Father Gutiérrez along with several others in September, 1632, Father Thomas went into hiding to continue to minister to the Christians under persecution.

Not long after Thomas' return to Japan, officials put up his portrait in one place after another, with the notice, "Do not harbor this person! If you know where he is, turn him in." It was the first time such a "wanted poster" was used in Japan to track down a fugitive. His likeness was so widely distributed that his face became known all over the country, which made it extremely difficult for him to hide. At first, he hid himself deep in the mountains in a small cave. By day he would hide in this cave, and at night he would visit the Christians, administering the sacraments, seeking to encourage and strengthen each one of them. When it became evident that Jihyoe's Rock was no longer safe, Thomas moved to another cave right on the Bay of Nagasaki in what is now known as Tomachi, from which he would still manage to go in and out of the city of Nagasaki.

Finally, on November 1st, 1636, Father Thomas was arrested in Nagasaki. Thus, his missionary activity came to an abrupt halt. His giving witness, however, did not come to an end. He was subjected to over six months of interrogation and a series of tortures: "mizuzeme" or water torture in which the victim was forced to swallow great amounts of water; forcing iron pins into his fingernails up to the joint; piercing and ripping of the flesh by bamboo rods with metal harpoon like tips. The purpose of all these tortures was not to kill him but to break his spirit and make him recant. But Father Thomas endured all these with incredible strength.

Finally, the magistrates decided to execute Father Thomas by suspending him upside down until death. It is said to have been on August 21st, 1637. Going with him to execution were twelve other men and women, mostly **Augustinian Tertiaries and members of the Confraternity of the Cincture** who had given him shelter. Two days later, however, when seven of them had already died, Father Thomas, who was unconscious but had not yet expired, was taken down from the pit and carried back to his cell where he was given treatment, with the sole purpose of submitting him to further interrogation. Despite the cruelty of the tortures inflicted upon him, Thomas did not say anything. So, the officials circulated the rumor that Father Thomas had been removed from the pit because he had abandoned the faith. The authorities hoped that this would discourage the Christians and cause them to abandon the faith.

But what followed two and a half months later spoke for itself. Father Thomas, along with four Christians who had provided shelter for him, was once again condemned to death in the pit. As soon as he was led out of the prison, he began to shout in a loud voice, "Faith in Christ lasts for ever," and "I am going to my death because I love Jesus and believe in him." To silence him, the executioners gagged him and a herald was sent ahead of the procession shouting, "Thomas has given up the faith," but Thomas vehemently denied this by shaking his head in disagreement.

When he arrived again at the place of execution, his body could take no more, and he was the first of the five to die after being strung up in the pit. It was on November 6th 1637, when Father Thomas was 35 years old. His priestly ministry which lasted approximately ten years was exercised, largely living in caves and enduring cold nights in the woods, always in flight from persecutors. There might be various epithets we can use to describe the life and person of Father Thomas of St. Augustine; for example, a man of dogged determination, of fearless courage, and of incomparable patience, a dynamic and creative pastoral minister, so on and so forth. But he was first and foremost a witness for Christ.

On November 24th, 2008, Thomas of St. Augustine will be beatified in Nagasaki, Japan. For all of us, this is a magnificent opportunity to renew our own faith, and to open our hearts to the inspiration of such a courageous and generous witness to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. In our world today, while most of us are not subject to physical dangers in professing our faith, we do find many situations of indifference and even direct opposition to the message of Christ and to the teaching of our Church. The strength and courage of Blessed Thomas of St. Augustine can encourage each of us to renew our own commitment in giving our lives in service to the Gospel.

Fr. Robert F. Prevost
Prior General O. S. A.



From our Chaplain

December 8th. 2008

Dear Friends,

at this time of the year when the Season of Advent comes around we are reminded that it is a time of waiting, a time of expectation and a time of holding ourselves in readiness for a truly life-changing event. Unfortunately the pace of life moves us along so quickly that we hardly have time to think about the meaning of the Incarnation to our world and to ourselves and so Christmas morning dawns like every other day because it is crowded with family commitments which block out any chance to ponder its unique spiritual significance.

In the past few weeks, I have had the experience of visiting Long Bay Goal to share with some of the inmates a method of Christian Meditation which they might find helpful in a place where they are deprived of all the usual resources that bring comfort in their lives. By the time I have driven through the boom gates, shown my license and entry permit to the guard and walked up to knock at one of the giant gates into the prison, I too am in need of the calming effects that only a period of stillness and silence can bring!

Normally at the end of each session there is time for a cup of tea and general conversation among the participants which nearly always has to do with when they are due to get out. This routine was interrupted two weeks ago when a prisoner escaped (not from my group, even though we did all have our eyes closed at the time) and the officers rushed in to lock the whole place down. This included us visitors who had our cars searched and had to wait for the completion of a count down before we were allowed to leave.

As a result of this I must admit that Advent has taken on a particular significance for me when I consider what *waiting* means for each prisoner who holds themselves in readiness for the day on which they are to be set free. St. Augustine tells us in one of his discourses on the Psalms :

“There is a hidden groaning which human ears cannot catch. However, if a man’s heart is so obsessed with the thought of some longed-for object so that his inward suffering is expressed very audibly, then somebody who hears this will want to know the reason, and will say to themselves ‘Perhaps such-and-such a reason has caused his grief; perhaps this-or-that is the matter with him’. Who can know, except He in whose sight and hearing the suppliant groans?” (On Ps 37, 13)

Perhaps because our horizons at the moment give the illusion of being unlimited we fail to notice the boundless horizons that are promised to us on this feast of the coming of the Son of Man? If our horizons were to become limited, maybe not so drastically as to be in prison, but by ill health, the frailty of age, worries of a financial nature or the loss of a loved one, then we too might learn how to approach the ‘Season of Waiting’ with hearts that are fine tuned to the promises of our God. In a very real sense we are all confined behind the bars of our own fears or compulsions but we imagine we can walk away from them any time we like. The recurring feast of Christmas each year reminds us how much we need the overture of God’s love to once more touch and transform us into living images of his Son.

“Rejoice, you who are weak and sick; it is the birthday of the Savior, the Healer. Rejoice, captives; it is the birthday of the Redeemer. Rejoice, slaves; it is the birthday of the one who makes you lords. Rejoice, free people; it is the birthday of the one who makes you free. Rejoice, all Christians, it is the birthday of Christ.” ... (Augustine, Sermon 184:2)

Next week when I visit Long Bay Goal for the last time I hope I am able to leave the participants with a sense of peace in the midst of their waiting, knowing that they do not wait alone because the Christ child is with them. I hope they can begin to glimpse from their experience of meditation that the future is not dark in keeping with our many deficiencies, but “bright as the promises of God”.

“He who sees within us loves within us; let him be loved in return, for he brings beauty itself within us. What are interior beauties? Those of conscience. There Christ sees and loves and speaks and crowns.” (Meditation on Ps 44. 29)

May your hearts be open to receive the gifts God has in store for you, especially the gift of his own Son who comes as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes so that we may welcome him

with much love,

Paul

Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

September Pilgrimage of Augustinian Friends, 2009

In September of next year we hope to be leading a pilgrimage to various Augustinian sites in the northern hemisphere that we have heard about from our childhood but have never yet had the chance to visit. The tour is being organized by “Harvest Travel Australia” and they will be providing final details of the itinerary and the complete cost in a brochure that will be available early in the New Year. At the moment it would seem that the pilgrimage can be divided into **three** stages and you are welcome to mix and match the parts of it that appeal to you or which best suits your budget. Once you have decided which option suits you, **confirm** your booking with Fr. Paul Maloney by phone or email and he will pass on your details to the Travel Agency.

STAGE ONE: Milan, Tuscany, Rome and places in between.

Tuesday September 1st. through to Wednesday September 16th. (17 days)

This is the bulk of the tour and covers time in Milan and Pavia where we visit Augustine’s tomb, the place of his first community at Cassago Brianza, the baptistery at the Cathedral in Milan and many other sites of this famous city. We then travel by bus to Tuscany where we make our home base with the Augustinian Community at San Gimignano and visit the early hermitages as well as the nearby cities of Florence and Sienna. We then travel across country to the shrine of St. Nicholas of Tolentine and the next day travel to Cascia where St. Rita is buried. We then arrive in Rome for 5 nights and are guided around the various tourist sites, but with time to visit those of particular interest to us as Augustinians. I am especially pleased that we will be travelling to the shrine of Our Mother of Good Counsel, an hour’s drive from Rome, for Sunday Mass. **The cost** for this leg of the journey (including air fares to and from Australia via London) will be: **\$7180:00 AUD plus taxes and insurance (think a further \$800:00); the final price subject to final number of bookings.**

STAGE TWO: North Africa, Tunisia and Algeria.

Thursday September 17th. through to Monday September 21st. (5 days)

We fly to Carthage in Tunisia where Augustine studied and gained his initial success in the academic field, lived with his little family and where he famously left his mother on the shore while he sailed for Rome. We then cross the border to spend time in the coastal town of Annaba where Augustine was Bishop for almost 36 years and where the ruins of his Cathedral can still be seen. We then travel to Souk Ahras (Thagaste) where Augustine was born, and call in on the town of Madaurus where he went to school. Our last day will be spent exploring the bazaars and environs of the fabled city of Algiers. **The cost** of this leg of the journey which is the complete amount of our pilgrimage with Harvest will be: **\$9850:00AUD plus taxes and insurance (as above); the final price subject to final number of bookings.**

STAGE THREE: London, Clare Priory, Canterbury. (optional)

Once we arrive in England we are free to make our own arrangements, however I have contacted Clare Priory and they have accommodation for 15 or so people with some sharing of rooms from Sept. 22nd –24th. If you arrive in London at the earlier date (September 17th.) I am sure we can arrange something similar and give directions on how to get there. Harvest are only too happy to organize reasonable accommodation in London where there are a number of Augustinian parishes and places of interest. A journey to Canterbury would be of special significance to us since it is the site of the martyrdom of St. John Stone, OSA. This leg of the journey is NOT part of the official pilgrimage but once an expression of interest is given I am sure we will be able to create an itinerary that puts you in touch with Augustinian Friends around the country whom you may have met at the International Conferences.