

Augustinian Friends - Prayer Resource Guide

Reflection on five Ways in which Augustinian Spirituality impacts on Social Justice Issues.

During the month of February the Augustinian Spirituality Centre at Greystanes hosted a three week intensive course for 15 young people as part of a formation process for those interested in participating in the Province's Volunteer Program. Part of the workshop required the submission of a written assignment and Mrs. Cathy Harris, a full time wife and mother and Centacare Social Worker contributed these insights from her own work experience and her short exposure to the spirituality and thought of St. Augustine. What she has learned in 3 weeks has, for some of us, taken a lifetime to absorb.

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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.

1] Augustinian Spirituality

We do not go to God alone – our relationship with others draws us closer to God. Where love for another person is present God is present too. *"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us"*. I have been very inspired by this concept to come to God through love of one another, since love for others is much more tangible and challenging than the sometimes abstract love for a spiritual God. However, Augustine also challenges us to see that we love a divine God in loving others. Love, as the very centre of Christian friendships and relationships, was essential for Augustine and for me. As someone who works in the community sector this value must also be reflected in my professional practice. *"When a person is without a friend then not a single thing in the world can appear friendly to them."* Many of the people I encounter in my work view the world as an unfriendly place and so, for me, it is as important to build real relationships with them as it is to pray for them. This has great implications for working as a Christian in the Social Justice field as it can be very easy to say "I will pray for you" but it is harder to love and connect with someone in the spirit of friendship, as Augustine taught, and then be able to truly walk alongside them through their life. Augustine greatly valued these relationships with others and experienced love for God in the love of others. "What is new in Augustine's idea of friendship is his statement that God, with Christ, is included in any relationship of friendship". And this is the learning and challenge for me to 'love' in all relationships and to seek to experience a deeper relationship with God through these.

2] *The Augustinian model of 'prayer of the heart' and the tradition of 'interiority'. 'Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee'* The young Augustine was continually searching with a restless heart for meaning in life, this very moving expression of searching and looking for meaning is one that equates 1600+ years later to our human quest for belonging and ultimately our place in the world. By finding this place of 'rest' like Augustine, within ourselves and with our God we are then able to be of service in the world motivated by love. The idea of reflective prayer leading into action is an Augustinian value that I want to incorporate more into my life and practice.

Reflection on Social Justice issues from an Augustinian perspective

The Rule of Augustine

- 3] *The Rule of Augustine* has implications not only for the Augustinian Order but for all of the Religious and Lay communities that use it as basis for community life. This document continues to be relevant to the human condition in every age. As Augustine formed communities of people around him wherever he lived, the Rule was written for vastly diverse groups of people from different societal groups and backgrounds. The fact that Augustine gave no group priority and empowered each member to care for and respect the others of the community shows an understanding of people that is still very needed in today's society. As a community we need to be challenged to see 'people' – not race, gender, disability or issue - and only by doing this can we build communities where we can experience the diversity of human life. By nature, Augustine teaches, we are all equal "A poor person is our brother or sister, because we are all born from the same parents Adam and Eve. We live under the vault of heaven. The difference between rich and poor is only a question of external things which are after all not ours". By integrating the Rule of Augustine into our lives and practice values emerge such as respect for different needs, dignity and the treating of others equally, forgiveness of others and self, all of which leads to living "harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart."

Social Justice

- 4] *Good Works and Action* - An Augustinian Social Justice response is one that comes out of love. "Prayer, fasting and good works are useless without our helping the poor people with mercy and fraternal love." Much of the writing of Augustine was inspired by challenges he met in the service of his diocese in Hippo amidst social and political problems of his time. However there are many examples of his experience of and concern for those forced to the edges of society including the poor, refugees, children sold into slavery and discrimination against women which are still relevant issues today. The importance again of good works and action are key to Augustine's response. For example, in response to the discovery of slave trading in Hippo he writes "for if we, that is the bishops, do nothing, will there then be anyone, who has power on the shore?"

My learning in this was how little things have changed since he was writing his letters and homilies to his community; they are still so valid today 1600 years later. We as humans still need to be reminded of the members of our communities that are disadvantaged by the current political and social policy of our time. As members of our current world community we need to have a voice and stand up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

- 5] *Preferential Option for the Poor* - Augustine challenges his followers to see Christ in the poor and to recognise their human dignity – "the poor are our way of seeing Christ still present in the world reflected in the life and history of suffering of oppressed human beings" and if we are to truly love God we must also love our neighbour, "Augustine demonstrates in a radical way that the love of one's neighbour is equivalent to love of God, that all true love is also love of God, that it is impossible to love God unless we also love our neighbour. Love directed to human beings is no different from that directed to God." (T. van Bavel OSA "Augustine's option for the Poor" p.18)

This theme of care, concern and action for all members of our society is foundational to Catholic Social teaching and for it to be a theme so strongly in Augustine's teachings still challenges us as Christians working for Justice insofar as we don't get to pick who we advocate, empower and care for, rather that we are to love God in all persons regardless of their situation. In Augustine's firsthand experiences as a bishop-magistrate of dealing with the poor and vulnerable we see his *preferential option for the poor* (although not called so in his time). Augustine makes a significant distinction between rich and poor concerning the same misdeed, for example theft. "It is one thing to sin in need, another to sin in plenty. If a poor beggar commits a theft, his crime is the result of hunger. Why should a rich man who is overflowing with so much steal another's property?" For me the learning in reading about Augustine's dilemma in this role is the ongoing and centuries old moral test that we face as a society - how do we as a community treat our most vulnerable and marginalised members – indigenous community, refugees, persons with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill? We are challenged as a whole society, as Augustine was, to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect these groups in our community. By challenging our local, national and international leaders to take a preferential option for the poor approach to social and political policy are we not ensuring that our worldwide society is reflecting the needs of the majority of its citizens and not just a wealthiest minority?



From our Chaplain

March 30th., 2009

Dear Friends,

Many years ago I came across a quote from an American Protestant theologian that offered me an insight that has continued to influence much of my approach to life. In an otherwise abstract and complex essay this one gem shone out. It stated simply: **“When we celebrate, we forget we are mortal.”** (Harvey Cox: The Secular City.)

I take this to mean that when we gather for a birthday or an anniversary or a commemoration of some special event that took place in the past (like Anzac Day); and when we look forward to an occasion that ushers in a hope for the future such as a birth or a marriage (or the beginning of a new millennium), then we are extending Time’s horizon back into the past or forward into the future which leaves us with a sense that life’s possibilities are endless. In this way, at least for a little while, we ‘forget’ we are mortal and catch a glimpse of what it means to **“remember we are immortal”** - which happens when we consider the triumph of the Resurrection gained for us by Christ on the first Easter morning. The underlying reason why we celebrate, no matter what the occasion, resides in the link we make with the ultimate “pushing back” of the horizons of our mortality that took place when Jesus broke out of the cave that was his tomb.

“Christ rose again; the case is complete and closed. He was body, he was flesh, which hung on the cross, gave up the soul, was placed in the tomb. He presented it alive, seeing he lived in it. Why are we astonished, why don't we believe? It's God who did it. Reflect on the one who brought it about, and you eliminate all possibility of doubt”.
(St. Augustine: Sermon 242, 1)

On a recent visit to Viet Nam I was struck by the evident signs of resurrection visible throughout a country that had been oppressed by so much suffering. I was in a constant state of amazement at the vitality and industry going on around me in spite of very visible poverty. I was often asked for my impressions of the people I was meeting for the first time, and I found myself replying that it was their bravery that I admired the most in facing up to difficult conditions in the city and even more so in the country where malnutrition is highest. St. Augustine understood the debilitating effect this can have on even the bravest heart:

“A human lifetime truly involves tribulation. There are two torturers that torment the human being in turn: fear and pain. When everything goes well, the ghost of fear appears. When everything goes wrong, it is suffering’s turn. Is there anyone who is not disappointed by prosperity in this world, not broken by adversity?”
(Sermon 124,2,2)

One story that was told to me concerned an elderly woman who came each day to the same spot on the corner of a busy street in Saigon to sell cigarettes and chewing gum from her portable stall. She sat unprotected from the rain and the sun and offered her wares cheerfully. In one conversation with my European friend she explained that it took her four hours each morning to travel from her home to this particular corner and that she sometimes had to make the trip twice if she needed to have a rest during the heat of the day. My friend asked her why she did not choose a spot closer to where she lived but was told “No”, she was happy to come here. When my friend asked her what made her happy coming all this way she was told “Do you see the building here beside me? Many years ago I used to live there”.

In the face of her displacement, a fate repeated time and again in the lives of so many Vietnamese refugees, she was able to glean a little comfort from sitting outside the house that used to belong to her family. It gave her space to ‘celebrate’ in her memory who she was, even in the face of her poverty and evident mortality. While I was in that teeming city I found myself pondering how we are all sooner or later reduced to occupying only a small square of pavement compared to the vastness of our dreams of what we thought we needed. With this realization comes the possibility of transforming our hearts from despair to joy, from depression to celebration. *“Don’t be ambitious for more than is needed. Be satisfied with that. Wanting what is superfluous is a disguised form of greed. Being satisfied with what we truly need is the only true form of wealth”.*
(Sermon 142, 1,1)

May Easter be our time to Celebrate because our mortality has been transformed (forgotten) in the glory shared with us by the Risen Christ ,

With much love,

Paul

Tolle Lege (Take and Read)

On February 20th. 2009 we received the sad news that Fr. Tom Martin OSA had died after a 6 month's battle with cancer. Originally from the Chicago Province of the Order, Tom spent many fruitful years at Villanova University in Philadelphia where he led a renewal of interest among Undergraduate and Graduate students alike in the fields of Augustine's spirituality, philosophy and preaching. His visit to Australia eleven years ago initiated the work which continues on at the Augustinian Spirituality Centre at Greystanes and we are indebted to his writings and warm encouragement shared so generously with us over the years. This excerpt from one of his last essays honours him as one of a long line of scholars whom he so lovingly researched for the benefit of his Augustinian brothers and sisters.

“Augustine used the image of the restless heart to express humanity's dynamic and unrelenting God-directedness — we are made for God and that thrust is felt in every fibre of our being. He speaks of love as a kind of weight: *'my love is my weight, it is what takes me wherever I go'* (Conf. 13,9,10). Put in more modern terms, love is an irresistible gravitational pull. It is this awareness that gives Augustinian spirituality a dynamism, a restlessness, a holy tension that never allows the Christian to settle into comfortable complacency. *"If you say, 'I'm finished' you're finished; always improve, always go forward, always make progress: don't stay where you are, don't turn back, don't abandon the course'* (sermon 169,15.18). His intentions were not to encourage laziness or tepidity; rather, his views reflect his dynamic and restless heart, aware that the business of holiness will always be for the Christian 'unfinished business'. We are always 'on the way' - Christ of course being the way; we are always pilgrims on pilgrimage; we are always asking, seeking, knocking (cf. Matthew 7:7). It is why *confessio*, forgiveness, bearing one another's burdens, fraternal correction, and most especially humility are the practical foundation stones of Augustinian spirituality . *'So, brothers and sisters, as I began to say, we are on the way, let us love with love and charity, forgetting all that passes with time'* (sermon 346B,4).

As Augustine lay dying, the world he knew was about to collapse. His own city was under Vandal siege and fell shortly after his death. His writings had already begun to make their way throughout the Christian world of his day and, after his death, his library at Hippo Regius somehow made it to European soil. As the western Roman Empire gradually disintegrated the writings of Augustine offered a beacon of continuity and security. Certain key figures in the centuries immediately following Augustine's death saw to it that his spiritual legacy would continue to nourish Western Christianity. Such names as Boethius (died 524), Fulgentius of Ruspe (died 533), Eugippius (died c. 535), Caesarius of Arles (died 543) - all played important roles in keeping Augustine's spiritual vision alive. The 12th. Century Victorines of Paris, most especially in the persons of Hugh of St. Victor (died 1141) and Richard of St. Victor (died 1173) were profoundly Augustinian in their spirituality. In the 13th. Century the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine were founded, seeing themselves as 'sons of Augustine'. There emerged from their ranks leading theologians, spiritual thinkers and writers who continued Augustine's legacy of spirituality: Giles of Rome (died 1316), Bartholomew of Urbino (died 1350), Gregory of Rimini (died 1358) begin a long line of Augustinian thinkers that continue to the present. The 20th century saw a revival of Augustinian spirituality, most especially in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, where the voice of Augustine was called upon more than that of any other father of the Church. The fact that Augustine's *Confessions* continue to be a bestseller is one sure sign that the spirituality of Augustine continues to beckon even today's lovers of God”.

Thomas F. Martin (died 2009), *"Augustinian Spirituality"*: Saint Augustine, pp 258 - 259.

Mercatorfonds, Augustinian Historical Institute, Augustinian Press. 2007.

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