Opening Talk – Ordinary Provincial Chapter
28 July 2002
Australia

As I begin this talk this evening, I would like to tell all of you that I consider it an honor to be with you as the Province of Australia begins this Provincial Chapter, in the 50th anniversary year of its founding. I believe that what we do here during the next several days is of significance, not only for the Augustinians in Australia, but for the entire Order and for the Church. The presence of a number of lay men and women here with us is also noteworthy, and I want to thank those responsible for inviting these guests to be with us as we begin the work of the Chapter. As I share these reflections with you, I hope you will understand how you, the laity, as you too learn with us what it means to live the spirituality of St. Augustine, are also a significant part of the mission that we are called to live in the Church and the world today.

The thoughts I offer to you this evening are meant as an invitation to consider what it means to be Augustinians today, especially in a world that so often has become insensitive or unaware of the profoundly meaningful, yet highly elusive, dimension of the spirit in human life today.

THE CHALLENGE OF LIVING OUR AUGUSTINIAN CHARISM TODAY

There is a certain rumbling that we can detect nowadays, within some of the "signs of the times" that define our western world today, in which we can detect a profoundly Augustinian element. This presents a challenge to us. It causes us to open our eyes, to look around, and to be sensitive to, aware of, the problems of our times. We are called to recognize and to accept the responsibility to offer to the people we serve the values that we discover in our Augustinian charism and spirituality. This challenge can be identified within the following dimensions:

1. **Authentic concern for the human person**. Our culture is markedly person-centered, and the Church declared in the Second Vatican Council that we cannot live, nor do we want to live, with our backs turned to the anguish and the the hopes and desires of the human person (GS 1). The option of people of faith cannot be to isolate oneself from humanity. The "religious options" can never be an excuse to run away from a true commitment in this world (which is the place where the Reign of God is sewn and constructed). Nor can we avoid a true concern for the problems of our brothers and sisters as they struggle to find meaning and a reasonable level of well-being in their lives.

   "I am a human being, one of many. I live among humans and I have a human heart" (*Serm 233, 2; Cart. 78,8; The Trinity 4,1)*, "and nothing that is truly human is foreign to me" (*Cart. 155)*. This should be the motto, the trademark that identifies us as believers today, and most especially for those of us who share the Augustinian charism.

Respect for the human person and his/her dignity, sensitivity to what is truly human, dialogue with diverse cultures, the acceptance of human values, living in tune with the deepest longings of humanity – all of these are indicators of what must be the spirituality of persons of faith who seek to imitate Augustine's style of life – and we must affirm those values and offer them to those who suffer as victims of the injustice of poverty as well as to those who are slaves of their own materialism. Augustine recognizes that people suffer "because of the lack of bread and also because of their attempt to live by bread alone" (*Com.Ps. 33, 2,15).*

2. **Attitude of constant searching**. A culture in crisis is, necessarily, a culture in search for something. Our society today leads us to a search for meaning, for truth, for well-being, happiness and peace. It is the same crisis that Augsutine lived, and who invites us to "search that we might find, and in finding that we might continue to search." (*Trinity 15,2,2*); to "search continuously with the hope of finding" *(Serm. 169, 15,18).* From this perspective, to make a choice for humanity does not mean to set God off to the side – to leave God outside of our consideration.
   Christians today, and even more so, those who live the Augustinian charism, are called to be "professionals" in the search for human meaning, and to give witness to the salvation and fulfillment that comes from God in Christ. We do not do that, however, as someone who "possesses" the truth, but rather as companions on the journey, brothers and sisters who walk together in the adventure of life. This is an attitude and a witness that today is perhaps more necessary than ever before, and which in some way must form part of the prophetic dimension of our Christian and religious life.

3. **Life in community and interpersonal relationships.** Loneliness and manipulation of the masses are, paradoxically, two of the principal threats that people around us suffer today. How do you live "humanly" in a society like ours, which causes isolation and loneliness on the one hand, and at the same time manipulates and victimizes whole groups of people within our society? How do we respond to this challenge? There is no fuller and more authentic manner of living as a person and as a Christian, responds St. Augustine from his own experience, than to live in community, walking together and supporting one another, just as deer were believed to do as they crossed a river. (cfr. *Eighty three diverse questions 71,1)…*

   The challenge is before us, to make a meaningful choice in favor of a lifestyle that is capable of incarnating this ideal and offering this ideal to our world today: to live in fraternity, to create community, to be model of Church, as "community of communities". And the world is anxiously awaiting a model of a kind of human relationships that are based upon equality, sharing, service, true love – in contrast to the idols of power and the selfish accumulation of goods that are the result of the kind of exclusive egoism that is so prevalent today.

4. **Sense of Church**. To love the Church is a fundamental characteristic of our Augustinian charism. To be "religious" in the mind of St. Augustine is to live as "a perfect Christian in the Church." (*Contra la cart. de Petiliano* 2, 104). The

Church – self-proclaimed as "light to the nations and universal sacrament of salvation" in the hope-filled context of the Second Vatican Council – is considered by many today to be an obstacle in the path that leads to God. The Church lives today in the midst of a painful crisis, and at the same time must recognize the need for a new and powerful evangelization.

To be Church in an authentic fashion, and to be "one with the Church", is a very real challenge to us today. The Church needs to be a fraternal community, in service to the Kingdom, a sign of a new world of hope that is more just and more human. This could well be the first service that we as Augustinians offer to the Church: a service that we develop through our lives of contemplation and action, as a sign of identifiable presence of the Church in the midst of God's people.

5. **A theological reading of poverty.** One of the greatest and most urgent problems facing the world today is the increase of unjust poverty and oppression, and not only in the so-called "third world." It is impossible to be Christians today if we turn our back on the "cry of the poor" and their struggle to find justice. The misery of millions of human beings is proof of the existence of sin in our world, and the negative effects of a globalization that increases the wealth of a select few, and creates more poverty makes it ever more important to ask ourselves "where will the poorest among us find something to eat?"

Once again, Augustine will give us the theological basis for our concern: "Christ became poor, and is in our world among the poor, among the weakest and neediest members of his Body. They are the "feet of the Lord", and it is useless to try to kiss the head of some of the members while others are stamping upon the feet (Com. 1 Jn 10,8).

A truly Christian commitment demands that we embrace the cause of justice and peace, what Augustine calls "two inseparable friends" (*Com. Ps. 84, 12)*, as a condition of true living of the Gospel of fraternity, and in order to give a minimum of credibility to our Gospel witness in the world of pluralism and frequently of conflict.

IV.- CONCLUSION

"Times have changed. The world and the Church have changed…. As Augustinians, we have been invited to exercise creative fidelity to our origins and to give witness today to the significance and vitality of living together, with "*one mind and one heart, entirely centered upon God."…* If we Augustinians want to continue our mission as servants of humanity, we must be capable of being in touch with reality, in order to listen carefully to the voice of a changing world….

"How have we responded to this invitation to renew our life together and to bear better communal witness in the world of the Good News? As Augustinians we have traditional methods for communicating the Good News that have proven their worth throughout the ages: from the pulpit, in the classroom and through catechetical instruction. And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we should reinforce the communal nature of our life and activity. It is a challenge that we have to face today. (Ordinary General Chapter *2001, Documents, B-2 ss.)*

These words from our last General Chapter lead us to conclude while underlining what has already been spelled out: to reflect honestly and effectively upon our Augustinian way of life and charism must never be reduced to a repetition of the things we have accomplished. It requires rather a humble and questioning examination of conscience.

Are we merely repeating the same things we have been doing for the past 50 or 100 years? Or are we capable of entering into a true process of renewal? Are we bystanders, watching as history goes on around us, or do we actively participate in creating human history? Are we courageous in reading the signs of the times? Do they say something to us, as we look at the problem of terrorism, the challenge of globalization, the suffering of millions of human beings? Or do we live with our backs turned on such elements of our world? Are we searching for the most effective means of evangelization, and of sharing our spirituality with our world, or are we satisfied with using the same old formulas and the same language that we have used for the past 50 years?

These and other comparable questions, which each one of us could certainly develop, must be taken into consideration as we speak of the "restlessness" that must form a part of those of us who in one way or another seek to be the spiritual heirs of St. Augustine. St. Augustine inspires us and urges us on to seek constantly, to look for new ways in which we can respond to the needs of the people of our times. The same words that he spoke to his followers are valid for us today:

"In this life, we are travelers, always on the way. This means that we must make progress, move forward. What you already are should displease you, if you want to arrive at what you have not yet become. In reality, if you feel satisfied with something about yourself, that's where you are waylaid. If you say, "Enough", that means you are lost. Grow always, go forward always, make progress always. Do not stop along the way, don't go backwards, don't get distracted on the way." (*Serm 169, 18)*