

XVITH CENTENARY OF THE CONVERSION OF ST. AUGUSTINE

A cry from the heart
Conversion and Prayer Today

A letter from the Prior General of the Augustinians



“God is delight and the faithful rest in delight with Him, called home from the noise that is abroad to the joys that are silent. Why do we rush to the top of heaven and the bottom of earth looking for Him Who is here at home with us if only we would be with Him”. (De Trinitate, 8, 7, 11).

“No movement in religious life has any value unless it be also movement inwards to the “still centre” of your existence where Christ is. It is not what you do that matters most, but what you are”. (Pope John Paul II, Address to Religious of Ireland, 1 October 1979. AAS)

INTRODUCTION

St. Augustine opens the story of conversion by describing the restlessness that seethes in the heart of every person:

You excite the human person, so that his delight is to praise You, because you made us for Yourself and our heart is restless until in You it rests.

The conclusion of the last book of the Confessions returns to the theme of restlessness, and Augustine addresses God who alone can calm that unquiet in which He created us:

You, O God, who alone are good, have never ceased to do good. Some works of ours are good because of your gift, even though they are not eternal. We hope, after these good works, to rest in your great sanctification. You are the goodness that needs no other good, always at rest within Yourself, for Your yourself are your own quiet. And what man can bring another to understand this? What angel can do so for another angel, or for another man? From you let it be asked, sought after, knocked on the door for: thus, thus will it be received, found and disclosed to us.

Bracketed between these two chapters is Augustine's description of his spiritual odyssey. Looking back after a lifetime on all that he had written, Augustine was to say of his Confessions:

The thirteen books of my Confessions praise the good and just God both for the bad and good events of my life, and they make the human mind and heart enthusiastic for Him. In so far as I am concerned this is what they did for me when they were being written and do for me now when they are read.

The Confessions are a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the God by Whom Augustine eventually realised that he was already known, loved, followed and finally coaxed home from all his wanderings. Augustine discovered God waiting to welcome him home inside his own heart⁴.

¹ *Confessions* I, 1, 1.

² *Ib.* XIII, 38, 53.

³ *Retractions* II, 6, 1.

⁴ *Cfr. Conf.* X, 18, 27.

An Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, solemn liturgical celebrations, international symposia, renewal courses, an international Youth Festival at Lecceto and other events have marked the 1600th anniversary of the Conversion of St. Augustine. It is not however just a remembrance of an event over and done with some sixteen centuries ago. It is also an invitation to trace the same prayerful path that alone leads to the discovery of the living and loving God at the centre of one's life. That discovery gives us access to the interior world where the multiplicity of all we see and hear around us comes together into one to take on its true meaning, coherence and worth.

PART 1
AUGUSTINE, RESTLESSNESS AND PEOPLE TODAY

1. The Restlessness of People Today

A recent survey by the Holy See lists the symptoms in which many people today express their quest for meaning and their need for God. The report recapitulated the answers to a questionnaire sent all over the world concerning the activities of the many religious sects currently in our midst. The factors which lead so many into the sects is their sense of loneliness and rootlessness. They want for a community to belong to. In the complex and confused state of the world today they need more satisfying answers to the deeper questions of life. Many are no longer at home with themselves, with others, with their native culture and environment. They are in search of ways of putting it all together into some kind of coherence and order.

People want to emerge from anonymity and achieve identity. They wish to feel that they are individuals with their own personal value and recognised as such, and not just ciphers or faceless members in the crowd. There is also a very deep spiritual need, a deepfelt longing to reach behind the evidence into the reality that is there at the back of the immediate, the phenomenon, the controllable, the material element. Many people feel the lack of a competent spiritual guide to lead them spiritually and strengthen and confirm them in their search.

A world shakily balanced between hostility and conflict, violence and the fear of total destruction, with so many people uncertain of the future, helpless and powerless, is a world in desperate need of some sign of hope, of the vision of a future worth living for and worth fully committing oneself to.⁵

The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Vatican II had already described the complex and contradictory situation in which the human person is living out the last decades of the twentieth century. The rapid and profound changes that characterise today's world have been triggered by the intelligence and activity of man himself. Now however they are rebounding on him, on his judgments and desires, both individual and collective, and on his way of thinking and acting. The imbalances from which the contemporary world is suffering are linked up with that much more profound imbalance that is rooted in the heart of man. It is within the human person that the struggle is taking place.

For all these reasons and faced with the way in which the world is actually evolving, more and more people are asking themselves with ever greater urgency fundamental questions such as: What is the human person? What is the meaning of suffering, of evil, of death which continue to exist despite so much scientific and technological progress? Of what

⁵ Cfr. *Il fenomeno delle sette o nuovi movimenti religiosi: una sfida pastorale* in L'Osservatore Romano Documenti, Mercoledì 7 Maggio 1986 pp. I-II.

value are these conquests won at so great a price? What contribution can the individual make to society and what can he expect from it? What happens when this little life is over?⁶

In a thousand ways the human person experiences his limitations and yet he is aware of having endless aspirations and of being destined for a higher and better life. He is attracted by many things and yet always constrained to choose some and leave others. His longings for a higher, spiritually more satisfying and better life are often undermined by his weakness and egoism.

Many, it is true, are so immersed in material pursuits, that they are unable to have a clear grasp of this drama, while others are so oppressed by misery that they have neither time nor leisure in which to reflect on life's deeper problems.

On the other hand, there are the optimists who believe that purely human resources will eventually lead to the authentic and final liberation of mankind by creating a future that will fully appease all the desires of the human heart. Others however despair of finding a future worth the pain of living for, or of discovering some meaning to life itself⁷.

2. Augustine In Search of Himself and of God

Augustine's Confessions describe his restless journey in search of answers to the deeper questions of his existence.

His brilliant mind and studies, his joining of the religious sect of the Mani, his ambitions in the field of teaching, his experiences of human love and tenderness, his travels through the world, his experiences as Rhetor at the Imperial Court, his meeting with the affable, eloquent, plausible but answerless Faustus, they all of them failed to fill the yawning void he felt within his heart.

Through the pain of all his searching Augustine plumbed that depth of human longing that nothing on earth can satisfy. For the human person is made in the image and likeness of God and that is at one and the same time the cause of all his ceaseless searching and man's true honour and glory. In his very structure man is made for God and from this springs his interminable longings and restless quest:

Indeed, the true honour of man consists in his being the image and likeness of God, an image that is not conserved except by going towards Him by Whom this image has been impressed.

God has planted His likeness deep and forever in the human soul, so that even if by weakness and sin it is defiled, man nevertheless retains, in the very core of his being, his God-directedness.

It is above all in prayer that Augustine unfolded to the God Whose image he bore in his soul. In the prayer that grace gave rise to he opened up to the God ever present in the intimacy of his being. This God alone filled the emptiness within. It is above all to prayer that the Conversion Year invites us, both individually and as a community, if we wish to be true spiritual heirs to Augustine.

In prayer reciprocal personal relationships both within the community and outside are carried back to their source in the unity, peace and love that is God. Rooted in that divine indwelling Reality people take on their true worth and discover their true home. The community of friendship that flowers from this awareness creates space for each and all, and the love that welds it into one is nothing less than God.

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes* 4, 10.

⁷ *Ib.*

⁸ *De Trinitate* XII, 11, 16.

Through prayer all the other works of the apostolate are consciously linked to the inner mystery of God's dwelling, and they in turn become an expression of prayer. If our service of God's people does not put them in touch with these inner realities, then it is all wasted effort, no matter what its seeming success. For the depth of man's need cannot be papered over with surface activities, nor is it honoured by neglecting the real source of his grandeur, that image and likeness of God imprinted in the deep of his soul, and making him restless and unhappy until he comes to intimacy within himself with that God Who alone can bring him to completion.

PART II PRAYER A CRY FROM THE HEART TO GOD

1. St. Augustine: Heart, Faith and Prayer

Despite his enormous influence on all subsequent schools of spirituality both within the Church and outside of it, St. Augustine left no systematic treatment on the subject of prayer. Letter 130 to the Roman noble lady Proba was in answer to a few questions and dealt specifically with some aspects of the prayer of petition. There are also four discourses on the Our Father delivered to the catechumens on different occasions which however are far from a complete treatise on prayer⁹.

Nevertheless *"it is difficult to find any work of his from which prayer is completely absent, seeing that he experienced such a great need to dialogue with God and to involve others in that dialogue"*¹⁰ while his Commentaries on the Psalms are a veritable treasure trove for those seeking his thought and teaching on prayer. His Confessions, like many other works of his, show us Augustine as he lived his life of prayer.

Prayer for Augustine is no imposed ritual to be carried out daily from a sense of obligation. Rather it is the breath of the soul, the spontaneous expression of his faith, hope and love in which he shakes off the limits placed on him by time and duties to enjoy the liberating embrace of the God who dwells in the most intimate core of his being. In prayer Augustine could really come alive and reach for that communion in which fatigue and pain give way to the full enjoyment of God:

*When with my whole self I cling to you, for me there there will be no more pain or labour and my life, all filled with You will be fully alive. You raise up those whom You fill out with Yourself. For the moment, I as yet unfilled with You, am a weight unto myself*¹¹.

The Doctor of Grace realises that this experience is possible only because God anticipates us with His love, pursues us even when we stray and brings us home to the enjoyment of His love for us. Without this conviction of being known, called, cared for, loved and forgiven, the dialogue with God could not begin, indeed true dialogue with others would also prove impossible:

*There is nobody who does not love. The question is: what do you love? We are not told not to love but make a choice in what we love. But how can we choose unless we are already ourselves chosen? In fact, unless we are ourselves first loved, we cannot love*¹².

Faith leads a person through the opaque screen of phenomena to the underlying Reality of the loving and ever-present God. It leads us beyond the small conclusions of our own research until with a leap launched by grace, we plunge into the depth of God Himself.

⁹ Sermons 56, 57, 58, 59.

¹⁰ N. CIPRIANI, *La pedagogia della preghiera in S. Agostino*, ed. Augustinus, Palermo 1984, p. 12.

¹¹ Conf. X, 28, 39.

¹² Serm. 34, 2.

Prayer nurtures on faith:

"To show us that faith is the fountain of prayer and that no stream of water can flow from a dried-up fountain, the Apostle says: how can we call upon Him in Whom we have not believed? So, to be able to pray we have faith, and so that the faith that makes us pray might never fail, we pray. Faith makes prayer flow and the prayer that wells up asks that this faith might become ever stronger"¹³.

The dialogue that is prayer however is no mere external conversation, but a cry from the heart to God:

"Prayer is a cry that one raises to the Lord. If, however this cry only consists in the material sound of the voice without the intense longing of the heart for God, it is without doubt wasted breath"¹⁴.

For Augustine, as in Scripture, the heart is the most important organ of the body. It is also however the very centre of the soul¹⁵. In the heart is where one is completely at home with God, where there is nothing hidden and no pretence. It is the most intimate core of the person where he is alone with God, whose voice resounds in his depths¹⁶.

When from the heart a person wanders, he goes away from himself and from God. God however remains at home, right there at the centre of one's being, always waiting to welcome the person home and pardon him:

"Go back home into your own heart! Why do you want to go far away from yourself? Straying afar you lose yourself. Why wander along abandoned highways? Go home to the Lord. He is ready, waiting. First of all, go back home into your heart, you who have become a stranger unto yourself. From wandering around in a vagabond way, you no longer know yourself, and you are searching for Him who created you"¹⁷.

Prayer wells up from the depth of the heart to involve the whole person from the inside Out. One can be brought unwillingly to church and compelled to approach the altar and forced to take the sacrament, but nobody can believe except freely, for the confession of faith springs from the innermost centre of the person¹⁸.

Moreover, the prayer that wells up from within is sheer delight to the soul, and one is drawn to it not from obligation or imposition but simply because one is touched by the indwelling God and experiences the freedom of unfolding to His love¹⁹.

Unfortunately there are people so seduced by wellbeing and a sense of self-sufficiency that they don't seem to experience any great need for God while others, in great number, are so oppressed by misery that they have no leisure to reflect on their greatness²⁰.

People caught up in a busy schedule, with some job satisfaction, pleasant surroundings and friends, and experiencing a certain amount of justified success would miss the grandeur of their calling and the inexhaustible potential and resources they possess if they allowed their life to be locked in at that level.

For Augustine it was preferable to experience the limits that beset this life of pilgrimage, and so to sigh for liberation, than to remain cushioned by life's comforts to the extent of never catching a glimpse of the unlimited horizons to which we are called. The Holy

¹³ Serm. 115, 1, 1.

¹⁴ In Ps. 118, serm. 29, 1.

¹⁵ N. Cipriani, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁶ Gaudium et Spes 16.

¹⁷ In Jo. 18, 10.

¹⁸ In Jo. 26, 2.

¹⁹ Ib.

²⁰ Cfr. Gaudium et Spes 10; Ep. 130, 3, 8.

Spirit who groans within us with sighs too deep for words²¹ is really attuning us to the unspeakably wonderful future to which we are destined, the hopes of which make us reach forward out of the strictures we now experience²².

2. Contemplation: The Realisation and Destiny of Man

Contemplation of God in full communion and perfect intimacy was the future to which Augustine aspired and constituted for him the completely soulfilling destiny God had in store for mankind:

“Jesus Christ Our Lord will then hand over to God the Father His Kingdom. Neither He nor the Holy Spirit will be separate from the Father when He will lead the faithful to the contemplation of God, that contemplation which is the completion of all our good actions, peace without end and joy that will never be taken away from us²³. This contemplation is promised to us as the completion of all our good actions and the never-ending fullness of our joy... After this day we'll look for nothing more as there will be nothing more to look for. The Father will reveal Himself to us and this for us will be enough”²⁴.

While the full enjoyment of this contemplation is something we wait for in hope, even during this life of pilgrimage we are in some way capable of dedicating ourselves to it:

“An image of this joy is offered to us by Mary seated at the feet of the Lord and wholly intent on His word, that is, free from all activity and altogether caught up in the Truth in a way that this life permits, but nevertheless sufficient to prefigure what the future will hold for us eternally”²⁵.

Of this soul-filling intimacy Augustine spoke in lyrical tones:

“Then you said to me in a powerful voice, in my inner hearing, that not even that creature for whom You are the sole pleasure, is coeternal with You. That creature is so absorbed in You with complete single-mindedness that at no time and in no place does it reveal that it is but a changeable creature. It has You always pre. sent and holds to You with all its affection, without any future to wait for or any past memories to return to. It undergoes no vicissitudes nor temporary distractions. Oh, how happy is such a creature, if such exists, for being immersed in Your own happiness; happy for it, happy that You inhabit and enlighten it. In my judgement I find nothing that I could more willingly call the heaven of heavens of the Lord than this Your dwelling-place dedicated to the contemplation of Your delights, never to be detached from You so as to move towards other purposes. This is a pure mind, united in the greatest concord by the stable bond of peace with the holy spirits who are citizens of your city situated in the heavens above our heavens”²⁶.

A life committed to these contemplative delights is one in which Augustine would willingly have lived out all his days, did not the indigent Christ knock at the door of his peace and call him to the busy life of a pastor²⁷.

²¹ Rom. 8, 26.

²² In Jo. 6, 2.

²³ De Trinitate I, 10, 20.

²⁴ Ib. I, 8, 17.

²⁵ Ib. 1, 10, 20.

²⁶ Conf. XII, 11, 12.

²⁷ Cfr. In Jo. 57, 3-4.

3. Contemplation and Service of One's Fellowman

Augustine's insistence on the interior life, on listening to God instructing and enlightening within²⁸, and on the delights of contemplation, not lead to the conclusion that prayer is about fleeing the world and its concerns, a kind of spiritual escapism from one's responsibilities to that world which is the theatre of man's becoming, and to its inhabitants who are man's fellow-pilgrims on the way into the future.

His underlining the realities that lie at the heart of man was no invitation to non-participation in the renewal of the world. Augustine precludes any such misinterpretation by his all-pervading doctrine on love.

A person is not what he possesses or knows or does but what he loves²⁹. The power of love like a fire fuses into one the lover and the what he loves so that they become one reality³⁰. Love is a force that seeks to be active and engaged:

*"In a word, every love is charged with power, and when it resides in a love-struck heart, it cannot remain inoperative: it must break out into action"*³¹.

One can understand how Augustine has no difficulty in proclaiming the primacy of contemplation. It is certain that the more we are united to God in faith and love, the closer we draw to our neighbours. The love of God and the love our neighbour necessarily coincide. The whole purpose of living is for loving, and the love that wells up is not just derived from God, but is God Himself:

*"You cannot say: I love my brother, but I do not love God. In the same way you lie when you state that you love God but not your brother. You are deceiving yourself when you state: I love my brother and then you hold that you do not love God. Of necessity when you love your brother you love love itself. Love however is God so that the person who loves his brother of necessity loves God"*³².

All creatures are rooted in God Who is love. It follows that the discovery of the indwelling God is at the same time the discovery of that love which is the binding force of all creation.

Prayer then, which is nothing if it is not love, far from separating people from the rest of humanity and its concerns, links them together in the deepest way. There in God people find their true identity and fulfilment and so can enter into ever more honest and deeper dialogue with one another in God.

Augustine's own life is a clear testimony of the way in which a contemplative attitude can overflow into a most fruitful activity of love in the service of one's fellowman. Possidius in his life of Augustine narrates how he kept himself always united with the realities of the spirit but descended from the heights of study and prayer to attend to the daily needs of the people. By day he laboured and by night he prayed and studied and wrote³³.

4. Spirit, Love and Prayer

Love and prayer are linked inseparably together. First of all, there is the love of God for us without which it would be absolutely impossible for us to love God³⁴.

God has not only given us an experience of His love for us but has also granted us the power to love Him in return. That power is the Holy Spirit:

²⁸ Ib.

²⁹ In Jo. 2, 14.

³⁰ Ib.

³¹ In Ps. 121, 1.

³² In 1 Jo. 9, 10.

³³ Possidius, *Vita s. Augustini*, XXIV.

³⁴ Cfr. Serm. 34, 2.

“He has given us Himself as the object to be loved, and He has given us the resources for loving Him. Hear from the Apostle Paul in a more explicit way what God has given us so as to empower us to love Him: The love of God is poured into our hearts. How does this happen? Relying perhaps on our own resources? No! How then? Through the action of the Holy Spirit whom He has given us”³⁵.

The Holy Spirit who is love empowers us and prompts us to pray:

“We have within us, so to speak, a learned ignorance, learned in so far as it is enlightened by the Spirit of God who helps our weakness... The Holy Spirit then urges the saints to pray with sighs too deep for words inspiring in them the desire for a good so great that it is as yet unknown but for which we wait on in hope”³⁶.

In baptism the Christian is gathered up into the surrender of Christ³⁷ so that he achieves a new identity in the Lord and becomes part of His Body here on earth. The life of Jesus is lived out by the Spirit within him³⁸ and the very prayer of Jesus, ABBA, is prayed in him by that same Spirit³⁹. Augustine comments:

“If we were to say that these words of the psalm which we have heard and in part sung, were ours, it could be feared that we are not stating the truth. In fact they are more the words of the Spirit than they are ours... It is the voice of the Spirit of God for we could not say these words without His inspiration. On the other hand, it is not the Spirit's voice in so far as he does not experience misery or suffering”⁴⁰.

It is God's design that humanity should be the beneficiary of the Spirit. Here, on pilgrimage, the Spirit is the divine guarantee of the unspeakably beautiful future that awaits us⁴¹. The Spirit's first fruit is love⁴², and it is love that shows that we are Christ's⁴³.

The unity for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper as the completion and perfection of man⁴⁴ is a future already in the shaping because of the powerful presence of the Spirit within us:

“The Father and the Son wished to create a communion between us and them through what is common to them both. Through that gift they both have they wished to gather us into one, that is, through God the Holy Spirit the Gift of God. In fact through the Spirit we are reconciled with God and take our delight in Him”⁴⁵.

The Holy Spirit leaps up like a fountain in the centre of the temple that we are⁴⁶ and flows like a river in the bedrock of our being⁴⁷.

To the lady at the well who enquired about the proper place to worship God Jesus replied:

“The hour is coming and is now when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth. For the Father seeks such worshippers to pray to Him”⁴⁸.

³⁵ Ib.

³⁶ Ep. 130, 15, 28.

³⁷ Cfr. Rom. 6, 11.

³⁸ Cfr. Jo. 3, 33ss.

³⁹ Cfr. Rom. 8, 15; Gal. 4, 4-8.

⁴⁰ In Ps. 26, II, 1.

⁴¹ Cfr. Eph. 1, 13-14; 4, 30; 2 Cor. 1, 22; 5, 5.

⁴² Rom. 5, 5; Gal. 5, 22.

⁴³ Cfr. Jo. 13, 34-35.

⁴⁴ Cfr. Jo. 17, 11; 21-23.

⁴⁵ Serm. 71, 12, 18.

⁴⁶ Jo. 4, 10-14.

⁴⁷ Jo. 7, 38-39.

⁴⁸ Jo. 4, 21-23.

With these words Jesus declared once and for all that the worship of God is no longer tied to a particular place but is linked to the presence of the Spirit who becomes in the heart of the faithful the source of a new life.

Prayer then is not to be considered as simply a mental or vocal effort to be undertaken sporadically during the day. It is the YES of Jesus, breathed in us by the Spirit of God. It is the privileged expression of what by faith we are. It is the voice of the breath of the Spirit within us. Even when it is not formal prayer it is going on within us. It is the life which we are invited constantly to live without ever tiring of it⁴⁹.

PART III *PRAYING TODAY*

1. Living is Praying in Augustinian Spirituality

Augustine has traced for us a safe and secure path that leads to a full and true life, namely, to communion with God. It is the pathway of prayer which Augustine links up with life itself. Prayer when it is authentic reveals itself in the way we live and life itself becomes a prayer⁵⁰. Prayer is the preferred, indeed the only pathway that can bring the human person and the human community to full realization.

Those who are invited to follow the prayer path as a state of life forego profound human values such as private property, a family and personal projects and ambitions in the certainty that their vocation will bring them to completion and to living out their identity to the full. Their very profession is to live and to pray. Not to pray is not to live.

The invitation to prefer the life of prayer to those other profound human values is a call to make a daring choice. If however having made the choice the life of prayer is not lived out, then it turns out to be no longer daring but hazardous for it leaves the person frustrated, empty, discontented, and unfulfilled.

Prayer, like love, cannot well up except in freedom. That freedom is enacted when at each moment the love of God is newly welcomed into one's life and responded to. It is what the Rule teaches: the life of prayer is to be lived, not as something to which we are obliged by law, but always in the freedom and spontaneity of grace, like people who have fallen in love with an ideal of spiritual beauty⁵¹.

The Constitutions state that the purpose of the Order is to seek and honour God with one heart in communion and spiritual friendship and at the same time serve the people of God⁵².

From its beginnings the Augustinian Order, after the example of St. Augustine, aimed at joining apostolic service with a love for study, prayer and contemplation. Clear evidence of this contemplative attitude was the great emphasis given to liturgical celebrations and meditation in our communities, as well as the very name, Hermits of St. Augustine, by which for centuries we were known. This name reflects the origins of the community.

Today the contemplative nuns occupy a very important place in the Order. They are committed above all to prayer, self-denial and study, in this way offering us enthusiastic collaboration in coming to the help of the needs of the Church and of the Order. They through us engage in the active apostolate and we through them become contemplatives⁵³.

⁴⁹ Lc. 18,1.

⁵⁰ Cfr. N. Cipriani, op. cit., p. 32.

⁵¹ Regula VIII, 48.

⁵² Constitutiones O.S.A. 16.

⁵³ Ib. 45.

The life of the contemplative nuns is a signal and a reminder to the whole Order of that contemplative dimension which remains an essential component of Augustinian spirituality.

2. Prayer and Renewal

The Conversion Year now drawing to a close urgently challenges us to make for ourselves that journey which brought Augustine to a rediscovery of his own self and of God. It was first of all an inner journey undertaken after so many years of being dissipated and lost. It was however above all a commitment to prayer ever renewed and unceasing dialogue with the God who had always been near, living there right at the centre of his heart.

St. Augustine insistently invites us to the enjoyment of this dialogue:

*"You alone are near those people who place themselves far from you. Let them then turn back and seek you. You do not abandon your creatures as they abandoned their Creator. If they turn back to themselves to seek You, there You are already there, in their heart, in the heart of whoever recognises You and throws himself at Your feet, weeping on Your knees after their rough journey. You immediately dry their tears and they are comforted in their weeping, for You, Lord, are not just any person made of flesh and blood. You, Lord, are their Creator, and you give them heart and console them"*⁵⁴.

Our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to this unceasing filial dialogue with God⁵⁵. It is a dialogue that takes place in the more solemn moments of the liturgy of the Eucharist and the Hours, but it also spreads itself out to include each moment and every activity of the day. Speaking of continuous prayer Augustine clarifies:

*"Your desire is your prayer; if your desire is continuous, so too is your prayer. For the Apostle did not speak in vain when he said: Pray without interruption. Is it that we should always be genuflecting, always prostrating, always raising up our hands to fulfil the command to pray without interruption? If this is what we understand praying to be, I do not believe that we can pray without interruption. There is however another prayer, an interior prayer that knows no interruption, and that prayer is your desire. Whatever you are doing, if you desire that Sabbath, you never cease to pray. If you do not wish ever to interrupt your prayer, never cease to desire. Your continuous desire will be your continuous voice. It will grow silent if you cease to love"*⁵⁶.

This then is the prayer to which we are invited. It is an interior, uninterrupted prayer which is the expression of love and desire and involves the whole person and one's whole life.

Since the Second Vatican Council much has been said about the renewal of the religious life. In fact, many of the external aspects of the religious life have undergone profound changes. Changes are of value to the extent that they allow our life to be more authentic and our christian witness and service more incisive. There is however no religious renewal at the individual or community level unless communion with God at the centre of one's life is deepened.

This is the clear message that the celebration of Augustine's Conversion gives us.

It is an invitation not just to remember but to share the experience of an interior dialogue that is both loving and reassuring and is nourished on attentive and devoted listening to the Word within. If in God we have discovered our identity and coherence, as well as the capacity for a new relationship with our fellowman, only a continued contact with Him and an uninterrupted longing for Him will save us from dissipation and discontent.

⁵⁴ Conf. V, 2, 2.

⁵⁵ Lc. 18, 1.

⁵⁶ In Ps. 37, 14.

Prayer however is no alibi for our duty to attend to the Christ who knocks at the door from without⁵⁷ in the fear that out there we will only soil again the feet we have washed⁵⁸. Prayer should rather be snatched as it were from those ever-rarer free moments and become parentheses for our spiritual regeneration and revitalization.

This revitalising contemplation is not something undertaken at the expense of the service we owe to the needs the Church⁵⁹ and our fellowman, especially during those times when we can be with them on our common way⁶⁰. What must be foregone is any type of individual or community self-seeking, in the conviction that this is the true way to joy and life. In this way too we will become more docile to the Spirit and more pliable in the distribution of the daily round of prayer and work.

The frenetic pace at which life today is often lived must not be allowed to squeeze out this dialogue with the Father so necessary for our continued spiritual health. Jesus took advantage of the time of night⁶¹ as did St. Augustine⁶². These were the times left free from the necessary service of one's fellowman. They were times for tasting and seeing how good the Lord was so as to return once more to heal the sick and fill the needs of all those who wait for a truly convincing message of hope⁶³.

St. Augustine frequently made use of study, and especially the study of the Scriptures to converse lovingly with the Lord⁶⁴. For centuries this remained an honoured tradition in the Order⁶⁵. Study and meditation of the Word and of the signs of the times, their interiorization and reviewing life's events in their light in the presence of God in our heart is how we bring the opposites of contemplation and action together in a wholeness that at one and the same time allows them to coexist in healthy tension and yet creates for us that ample inner space in which to live and breathe.

3. St. Augustine and Ways of Praying Today

Despite the massive secularisation of the contemporary world, and even perhaps on that very account, many people are in search of a deeper, more interior life both within and outside the Church. In recent times within the christian community have emerged prayer movements such as the charismatics, small prayer groups, and meditation schools. There has also been a marked liturgical renewal with much more involvement on the part of lay people who clearly want a more active role, especially in the liturgy of the hours, the liturgy of the Word and the Sacraments.

Many people go outside the confines of the Church in search of deeper religious experiences under the guidance of spiritual leaders especially from the East. Others become members of the various sects which have proliferated in recent years even in the West. The fact that some christians enrol in these sects is justly causing considerate pastoral concern. It also however creates a challenge for all who wish to know and care for the deeper needs of people today.

There is a rediscovery of the treasures of the past, the great teachings and practices of meditation and contemplation to be found among the early Fathers and in the mystics of the

⁵⁷ In Jo. 57, 4.

⁵⁸ Ib. 1, 6.

⁵⁹ Ep. 48, 2; PL 33, 188; Ep. 243, 8.

⁶⁰ Cfr. Conf. XI, 2, 2.

⁶¹ Mt. 14, 23; Mc. 1, 35; 6, 47; Lc. 6, 12.

⁶² Possidius, op. cit., III, XXIV; cfr. L. VEPHEIJEN, *Nouvelle approche de la Règle de St. Augustin*, Bellefontaine 1980, pp. 258 ss.

⁶³ Lc. 4, 16 ss.

⁶⁴ Cfr. Conf. XI, 2, 2-4.

⁶⁵ Constitutions O.S.A. 124 ss.

middle ages. Even depth psychologists such C. G. Jung are astounded at the depths touched on and explored by great spiritual leaders of the past such as St. Augustine and Meister Eckhart.

Ever since his times and right up to today the masters of the spirit and the mystics have drawn very deeply and not infrequently exclusively on the doctrine of St. Augustine. In Augustine the man of today can find a sure guide who not only plumbed the depths of human experience and the graced soul but has been able as no other to communicate that experience in all its details, beauty and breadth.

People today are not satisfied with the mere forms of prayer that have developed over the past few centuries unless they lead right down into a living and soul-filling contact with the God who dwells at the centre of the soul.

St. Augustine did not interest himself particularly in the techniques of prayer, the positions of the body and the psychological training much in vogue today. Nor however does he reject them. For Augustine what counted was anything that helped a person to an awareness of what was within, so that in a truly christian prayer, welling up from the Spirit of God, a person would allow himself to be caught up in Christ.

CONCLUSION

For those who, like us, have been chosen and have in turn chosen him as spiritual Father and Master, St. Augustine offers himself as guide into that mysterious and fascinating inner world. There, in the intimacy of the heart, God awaits us. There He wishes to feed our deeper hunger and slake our searing thirst with the gift of Himself, in this way filling out the vast emptiness that we are.

Even if we get lost on the way, He still awaits us. In Him alone will we find ourselves, in Him alone will we find the meaning and value of everything in our world.

Prayer is the privileged pathway for returning to God and to our own true selves. Prayer however is something that does not suffer delay. It cannot be put off, for example, like a journey, to another day when things might be more favourable, vocations more abundant, the externals of the religious life better organised.

Prayer can only take place now and here. If now we pray, we pray always. If we do not pray now, we never pray. Without the living contact with God that is prayer, there is no value in reorganization and there is simply no renewal in the religious life.

Like faith of which it is the breath, prayer is an absolutely free activity under grace. No obligations or laws can impose it, and nevertheless, without that free unfolding of ourselves to God we can never enjoy His free gifts of abundant life⁶⁶, full joy⁶⁷, profound harmony and peace⁶⁸, authentic freedom⁶⁹ and complete intimacy and communion⁷⁰ in which the human person comes to fulfilment in Christ. God is always offering Himself gratuitously. He waits for us to welcome His self-gift.

May the Conversion Year awaken in each person the attitudes of the Virgin Mary, so that “it will be done to us in accordance with His Word”⁷¹ and so we will do whatever He tells

⁶⁶ Jo. 10, 10.

⁶⁷ Jo. 15, 11; 16, 24.

⁶⁸ Jo 14, 27.

⁶⁹ Jo. 8, 33. 36.

⁷⁰ Jo. 17, 22.

⁷¹ Lc. 1, 38.

us⁷². Then indeed the water of our life will be changed into the inebriating wine of His presence to brighten up with gladness the world around us.

Rome, 13 November 1987, *conclusion of the Centenary Year of the Conversion of Saint Augustine and of the Death of Saint Monica*.

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