

More on “Augustine on Prayer”

Talk by Jean Henderson, Clare Priory 30/07/2015

“Thou hast made us TOWARD thyself”

“We are DRAWN to God because we are what we are”

We are CAPEX DEI (capacity for God).

Our whole being therefore is drawn to God because we are what we are and this in-built desire, this longing for God is the only road to happiness.

The Christian's quest for happiness consists in the endeavour to adhere to God; in our efforts to unite ourselves to God by love, in our reaching out to him in prayer.

Prayer is the language of the heart's yearning for God. It is the interpreter of the heart's desire:

“The mouth speaks through the medium of words, the heart speaks through the medium of its desires. It is your heart's desire that is your prayer.”

Augustine has a lot to say about Interiority.

“Enter into your heart and if you have faith, you will find Christ there. There he speaks to you.”

“God speaks to me in the great silence of the heart.”

“Return to yourself from the things that are without and give yourself back to him who made you.”

“He departed from us at the Ascension so that we should turn to our hearts and find Him there at home with us, if only we would be with Him.”

“Prayer is not the reverberation of sound, it is the articulation of love. It is with the heart rather than the lips we pray... Therefore whether we cry to the Lord with voice of the body – where occasion demands it – or in the silence, we must cry from the heart.”

“Our Lord forbids loquacity – you are not to address God with a great flow of words in your prayer.”

Contemplating God does not require what he calls loquaciousness, as if the more words we have, the more easily God will hear us. God, in fact, does not need to be informed of our needs, for we are praying to Him, who knows what we need before we ask it of Him. If then God already knows our needs, why do we express them in a prayer? It is we who need to pray in order that our desire for God be expanded to receive what He wants to give us. We often need to put our thoughts and feelings into words in order to clarify to ourselves what they are – and sometimes we need to do this where God is concerned and in putting our desires, longings and so forth into words with God they become clearer to OURSELVES.

“Through prayer, therefore, it is brought about that the heart is TOWARDS Him who is always ready to give, providing that we are ready to accept whatever He may give... we know what we want, God knows what we need.”

“We need words to help us recollect ourselves and see what we are asking for, not to make us suppose that the Lord must be given information or swayed by words.”

With a prayer of petition then, we are not, with many words, attempting to inform Him of our needs which He already knows about, or to persuade Him to respond to us. Rather than changing God we pray in order to be changed by Him. Prayer that is truly Christian doesn't seek to control God or to construct God according to our own requirements, but should instead make us more receptive to

God as He really is. In the spiritual life, according to Augustine, to please God is to be pleased with God.

However there is no situation that is outside our prayer – every need, every longing, every worry, every sorrow, every shame, all our gratitude and praise, everything, can be brought to God in prayer, expressed to God in prayer. God doesn't need to be told – but I need to say it – therefore God wants me to say it. God wants, in fact, me to hear my cry out to Him from my heart. Not with flowery speeches, not addressing Him as an audience, but with a few deeply meaningful words that are truth. These are the prayers that God accepts and takes on board as it were, perhaps even in spite of ourselves we are being drawn along the road and drawn closer to the mystery of God.

And so to the Totus Christus:

So called Personal Prayer does not occur in isolation from everyone else, but has a clear ecclesial and communal dimension. We pray as part of a believing community – the Church – which is the Body of Christ. The ecclesial dimension of Augustine's teaching on prayer highlights its Christocentric aspects as well, which is in keeping with the Christocentric nature of his spirituality as a whole – and if our prayer is both ecclesial and Christocentric, it is also Trinitarian.

The prayer of every Christian as a member of Christ's Body, then, becomes, for Augustine, the “Totus Christus” the whole Christ, head and members.

And as we find this yearning for God in every aspect of our life – expressed in the “silent” prayer deep within our deepest self – in the prayers using words of petition and praise – and, in union with all our fellow members of the Totus Christus, in our shared prayer of liturgical celebrations as a whole – wherever we pray and however we pray, we pray as members of that Body.

Jean Henderson