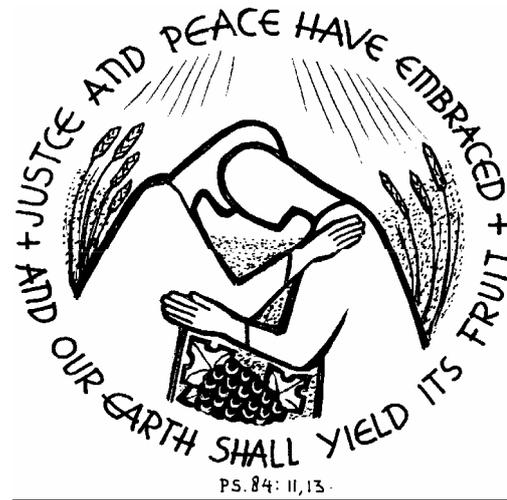


FRIENDS OF AUGUSTINE

AUGUSTINE FOR TODAY



THE AUGUSTINIAN COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE AND PEACE

THE WORD

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it” (John 3: 16-17).

God so loves the world, this world, the whole world, always and everywhere, but specifically here and now, not simply some ideal world “as it should be”, or some supposedly better world, observed through the haze of nostalgia, a world frozen at some specific point in the past. Not elsewhere either – some “holier” place, some Rome or Jerusalem, where there are some hypothetically worthier, more upright people – but right here, right now.

This basic truth is hard for some to grasp: God loves US, and has sent his Son to save us, “not as individuals without any bond or link between us, but rather to make us into a people who might acknowledge God and serve God in holiness”, as Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (# 9) reminds us.

If we consider the population of the world as a village of 100 inhabitants, maintaining the current proportions as they are, it would look something like this:

In a world divided between north and south, developed and developing nations, 90% of those in the south live in poverty (defined as not having enough to sustain life nor achieve a minimum of formal education). Twenty percent of those who live in the north share this condition. Together, they make up 4/5ths of the world’s population. The other 1/5th – 80% of those who live in the north, and 10% of those who live in the south – enjoy the benefits of the world’s goods.

At the same time, the United Nations Human Development Report in 1999 estimated that the cost of achieving and maintaining universal access to basic education for all would be US \$6 billion; basic health care and adequate nutrition for all: US \$13 billion; clean water for all: US \$9 billion. That amounts to roughly \$28 billion a year -- or less than 3 % of the combined wealth of the 225 richest people in the world.

Now, let us examine what we have spent in 1999 for the following concepts:

- Cosmetics in United States: \$8 billion
 - Ice-cream in Europe: \$11 billion
 - Perfume in USA and Europe: \$12 billion
 - Dog and cat food in USA and Europe: \$17 billion
 - Cigarettes in Europe: \$50 billion
 - Alcoholic Drinks in Europe: \$105 billion
 - Military expenses in the world: \$780 billion

It would be misleading to conclude that if we provided all our ice cream money for governments of developing nations that they would invest it in resolving the issues of health or education. Corruption depletes funds available. This points out the need to work on the issue of justice, as well as charity, in order to transform, convert minds and hearts, as well as behaviour and structures, so that all are included in God’s good gifts.

“The community of believers was of one mind and one heart, and no one claimed any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them and they were distributed to each according to need”

Acts of the Apostles

4: 32,34

FROM AUGUSTINE

What role does religion, Christianity, Augustinian spirituality play in forming world opinion? The question we are addressing is not: who is at fault, who is to blame; but rather, what responsibility do we, you and I, have for transforming this situation? Here is where it would be good to examine the Augustinian interpretation of some basic Christian principles, principles that Augustine stressed in word and deed and which underlie our Augustinian spirituality and which find their expression

Rule of life.

1. The first principle is that all people should **honour God in one another**. We are born equal in dignity. Augustine expressed it this way:

Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honouring God in yourselves, whose temples you have become.

Rule Chapter I

Our dignity does not flow from what we have, but from who we are: children of God, sisters and brothers all. Some have more treasured gifts than others and some have greater needs than others, but we are all equal in dignity. Much lip service is paid to this principle in our democratic society, but then, how do we explain the inequitable distribution of the world's goods? Do some have more of a right to food than others? Is it that there is not enough food, too many people?

2. The second basic principle underlying Augustinian spirituality and encouraging social responsibility flows from the first: God created the world for everyone: **share all in common**.

Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common. Food and clothing shall be distributed to each of you by your superior, not equally to all, for all do not enjoy equal health, but rather according to each one's need. For so you read in the Acts of the Apostles that they had all things in common and distribution was made to each one according to each one's need.

Rule Chapter 1

The universal and common destiny of the goods of the earth lies at the very heart of the Gospel and the social justice preached by Jesus. Augustine's affirmation of the universal destiny of all God's good gifts is a constant in Christian tradition. John Paul II expressed it this way: "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of its members, without excluding or favouring anyone." (Centessimus Annus 1991) This principle is essential to the construction of a society where peace, justice and solidarity are valued and enjoyed. Communion of goods is the incarnation of the communion of hearts, as well as the condition for realising it. It is evident from the Rule that the economic organisation of Augustinian community rests on two pillars: the communion of goods; and proportional distribution done according to the needs of each person. Augustine says it in the following fashion:

"Do you think it's a small matter that you are eating someone else's food? Listen to the apostle: *We brought nothing into this world*. You have come into the world, you have found a full table spread for you. But the Lord's is the earth and its fullness. God bestows the world on the poor, he bestows it on the rich."

Sermon 29, 2

In private property there lurks the danger of discord, as Augustine points out:

“It is those private things that we possess as individuals that give rise to lawsuits, enmities, disagreements, civil wars, disturbances, social strife, scandals, sins, general wickedness, murder.”
Exposition on Psalm 64,9.

Private ownership (a legitimate expression of the dignity of each person) always needs to be subordinated to the common good. Greed and selfishness are the greatest cause of poverty and the cornerstone of the structures of sin. The exclusive and excessive pursuit of personal wealth has become today’s idol, an absolute, sought for its own sake.

3. The third principle underlying our social responsibility, according to Augustine, is that we are called to **have greater concern for the common good than for our own**. Helping the poor is a matter of justice. Augustine expresses it this way in the Rule:

No one shall perform any task for his own benefit but all your work shall be done for the common good, with greater zeal and more dispatch than if each one of you were to work for yourself alone. For charity, as it is written, is not self-seeking (1 Cor 13:5) meaning that it places the common good before its own, not its own before the common good. So whenever you show greater concern for the common good than for your own, you may know that you are growing in charity. Thus, let the abiding virtue of charity prevail in all things that minister to the fleeting necessities of life.

Rule Chapter 5

Augustine resisted the temptation and danger of privatising the Christian experience. Augustine understood and lived out the consequences of Christ’s solidarity and identification with the poor.

“Christ who is rich in heaven *chose* to be hungry in the poor. Yet in your humanity you hesitate to give to your fellow human being. Don’t you realise that what you give, you give to Christ, from whom you received whatever you have to give in the first place.”

Commentary on Psalm 75,9

“*Whenever you did it for one of the least of mine, you did it for me*. Christ has received what you have given; it has been received by the one who gave you the means to give it; it has been received by the one who at the end will give you himself.”

Sermon 389,4

Augustine did not advocate self-impoverishment in order to achieve a more equitable situation. He encouraged and practised almsgiving, insistently, that is: sharing what we have with those who are less fortunate. Almsgiving, for Augustine, is nothing more than paying a debt: “If you were giving something of your own, then it would be pure generosity; but you are giving what belongs to God.”
Exposition on Psalm 95,15

For Augustine, it is not enough to practice charity. Both charity and justice are essential for being a Christian. “You give bread to a hungry person; but it would be better were no one hungry, and you could give it to no one. You clothe the naked person. Would that all were clothed and this necessity did not exist.” Tractate 1 John 8,8.

Clearly, those who choose to follow Augustine today by living in community and striving to share material and spiritual goods stand in contradiction to a society based principally on self-interest. Augustine’s Rule can yet play a critical role within a capitalist society that is based on private property, as well as a utopian role to the benefit of society based on the common search for the common good. Creed and deed are inextricably connected for Augustine. Today we are quite aware that the proposal of Acts of the Apostles, taken up in Augustine’s Rule, is valid not only for the whole Church but also for society as well.

POINTS TO PONDER

- How are the three guiding principles made manifest among us, in our family, parish, among the Friends of Augustine?
- In what specific areas do we need to grow in order to give better witness to these values?

A FINAL THOUGHT

“Go on making use of your special, expensive foods, because you have got into the bait of them, because if you change your habits you get sick. Go on making use of your superfluties, but give the poor their necessities. He looks to you, you look to God. He looks to a hand that was made as he was, you look to a hand that made you. But it didn't only make you, it also made the poor man with you. He gave you both this life as a single road to travel along. You have found yourselves companions, walking along the same road; he's carrying nothing, you have an excessive load. He's carrying nothing with him, you are carrying more than you need. You are overloaded; give him some of what you've got. At a stroke, you feed him and lessen your load. So give to the poor; I'm begging you, I'm warning you, I'm commanding you, I'm ordering you: Give to the poor whatever you like.”

Sermon 389,5-6

Compiled by Art Purcaro OSA