

## Chapter 9

### Living with Augustine:

### The Spirituality of the Augustinians<sup>1</sup>

By Martijn Schrama

EDITOR: Augustine himself lived in a monastery and wrote a monastic rule. Today, there are still monks who are inspired by Augustine's rule. Martijn Schrama, himself belonging to the *Ordo Sancti Augustini*, describes the origin of the Augustinian Order and their spirituality such as the theology of love, healing and helping grace, virtues and Christ's mediatorship.

At the end of the fourth century, Augustine proposed a fairly short monastic rule to his housemates with whom he was forming a monastic community. The ideal first Christian community he had in view was that of Jerusalem (Acts 4:32-35). The Rule is to a large extent inspired by the Bible. It calls on the housemates to go on the way to God as a community (Rule c.1). The continuing longing for God is also a source of continuing prayer to Him (Rule c.2). In a community that itself is on the way, the practice of hospitality is not seen as a mission of people who know they have arrived, but such a service flows out of the awareness that all people on earth are on the way and on that journey form one large community.

*Caritas*, love to God and neighbour, is the key word in the Rule. There is an emphasis on communal ownership of goods and communal prayer at fixed times throughout the day. This not regarded as a means for each housemate to reach his own level of holiness, but as a community as a whole to spread the sweet fragrance of Christ. Such a community grows and becomes more mature by cultivating respect for each other--"Honour God in each other, for each one of you has become His temple (Rule c.1). The growth process is stimulated by the desire for God and by the awareness that Christ identifies with each of them. Having an eye for that identification is also characteristic for Augustine's ecclesiology.

The mutual love is tested and purified by taking the housemates into account and by having patience with them; by immediately forgiving each other in the heart after a quarrel and not to be headstrong; by the daily unselfish exertions on behalf

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<sup>1</sup> Original title: "Living with Augustinus: De spiritualiteit van de Augustijnen."

of the household and what the community asks further. Not claiming ownership, communal use of goods and personal soberness are understood as participating in divine love. The relationship between the Superior and the other religious members needs to rest on love and mutual trust. The office of Superior is a service to the community. “Let the Prior not seek his happiness in his / her authority, but through service in love” (Rule c.7). In everything the Rule breathes a spirit of generosity. It pleads for internalizing the acts of daily life and to allow it to move through the heart.

Augustine emphasizes that the Rule can only be fruitfully followed within Christian freedom—“not as slaver under the law, but as free people under grace” (Rule c.8). When there is spiritual progress, thank God, so the Rule advises, because all good things in a human community ultimately are a gift from Him, not earnings on our part. The eighth and last chapter of Augustine’s Rule plays on the positive working of the entire community on its environment, not as planned action but as pure nearness. As lovers of divine beauty, the religious will spread the sweet fragrance of Christ in the world by their love for God and for each other as a community.

### **Advice for Monks**

In addition to the Rule, there are other works of Augustine with influence on the spirituality of Augustinians. In *The Labour of Monks* he lays the basis for monastic labour in the larger context of the duty of labour for each Christian. In Sermons 355 and 356, recently having been appointed bishop, he lays responsibility on his congregation over the form of communal life in the bishop’s household. His *collegae pastores* live together with him under one roof. They have everything in common and lead a sober life in service to evangelism and church.

In Letter 48, he encourages the monks on the island of Capraia to assist the Church with pastoral services when it is needed. They may never think of their contemplative rest time as higher than the needs of the Church, but at the same time not neglect the contemplative life. In Sermon 104, he criticizes a quietist-coloured piety. He considers contemplation without action possible only in heaven. In this life the seeker after God needs to strive to become both Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

Augustine's opinion about the close relationship between the contemplative life and pastoral activities is characteristic of the spirituality of the Augustinian Order ever since its beginning. The order was started in the thirteenth century by the unification of a number of hermitages (communities of hermits) in Toscanini. Their unification was based on Augustine's Rule. At the urging of the Pope, their definite merger was firmly established in Rome in 1256 during the first general meeting of the Order.

The Augustinian Order contributed to the dual ideal of evangelical poverty and apostolic brotherhood that in the course of reforming movements during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were propagated and took shape among the so-called beggar orders.

All the remaining works of Augustine are an important part of Augustinian formation and study. They serve as inspiration for their preaching. By means of regular changes in liturgy and dedicated study, and with a heavy emphasis on both the loneliness in the monastery cell and servanthood to the church, the order has produced many exegetes and preachers. United by reading and interpreting Augustine's writings, they developed a way of thinking and living in which already early on the emphasis was laid on three primary factors: (a) love; (b) the healing and living grace to enable them to be virtuous; (c) the Mediator Jesus Christ.

### **Theology of Love**

Humans are most intimately united with God through His love. Divine love focuses on the will of humans and on the heart, which is the seat of affections. The primacy of the will flows forth from the primacy of the heart. The spiritual writers of the Order focused their attention not exclusively on the rational side of the soul, but preferred to dwell on its affective possibilities, for all the capabilities of the soul, namely, consciousness, will and reason are images of the Trinitarian God. Through this means a harmonious bond is established between the knowledge of the spirit and the affections of the heart.

The first Augustinian theologians, Aegidius Romanus (1243-1316) and Jacobus van Viterbo (c. 1255-1308), made the affective relationship with God their main theme. Their theology is primarily to describe the relationship between sinful humanity and God, who gives humans salvation and leads them to their

glorification. Speculation about how God exists *an sich* without including humans, leads nowhere. Theological knowledge needs to encourage love. Theology is not solely focused on speculations nor merely on moral deeds, but first of all on stimulating the affections of the heart. Augustinians call their theology “*theologia affective*.” From there, insight and moral behavior emerge from the positive reaction of mankind to the affections or emotions brought about by God in the human soul.

Divine love sees to it that every human being has an in-created longing for God. This vision does not tolerate a so-called natural world as an independently existing world, existing without God. Neither will it tolerate an unbridgeable chasm between the supernatural and the natural. Augustine and the church fathers recognized a natural and obvious crossover from the natural to the supernatural, which also comes to expression in the Augustinians’ explanation how mankind needs to hold up the dual commandment of love, love to God and neighbour. Here also it is about that one undivided love, whereby love to neighbour becomes the criterion to test the true shape of our love for God.

Love is attractive and leads to true happiness and salvation. According to this vision, this attraction of God’s love leads people to the effort to overcome sin. In his commentary on Luke 14:23—“make them come in”-- Johannes Zachariae (before 1384-1428) writes:

This happens through the soft force of what virtue does and gives pleasure, not through any form of forceful violence, but so that a person chooses freely to seek the good. Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father...draws him” (John 6:44). That is to say, unless the Father has worked in the will of that person and changed him.

### **Healing and Helping Grace**

Humans are truly connected with God through His grace, already since Paradise. That is the source of the special relationship between them. The possibility of a human nature that has its own self-empowered independence, separate from the divine world, is rejected. As creatures, since their origin, humans naturally are to be connected to their Creator. His graceful influence finds its fullness not only in

the will, but also in the mind and in reason. Every positive epistemological result is preceded by a moment of divine enlightenment.

The Augustinian vision on mankind has an eye for the dynamic relationship between divine grace and human freedom. The more a person attributes to grace, the more free he is. Only in so far as the will is motivated by grace, can one speak of a free will. Before helping grace elevate mankind to a higher plane, healing grace must heal human nature that is damaged by the fall. Mankind is sick; his capabilities to will and to know are seriously weakened. Healing grace is needed to stimulate healing.

Already Aegidius Romanus spoke of this:

Adam was wounded in his natural capabilities, not to the extent that he lost what belonged to his nature, but in such a way that those natural capabilities were less capable to do good and more to do sin. Because of the resistance by desire, we see in our members a law that fights against the law of the spirit (Romans 7:23), wherefore it is difficult for a human to do the good. For there is in us, no matter what state of grace and good will we find ourselves in, an ongoing battle against the vices.

God grants the repentant sinner forgiveness, provided his repentance is motivated by love, not by fear for punishment. Here also the faith that mankind is taken up into God's love, forms the basis on which confession of guilt leads to freedom and happiness. Love makes the relationship that already exists between God and mankind grow. Fear makes it wither. In loving trust, confessing your own failures restores and strengthens the awareness of the original bond.

Augustinians emphasize God's acts in humans completely in the line of Augustine. Aegidius Romanus writes,

If we want to avoid evil actions, the only means available to us is that we, possessing God's grace, allow Him to move us, to lead and guide us. As soon as we want to be moved only by our own opinions, we fail in doing good deeds and acts. Thus, if we want to persevere in the good, more happens within us (*affici*) than that we ourselves do. God grants the

repentant sinner forgiveness, as long as this repentance is inspired by love, not by fear of punishment.

## **Virtues**

The Christian life is rooted in God's love, in the Holy Spirit as a gift. We have access to this love not from the sources of nature or from our own will, but it is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that is a gift to us (Romans 5:5). To bear fruit, a person needs to have a part in this love. He needs to be led by grace. The concurrence of God and human, from the side of the sinful person, is primarily a question of surrendering and following. Prayer is also placed within the context of love. It is a physical-spiritual expression with or without words, of the desire for God that lives in humans.

Thus Christian perfection exists fundamentally in the love that comes from God. It is God as the first to give His love. Subsequently, a person gives love back to God by spending it on the neighbour. In the environment of such loving acts the virtues develop and grow. Every virtue is an aspect of love. However, vices can also be hidden under the appearance of virtue, especially pride. Augustine warns in his Rule (c.1) that pride knows even how to spoil good deeds.

The spiritual writers of the Augustinian Order do not recommend holiness as a heroic practice of virtue by a religious elite. The potential for holiness is recognized for everyone who is called to it by God. When it comes to asceticism, they do not place an emphasis on strictness so much as honesty and humility. They do not adhere to any special method but more to the good will and loving freedom in which the ascetic is experienced. However, they do not consider soberness as a form of ascetics, but more as the social side of love.

## **The Mediator Jesus Christ**

The good works of people fall short. In line with their doctrine of original sin, the Augustinians point to the lack of their own righteousness. They emphasize that humans always fall short over against God and remain His debtors, even in the doing of good works. That is the reason they warn against the falsehood of self-justification in which people highly praise their own good works and have the audacity to trust in their own merit.

Albertus of Padua (1282-c.1325) writes:

No matter how great their merit may be, humans cannot trust in their own righteousness for four reasons: (a) our own righteousness is insecure, for no one can be sure whether his works are righteous; (b) our works of mercy are always tainted with sin; (c) our righteousness is not solid, for one can lose this righteousness at any moment; (d) our good works have not yet been tested, but must still be brought before the judgement of God.

Thomas of Villanova (1488-1555) also warns against self-praise and trusting in your own righteousness:

Blessed are those to whom the Lord grants doing good without they themselves promoting their works, but only praising Jesus Christ. Our hope must be founded only on Him who gives life to our dead works through His grace and adds lustre to them so that they are worthy of eternal life. That is the reason our own righteousness is to be despised and only the righteousness of God is to be highly praised. For as much as we denigrate our own earnings, that much will be ascribed to God's grace. Those who lean on God because of their mistrust of themselves, stand firm in God and do their works in humility and love to God. May they forget their own good works in order that they may remember God.

Without denying that good works can be regarded meritorious by God, Augustinians point also to Augustus' declaration that in our services God crowns His own gifts. Humans need to base their trust not on their own merits, but on Jesus Christ. Out of that bond to the Lord Jesus, the believer needs to trust on God's mercy. The fulfillment that Jesus Christ gives to our works is absolutely necessary to face God's judgement. This thought emerges from Augustine's church experience: The fellowship among believers exists due to the Lord Jesus who identifies Himself with every believer. The fellowship (*Totus Christus*) that arises out of this identification process supplements what is lacking in the individual believer. In addition, herewith the mystical cohesion of the Church is emphasized.

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