

WHAT MAKES AN AUGUSTINIAN PARISH?

AUGUSTINIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR PAROCHIAL MINISTRY

North American Augustinians

From the Introduction:

Before all else, dear brothers, love God and then your neighbor, because these are the chief commandments given to us. P1

All followers of Jesus are called to love God and neighbor. The synthesis of the Gospel for Augustine and the way to live it out can be found in his *Rule* or way of life.

We can use these principles, which we find in the *Rule*, in our ministerial service. As religious, we can be a model of community for those parochial communities which we form and serve.

Principle one: Unity and Harmony

Live together in harmony, being of one mind and heart on the way to God. (1.2)

St. Augustine, reflecting on the Christian community described in the Act of the Apostles, realistically expects diversity. He likewise promotes harmony, by which differences are respected and, under the influence of grace, the community approaches unity.

Principle two: Stewardship

Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common. (P4)

Like the community of Acts, we are called to be wise stewards of our time, treasure and talents – both material and spiritual goods. Freed from the burden of possessiveness, Augustine encourages us to abandon all self-seeking in order to find joy in sharing with others God's manifold gifts. The community (Church) can hold goods in common and from this storehouse share whatever is necessary for those in need. Our parish communities advance this way of life by embracing stewardship, returning a share of what we have and focusing our mission on the genuine concern for those who are in need.

Principle three: Care and respect for the individual

Your superior should see to it that each person is provided with food and clothing. He does not have to give exactly the same to everyone, for you are not equally strong, but each person should be given what he personally needs. (1.3 also 1.6 and 5. 3 & 8)

When common resources are joyfully shared to meet individual needs, the community itself is strengthened. Both the person providing the resource and the one receiving it benefits.

This reflects the life of our Trinitarian God in our imitation of God's own generosity and sharing. The core teaching of the gospel and the first principle of social justice is that every human person is a child of God, worthy of respect and dignity. A parish encourages each person in the use of his/her God-given gifts in service to the community. The parish is also to be open to the differences of individuals as a means of witnessing to the community through each person's uniqueness and diverse gifts.

Principle four: Worship

Persevere faithfully in prayer at the hours and times appointed. (2.1 also 2.2 & 2.3)

The community should always have an outward focus, seeing and finding Christ in others. Allowance must be made for personal and private prayer so that the God who dwells within can be found. Prayer and liturgy (as the work of the people) encourage a peaceful and harmonious community. For authentic community life to exist in a parish there must be a faith-based sharing of one's interior life as we journey on our way to God. Our prayer together must come from the heart, contemplating in our hearts what is said by our lips.

Principle five: Moderation and Self-Denial

As far as your health allows, keep your bodily appetites in check by fasting and abstinence from food and drink. (3.1 also 3.2 to 3.5)

Fasting, abstinence, sacrifice, self-denial are all necessary for spiritual growth but they are means, not ends in themselves. St. Augustine urges moderation in all things, advising spiritual discipline "so far as your health permits." These practices are meant to lead us to God and to live a simple lifestyle, rejecting materialism and consumerism and being in solidarity with the poor.

In the words of St. Augustine: "It is better for us to want a little than to have too much."

Principle six: Mutual care

In all actions, let nothing occur to give offense, but only what becomes your holy state of life. (P19 through 29)

God cares for us when we are cared for by another in love. One clear manifestation of such care is the obligation to speak fraternally to another who is in danger of straying into sin. Ultimately, such admonishment must always manifest the tender mercy and forgiveness of God. When in need of assistance we must graciously accept the help given. We must humbly accept fraternal correction, which is based on truth and offered in a charitable spirit.

Principle seven: Humility

If, in the religious life, rich people were to become humble and poor people haughty, then this style of life would seem to be of value only to the rich and not the poor. (1.6, 7, 8)

Augustine contends that there is no possibility of true community of mind and heart without the virtue of humility. It is the primary virtue for common life. Conversely, pride, which lurks even in good works, is the beginning and origin of all sin.

Just as Christ emptied himself, so too ought we to guard against pride which can undermine a good work and distort motivation.

Social status, education, possessions and high achievements do not make us who we are except when pride dominates. The incarnation of the Word is God's humility. When we imitate Christ in his humility, we are formed in his image by loving God and others more than self. We depend on God for all that we are and what we have.

Principle eight: The common good

Love puts the interest of the community before personal advantage, and not the other way around. (5.2)

Charity grows whenever the individual or the community freely chooses to place the greater good ahead of one's own. We are called to build the kingdom of God, not our own. Cooperation, collaboration and the recognition of the gifts of others enhance the growth of community. The measure of our growth in charity is found in our placing the community interest (parish) before our own.

Principle nine: Reconciliation

If you have hurt a person by abusing him, or by cursing or grossly accusing him, be careful to make amends for the harm you have done, as quickly as possible, by apologizing to him. And the one who has been hurt should be ready in his turn to forgive you without wrangling. (6.2)

A community of life without conflicts is impossible. Living and interacting together is bound to create conflicts and Augustine in the Rule offers us a way to respond to these situations. Disputes are to be addressed quickly, directly, and with compassion. The one who has been offended must be ready to forgive. Here again, forgiveness must come from the heart not just the lips. To forgive from the heart requires humility.

Augustine makes it eminently clear that a community will be strong only if its members interact honestly and lovingly. Reconciliation is based on true concern for each other's welfare. An Augustinian parish ought to model open, forthright and loving confrontation in pointing out what is truly harmful to individual persons and to the community for the welfare of all.

Principle ten: Authority and obedience as service

Your superior must not think himself fortunate in having power to lord it over you, but in the love with which he shall serve you. (7.1-4)

For Augustine, authority is an act of loving service. A designated authority figure or leader is not placed above others but remains a part of the community (parish) with special responsibilities and duties toward others. Guiding the community toward the fulfillment of the Gospel ideals and being an example to others are two of the most important aspects of the role of authority (pastor).

Every member, however, must take responsibility for the progress toward these ideals and the discernment of the community's direction.

Likewise, obedience shows a loving compassion for the leader who bears greater responsibility for the community and a willingness to listen and cooperate for the common good. This certainly shapes our New Testament understanding of authority as counter-cultural as proclaimed by Jesus. Such authority remains gentle and humble because it is always perceived as in service to God, whose servants are thereby served.

Principle eleven: Ongoing conversion

This little book is to be read to you once a week. As in a mirror, you will be able to see in it whether there is anything you are neglecting or forgetting. (8.2)

Augustine encourages us to look into the gospel and *Rule* as in a mirror to assess how well we are approaching our goals. Thus, we can monitor our progress in the Christian life, a gradual process of ongoing conversion in Christ. Conversion is a life-long process. Frequent personal and communal evaluations help us focus on the journey toward God in oneness of mind and heart. Augustine's words alert us that on our journey as the pilgrim people of God we cannot be complacent. Regular review of the process can stimulate renewal and strengthen commitment and fervor.

Principle twelve: Freedom under grace

Live in such a way that you spread abroad the life-giving aroma of Christ. Do not be weighed down like slaves straining under the law, but live as free men under grace. (8.1)

While striving to live in oneness of mind and heart intent upon God as proposed by Augustine, we must remember that God gives us the grace needed to succeed. It is this grace, freely given by God that grants us the freedom to choose to love one another as Jesus did and reject the enslavement of sin. Grace gives us the freedom and the responsibility to find God in ourselves and in one another.