

Introduction

It sometimes happens that a priest from my surroundings says to me: Why discuss Augustine today? Augustine is *old fashioned*, *démodé*. Indeed, we must situate Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries, but isn't the story of the Gospel older? Of course, we understand that behind these considerations there lies the question: What is the contemporary relevance of Augustine?

The Relevance of Augustine for our Time

A first reason why it is valuable to continue talking about Augustine is the fact that he can undoubtedly be called the greatest among the Church Fathers.¹ He left an important mark on later Christian thought. Moreover, he composed a lot of writings: more than eight hundred sermons, some three hundred letters, and a hundred works in which he unfolds his theological vision. In addition, Augustine exerted a particular influence on the Christian ideal of religious life by writing the oldest monastic rule in the West. As a result, he had great significance for the development of Western monastic life. Over the centuries, several monastic rules have been given the name of Augustine, but in fact only one goes back to Augustine. The Rule of Augustine was copied and was widely spread, especially from the eleventh century onward.

The Second Vatican Council envisioned a return *ad fontes*, a return to the sources: Bible, liturgy, and the Church Fathers. One of the most prominent Fathers to appear in the documents of the Second Vatican Council is Saint Augustine. Some scholars such as Anthony Dupont have made a study on the authority of Augustine at the Second Vatican Council, analysing the use of Augustine in the preparatory and the promulgated documents.² Dupont notes that Augustine

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1. Cf. QUICKE, G., *Zorg voor de ziel. Augustinus inspireert*, Halewijn, Antwerpen, 2021, p. 145-147.
 2. Cf. DUPONT, A., *The Authority of Augustine of Hippo at the Second Vatican Council. A Comparative Analysis of the Use of Augustine in the Preparatory and the Promulgated Documents*, in, ROUTHIER, G., ROY-LYSENCOURT, Ph., Schelkens, K., *La théologie catholique entre intransigeance et renouveau: la réception des mouvements préconciliaires à Vatican II*, Louvain-La-Neuve/Leuven, 2011, p. 11-48. Zie ook: MORÀN, J., *La presenza di S. Agostino nel Concilio Vaticano II*, in *Augustinianum* 6 (1966), p. 460-488.

is the most quoted Father at the Council. Of the approximate 330 quotes of *Patres* and *Doctores*, he was referenced 57 times, while Thomas Aquinas was quoted only 25 times. Compared with the promulgated documents, the preparatory documents seem to be more faithful to Augustine's original context and his intentions.³ Regarding the genres of Augustine's writings in the promulgated documents, the pastoral writings (28 references to sermons and 4 to letters) represent the majority, and the doctrinal/polemical writings the minority. Dupont concludes that the presence of Augustine's pastoral writings is significant in the promulgated documents.⁴ The use of Augustine conformed to the wish of John XXIII for this Council, namely to be a pastoral Council.⁵

In an address, Pope Paul VI emphasized Augustine's importance for the whole tradition over the centuries: "*It can be said that all the conceptions of the past converge in his works and are the source for the whole doctrinal tradition of successive centuries.*"⁶ In 2008, a unique manuscript was published with Pope Paul VI's personal notes. It is a manuscript containing quotations from the works of Augustine written in the pope's handwriting. The publication counts 230 pages and provides us with a rich and diverse range of quotations from Augustine's works.

On August 28, 1986 Pope John Paul II issued '*Augustinum Hipponensem*', an Apostolic Letter to the bishops, priests, religious families, and faithful of the whole Catholic Church on the occasion of the sixteenth centenary of the conversion of Saint Augustine, Bishop and Doctor.⁷ Quite regularly, Pope Benedict XVI underscored that the teachings of Saint Augustine are a path for the search for Christian unity, especially a source of unity with the Orthodox. At the beginning of September 2009, a message from the Pope was sent to Cardinal Kasper as the 11th Inter-Christian Symposium gathered in Rome. Pope Benedict XVI explained that the theme, *Saint Augustine in the Western and Eastern Tradition* is "*most interesting for reflecting further on Christian theology and spirituality in the West and in the East, and on its development.*"⁸ The Pope continued that the study of spiritual riches in

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3. Cf. DUPONT, A., *The Authority of Augustine of Hippo at the Second Vatican Council. A Comparative Analysis of the Use of Augustine in the Preparatory and the Promulgated Documents*, op.cit., p. 11-48.
 4. References to the Tractates on the Gospel of John are: LUMEN GENTIUM: Tractates on the Gospel of John, 61, 2; Tractates on the Gospel of John, 13, 12; SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM: Tractates on the Gospel of John, 6, 7; Tractates on the Gospel of John, 6, 13; GAUDIUM ET SPES: Tractates on the Gospel of John, 50, 6; Tractates on the Gospel of John, 23, 6; Tractates on the Gospel of John, 11, 4; PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS: Tractates on the Gospel of John, 123, 5; OPTATAM TOTIUS: Tractates on the Gospel of John, 32, 8.
 5. Cf. DUPONT, A., *The Authority of Augustine of Hippo at the Second Vatican Council*, op.cit., p. 35.
 6. PAULUS VI, *Inaugural address at the Patristic Institute of the Augustinianum*, May 4, 1970, L'Observatore Romano English edition, May 21 1970, p. 8.
 7. Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Augustinum Hipponensem*, Apostolic Letter, 1986.
 8. BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Cardinal Walter Kasper, Castel Gandolfo*, 28 August 2009.

the Christian East and West, with historical objectivity and fraternal cordiality, is essential for better reciprocal appreciation among all Christians.

In a meeting with a group of 200 members of the General Chapter of the Discalced Augustinians, Pope Francis said that “*fidelity to tradition ensures a fruitful future... To be modern, some believe that it is necessary to detach oneself from roots. And this causes ruin, because roots, tradition, are the guarantee of the future.*” The Holy Father further clarified that “*the roots are the tradition that bring you the sap to make the tree grow, bloom, and bear fruit. Never detach yourself from roots in order to be modern, that is suicide.*”⁹ Pope Francis encouraged the friars to strengthen their desire to walk in the living Christ and to continue in this way.

At the conclusion of the *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, Pope Francis published an Apostolic Letter entitled, ‘*Misericordia et misera*’. The title ‘*Misericordia et misera*’ is an expression used by Saint Augustine in his commentary on the encounter of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11): “*the two of them alone remained: mercy with misery*”.¹⁰ Augustine comments on the reaction of Christ who is left alone with the woman and raised his eyes to her: “*we have heard the voice of Justice, let us also hear the voice of mercy.*”¹¹ Augustine describes this event as an encounter between “*misera*” and “*misericordia*,” between the wounded woman and the Physician, between the great misery and the great mercy.¹²

‘Run, I will Carry You’

The first time I heard about Augustine explicitly was when I was a teenager in the last year of humanities. I read an article by Christopher Dawson about Augustine’s influence on European culture. Since then, this Church Father never left my mind. I wrote my doctoral thesis on his theological vision. I read works by and about Augustine. I gave talks at conferences about him. Reading and rereading his Confessions, his Soliloquies, his Rule, his Expositions on the Psalms and the Tractates on the Gospel of John, his amazing sermons, as well as his work on the Trinity deeply affected me. Step by step, Augustine has become as familiar as a friend to me. He speaks to my heart, he inspires my thoughts, he stirs my desire to follow the Lord. He sustained me in accomplishing my tasks as a staff member at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. He gave me courage and confidence as I made my way in the shadow of St. Peter’s Basilica. He reaches out

9. POPE FRANCIS, *Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Discalced Augustinians*, Clementine Hall, Thursday, 12 September 2019.

10. Tractates on the Gospel of John, 33, 5.

11. Tractates on the Gospel of John, 33, 6.

12. Cf. Expositions of the Psalms, 50, 8. “*vulnerata et medicus, remansit magna miseria et magna misericordia*”.

to me with spiritual food as I walk together with Christians of the Middle East, a Church of martyrs, to whom my heart is so attached.

The conversion experience that Augustine went through ultimately became the experience of a growing trust in God who first loved us: “O Lord our God, under the shadow of Your wings let us hope, defend us, and carry us. You will carry us both when little, and even to grey hairs will You carry us.”¹³

The path to inwardness is a central theme in Augustine’s spirituality. The true pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of the heart. “Return to your heart and from there to God.”¹⁴ Augustine calls for a return to the heart, the center of the person, the place where God dwells and speaks to us. This passionate search for God finds expression in a life of authentic prayer. Prayer is a matter of desire and yearning.¹⁵ Desire is the heart of prayer. “Longing is the bosom of the heart.”¹⁶ The life of the Christian is one holy desire to imitate Christ day after day. Without having devoted a specific treatise to Christ himself, Augustine was primarily concerned with who Christ is for us: “Like a tree sprung up beside the river is our Lord Jesus Christ. He assumed flesh, died, rose again, ascended into heaven. It was His will to plant Himself, in a manner, beside the river of the things of time. Are you rushing down the stream to the headlong deep? Hold fast the tree. Is love of the world whirling you on? Hold fast Christ. For you He became temporal, that you might become eternal; because He also in such sort became temporal, that He remained still eternal.”¹⁷

Step by step, Augustine unfolded Christ in his many sermons and writings as a humble physician, mediator, and shepherd. Christians are called to become faithful imitators of the merciful Lord, who heals the wounds of the past. “Let us therefore, wounded as we are, pray to the Physician, let us carry ourselves to the inn to be cared for.”¹⁸

Inner life is intrinsically linked to community life and apostolate. Augustine developed a spirituality of *togetherness*. In his sermons, Augustine called the faithful to enter with him into the mystery of God’s Word. He invited them with the words, “Listen with me.”¹⁹ We also find this spirituality of belonging in the way Augustine carried out his pastoral mission together with his fellow believers. The shepherd and the faithful share in the mission of Christ by serving. We are

13. Confessions, IV, 16, 31.

14. Sermon 311, 13.

15. Cf. SCHRAMA, M., *The hart that thirsts with longing: Augustine’s commentary on Psalm 42*, in VAN BAVEL, T.J., *Saint Augustine*, (edited by Tarsicius J. van Bavel in collaboration with Bernard Bruning), *op.cit.*, Mercatorfonds, Brussels/ Augustinian Historical Institute, Heverlee, 2007, p. 144.

16. Tractates on the Gospel of John, 40, 10.

17. Tractates on the First Epistle of John, 2, 10.

18. Tractates on the Gospel of John, 41, 13.

19. Sermon 261, 2.

all fellow disciples, fellow servants of *the one Shepherd*.²⁰ Pastoral life is sustained through deep communion with Christ himself, at whose source we may quench our thirst.

The spirituality of community life is lived concretely in the Church as the *Totus Christus*, the Whole Christ. There is deep unity between Christ and the Church, the Head and the members. Christ speaks in us and we speak in Him. That is why Augustine encouraged the faithful to consider the unity of the whole Church in Christ. In this way, we can also better understand why Augustine used the image of the Church as mother. With a profound sense of the Church as the body of Christ, Augustine also repeats for us today, “*Love this Church, stay in this Church, be this Church yourself.*”²¹

The spirituality of the *Totus Christus* is expressed in the loving care of the poor and vulnerable. The love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the foundation of the Church’s communion. The Church is called to be a bridge of mercy from time to eternity,²² a healing community, like the inn in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The true shepherds of the Church are driven by a merciful love, which lovingly touches, restores, and heals the wounds. Through hospitality a Christian community is a healing community, where the guests feel at home. Hospitality is a way in which the wounds become a source of healing.²³

Augustine reminds us that Christ is carrying us, His sustaining presence is a sign of hope and light. Augustine considered himself a *minister of Christ*. The most important actor in our apostolate is Christ himself. Christ is the source and the strength of our ministry. We are only able to carry Christ, because Christ is carrying us. The burden rests not so much on our shoulders, for we belong to the Lord, who leads us. We are not preaching our own word but the Word of God. Christ is speaking in us, He needs our voice and our tongue and our lips to continue to speak in this world.

“*Run I will carry you.*” In our pilgrimage we are not alone, because Christ is with us, our way and our light. Therefore, our pilgrimage of love is a way in joy and light because we are sure that we are on the road with Him and that we receive His mercy which is our joy.²⁴

20. Cf. Letter 217, 1.

21. Sermon 138, 10.

22. Cf. Expositions of the Psalms, 60, 6.

23. Cf. QUICKE, G., *Augustine of Hippo as promoter of unity*, in *Agustín de Hipona como Doctor Pacis: estudios sobre la paz en el mundo contemporáneo*. Edited by Anthony Dupont, Enrique Eguarte Bendímez and Carlos Alberto Villabona. Bogotá: Editorial Uniagustiniana, 2018, p. 83-112.

24. Cf. Tractates on the Gospel of John, 36, 8. Cf. Tractates on the Gospel of John, 83, 1.