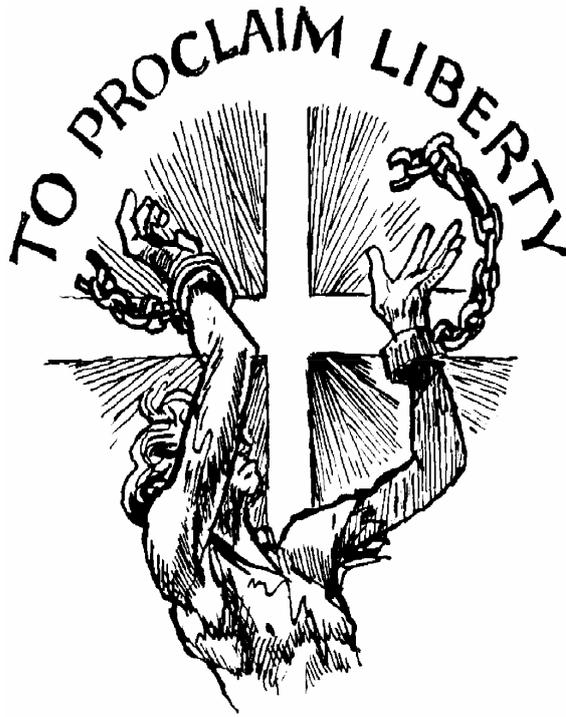


FRIENDS OF AUGUSTINE

AUGUSTINE FOR TODAY



ADDICTION AND GRACE

THE WORD

A leper came to him and pleaded on his knees. "If you want to" he said "you can cure me". Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. "Of course I want to!" he said. "Be cured!" And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured.

Lk. 1:40-42

People tormented by unclean spirits were also cured, and everyone was trying to touch him because power came out of him that cured them all. *Lk. 6:18-19*

Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

Ep.3:20-21

In returning and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust shall be your strength . . . The Lord is waiting to be gracious to you. . . Blessed are those who wait for him.

Is.30:15-18

REFLECTION

Sam, an offshore worker, spent two of his four weeks onshore with his current partner, the mother of his child, and two with “the other woman”, his former partner, a close friend in the next town, terminally ill, who didn’t know “the current” existed. This meant a constant tissue of lies, cover-ups, of infidelity and guilt, year in, year out. He would walk up and down the aisle of the local church shouting, “Why, Lord, why not release me and get me out of this?”

Augustine and Sam never met and I never introduced them - and yet Augustine is the man for Sam and for countless people bogged down in situations of their own making, for both of them learnt to present their complete selves and their situations, painful and sinful, to God, aloud.

All of us have experience of people, even in our own families, who are discouraged, crushed by besetting sin, by addictions they cannot break free of, and yet have so much goodness and longing for freedom and for God in them. My own experience: for five years after Ordination, of knowing one hour’s prayer should be done each morning, and yet postponing and postponing hourly and daily, ending each day with another “Sorry Lord.” Augustine, “Time passed by. I delayed turning to the Lord and postponed from day to day finding life in you.”

In the Confessions, Augustine confesses his miseries, of his own making, and “Your mercies”. He was a man of a passionate nature, of whole hearted commitment, addictive. Fortunately God was addicted incurably to Augustine, and through his mother, friends, his Church, Bishop Ambrose and various heretics, “Your own indwelling” stirred up continually in him, even while he was in the mire, a hunger and thirst for truth, for sublimity, for love and beauty, and for friendship.

“We are bound to earth by chains of our own making”. He had followed “lusts and darkness in their fulness from adolescence.” Nothing colourful by today’s standards, perhaps, but he writes looking back seeing himself in the clear light of God, knowing he had been living outside himself, “in love with love”, with a partner and child by the time he was eighteen. A man for today indeed.

Before his conversion, some examples of the passions, addictions enslaving him: heretical sects, horoscopes, astrologers, personalities (he used to sit staring by the hour at Ambrose reading the Scriptures); “the slavery of worldly office”, and, “to a large extent what held me captive and tortured me was the habit of satisfying with vehement intensity an insatiable sexual desire . . . the chains of sexual desire by which I was tightly bound”.

After his conversion, aged twenty eight, he was left with fear of “uncontrollable desires”, and struggled daily against them, fighting “against the necessity of food, lest I be captive again”, and even against the sounds of praise, music in church. But he fought and struggled because he was hooked on God and thirsted to rise above the goodness of creatures to their God Creator. “ I was caught up in your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight, the weight of sexual habit”.

His analysis of his paralysis: sin indwelling had distorted the will, giving rise to passion. Servitude to passion gave rise to habit; habit not resisted gave rise to necessity . . . “and these are the links of the chain that constitutes harsh bondage.” Grace, the touch of God, was the only answer.

As he came to crisis, with the failure of many resolutions at the back of him, he notes two things:

Voices tugging at the garment of the flesh . . .” from this moment we shall never be with you again.” (But the moment he got the will-power, the voices ceased.)

all the visible signs of anxiety, twisting his fingers, hands in hair, tears, face red with emotion. And he shouts aloud, "How long, Lord, how long? Why not now? Why not an end to my impure life now?"

AUGUSTINE'S MOMENT OF GRACE

As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the house nearby chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which) saying and repeating over and over again, "Pick up and read, pick up and read." . . . I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find . . . I seized it (the book of the Apostle), opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit; "Not in riots and drunken parties, nor in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." (Rm. 13:13-14)

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All shadows of doubt were dispelled.

Conf.8:29

From my own experience of loss of faith, I remember confessing aloud to the God I doubted existed, sitting on a tree stump in the retreat house of Minsteracres, with only a rabbit as listener. To cry out, to shout aloud to God is an enormous act of faith - it lets God in, who is already freeing the will.

AUGUSTINE A MAN FOR TODAY . . . WHY?

Because more than any other saint we have details of, he was a sinner, an addict - and in search of God.

Because he speaks aloud, passionately and honestly of his personal mire: he brings his sin aloud to God while he is still in it - and experiences change.

Because having spoken to God, he then writes to God: the Confessions are like a diary. He records, yes, his miseries. But he records all God's words to him. While we complain that God never speaks, Augustine so yearns for God and so steepes himself in Scripture, that he records God's answers

abundantly. Further, on looking back, he sees all his sin, his slavery, all the events of his life in the light of faith, noting how God had been arranging things, working behind the scenes, all along drawing him closer.

Because he needs a community of friends around him so they can share faith with one another, helping one another with the search for God.

Because he addresses, as he writes the Confessions, "God indwelling" in his heart and soul: and believes profoundly in the indwelling of God in the heretic and wanderer.

Because Augustine, in searching for God, acquires a profound self-knowledge. We look for God in prayer, and go through the purgatory of finding the worst side to ourselves.

Augustine, a man for today's men, women, adolescents, - career-orientated, addicted to sex, drugs, alcohol and gambling, child by current partner, often self-absorbed and lost in the pleasures of created, material things, - but still searching for love, truth, beauty, friendship - and God.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Who have I ever constructively discussed my habit/addiction with? (Doctor, friend, counsellor, priest . . .)

- How much of my habit, - proximate occasions, causes, effects on others and me, have I brought to Jesus Christ in my own words:
 - in silent prayer?
 - out loud, like Augustine?
 - in a Dear God/Lord letter?

- Do I trust God to have such loving power over me that;
 - He can enlighten me as to the way forward in tackling my habit, its occasions, causes, effects, benefits, cures?
 - He can, in His time, break its grip and banish it?
 - He can, once it is brought to Him regularly in humble prayer, draw great good from it for me and my family?

A FINAL THOUGHT

Let your sin be not an abyss
between you and God,
but a bridge.

Jean Vanier

Compiled by John Reid OSA