

Augustine on Prayer

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Introductory remarks:

I have spent many hours trying to prepare these talks and have suffered from acute frustration - not, I hasten to say, because Augustine's spirituality and specifically, his teaching on prayer, failed to satisfy me in my own spiritual journey - but because I have found it difficult [not to say impossible] to reproduce it in both spoken and written words in such a way as to convey the passion and simplicity of the teaching - His teaching amounts actually to an absolutely clear and natural process flowing out of who and what we are in relation to the Trinity God - and the Incarnate One, Jesus Christ. Augustine goes right to the heart of the matter. It is the Trinitarian and Christocentric spirituality of Augustine that first attracted me to him after many years of avoidance.

In spite of the fact that Augustine never wrote a treatise on prayer, there is a vast amount of material on the subject throughout his works, for he believed that prayer should flow through the entire life of every Christian - that prayer can only be constant because it is the expression of our desire, and our desire can and should be constant.

I have, therefore, concentrated predominantly on that desire and the source of the desire, because that surely is what prayer is all about. Obviously I can only touch here and there on these things but I hope Augustine himself will partner the Holy Spirit in guiding me through his fundamental teaching.

Augustine's spirituality is centred on the Trinity and on the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ who came to this earth not only to redeem us and show us what God is like - but also to show us what we are like. He came to gather us up in His Body, the Church, and bring us all finally back into the heart and home of God.

We must remember that Augustine was deeply soaked in Scripture, and it was when he discovered that Christ in the Scriptures was witnessing to His Divine Father and to the Holy Spirit, and was the perfect image of the Trinity God that his conversion was complete - at last. I think, too, that as Augustinians we are aware that Augustine's vision of communion is rooted right in the heart of the Trinity - so that's where we shall begin.

Genesis 126- Formed in the image of God

'Then God said: "Let US make humankind in OUR image according to OUR likeness...." So God created human beings in His image. In the image of God He created them, Male and female He created them.'

Each one of us has been formed in the image and likeness of our Triune God - that's what we are. But due to sin - neglect - ignorance etc.- etc. - that image has become deformed, obscured. But because that's what we are - and that's what has become so obscured - there is deeply in our very nature the yearning to have that deformed image reformed. There is this longing which is absolutely part and parcel of our nature.

"Thou hast made us TOWARD Thyself, and our hearts find no rest until they come to rest in Thee."

We are DRAWN to God because we are what we are.

We are CAPEX DEI [capacity for God]

The deepest part of our very nature is this capacity for God - and this capacity craves satisfaction/fulfilment - [we don't always recognise what we crave for]. This yearning movement TOWARDS God needs satisfying if we are to be truly happy.

The pursuit of happiness - the happy life.

We human beings all seek after happiness - the happy life - and the pursuit of happiness can ultimately only be satisfied in God [because we are what we are] who is our Supreme Good [this again because we are what we are].

Augustine found that the yearning of the human heart for happiness and the findings of reason concerning our Supreme Good were confirmed by divine assurance and supported by the authority of divine command: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole soul and your whole mind." The command has no limits because the measure of this love is the utmost capacity of mind and heart and soul - our whole being is drawn into this loving of God. That's God's command - and there it is Scripture - and it's reasonable because of what **WE** are.

It was St Paul who assured him of complete satisfaction in this love: "We know that to those who love God all things work together unto good." And in one of the most wonderful passages in Scripture, Paul reassures him of permanence in the possession of the Beloved:

"For I am absolutely certain that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is Augustine's spirituality -

It is God, therefore: "in following whom we live well, in reaching whom we live both well and happily". [Again: "Thou has made us TOWARD Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts can find no rest until they rest in Thee"] Our desire for God is the only road that leads to Him and to happiness. This in-built desire, this longing for God is our only road to happiness.

In this life, therefore, our most important and pressing task is to unite ourselves to God by love. "Going in quest of God, striving to adhere to Him, reaching our for Him makes us good; attaining Him, seeing Him makes us happy." We are what our love makes us - because the power of love is that it transforms the lover into the image of the object loved. [We were formed in His image - the image was shrouded in sin, neglect, ignorance, etc. - and now it is transformed again into His image.] So this is our happiness - never complete in this world, but constantly strived after.

This love needs a medium of expression - and that need is supplied by prayer which is the loving reaching out of the mind to God. Prayer, then, plays a very important part in our quest for happiness. It involves the descent of a loving, redeeming God in Christ, and the ascent of a loving aspiring soul - to the Triune God.

The only ultimate happiness open to us [who Augustine refers to as pilgrim souls'] is the loving possession of God in the security of eternal life - until then our happiness is incomplete.

Meanwhile, the Christian's quest of happiness consists in the endeavour to adhere to God; in our efforts to unite ourselves to God by love; in our reaching out to Him in prayer.

Prayer is the language of the heart's yearning for God; it is the interpreter of the heart's desire. "The mouth speaks through the medium of words, the heart speaks through the medium of its desires. It is your heart's desire that is your prayer."

"It is not words that God wants of you, but your hearts." "It is with the heart we ask; with the heart we seek; and it is with the voice of the heart that the door is opened."

It is important to realise that in these texts and everything that Augustine says, the term "heart" is used in the Scriptural sense, in which it indicates our whole interior and spiritual life, and all its faculties. It signifies, then, not only the heart, but the mind as well. Prayer is the loving reaching out of the mind to God; it involves mind and heart, thought and desire, knowledge and love - the entire person. As Augustine says: "The cry of the heart is a solemn earnestness of thought which, when given vent to in prayer, expresses the profound yearning of the one who prays." The whole one who prays.

I think to end this basic, fundamental look at where Augustine starts with prayer, at the individual's yearning, we should mention something of his thoughts on interiority. And he has a lot to say on interiority:-

He says:

"Enter into your heart, and if you have faith, you will find Christ there. There He speaks to you."

"He is in our very inmost hearts, but our hearts have strayed from Him."

"God speaks to us in the great silence of our hearts."

"Return to yourself from the things that are without and then give yourself back to Him who made you."

"Do not go outside yourself! Return to yourself! Truth dwells within."

"Why do we rush about from the top of heaven to the bottom of earth looking for Him who is here at home with us, if only we would be with Him."

"He departed from our sight at the ascension so that we should turn to our hearts and find Him there. He departed, but He is here with us."

I would like to quote here from the Constitution of the Order of St Augustine - because it sums up so well much of what I have been trying to say.

33. We cannot enjoy the satisfaction of true happiness except in God, because we are made in his image and likeness. We are his image for the very reason that we are capable of possessing him and able to share his being. "Through sin" the image of God is obscured in us, but not destroyed, and "through grace it is renewed".

34. This image will be more readily re-fashioned in us if we proceed by way of the interior life [interiority]. Led by the voice of creation itself, we must continually turn back into ourselves and, entering into the depths of our being, diligently work toward perfecting our hearts, so that praying with the continuous desire of our hearts we may come to God. "Do not go outside yourself, but turn back within; truth dwells in the inner man; and if you find your nature given to frequent change, go beyond yourself Move on, then, to that source where the light of reason itself receives the light." Having thus turned within ourselves, we shall renew his image and draw near to the Father under the guidance of the truth of Christ, toward whom the love of the Holy Spirit carries us and makes us one in God.

Deep within our hearts He is to be found - and the whole of our heart, the desire of our heart - is our prayer to Him. And that's where it takes place. In our heart [which the Spirit will help us get to know] we are to be with God. There He is to be found - there he speaks to us - and there the yearning of our hearts speaks to Him even before any words are

uttered.

Augustine says again:

"He who prays with desire sings in his heart even though his tongue be silent, but if he prays without desire, he is dumb before God even though his voice sounds in the ears of men."

And finally:

"Prayer is not the reverberation of sound; it is the articulation of love. It is with the heart rather than the lips that we pray... Therefore, whether we cry to the Lord with the voice of the body - where occasion demands it - or in silence, we must cry from the heart."

According to Augustine only the heart's cry, only the longing of the heart makes prayer genuine.

The Use of Words in Prayer

If prayer is pre-eminently the desire of the heart for God - as Augustine says:

"Our Lord forbids loquacity - You are not to address God with a great flow of words in your prayer."

What then is the place of words in our prayer? Why use them?

We know for sure that prayer as "dialogue with God" requires the use of words, and Augustine speaks at some length on the use of words in his answer to a letter written to him by the lady Anicia Faltonia Proba. She read St Paul's words in Romans 8 "for we do not know how to pray as we ought" and put this question to Augustine: "What are we to ask for in our prayers?" In answer, Augustine goes to his beloved Psalms:

"One thing I have asked of the Lord, this will I seek after. that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to visit His Temple"

To contemplate the Lord in this way - what Augustine calls the "blessed and happy life" - does not require what he calls loquaciousness, as if the more words we have, the more easily God will hear us. God, in fact, does not need to be informed of our needs, "for we are praying to Him who knows what we need before we ask it of Him"

If, then, God already knows our needs, why do we pray to Him?

"God does not want our wishes to be made know to Himself, since He cannot be ignorant of them; but He wants our desire to be exercised in prayer, thus enabling us to grasp what He is preparing to give. That is something very great indeed;

but we are small and limited vessels for the receiving of it"

It is we, then, who need to pray in order that our desire for God be expanded to receive what He wants to give us. We often need to put our thoughts and feelings into words in order to clarify to ourselves what they are - and sometimes we need to do this where God is concerned and in putting our desires and longings and so forth into words with God they become clearer to ourselves.

And again. "The very attention to prayer clears and cleanses our hearts" and makes them more capable of receiving the divine gifts which are spiritually infused into us "Through prayer, therefore, it is brought about that the heart is TOWARDS Him who is always ready to give, provided we are ready to accept whatever He may give." I think that is one of the secrets of Augustine's teaching on prayer: God is always ready to give - the question is are we always ready to accept what he gives? We know what we want - God knows what we need!

Augustine does not rule out the use of words in our prayer [Cf the Confessions!]. He does counsel against using too many words, addressing God, making speeches to God ..., and the words which we do use must always be used in conjunction with exercising our fundamental desire for God in prayer to prevent what had begun to grow lukewarm from going cold and being completely extinguished as he puts it:

"We need words to help us recollect ourselves and see what we are asking for, not to make us suppose that the Lord must be given information or swayed by words."

So manipulating God is out - great!

"God is the aim of our prayer; He should be the goal of all our desires. He wants our minds and hearts to be set on Him alone. And the purpose of having definite times for prayer, and of using words when we pray, is to fix our attention on our desires, to direct them deliberately to God, to construct them on spiritual lines and, as it were, to lift them up off the earth"

With the prayer of petition, then, we are not, with many words, attempting to change God or to inform Him of our needs which He anyway already knows about, or to persuade Him to respond to us [nagging God is not unheard of]. Rather than changing God, we pray in order to be changed by Him [re-form His image that we are]. Prayer that is truly

Christian doesn't seek to 'control' God, or to construct God according to our own requirements, but should instead make us more receptive to God as He really is. In the spiritual life, according to Augustine, to please God is to be pleased with God.

And Augustine further reminds Proba that when we don't know what to pray, the rest of St Paul's statement tells us that "the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words". After all the deepest of our feelings, desires, longings, very often are quite impossible to put into words; we can't express them - and so in prayer the Spirit Himself takes over for us and speaks for us - prays for us with sighs that are too deep for words. [Language of the heart?]

And, she asks. 'What if our prayer is not heard?'

If our prayer is not heard, or we receive a response contrary to what we expect or desire, Augustine advises Proba:

"to bear it patiently, giving thanks in all circumstances, and have not the slightest doubt that it was more opportune for God's will be done than ours"

It takes a long time, I think, to get to that point, but it's the point at which we are to aim.

Augustine's key concept of prayer is a fundamental desire for God: a primary orientation that we have towards the Trinity God, in whose image we are made - and re-made, who draws us into His communion as Father, Son and Spirit. This desire for God is exercised in a particular way in the prayer of petition, in situations of need and suffering; and in the prayer of praise of God's goodness as we wait in hope for the full sharing and communion with the blessed in the City of God.

There is no situation that is outside our prayer - every need, every longing, every worry, every sorrow, every shame, everything, can be brought to God in prayer - expressed to God in prayer. God doesn't need to be told - but I need to say it and therefore God wants me to say it. God wants, in fact, me to hear me cry out to Him from my heart. Not with flowery speeches, not addressing Him as an audience, but with a few deeply meaningful words that are truth. Those are the prayers that God accepts - takes on board as it were.

This context of solidarity and communion with our fellow citizens in heaven and here on earth reminds us that all our prayer, be it petition or praise is not offered in a vacuum. Personal prayer does not occur in isolation from everyone else, but has clear ecclesial and communal dimensions. We pray as part of a believing community - the Church - which is the Body of Christ. The ecclesial dimension of Augustine's teaching on prayer highlights its Christocentric aspects as well, which is in keeping with the Christocentric nature of his spirituality as a whole. And if our prayer is both ecclesial and Christocentric, it is also Trinitarian.

"God has sent the Spirit of Christ into our heart crying 'Abba! Father!'"

Our ecclesial prayer is the voice of Christ praying in His Church, and in our prayer we enter into solidarity with all our fellow human beings [past, present, and to come]. Because of this solidarity between Christ and His members - the place of divine worship is in fact the community. With St Paul, Augustine explains the image of Christian community as the Temple of God:

"This is the Temple of God, that is the people themselves, wherein God is prayed to and where He hears."

The prayer of every Christian as a member of Christ's Body, then, becomes Christ's prayer. The voice of Christ and His Church becomes, for Augustine, the "Totus Christus" - the whole Christ, Head and members.

"This is the complete Christ: Christ united with His Church"

Here, too, the prayer of the "Totus Christus" should be the longing of the hearts of the Head and His members rising up to God in one united expression of our praise and love of God and our redemptive compassion for our fellow human beings:

"We travel the way of Christ's humanity in order to reach His divinity"

And so we have come full circle. As you can see, I have touched here and there on Augustine's thought and vision:

- every human person's fundamental orientation towards our Trinity God.

- the yearning of every human heart for God, which characterises his spirituality is - as he puts it "a finding of one's home in God and a joy of intimacy with Father, Son and Spirit".

- our yearning for the Triune God is to be exercised in our prayer of petition and praise which enables us to receive what God wants to give us and places us in solidarity with the rest of the Body of Christ, as the Totus Christus.

I have, as I have said, flitted through much - but done justice to nothing.

Perhaps, at least, your appetite has been sufficiently whetted to send you off to find out more.