

Conversion and Conversions in St Augustine

FoA Clare Priory Meeting November 2010 Topic.

Notes and Reflections, Based on Conversion and Conversions in St. Augustine by Miguel A. Keller OSA

Conversion – A radical change of direction, a turning round, a radical change of attitude towards God and a witness to a new way of life and living. Jesus starts his ministry with a strong and urgent call to conversion . “ Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand”. The Gospels are full of incidents and stories of conversion.

The Word

Luke Chap. 19 v 1-11

Jesus entered Jericho and was going through the town and suddenly a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man. He kept trying to see which Jesus was, but he was too short and could not see him for the crowd; so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him, “Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today.” And he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully. They all complained when they saw what was happening. “ He has gone to stay at a sinner's house,” they said. But Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to the Lord, “Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor and if I have cheated any body I will pay him back four times the amount.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost.

[We shall return to Zacchaeus later but first look at Augustine's conversions]

Augustine

Rather like the Prodigal Son Augustine's conversion is rather a recovery of his faith – he had never fully abandoned Christ but lost his way in the clamour and experiences of adolescence.

“I slid away from you and wandered away far from your steadfastness my God. I strayed in adolescence and I became to myself a land of famine”Con. 2.10. 8. Augustine's search and journey towards God culminates in the famous conversion scene in the garden. The account from The Confessions speaks with real emotion of what Augustine was experiencing. Con. Book 8. He was agitated and restless; he wrangled with himself; he was miserable; he was sorry. Augustine was led to read the Scriptures by a child playing. Jesus spoke to Augustine through the words of Scripture. He was filled with the “light of confidence”Grace and joy.

Written some years after his conversion and baptism and after being made a priest and Bishop,

Augustine was able to reflect and analyse his life experiences. He relates in prayer how even though he wandered away, God was always there, a providential influence, which

Augustine did not always recognise at the time. Augustine is able, with great humility, to remember his past, the present, and looks forward to the future with God as his guide. What does Augustine's conversion experience tell us about our own relationships with God?

Experts speak rather of Augustine's conversions rather than his conversion and focus on four different stages:-

- Intellectual Conversion

Search for truth. Nothing but the truth would do for Augustine. Augustine's restlessness. Intellectual pride led him down the wrong paths. Augustine's initial contempt for the Bible as too simplistic. He searched Astrology, and the Manicheans for answers to his questions without satisfaction. God was acting in sending Augustine to Ambrose, who with his teaching and friendship, puts Augustine back on track.

- Conversion of the Heart

Interior struggle. The importance of knowing oneself. Augustine was keenly aware of the nearness of his goal but disturbingly unable to reach it. Pain, and turmoil, the conversion in the garden. Augustine finds that only God can convert his heart and give him the strength to make the decision. Again the people with whom he comes into contact help Augustine put his trust in God alone.

- Ecclesial Conversions

Becoming priest and bishop, something definitely not in Augustine's plan. Augustine actively tried to avoid such a responsibility. The contemplative life was what Augustine had in mind for himself. He had to accept the responsibilities that come with Baptism. Service. How to serve. Augustine had to learn how to balance the contemplative life and the active life of service. Augustine found that one was not possible without the other. The demands made upon Augustine as Bishop were difficult but his deep interior life lifted and strengthened him in his service to others: Prayer- love- action.

- Ongoing Conversion

Augustine's ongoing battle with temptation. God's Grace to take Augustine beyond his own abilities. We have seen above that Augustine needed support in his ministry, he recognises that only God's Grace will take him forward.

Augustine lived out each day his ongoing conversion. "My weaknesses are many and great, but your medicine is more powerful and effective...."

Key elements for us

We learn from Augustine that God's providence is with us throughout our lives and that we can rely on Him for help in our daily conversions. God has plans for us - sometimes these are not always the same as ours! Our desire for God is great but we must cultivate and enrich it by listening to the God within us and by living a life of service. To and for others. True joy awaits us.

Points to ponder

- Importance of the restless heart.

“...he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man.”

Zacchaeus has found no pleasure in his wealth. He wants to see Jesus. He searches for Jesus. He is eager, he runs ahead.

“Our Hearts are restless until they rest in You” Con 1.1.1. We shall never be fully satisfied by earthly things which give us fleeting pleasure but can never take the place of God.

God works through our restlessness to keep us searching. God uses our innate gifts and personalities in our conversions. Fr. Brian Lowery calls this 'Inner Providence'
How do we deal with our own restlessness?

- The need for conversion

“They all complained when they saw what was happening.'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house,' they said.”

Zacchaeus is not popular with others because of his position in society and is suspected of mis-dealings in his business affairs and his love of money.

God uses our painful experiences. 'Negative Providence'. Pain, hurt, disappointment, jealousy. As in Augustine's life, hurt can prod us onwards . To refuse to change leads to further hurt and disappointment. This is an ongoing process throughout our lives.

Without conversion and ongoing conversion we are miserable. “Oh, how tortuous were those paths! Woe betide the soul which supposes it will find something better if it forsakes you” Con 6. 16, 26

What barriers to we put up between us and God for our continual conversion?

- Listening to the Word

“.....but he was too short and could not see for the crowd. 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today.'”

God uses Zacchaeus' short stature to get him in the tree where Jesus can see him. He listens to Jesus and is surprised that Jesus is speaking directly to him. The “Hurry down” echoing the urgency of Jesus' call at the beginning of his ministry

God's Word in Holy Scripture plays a vital role for Augustine. In the garden -Augustine's famous conversion narrative. For Augustine, the Bible becomes a place where he meets God.

“To listen to the Gospel is like the blind of Jericho to hear the sound of Jesus' footsteps as He passes by..... and when we read of the passing actions performed by the Lord we are still being shown Jesus passing” Sermon.88.11

The Word of God is fundamental to conversion.

How good are we at listening? As Jesus “passes by” do we recognise Him?

- Humility as Basis

“ And he hurried down and welcomed Him joyfully”

Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' call. He recognises his wrong doing and receives Jesus joyfully. Being close to Jesus brings joy.

Recognising our stubbornness and pride. Admitting our mistakes. Augustine had once thought Holy Scripture to be too simplistic, but is converted to the joy of it's richness

and finds Jesus speaking to him when reading and studying with humility. Initially he thought that once baptised he would lead a life as given in the Sermon on the Mount. Augustine found he was mistaken. Only Christ, he found, fully and truly accomplishes this. We need permanent conversion.

He writes, "Humility is the first step in the search for truth. The second step is humility. The third is also humility, and the last humility." Letter 118.3.22

"I carry evidence of my sin and proof that You resist the proud" Con 1.1.1.

Do we recognise mistakes in our own thinking and admit that we can be wrong? Can we say sorry and make amends?

- Acceptance of Human Mediations

".... and suddenly a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance."

Zacchaeus had heard from others about Jesus and that He was in town.

The ordinary ways of encountering God. Human mediations are the normal channel for God's acting, speaking, saving, persons and events and personal experiences. Fr. Brian Lowery speaks here of "Outward Providence". The people and events in Augustine's life were used by God to bring him nearer. The roles of Monica, Ambrose, and others.

"We too are shaped by the those who travel with us on our journey ."– John Rotelle

Who are the people that have helped us on our conversion journey? What events have been significant?

- Socio -ecclesial dimension of conversion

"....I am going to give half my property to the poor....."

Zacchaeus thinks of others. Is sorry for his treatment of others. Gives half his property to the poor and promises to pay back four times the amount to anyone he has cheated

Conversion to God is not possible without conversion to one's fellow humanity. Service is required of us. The call to love. Augustine learned with difficulty to share his faith, learning and intelligence with often simple folk. To be at the disposal of every one. He found it a great responsibility, but found he was nearer to Christ in serving others.

" Our hope is that we may cease to be miserable in ourselves and that we may find our beatitude in You: for You have called us to be poor in spirit, to be meek, to mourn, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful and pure hearted and to be peacemakers." Con 11,1,1.

What is God asking of us today?

- The centrality of Grace

"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek out what was lost."

Jesus calls Zacchaeus and gives voice to God's Grace

Augustine in his prayers is humbly conscious of needing God. He trusts that God has been with him since before his birth (Psalm 139) and so will be with him always. Augustine also recognises that although we may be clear about what is to be done we do not always do it! We need God's Grace as we journey on. "God does not command impossible things, but he warns you to do what you can and pray for what you cannot". Nature and Grace. 43, 50.

How much do we rely on our own efforts?

From Pope Benedict XVI, speaking on Augustine.

"Let us pray, therefore, that we can follow the example of this great convert every day of our lives, and in every moment of our life encounter the Lord Jesus, the only One who saves us, purifies us and gives us true joy, true life." General audience 27/02/ 2008

Reading List

Providence in the Confessions of St. Augustine. You Were Always There .- Fr. Brian Lowery O.S.A.

As One Struggling Christian to Another. Chapter 5 - Theodore Tack O.S.A.

General Audience Wednesday 27/ 02 /2008 - Pope Benedict XVI

St. Augustine Confessions – translated by R.S. Pine- Coffin

Living with Contradictions. Reflections on the Rule of St. Benedict. Pg. 26/27 and 148-153 - Esther de Waal

A Book of Faith Pg.132 by Donald Swann – compiled by Elizabeth Gouge

St. Augustine – edited by Tarsicius J. van Bavel. Augustine and the Bible by Martine Dulaey

Prayers from the Confessions – edited by John e. Rotelle, O.S.A.

Gwen

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