

Primacy of Love

Love and true happiness

Augustine's writings begin with the Question as to how a human being can find true happiness. There is no human being who does not desire to be happy. Desire has to do with love, for nobody desires what he does not love. Love consists in the will to become one with the object which is loved. But not every object of longing and love can make a person happy. Only an everlasting and imperishable good can make us truly happy, for only such a good excludes all fear of loss of the object which is loved. God alone can guarantee such happiness. Love unites us with God as our eternal and everlasting good, and thus makes us participate in God's eternity. This happens according to the principle that a human being becomes what he loves: "Let him love the earth, he will become earth; let him love the eternal God, he will share in God's eternity,"

Love: the whole message of the Bible

According to Augustine the whole message of the Bible can be reduced to the two commandments, love of God and love of one's neighbour. He writes: "My hope in the name of Christ is not sterile, because not only do I believe, my God, that on the two love commandments depend the whole law and the prophets, but I have also experienced, and I still experience every day, that not a single mystery or Obscure word of Holy Scripture becomes clear for me. Unless I meet with these two commandments," Augustine remains faithful here to the Pauline line of thought: Love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13:10) and: Love is the end of the command (1 Tim 1.5). The word "end" does not mean that love puts an end to all other precepts or abolishes them, but love is the perfection to which every precept should be referred. These two love commandments are not only characteristic of the new but also of the old law. Consequently, Christ's words I give you. a new commandment: love one another just as I have loved you (Jn 13:34) did not only renew the apostles and ourselves, but also all the patriarchs, prophets, and righteous who lived at the time of the first covenant.

Loving with God's love

God is love. Revealing himself as good and merciful, God reveals himself as love. This becomes for us an appeal, a demand, and a command to love human beings as God loves them. The highest form of love for our brothers and sisters consists in loving them with God's love given to us by the Holy Spirit. Thus our love is a participation in the love of God which encompasses every human being, even our enemies. Our love has to mirror God's love. When Augustine speaks of love, he means love as a divine gift, which endows the human will with a new desire, a striving for the divine truth, wisdom, peace, and justice. To love with this love excludes all that is sinful, namely possessive or egotistic greed: pride, pretension, self-praise, or honour and seeking one's own profit. The fact that love is a gift from God applies in the first place to love for God, for he alone can give himself to us. He has loved us first. But the same principle applies to love for one's neighbour. The Holy Spirit in us also enflames us to love the human being alongside us. According to Augustine, a merely natural love for one another is not enough, because then we easily

neglect God as our supreme good. To love the other as ourselves means that he or she may find his or her good where we ourselves find it, namely in God. Only in this light can we rightly understand Augustine's famous sentence, "Love, and then do what you want, for from that root nothing but good can spring." Love is the most difficult law we have; it never means that we are free to do as we like.

Temporary primacy of love of one's neighbour

Seen in the light of the foregoing considerations, Augustine defends even a temporary primacy of the love of one's neighbour. Temporary means: here on earth, as long as we have to care for our fellow human beings. It is true that love of God comes first as a commandment, but equally true that love of one's neighbour comes first on the level of practice. In order to love God we have to begin with love of our neighbour: "These commandments must always be reflected upon, they must be pondered, they must be adhered to, they must be acted upon, they must be fulfilled. The love of God is first in the order of commandment, but the love of one's neighbour is first in the order of action. In loving your neighbour, and in being concerned about him or her, you get going. Where could you go, except to the Lord God?" The reason why this is so is the fact that both loves include one another and cannot be separated. Therefore, it is sufficient to mention just one of them. Appealing to the authority of Paul and John, Augustine draws the conclusion that it is not without reason that holy scripture commonly puts one commandment for both. The reason for this appears clearly from the following text: "Why does Paul in both Galatians and Romans mention only love of one's neighbour? Is not the reason that, since love of God is not so frequently put to the test, people can deceive themselves about it? In love for one's neighbour, however, they can be more easily convinced that they do not love God, when they act unjustly toward other people. By the precept of love for one's neighbour they are made aware of their shortcomings. Some of the Galatians were deceiving themselves that they loved God. They were shown clearly that they did not because of the hatred among brothers and sisters." Thus the love of one's neighbour is the concrete norm for our love of God, for by its practical nature it excludes any self-deception. Love of our neighbour is the most concrete means of giving expression to our love of God.