

**AUGUSTINE:
RESTING IN GOD**

Augustine on prayer

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One of the frustrating things about Augustine is that he was not a systematic theologian. His thoughts and ideas are not organised in a systematic way which would allow us to go to a particular book in order to find a clear and structured presentation of his thoughts on a specific subject. When it comes to prayer, Augustine left us no systematised teaching on prayer. His thoughts are scattered throughout his writings and the record of his preaching. Perhaps this is why the insights and the power of Augustine's ideas are not so well known and are not often the subject of retreats, talks and workshops in the way that Ignatian, Franciscan and other prayer spiritualities are. I believe this to be a great shame because I believe Augustine has powerful and dynamic things to share with us. In the last few years, since I began to dip into Augustine with more regularity, I have discovered a way of prayer which certainly suits my personality more easily than many other popular ways of praying. I know that I am unique and special but I am not air that unique and special and I am sure that there are many others who have similar personalities and who will find in Augustine's way of prayer an inspiration, help and support.

Given how much Augustine wrote and given how many of his sermons are recorded, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say that anyone has completely gathered his ideas about prayer. One gathers impressions, ideas and from time to time clear instructions. What I can share with you today is only what I have managed to glean from my own paddling in the edges of the depths of Augustine's world of ideas and from various commentaries on his teaching. I suppose that I really ought to say that what I want to share with you are my reflections informed and moulded by Augustine, I would be somewhat wary of saying that what I share is truly Augustine. He is such a giant that I would be uneasy about ever saying that I understood him. One of the things which is very clear about Augustine is that he was, above all things else, a man of prayer. His writings are, in many cases, conversations with God. They are an extended form of prayer. Possidius, a disciple and biographer of Augustine recorded:

He resembled the devout Mary of the Gospel, that figure of the heavenly Church, of whom it is written that she sat at the feet of the Lord, intently listening to his words.
Vita 24,12

Where to begin? Perhaps the obvious starting point is the passage from the Confessions which is probably the most well known and best loved quotation from Augustine for in it Augustine pinpoints the force which impelled him throughout his life:

*You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

That wonderful one-liner comes from the first book of the Confessions. Unfortunately it is usually not quoted in the context of the rest of the passage of which it is a part. The whole of that passage reads:

*Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense,
and your wisdom beyond reckoning.
And so we humans,
who are part of your creation,
long to praise you —
we who carry our mortality about with us,
carry the evidence of our sin
and with it the proof that you thwart the proud.
Yet these humans,
due part of your creation as they are,
still long to praise you.
You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy,
because you have made us
and drawn us to yourself,
and our hearts is unquiet
until it rests in you*

(Confessions 1.1)

I find this a fascinating passage because, for me, it speaks of Augustine's great hope. Too often Augustine is portrayed as a pessimist, obsessed with sin and human failure, but I find that, even though it is true that sin deeply troubles Augustine, he still believes with great passion in the goodness which, through God's mercy, exists within the depths of every human person. That goodness, which is the presence of God, is present in every heart, but the problem is that we are too often alienated from ourselves. This is the tremendous insight of that wonderfully sensuous prayer, a prayer which reminds me so much of the eroticism of the Song of Songs. This again is a well-known passage from the Confessions and expresses a central motif in Augustine's

thinking:

*Late have I loved you,
O beauty ancient, ever new!
Late have I loved you!
For behold, you were within; and I without.
And without I sought you,
and deformed I ran after these forms of beauty you have made.
You were with me and I was not with you.
Those things held me back from you,
Things whose only being was to be in you.
You called; you cried; and you broke through my deafness.
You flashed, you shone, and you chased away my blindness.
You became fragrant; and I inhaled and sighed for you.
I tasted and now hunger for you.
You touched me and I burned for your peace.* (Confessions 10.27)

Here is a great key to Augustine's thinking and to Augustine's prayer. We look for happiness and fulfilment outside of the place where God is. We wander round looking for a home, looking for a place to rest but cannot find it because we are either looking in the wrong place or we are not looking beyond the surface to the deeper reality. In a wonderful image Augustine speaks of the "weight" of the heart, he says that the heart has a natural, by which he means a God given, weight which draws it to God. The "weight" draws the person into the heart where God dwells. It is worthwhile noting that Augustine, reflecting on his life story, recognises that gravitational attraction even when he was living a life which he would certainly believe was far from God or at least, he felt himself far from the God who was, in fact, very near to him. This then becomes the great call of Augustine to all who want to pray:

*The word calls you to return.
In Him is the place of peace
That cannot be disturbed*

"Return to your heart". This call is central to Augustine's prayer, the heart, above every other place, is the place where God dwells. So, if we would wish to begin the journey of prayer we must withdraw into the heart:

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

*God is delight
and we rest in delight in Him,
called home from the noise that is around us
to the joys that are silent.*

This place of prayer, the silent heart, is the place of rest in which, if we are willing, God can do great things:
Unknown to me. You caressed my head,

*You closed my eyes
that they should not see my emptiness.
I lost for a while the heavy burden of self
and my madness was lulled to sleep.
And when I awoke in You
I saw You completely differently*

"Rest" is a key word for Augustine. If we learn how to rest in God, learn how to simply be in God's presence God will do wonders. But for that to happen we have to learn the art of silence in prayer:

*Enter into yourself
leave behind all noise and confusion.
God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart*

*Look within yourself
and see whether there be some sweet hidden place within where you can be free from noise and
argument, where you need not be carrying on your disputes
and planning to have your own stubborn way.
Hear the word in quietness ▼ that you may understand it.*

The joy of this is that we can have access to the desert, the place of God's most powerful action, the place of radical change, in any place and at any time:

*The Christian may sometimes envy
those who have renounced the cares of the world
for the supposed calm of the desert;
but then those who live in the world
may at any time find within themselves the true desert, where no one enters,
where no one is with you,
but where there is only you and God.*

and in another place:

*For Christians who fear they are drowning in the world's business the worst thing they can do is
panic. There can be no question of escape from the situation; they are many miles from land and there
is no help near. The one thing they can do is to withdraw, as it were, into themselves, to find the Christ within
who is as powerful to still the tempest in their own lives as He was to subdue the waves on the Lake of Gali-
lee.*

and again;

*Where so ever you are,
where so ever you may be praying,
He who hears you is within you,
hidden within,
or He who hears you
is not merely by your side,
and you have no need
to go wandering about,
no need to be reaching out to God
as though you would touch him with your hands.*

In the midst of a very busy world, the art of resting is not easy to develop. Many of us, despite the theology of the head, still believe that we are only worthwhile, only justify our existence, if we are busy and we feel guilty about rest. Yet, as Augustine says, with beautiful simplicity:

*At the well where Our Lord sat down to rest,
great mysteries took place.*

What do we do in this inner and always available desert of the heart? Augustine would, I think, ask us to be silent. He says:

*Our Lord forbids loquacity.
You are not to address God with a great flow of words*

*Enter into yourself
leave behind all noise and confusion.
God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart
Hear the word in quietness
that you may understand it.*

*He bade me shut the door
of our secret chamber
and pray in secret,
that is in the soundless
secret places of our hearts.
For we pray to Him
In the silence in our hearts.*

It is into that silence that God speaks, often without us understanding how and without us being immediately aware of what is being said.

*Your true teacher will always be
the teacher within.*

*It is He Who enables you to understand
in the depths of your being the truth of what is said to you Let Christ speak to you interiorly,
in that place where no human teacher may enter.*

By going into our hearts we go into that place of our deepest longing. That longing is, says Augustine, prayer itself. I have found this a consoling and helpful thought. Like so many I have beaten myself with my lack of prayer - by which, perhaps, I have meant my lack, or difficulty or dissatisfaction with formal, wordy prayer. The longing of the heart for God is in itself real and deep prayer. Augustine says:

*Let your desire be before God
and "the Father, who sees in secret will reward you".
It is your heart's desire that is your prayer;
and if your desire continues without interruption,
your prayer continues as well.
For it was not without meaning
that the Apostle Paul said,
"Pray without ceasing"
Are we "to pray without ceasing" in the sense of kneeling, prostrating ourselves
or lifting our hands?
For if he speaks of prayer in this sense,
I believe we cannot do it "without ceasing"*

*Yet there is another inward prayer without ceasing,
that is the desire of the heart.
Whatever you are doing,
if you are longing for that eternal Sabbath rest with God you are not ceasing to pray.
If you want to pray without ceasing,
never cease to long for God...
The freezing of love
Is the silence of the heart
the flame of love is the cry of the heart.
If love continues, you are still lifting up your voice;
you are always longing for something
and if you are longing for something yet to come,
you are calling to mind
the eternal Sabbath rest that God has promised. Homilies on the psalms 38.13*

That longing heart allows the whole of our life to be a great hymn of praise to God:

*You are praising God when you do your day's work.
You are praising him when you eat and drink.
You are praising him when you rest on your bed.
You are praising him when you are asleep.
So when are you not praising him?*

Commentary on Psalm 146

There is a line somewhere in his writings which [found both deeply true and deeply consoling, where Augustine says that we even sin with deep groaning of the heart. If our basic orientation is towards God, then, even when we sin, even as we go towards it, our hearts groan for the reality of God. In some paradoxical way even our sin is about God's glory — for adding to what St Paul said, Augustine says that:

All things work for good for those who love God — even sin!

How is that for someone who is accused of being a pessimist! I can only hope that God hears and understands the regular groaning of my heart. I am sure he does for "he knows of what we are made".

In our prayer, our resting in God, for what should we pray? Augustine is very clear about his. For Augustine, prayer is no shopping list! What does he say?

*Do not wish to ask anything of God
except God.
Love him, desire him alone.
Leave all your desires.
He who made heaven and earth
is more beautiful than all;*

*he will be to you everything you love.
Seek for him alone,
and despise everything else,
make your way to him.
Forget other things, remember him;
leave other things behind, stretch out to him.
Let him be your hope,
who is guiding you to your destination.*

Augustine's heart and Augustine's prayer are the heart and prayer of a contemplative, it is important, however, to remember that Augustine achieved this contemplative prayer in the midst of a tremendously busy and active life. He had, most probably, a personality which was naturally contemplative but, given the burden of his office of bishop, that aspect of his character could easily have been submerged. What fed his heart and spirit which led him into the realms of contemplative and, indeed, mystical prayer? There are a number of features.

Firstly is silence, both exterior and interior silence. Augustine knew that God has to be waited on in silence and that, in prayer, God is the genuinely active partner.

*It is hard to find Christ in crowded places.
We need solitude.
If your heart is attentive,
God allows himself to be seen.
In the crowd you find noise,
in the silence you find God.*

The stilling of the exterior noise is possible, the interior noise is more difficult! Speaking of his early years Augustine says:

*The sound of Your secret melody
I could not catch,
No matter how hard I tried.
my heart was deafened
by the din of my mind.*

While it may be difficult, that silence of the heart is a discipline which can be learned.

Augustine's contemplation is fed by his meditation and his meditation is fed by the Word of God. It is impossible to read more than a paragraph of two of Augustine's writings without tripping over Scripture. Augustine is deeply steeped in the Scriptures and, at times, it is hard to see the seam between Augustine's words and the words of Scripture. Without any doubt Augustine desired God's people to have access to the Word of God and he wanted his people to have a deep familiarity with it. If we wish to advance into the prayer Augustine knew, we must feed ourselves with the Word of God.

A man of community, Augustine's contemplation was also fed by familial charity. This was the greatest demand of all. Following the example of Jesus, who set off for "lonely places" but who would immediately come out of them when love demanded, Augustine teaches us:

*Love of truth seeks the quiet of contemplation,
while the urgency of love accepts the activity of the apostolate.*

De Civ 19:19

But he does warn us, and it is a salutary warning for those of us engaged in very active apostolates for it reminds us of the parable about salt and the loss of taste. Augustine, while recognising the importance of our duty to serve the community, says:

*We ought not to renounce completely the joys that truth brings, lest deprived of that sweetness
we be weighed down by the urgency of love*

De Civ 19.19

The search for God is, for Augustine, an unending search. Having found God we become aware of the need to go further. The search for God will, Augustine says, continue in heaven for we can never reach the end of the infinite:

*Let us seek him out in order to find him,
and when we find him,
let us continue searching for him.
We must search for him,
because he is hidden from us.
And when we have found him,
we go on searching because he is without bounds.
He fills those who seek him,
insofar as their capacity permits;
and he increases the capacity in those who find him,
so that they might again seek to be filled.*

In ep Jo 63.1

And again:

*We search for God in order to find him with greater joy,
and we find him in order to keep on searching with greater love.*

De Trinitate 15,2

There is so much more which has not been touched on here but, I hope, there has been a taste of the energy, the humanity, the passionate love of this great lover of God who, out of his own experience of his weakness and human fragility, offers me such hope and who speaks to my heart with comfort and love. For Augustine reassures me that, even in my sin, failure and limitation, I do not have to journey to find an elusive God. I have only to turn into my own heart to find the God who never stops calling to me. Augustine reassures me that, just as I am, I praise my God simply because I am:

*Our voices praise you, O Lord,
our spirit praises you.
Since our being is a gift of your love,
our whole life becomes a continual liturgy of praise.*

So let us follow the example of Augustine and end with a simple line of encouragement from him:

Sing and keep on walking.

Sermon 256,3