

## 1/ 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 inflames 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

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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.

## 2/ The Whole Christ

### ***Together one body***

"If the only word in scripture were that one word of the Holy Spirit that God is love, it would be amply sufficient and we would not need to seek further." According to Augustine, the chief reason for the incarnation was God's love, for he gave his Son to us. Thus the Son became the incarnation of God's love. If God is love, it follows that God does not wish to remain aloof without any relationship with the human world. Love requires companionship. God the Father begot an only Son, but God did not want the only Son to remain alone; God gave him all human beings as brothers and sisters. Christ stands in an all-embracing relationship with the whole of humanity, because his love extends to every human being without exception. In love we discover a double movement: a longing to become one with the beloved, and the need to maintain a certain distance out of respect for the personal identity of the person we love. Love results in a reciprocal presence without destruction of the other: a friend in his or her friend, a husband in his wife, a mother in her child. Christ too identified himself with every human being, and is present in them. Augustine calls this union: the whole Christ. He bases his insight on Paul's doctrine of the relationship between Christ as the head and us as the body: ***Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members, many as they are, are together one body, so also the Christ*** (1 Cor 12:12). The one Christ encompasses the head as well as the limbs, and this union is as intimate as that which reigns in a living body. Thus Christ participates in our life, and we participate in the life of Christ.

### ***Honour God in one another (Rule)***

Since God is the centre of Christ's life, many of the above mentioned ideas also apply to God. The way to be one with every human being is to feel at one with him or her in a higher unity: in the concern of God for all. Each human being is a place where God is. Each one belongs to God who loves them all. If we too love them all, we honour God. Only when people become one another's sisters and brothers are they the new temple of God, that is, the place of his presence, for God dwells nowhere but in love. Before speaking of a church as the house of God, we should consider ourselves: "This church building is the house of our prayers, but we ourselves are the real house of God. Together we form the house of the Lord only if we are joined to one another in love." Thus love of God and love of

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one's neighbour are competing acts, but they embrace each other in one great dynamic movement.

### **Christ in the poor**

Augustine finds inspiration principally in two biblical texts: **Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you to drink? And the king will answer: "Amen, I tell you, anything you did for one of the least of mine, you did for me"** (Mt 25:37-40) and: **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"** (Acts 9:4). As regards this last text, Augustine remarks that the risen Christ does not say: Why do you persecute my disciples? but: Why are you persecuting me? Such an identification of Christ with the poor, the outcasts, and the persecuted meant for Augustine the recognition of their human dignity. "Be faithful to Christ in his poverty" is the same as saying "Be faithful to your neighbour in his poverty." Matthew 25 shows Augustine how Christ is still present in this world and how he is to be comprehended by the faithful. The suffering and poverty of Jesus Christ is continually reflected in the life and history of suffering and oppressed human beings. Here in this pilgrimage on earth, the hungry Christ is fed, the thirsty Christ is given to drink, the naked Christ is clothed, he is welcomed in the person of the stranger and visited in the sick. When human beings are in want, it is Christ who is in want: "Go onto the road. Christ the stranger is not absent. Do you think that you are not permitted to welcome Christ? How can this be? You ask. Listen: **What you did to one of the least of mine, you did to me.** He who is rich is in need until the end of time. He is truly in need, not in his head, but in his members."

### **Option for the poor**

"We are the servants of his Church, and most of all of its weakest members, whatever sort of members we ourselves may be in this same body." This statement of Augustine shows clearly his deep concern for the poor and powerless. From certain, newly discovered letters we know a lot about his social activities. There we see him asking the emperor to promulgate a new law against the slave-traders. We see him very worried about the sale of children, which the Christian emperors had allowed for a period of twenty-five years in order to prevent child-murder when parents were not able to feed their newborn babies. The tenant farmers, especially, had to resort to the desperate measure of hiring out or selling their children. This often led to perpetual slavery which was not permitted by the law, and Augustine protested vehemently against this abuse of children. He had the lot of children very much at heart, for he saw it as his task as bishop to protect orphans so that they would not be robbed of everything by strangers. He also considered it his duty to care for abandoned children. With regard to the poor, it was the custom of the Church of Hippo to give help to every person, whoever he or she was: a non-Christian, a prostitute, or a fighter in the arena. Augustine did not agree with the text: **Be merciful, but do not help the sinner** (Sir 12:4-7). He comments: "Let us treat them with human decency because they are human beings. Take pity on the condition that is common to all."

## **3/ Friendship and Common Life**

### **Mutual Love**

Augustine was very social minded and friendly. He never wanted to be alone, and he hardly ever spent a moment of his life without friends, or blood relatives, close by him. No thinker in the early Church was so preoccupied with the nature of human relationships. Even in his youth, he formed a core of abiding friendships. He described them in a beautiful passage of his **Confessions**: "All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their company: to talk and laugh, and to do each other kindnesses; to read pleasant books together; to pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things; to disagree without rancour as one might disagree with oneself, and then to season through this very rare dissension our normal agreement; to teach each other and to learn from each other; to be

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impatient for the return of the absent, and to welcome them with joy on their homecoming. These, and such-like things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection and received it back, and shown by face, by voice, by the eyes, and by a thousand other pleasing gestures, kindled a flame which fused our souls together, and, of many, made us one." This is what he loved in his friends. He felt guilty if he did not love the person who loved him and if that love was not returned. To give love and to receive love, in short, mutual love, this is Augustine's definition of friendship. The measure of true friendship is not temporal advantage, but unselfish love, based on a similarity of character, ideas, interest, and commitment.

### ***Limitations of human friendship***

Human nature possesses two great natural goods: marriage and friendship. In another text Augustine declares that two things are essential for the human being, namely life and friendship, and both are nature's gifts. God created the human being that he or she might exist and live. But if a human person is not to remain solitary, there must be friendship. He who tries to forbid all friendly conversation must be aware that he breaks the ties of all human relationships. Faithfulness, trust, veracity, and stability are the most significant qualities of friendship. Augustine considered, however, all human things perishable, a realisation that came upon him most powerfully when one of his young friends died. The experience of the loss of this friend did not drive him into a denial of friendship, but showed him that friendship has to be based on love of God, for "he alone does not lose a beloved one, for all are beloved in God, who is not lost." But not only death can snatch a friend from our midst; human weakness and instability can also cause friendship to change into treachery, baseness, and even hatred. Therefore, Augustine seeks the basis of faithfulness and stability among friends in God and in Christ. He had become aware of the fact that Cicero's definition of friendship, "Friendship is an agreement on all human and divine things, with benevolence and love," also encompassed the domain of the divine.

### ***Friendship in religious life***

In contrast to many founders of religious communities, Augustine gave friendship an important place in the common life of the religious. He taught his young monks that they were not obliged to accept immediately everyone in friendship, but that it should be their wish to accept everyone as a friend. Their attitude toward others should be such that the possibility of taking them into their friendship remains open. Although we never will succeed in penetrating fully another's innermost self, he called our attention to the fact that "Nobody can truly be known, except through friendship." And when his monks asked him when they could call another a friend, he answered: "We can consider another person as a friend, if we dare to entrust to him or her all our innermost thoughts." He also saw friendship as a help and consolation for himself, describing his monastic experience as follows: "I admit that I readily throw myself entirely on the love of my most intimate friends, especially when I am wearied with the world's scandals, and I find rest in that love, free of anxiety. This is because I feel that God, upon whom I cast myself without fear, and in whom I find secure rest, is present there. In this security of mine, I do not fear the uncertainty of tomorrow and of human weakness. What ideas and thoughts I entrust to a human being who is full of Christian charity, and has become for me a faithful friend, I do not entrust to a human being, but to God, in whom this person abides, and who made him or her a faithful friend."

### ***Influence***

In Western Europe, particularly in England and Northern France, Augustine's ideas on friendship had a strong influence on medieval Cluniac-Cistercian religious life, especially on Peter the Venerable, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Peter of Celle. It was only during the fifteenth century, apparently, that there came a flight from friendship because of the conviction that friendship among religious would undermine the integrity of life in religious community.

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