

Augustinian Spirituality

Augustine was born in Thagaste, in eastern Algeria in 352. He was a searcher always asking questions about life and the meaning of life. Augustine lived throughout his early life in a state of confusion, grief, restlessness and without direction.

Augustine reached a moment of spiritual crisis and had a unique conversion in his Milan garden. On hearing children chanting what sounded like “Take and read,” he picked up the Epistles of St. Paul to the Romans and read a passage that convinced him to give up his worldly career and devote himself to God. Later he wrote: “the words of your Scripture knocked at the door of my heart”. His anguish and restlessness dissolved somewhat and he describes the experience, as though an arrow from God had pierced his heart. “You have pierced our hearts with the arrow of your love and our minds were pierced with the arrows of your words” *Confessions* 9.2 and “Lord you pierced my heart with your word and I fell in love with you.” *Confessions* 10.6

Friends and friendship were important to Augustine and were characteristic to the way he lived his life – he set up a community of like-minded people and they shared their spiritual journey with each other. The spirituality reflected in his writings has been called “affective” because it deals with feelings, emotions and desire and is based on human relationships – love of neighbour and of community. He understood the Church itself to be community, and the family as community, to be the Church also.

Augustine’s spirituality was built on his life experience. His mature years of entry to Christianity helped him to be aware of the difficulties in people’s lives and to be compassionate to other people struggling to live Christian lives, He has often been referred to as the patron of struggling Christians.

Augustine encourages us to live a balanced life of work and prayer. Thankfulness was a favourite word of his – he linked thankfulness to God’s loving kindness – ‘All my memories are gratitude’. *City of God* 19.19

The theme of restlessness is very characteristic of Augustine’s writings – ‘My heart is restless until it finds rest in you’ – that expression characterises his ceaseless searching. Later in the confessions he would say ‘You were within me and I was in the world outside myself.’ Finally, when overcome with the God experience he would exclaim – ‘late, late, have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever new.’ *Confessions*.

Augustine’s experience shows us an oasis of solitude in our spiritual search and that is why practices such as mindfulness, meditation, contemplation are essential on the journey.

It is by looking inside ourselves that we discover the true self – it is in knowing myself that I come to know God. “It is only in the heart that I am whoever I am” *Confessions* 3.4

We rest and leave everything in God’s hands.

Augustine understood communion as an act of unity – unity with self, unity with others and unity with Christ. On receiving communion, he would see the recipient as a member of the Body of Christ “what you receive is what you yourselves are and it is to what you are that you reply **Amen** and so he encourages one to be a member of the Body of Christ in order to make that **Amen** come true.” *Sermon 272*

In conclusion Augustine’s spirituality is based on desire and longing for prayer, scripture, love, friendship, the Eucharist and in finding God in Creation. It is spirituality for all people 1 Jn. 4.6

Where am I in relation to Augustinian spirituality? I have spent much of my life in work activities – and perhaps often valued myself because of what I did in the work place. My heart would tell me that what matters is what *I am* but my head over ruled my heart and in many ways, I could describe my restlessness as being in line with Augustine’s. Now prayer is ‘Lord that I may know myself that I may know you.’ My desire is to continue to grow in inner strength and to find that sweet hidden place within myself sought by Augustine, to hear the word in quietness that I may continue journeying towards God, Self, Others and all Creation?

Reflecting on Augustine’s life it could be argued that ‘falling’ contributed eventually to his ‘conversion’. I resonate with the experience of falling and rising. I too was reckless but through awareness, prayer and support this recklessness resulted in a very positive relationship with self, other and God. A truly painful but remarkable journey!

