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1st July 2006 - Contemplation with St Augustine

Song: Veni Creator Spiritus (Come, Creator Spirit)

Prayer: Creator Spirit

St Augustine of Hippo

Our afternoon of praying with inspirations drawn from St. Augustine is to be one of practice rather than theory. So we will not attempt a description of his life or the importance of his influence on the thinking of the Christian Church in Antiquity in any detail that would do it justice, but by way of outline just to provide a few essential facts that will help us to situate him in time and place.

St. Augustine is one of the Doctors and Fathers of the Church. What is unique about him is that we know about his life through his “Confessions”, an autobiography and yet far more than that: Looking back at his stormy life at the age of 45 having found “rest for his restless heart in God”, it is a devotional outpouring and thanksgiving.

He stands at the transition between the Antiquity and the Middle Ages. His mind was the crucible in which two cultures were fused: the Graeco-Roman world through the Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy and the Jewish view of the world through Christianity. The products of his mind were transmitted to the Christendoms of medieval Roman Catholicism and also to Renaissance Protestantism.

He was born in 354 in Tagaste, a town along the coast of what is now Algeria and was then the Roman province of Numidia to middleclass parents, his father being and remaining a Pagan, and his mother Monica being a Christian. He died nearby in Hippo in the year 430 at the age of 76 years, having been the Bishop of Hippo for the last 34 years.

His parents recognised in him an outstanding intellect and enabled him to have an education that first saw him as professor of Rhetoric, and also adhering to the dualistic Manichaeic sect that believed that the human being can, thanks to his good spirit elevate himself above matter and so find salvation for his soul. In his youth from the age of about 16 he had lived quite a licentious life with a mistress who bore him a son. He lived with her for 13 years and seems to have been in that relationship primarily for sex. He found it difficult to control his passions and knew deep in his heart that to treat a woman as a sex object was not the kind of relationship that God wanted.

Under the influence of his mother, the teachings of St. Ambrose in Milan where St. Augustine spent some years, and his discovery of Neoplatonism he became converted to Christianity and lived from thereon a celibate life. He became a priest in 391 and bishop in 395. He combined following the

monastic ideal of contemplative prayer with an extremely efficacious preaching, teaching and writing activity.

He became the main personality of Western Christianity to refute several heresies that had arisen:

- Against the **Donatists**: A Christian group in North Africa who outnumbered in Augustine's time the Catholics who believed that the validity of the sacraments depended on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the priest. If a priest was not in a state of grace, then the sacrament would not be valid. This had caused a schism in the Church. Augustine proclaimed the universal vocation of the Church.
- Against the **Pelagians**: They claimed the primacy of human effort in spiritual salvation. They condemned human frailty and believed we are all capable of resisting sin. Augustine saw that in this stark moralism several errors are contained: It is not merely a denial of the virtue of Christian Baptism but contains a fatal misconception of the relationship between the human person and God. For to assert that man can achieve righteousness by his own effort is to contradict the fundamental truth that God is the giver of all Good. Augustine declared that no person *deserves* to be saved, but we all totally depend on God's Grace for our salvation.
- Finally, against the **Manichaean sect** that he himself had been a member of in his youth. The Manichaeans believed in the absolute equivalence of good and evil. Augustine had been preoccupied for a greater part of his life with "the problem of evil". Plotinus, approx. 150 years before Augustin, had declared that all that exists is of Divine origin. Augustine came to see, as had Plotinus before him, that "evil is the absence of God". Evil does not have a real existence in an absolute sense, but arises out of disobedience to, or a falling away from God. Augustine showed that good and evil are linked at the level of actions, as the light is linked to the shadow. However, whereas for Plotinus all is One, Augustine saw an abyss between God and the World. The Church never fully embraced that part of his view that tended towards a predestined view of human destiny: there was no room in his rigorous argument for a genuinely free response on the part of a person to the Spirit's gift. However, this argument was taken over almost unmodified by both St. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. It can perhaps be regarded as the product of the too audacious attempt of the time-bound human mind to contemplate existence with the eyes of the eternal God.

His feast is celebrated on August 28.

Four aspects that we found inspiring

While reading the Confessions of St Augustine, we were struck by four aspects of his writings and of his faith which we found uplifting and inspiring. We propose to describe these four aspects and to divide the afternoon into four parts, one part for each aspect. Each of them will help us to practice another form of prayer. Prayer cannot be talked about, it has to be practised.

These four qualities are:

- 1) **The quality of awareness**: St Augustine has a beautiful way of looking at his own life: a sharp but tender eye. Lucidity and compassion about himself.
- 2) **The quality of presence**: St Augustine describes retrospectively how God has always been present in his life and how God always tried to help him and to guide him although St Augustine was not aware of this presence and help.

- 3) **The quality of struggle:** St Augustine describes his life as a real struggle to discover God and to escape false representations of Him and false attractions.
- 4) **The quality of unity:** St Augustine shows how the visible world (the Creation) is an expression of God and how matter and spirit are two aspects of the same Reality.

The quality of awareness - Prayer of offering

This is about the quality of awareness. St Augustine has an astonishing capacity to look at his own life with a very sharp eye, without indulgence, but not in a destructive way. He looks at himself as he is and accepts what he is. There is even a kind of tenderness as if he would look at someone else with a lot of compassion. But nevertheless his glance is sharp and detects every detail of his life. Nothing seems to remain hidden. Light is making everything visible.

This way of looking at his life and at himself is a help for transformation. He sees his own limits and he sees how he cannot mature without resting in God. The awareness of his own limits helps him to find his way to God.

St Augustine exposes himself without being afraid of being judged. He says that nobody should laugh at him because we are all ill and we have the same healer or physician. His writings are a song of the love of God and the love for God.

His sharp and loving eye opens him the way to salvation. This is true confession.

It is very inspiring for us to see that the recognition of our limits is not destructive but liberating. Our sins, because they are forgiven, remain only a help to show us how much we need God to become what we should be. The recognition and the awareness of our sins should not lead to a destructive guilt feeling but on the contrary to the joy of liberation. Sin remains but sin does not matter any more since we are saved. Sin is only the finger which shows us the direction in which to go, the way of humility and surrender.

(texts)

Practice: We invite you to go outside and walk in silence. Look at yourself with kindness and compassion. Think of the aspects of your life you find difficult to accept: they may be aspects of yourself, or other people, or events, or situations, etc.... Focus on a few of these aspects and collect outside a few objects (stones, sticks, leaves, grass, soil, etc...), anything which can represent symbolically each of these different aspects. Sit down somewhere and put them in front of you. Contemplate them. Look at them with the purpose of recognising them and loving them. After a time of silence, offer them to God in any way you like. This is only a suggestion. Feel free to adapt it in your own way. It is important that you feel comfortable with the way you do it. Do not get lost in practical aspects. It is the process that matters and not the objects chosen.

(Sharing)

(Prayer : Prayer of Confession)

The quality of presence - Prayer of thanksgiving

This is about the quality of presence, of the presence of God in our lives. When St Augustine looks back at his own life, he discovers how much God has always been present in his life, in a discrete but nevertheless constant way. He discovers how God has always helped him to find his way to the Divine, how He has always guided him. God has helped him to go through suffering. Suffering is a

sign which calls out for a change. St Augustine notices how much he has not been aware of this presence although this presence seems so obvious to him when he looks retrospectively at his life after having found the way to God, i.e. after his conversion. The Confessions describe this unknown presence and show the diversity of the expressions of God in ways St Augustine did not think worthy of looking at because they seemed too simple, too mundane.

It is very inspiring for us to see how St Augustine can recognise this presence of God, because it tells us that God is also present at any moment in our life, even if we are not aware of this. God is talking all the time to us. He shapes us if we let him to. He wants to heal us in all circumstances of our life. We have to learn to recognise this constant presence and to see that it is the centre of our life, that it is its meaning. Everything happens here and now. There is nothing else that matters. Sure, we have to feed our family, we have to maintain the place where we live and provide what we need, but all that is secondary, even the help we bring to others. The core of our life remains this intimacy we can develop with God. He is the primordial actor.

(texts)

Practice: We invite you to sit in silence, trying to become aware of the presence of God. Sit comfortably. Relax but remain straight and alert. Breathe in and out deeply. Concentrate on your breath. Do not concentrate on thoughts which can arise. Let them go through your mind as clouds through the sky. Listen to the sounds around you. Be aware of the presence of others, of your sensations, of your mood. Be completely here and now. Be without expectations. Everything is harmonious. Everything is perfect. God is present and we do not need anything else. I ring the bell after 10 minutes.

Let us pray together, giving thanks to God. We invite each of you to express your gratitude: thank you, God for... No long sentences, but we wish to express here our thankfulness for as many things as arise in our hearts.

(Sharing)

(Prayer: Move among us, O God)

TEA BREAK

The quality of struggle - Prayer of intercession

This is about the quality of struggle. St Augustine describes his long years of searching for God as a hard and long struggle. We can notice how he struggled for years until he found God. These years are described retrospectively and look probably different from how they were experienced as at the time, because St Augustine looks at them now with the new eyes of his faith in God. Of course, the way of looking at it changes the experience completely. For all that, the experience he describes retrospectively is no less true. In his honesty, he tells us how he was corrupt, how he was divided within himself; he recognized how often he knew already the way he ought to go but was too attached to his old behaviour, to the pleasures he knew in his youth, to be able to change. Change needs time. You can see how deep his suffering is; this probably was the reason for the search and for the change. Pleasure can be experienced and yet happiness can remain far away. In this way his life is really the illustration of what everybody's life is: a long struggle and striving for happiness which needs a lot of patience and perseverance. We can progress only if we commit ourselves completely to this search for truth.

It is very inspiring for us to see that saints have a life which is very similar to our life. It does not differ much. The belief is very common, even in the teaching of the Church, that saints and mystics are in some way apart; they seem to have a special status, as if they were predestined to become saints or mystics, and we not. No, contemplation and sanctity are a call for each of us, of course for each one in a different way, but there is no easy way. It is encouraging to know that the struggle we experience in our everyday life is normal, that it is part of our journey to God. It is good to know that time is a necessary part of our evolution. God is always present with us, as we already said, but his presence is extremely discrete; because He loves us, He does not want to impose Himself on us. He wants us to search for Him. The more we search, the more He seems to hide. We have very often the tendency to think that others have it easier or that they are more gifted. That is not true, that is only an illusion. We are just different and have to struggle to find our own way. This is the practice: to trust our intuition, to trust ourselves when we open to the Spirit and to create our own path. In that we are very much linked one with each other. We are building one body, the body of the Church. We are supports for each other.

(Texts)

Practice: We invite you to a time of intercession. Intercession is the root of our struggle, because we have to stretch our struggle into the right direction. We have to be in harmony with God and with others. Prayer, being the root of our intimacy with God, is the only real force we can receive which is really effective. It is the only power. It is not our power but God's power flowing through us. Let us pray for the concerns which are central in our life, for what is the centre of our attention. It takes courage to share these more intimate aspects of our life but it is also the way to build our community link, to build our solidarity. Share only what you feel comfortable sharing. Everything here remains confidential. Each of us who wishes to present a topic can expose it in a few sentences and then we have 3 minutes of silence, with the gong ringing at the end. Intercession means compassion, i.e. suffering with... Try to concentrate on the subject and to feel empathy. Intercession is a prayer of the heart, not of the head.

(Sharing)

(Prayer: Fatima Prayer)

The quality of unity - Prayer of adoration

This is about the quality of unity, of unity between matter and spirit. St Augustine believed for a long time in Manichaeism, which says that the forces of good and evil are two equal forces and that matter is evil while spirit is good. St Augustine did not get free and find the path to God until he recognised that God is the only living force and that evil is the shadow i.e. where God's light does not reach. Evil is the absence of God. The fact he recognises that God is the only source of life allows him to see how much the Creation is the expression of God. Matter is not evil but matter and spirit are two aspects of the same Reality.

It is very inspiring for us to see this unity between spirit and matter, because it shows how there is only one Source. Sin is not an act against the Law but it is being far from God, it is turning away from this unique Source. Matter is a means which makes God partially visible to us. It is through matter that we find expression of our incarnation.

(Texts)

Practice: We invite you to a sort of game with light and shadows. We light the candle in the middle and you have a basket full of objects you can use to increase the light or to create shadows. You can use everything you like here around us. You can also modify what others did before you. This does not need to be serious, it can be humorous. We try to explore how light works and what can be the traps of evil. It is a game but it remains also a search for the light. Be creative and daring. Everything here remains confidential.

(Sharing)

(Prayer: At the conclusion of the day....)