

Augustine

Augustine was born in Tagaste, Souk-Ahras, Algeria on November 13, 354. His father, Patricius was a pagan. His mother, Monica was a fervent Catholic. Both were what we would characterize today as middle-class, neither rich nor poor. From an early age it was evident Augustine was gifted intellectually, aided by a very inquisitive mind and a very passionate spirit. His parents therefore wanted Augustine to receive a high-class education not ordinarily available within the means of people in their social class. Through the generosity of a family friend, Augustine was able to receive this education by leaving his hometown to study rhetoric (a well respected profession of the time) in Carthage, a great central city of the Roman Empire.

Though he left for Carthage with knowledge of the Catholic faith his mother had taught him at an early age, Augustine did not find fulfillment in the Church or with Scripture. He began to seek fulfillment elsewhere, and was drawn to other forms of spiritual expression, including various philosophers he was encountering in his studies, Manichaeism, which was a dualistic religious sect considered a Christian heresy, and even astrology. During this time Augustine also found himself in a restless search for pleasures not unlike the many influences of today: money, sex, fame, culture, etc. This drew Augustine further and further away from the faith of his childhood. Later when he was prayerfully reflecting on this period on his life, he would realize “I loved my own ways, not yours.” (Confessions 3.3.6)

Augustine eventually became a professor of rhetoric, first in his hometown of Tagaste and then later returning to Carthage. At the age of 28, he left Africa in the hope of establishing a teaching career in Rome. This led him to a prestigious teaching position in Milan, then the capital of the Western Roman Empire. During this time of worldly success Augustine began to slowly recall the faith of his childhood. What caused this shift? First, he began to experience a lack of fulfillment in the achievements he had made and the various worldly pleasures he had acquired. Second, he had found major flaws in some of the other spiritual expressions he had explored, especially with Manichaeism. It was in this context that Augustine would come to realize that in all these earlier pursuits, what he was really seeking was the God. “Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and yet so new, late have I loved you. You were always there inside me and I was running around outside. I was looking for you out there, and confused as I was, I threw myself upon those beautiful things that you had made. You were always in me, but I was not always in you.” (Confessions 10.27.38)

Augustine was drawn to a local Bishop named Ambrose. Augustine, a trained rhetorician with an appreciation for eloquence and still a strong desire to have fame and influence, admired Ambrose for his speaking abilities and the heavy influence Ambrose had on others. Yet, there was something else Augustine found attractive in

Ambrose that provides a valuable lesson for the Church's mission of evangelization today. Ambrose welcomed Augustine's questions and skepticism not with harsh defense, but with kindness. "I began to like him, at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth, for I had absolutely no confidence in your Church, but as a human being who was kind to me." (Confessions 13.13.23)

His discussions and relationship with the Bishop eventually led Augustine to reconsider the Catholic faith. As he did so, Augustine realized conversion would demand some changes to the life he had been leading. "I was thus weighed down by the pleasant burden of the world in the way one commonly is by sleep, and the thoughts with which I attempted to meditate upon you were like the efforts of people who are trying to wake up, but are overpowered and immersed once more in a slumber our sleep." (Confessions 7.5.12)

This willingness to wrestle with his own restless desire drew him closer to God in prayer. Recognizing his own powerlessness and facing seeming despair over his inability to make the leap to conversion, he felt a call to pick up Scripture as a voice said "Tolle Lege, Tolle Lege" or pick up and read. He grabbed a Bible placed nearby and opened to the first verse he could find. It was Romans 13:13-14: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts."

The verse in Romans spoke personally to him and Augustine suddenly no longer had any doubt he was called to convert. Shortly after, in 387 and nearly four years after he had begun his prestigious career in Rome, Augustine was baptized. Soon after his baptism, Augustine and a few of his friends (some of which had recently been baptized themselves) decided to return to Africa to live a life of prayer, study, and service together. Within a few years, Augustine would become well known in the town. In 391, against his own personal desires, Augustine was ordained a Priest. Following his ordination, he continued the common life he had established with friends. However, God had even more in store for Augustine. In 397 Augustine was ordained a Bishop, which required him to move to the Bishop's residence.

Augustine then wrote a Rule for the community of friends he was leaving so that they might continue the life that they had begun together. "The main purpose for you having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart." Throughout the remainder of Augustine's life and all the way till today, his Rule has enabled countless Catholic communities to flourish, most notably, the Augustinians.

Augustinian Spirituality

At the heart of Augustinian spirituality is the restless search for God. "You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Augustine's

own search for God began with the existential questions we all ask in life. What is the meaning of life? How can I find happiness and fulfillment? What happens after our life here on earth is over? Why isn't what I already have enough to make me happy? These questions ultimately led Augustine to an encounter with Scripture which led to his conversion. Augustine then determined the best way to continue his search for God would be with like-minded friends in community. He was heavily influenced by the life of the early disciples he read about in Acts 4:32-35: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all." Thus, another element of Augustinian Spirituality is a community that shares all things in common.

By living together, holding one another accountable to live a good life oriented towards God, enjoying daily prayer, meaningful conversation in the midst of the burdens and joys of everyday life, and sharing the unique gifts each member brings to the community, the community as a whole leads a meaningful life that remains oriented towards God in the midst of various distractions that come with life. Therefore, another way to summarize Augustinian Spirituality is through our core values of Veritas or Truth, Unitas or Unity, and Caritas or Love. We live the value of Veritas when our minds and heart and soul are focused on those meaningful existential questions that lead us to knowledge of God. We live the value of Unitas as we, like Augustine, realize the search for truth is best found in community and we are willing remove all that separates us from being in union with God and one another. This search for truth and unity can therefore only be found when we live the value of Caritas, recognizing the Golden Rule of Loving God and Neighbor invites us to put our own selfish ambitions aside for the sake of the common good of all people. "Before all else, dear brothers, love God and then your neighbor, because these are the chief commandments given to us." The Rule is therefore essentially a guide to Augustinian Spirituality.

The opportunities to live Augustinian Spirituality and the Rule that guide it are not limited to a community of Friars or Nuns. We have to remember that following his baptism, Augustine did not found a community of priests or bishops. He first founded a community of laypeople interested in living together so that they could search for truth in a society that in reality was not much different than our own. As a Bishop these same principles would guide his homilies, his arbitrations of civil disputes, the letters he would write to influencers of heretical movements, all the many writings he produced as one of the most prolific writers in Christian history, and the influences those writings have had on Church teaching on how to respond to the issues and challenges of our own day. We therefore cannot underestimate the opportunities that exist within families, workplaces, neighborhoods, civic institutions, etc. to influence a

better society when they are willing to embrace these core values of Veritas, Unitas, and Caritas.

The principles of Augustinian Spirituality that Augustine left us come from a man who faced many of the same challenges and pressures we face today. He grew up in a society where Christianity had a strong hold, yet there were tremendous powerful influences denouncing it. He grew up in a family with mixed religions not unlike many families today. Born into what we would call a middle-class family, he had to overcome the hurdles of receiving a quality education to achieve his dream as many in the middle-class do today. Augustine left the Church his mother struggled so hard to raise him in as many young adults find themselves doing today. Augustine grew up in a world where there was a tremendous gap between the wealthy and the poor, high taxation, divisive politics, increased violence, and external threats that ultimately led to the downfall the Roman Empire. It is in this context that we present Augustinian Spirituality and the Rule which guides it not as something exclusively for the clergy or religious brothers and sisters, but as a guide for inviting communities of all kinds to search together for the answers to the tough questions our own day. How do we overcome the division we see in our world? How do we look at the issues of rising violence in our cities, immigration, care of the environment, mass incarceration? How do we work together for a better future?