S T . J O S E M A R I A I N S T I T U T E P O D C A S T

Episode: How to Love: The Feast of St. Augustine

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Augustine of Hippo is one of the greatest fathers of the Latin Church and of the Church as a whole. He lived from 354 to 430 after the birth of Christ, and thanks to his *Confessions*, Augustine's life is well known. In the words of a renowned scholar on the early church, Henry Chadwick, “No figure of the ancient world is more accessible to us than Augustine.” His sincerity about his difficulties, moral failures, and doubts makes him attractive to us in our own cultural context of the 21st century, which, in many aspects, is so like Augustine's times. His conversion and holy life after his conversion, encourage us to follow him upstream against the current of mainstream culture. Augustine spent most of his life in Northern Africa, almost half of it as Bishop of Hippo Regius in today's Algeria. He was the most prolific early Christian theologian, writing over one hundred books, hundreds of letters, and preaching over eight thousand sermons. Thus, he almost single-handedly transformed the Western Church.

Augustine's brilliant rhetoric, his elegant language, his eloquence, his captivating images, his penetrating intelligence, the sheer mass of his literary production are like an avalanche that swept away the evil of the past and left us with the good of the past with a clean slate, or a recasting of memory with a solid foundation on which to build a civilization of love. The hours I personally spent reading page upon page of Augustine's sermons, letters, and books have filled me with joy, admiration, and gratitude for this beacon of light whose rays cross the abyss of time and illuminate our own darkness. His light deserves to shine and to be reflected and magnified. Every line Augustine wrote, every word he spoke, is a flame with love of the Holy Trinity. Any reader whose heart yearns for the unadulterated goodness of God, whose soul has begun to drink from the living water, will feel a spark jump out of Augustine's pages and enkindle our own heart with an urgency to reach out in longing for the city of God, whose first and foremost citizens are the angels.

In the following meditations, I do not attempt to give an account of Augustine's fervor, but to glean as much wisdom as possible from Augustine about the centrality of mercy and concern for the poor in our own lives. I first briefly describe Augustine's conceptual framework for his program of holiness. The psychological principle that pervades Augustine's whole thought is the all-importance of love. Love is as important in the moral and spiritual world as the law of gravity is for the physical world. Augustine presents each of the cardinal virtues, which are prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, as a form of love. For Augustine, our Christian life starts by clinging to God, the Father, and thus being sanctified. Holiness is charity, is grace poured out as love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and that conforms us with the Trinity. Once we have turned to God, we need the virtues as the path to happiness, e*udaimonia*, traced by Greek philosophy as, growth in the virtues. Augustine defines the virtues in two steps; first, in a wider way that allows for varying objects of our love. “Temperance is love,” he writes, “giving itself whole and undivided to the one it loves. Fortitude is love that easily endures all things for the sake of what is loved. Justice is love, serving only the beloved and therefore ruling rightly. Prudence is love wisely, choosing what helps it towards the beloved and avoiding what hinders it.”

Differently from pagan ethics, however, Augustine rejects any virtue except the supreme love of God. To be true love, virtue needs to be based on divine love. Like a river in four branches, the four virtues have a common source in divine love. Therefore, Augustine insists, “But we say that this love is not just any love, but the love of God, that is the love of the highest good, the highest wisdom, and the highest harmony. Therefore, we can also define the virtues in this way: Temperance is love, keeping itself whole and incorrupt for God. Fortitude is love that easily bears all things for the sake of God. Justice is love serving God alone and thus rightly ruling over everything else that is subject to humanity. Prudence is love that wisely discerns what helps its journey towards God from what may hinder it.”

Augustine's reformulation of the four cardinal virtues as forms of love is due to his general understanding of love as a kind of universal law of attraction that moves every being toward its proper place. Love for Augustine is like a natural law of physics that governs all of nature, even rocks and waves. “The movements due to weight,” he writes, “either downwards through heaviness or upwards through lightness, are like kinds of love of physical bodies. As the body is moved by its weight, so the soul is moved by its love to wherever it is drawn.” Augustine is speaking metaphorically. We are not rocks or waves or trees. He repeatedly makes clear that humans have free will and choose freely. We can only love by voluntary self-disposition. That is the whole point of Augustine's fervor. Throughout our journey in this life, we are placed before a choice between two modes of life, between two loves. This is a figure of speech that we find throughout early Christian literature, echoing the two paths presented to us in the Bible and patristic literature. We can either choose the path that ascends to love of the Triune God, who is our life and happiness, or we can choose the descending path into destruction and disunity, ending in the inexplicable iniquity of the nothingness of sin.

Along this path, we are guided by our love, which Augustine, in a rhetorical image, calls the foot of the soul, which carries us to our goal. Thus, love in rational beings must be ordered toward God. Augustine explains it with a comparison taken from married ls ife, “a man does not truly love his wife if he loves her

only for her dowry. Nor does a woman love her husband faithfully if she loves him only because he has given her gifts or because he has given much. How then should God be loved, the true and faithful spouse who brings forth the offspring of eternal life and does not allow us to remain barren. Let us love him in such a way that nothing is loved apart from him." The ascending motion of love is one of purification. We feel the draw of temporal and central goods more than we experience the attraction of the eternal ones. So we constantly need to discern our love. Augustine famously uses the distinction between *uti* in Latin, in English "to use," and *frui* in Latin, in English "to delight in," and this distinction helps him to guide us in our discernment. *What am I using, and what am I striving to rest in as my last end? In which magnetic field am I? What is my ultimate goal in life? What do I wish to enjoy for its own sake?* It takes a sensitive conscience trained by sincere personal examination to discover the deep motivations of our heart, as Augustine describes them. "I define charity as the movement of the soul towards enjoying God for his own sake, and oneself and one's neighbor for the sake of God. In contrast, I define greed as the movement of the soul towards enjoying oneself, one's neighbor, or any created thing without reference to God."

Sin has its origin in the inversion of the order of love. Augustine writes, "The good use the world as a means to enjoy God. The wicked, on the other hand, seek to enjoy the world and attempt to use God as a tool for their own ends." For Augustine, love of God is not merely an individual virtue, for the simple fact that Christ linked love of God and love of neighbor. However, Augustine underscores that love of neighbor is not truly possible without love of God. How could we truly wish our fellow humans the best if God is the best, and we do not share him with them by loving him ourselves? How can we share him without faith? Writing to an old friend, Augustine rejoices that the friend has decided to be baptized because, as he writes, "Where there is no shared agreement on divine matters between friends, there can be no complete and genuine harmony even in human affairs. For anyone who disregards the divine will inevitably have a distorted view of human concerns, and one who does not love the Creator cannot truly know how to love another person."

In Augustine, charity exerts the greatest associative force. The association of charity that Augustine envisions is rooted in a shared love for one another based on their mutual recognition that both are devoted to the same Trinity. Each person loves the other because they both love the same God. In contrast, Cicero, like Aristotle, based friendship on the virtuosity of the friends. Augustine, in consequence, replaces Cicero's definition of a people with his own based on love. Cicero defined it as a multitude of persons united by common utility and the consensus on what is just. Augustine, in contrast, defines it as a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on what they love. Augustine shakes up Cicero thoroughly. He replaces Cicero's legal definition with a pre-legal one. For Augustine, a people are primarily a civilizational unit, united by the values they share. For Augustine, love of God comes first and decides whether there is a true community. Such a conclusion is difficult to accept in our secularized society, in which believing Christians are a minority. Nevertheless, it is a good reminder for all who wish to be Christians in this world, there cannot be any truly human value without God, the Creator. This does not imply, and Augustine does not say, that non-Christians have no virtues, or that states should be confessional and impose the Catholic faith. Nor does it imply that post-liberal integralism is a

commendable option for Catholics. It means that as Christians, we belong to a spiritual order before we belong to any human organization.

The city of God, whose citizenship, love of God confers, is a transcendent and timeless reality. It is neither identical with any existing polity nor with the hierarchical Church. “The *City of God* is nothing less than the spiritual unity of the whole universe as planned by divine providence and the ultimate goal of creation,” writes Christopher Dawson. Our citizenship is in heaven before we belong to any nation or historical epoch. This seems to place Christians into a stance of otherworldliness. Peter Brown, one of the best-known scholars of Augustine, has characterized the *City of God* as exactly that, a book about being otherworldly in the world. He points out that it was Augustine's intention to stimulate in Christians a longing for something different, to examine the nature of their relationship with their immediate environment. Christians must be willing to leave the world by their moral lifestyle without leaving it physically. We are set apart by our yearning for a vision of peace. In one of his explanations of the Psalms, Augustine summarizes his long book, *City of God,* in a few pages. He contrasts Babylon with Jerusalem to paradigmatic cities in the Bible. Babylon is the place of confusion that we need to tolerate on Earth. Jerusalem is the vision of peace for which we yearn. These two cities are mixed with each other inseparably, and stay mixed until the end of the ages. Then at the end of the ages, they will be separated. Two different loves made these two cities. Babylon is founded by the love of the world manifested in greed. Jerusalem is founded by the love of God. We must leave Babylon without leaving this world, but how? “He who begins to love begins to depart,” answers Augustine. And we depart not with sadness but with joy. For many go forth joyfully, for the feet of those who depart are the affections of the heart. In this world, we suffer many tribulations, but like a ship that is safely anchored in the harbor basin, has already reached land, even though everyone is still on board. We too, are in a certain sense, already in the city of Jerusalem.

Augustine's congregation was experiencing the end of an era; the Roman Empire that they had known and in which they had grown up was falling apart. Their town, Hippo, was filling with refugees fleeing from the once invincible and prosperous Italy. Since the supposedly eternal city of Rome had been sacked, what was their Roman citizenship worth in such circumstances? Others were preaching doom and destruction, austerity and dispossession before the impending apocalypse. Augustine, in contrast, exhorts his congregation to sing love songs, yearning for a return to their original citizenship in the most beautiful city of God, their eyes on its peace. “Sing and walk,” exclaims Augustine, “Do not stray. Do not turn back, do not remain. To walk means to make spiritual progress, to improve, to purify our loves and lives, to become better men and women. A holy longing for God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit sets us Christians apart. This longing serves as a guiding compass in darkness and fog. The whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing,” writes St Augustine. Augustine did not want Christians to withdraw from the world, but to order their loves. They can and should love all good things on earth as God's gifts that make us love the giver more than we love his gift. Otherwise, we would be like a wife who loved the gold ring her husband gave her as a gift more than she loved her husband.

Augustine applies the analogy between love and the law of gravitation to life in society. “Love is my weight. It draws me to what my heart desires.” This can be a real or a false good. Mary Clark formulates Augustine's insights about the connection between love and justice as social principles very well. By rooting justice in the love of God and man, Augustine unites all people into a society. Accordingly, in the Augustinian outlook, a person is a social animal by reason of his moral exigency. “The society formed with God as the common object of love is a just society, because men who are rightly related to God will enjoy personal harmony and social peace. This love entails for each one the responsibility of providing the material, social, cultural, moral conditions which are needed to bring the men about them to full human development. Devotion to the common good is the sacred obligation flowing most immediately from God's command to love one's neighbor.” Augustine explains from the precept of loving the other as oneself and God above all stem all duties of human society, and it is difficult not to fail in them. And Augustine explains, a way to fail is to evade them by withdrawing from society and from the duties in society. Christians, therefore, must not withdraw from these duties; quite the opposite, they ought to be engaged in the world. In his letter to Marcellinus, Augustine writes, “Therefore, those who say that the teaching of Christ is opposed to the state should provide an army made up of the kind of soldiers that the teaching of Christ has commanded. Let them provide provincials husbands, masters, slaves, kings, judges, and finally, tax collectors and debtors of the public treasury, such as the Christian doctrine instructs them to be. Then let them dare to claim that it is contrary to the state. On the contrary, I would not hesitate to assert that if it were followed, it would undoubtedly be the salvation of the state.” These words remind us of origins, dream of a Roman Empire become Christian who God would help to overcome all the attacks of the enemy.

It is significant that Augustine does not go into details of how the state should or could be saved by Christians, nor its origin. His is not a program of social reform or a blueprint of legislation. This is a common feature of all early Christian teaching on society. The Church Fathers hope for an amelioration of society through Christian holiness. John Rist puts it bluntly, “Augustine shows no interest in institutional reform, even of such an institution of slavery.” Augustine does not support slavery, but accepts it as a sad result of human sinfulness. His notion of divine love as a supernatural foundation of society is precisely that, a foundation on which a true Christian society would be built. The fruit of Christian teaching would flourish, would grow in the time of abolitionism, and in the moment when Christian liberation was put into practice. Augustine reminds us that the political system and the economy are built on a foundation of values and social cohesion that neither the state nor the markets alone can create. Free markets are a cultural achievement that requires virtues, legal order, a culture of work, and honesty. They are structured by the notions of human dignity and quality, and freedom that are a fruit of the Christianization of antique society. When a society turns away from Christ, it is endangering the foundation on which all else stands, and thus also the stability of the house of our democracy and of our free markets. It is by the concern for the poor that Augustine measures first and foremost whether we are building up the city of God and standing on the foundation of Christ.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and l ord, my guardian angel, intercede for me. Amen.