

A Reflection for the Feast of St. Augustine

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Why are we celebrating the great St. Augustine—theologian, doctor of the Church, preacher—some 8,000 sermons—writer, bishop? We grew up calling him “our holy father Augustine,” and we know that in reality our connection with him is very simple and very personal, since one piece of his writing affects our every day life: the Rule of St. Augustine.

We say in the prologue to *You Are Sent* that our SSND charism “flows from our spiritual heritage—especially the gift of St. Augustine who formed a community to be of one heart and one soul in God...seeing the Trinity as the basis, source, and goal of all community.”

He did indeed found a small community in Hippo Regus in North Africa, which sadly he had to leave behind when he was elected bishop. Now 1600 years later the short rule he wrote is guiding more than 150 religious communities of men and women around the world, including the Dominicans, Norbertines, and School Sisters of Notre Dame. Why? Because it is daily challenging, deceptively simple, utterly flexible, and deeply human. Today’s readings touch into the heart of it: “God is love...if God has loved us, we must have the same love for one another. She who loves God lives in God and God in her.”

Augustine’s Rule is a combination of idealism and practicality—which someone estimated would fit on about seven sheets of 8 1/2 x 11 paper. In eight short chapters he calls us to live harmoniously in our home, intent on God, in oneness of heart and mind, sharing “all things in common,” faithful in prayer, chaste, with unselfish concern for the sick, responsive to leadership, even providing for use of the library in the days before printed books! —all in the spirit of the words in today’s Gospel, “The greatest among you, will be the one who serves the rest.” He writes of “Those of us who lived together as friends.” His community is a community of friends.

Today’s first reading sums up the opening words of his Rule: “Before all else, love God and then your neighbor, because these are the chief commandments given to us,” remembering as St. John tells us again today, “God is love. Not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us.”

There are two symbols connected with St. Augustine—the open book—and the flaming heart—symbol of love. It has been said that in the Augustinian tradition to love each person as Christ loves them is a daily struggle, our purgation is in relationships, and like Augustine at times we can experience what has been called “the dark night of love.” Augustine speaks to us the words we heard in today’s first reading: “*At present we love in hope...Love and God will draw near; love, and he will dwell in you. Do you want to know why he is with you if you love? Because God himself is charity.*”

The symbol of the “open book” tells us of his searching, his study, and his response to the words that came to him, “Take and read.” The Word of God was opened to him, as it is to us, through the readings of the liturgy and in our personal prayer and study—we recall our efforts at theological development and theological reflection. Another aspect of Augustinian spirituality is the “life-story” tradition, which supports the common journey, as we move through times of restless longing and unanswered questions, seeing how each person’s life has meaning for all—He writes: *“Let our search be such that we can be aware of finding, and let our finding be such that we go on searching.”* In the spirit of his *Confessions*, our prayer life is centered around “the great things God has done for me.” We look at our personal and communal life-stories, and in the words of today’s responsorial psalm: *“Proclaim God’s marvelous deeds.”*

We are encouraged over and over again by his, familiar words: *“Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient and ever new! Late have I loved you! You called and shouted and broke through my deafness.”*

“You have arranged it, O Lord, that praising you is a delight; for you have created us for yourself. Therefore our heart remains restless until it rests in you.”

And he sends us forth—really or in spirit, singing:

“Let us sing Alleluia here below amid anxiety so that we may someday sing it in security.... Sing and walk on...Advance in goodness, in authentic faith, in uprightness. And sing as you go.”