

Feast of Saint Augustine

Exactly 1600 years ago today, 28 August 404 A.D., Augustine found himself fast approaching his 50th birthday. He had only just begun that stage of life the Romans labeled “*senior*”—an age when great things were to be expected. And Augustine would not disappoint. We can well imagine his marveling at how remarkable and unforeseen the events of the past decade or so had been. He tells us in his *Confessions* that his decision to request baptism prompted his withdrawal from public life—he contemplated “flight into the desert” and did indeed “retreat” to the family home in Thagaste with relatives and chosen friends. However, it was not meant to be—God had other plans. A visit to Hippo Regius in 391 unexpectedly thrust upon him a role of pastoral responsibility, such that by 404 he was about to celebrate his 10th anniversary of episcopal ordination. “Flight into the desert” has now become a thoroughly public life. He has become the *de facto* public face of the North African Catholic bishops—it is his voice that engages Manichaeans and Donatists in open debate. His *Confessions* are beginning to make their way throughout the Latin west, generating conversation and controversy in the process--right about this time an ascetic named Pelagius heard a reading in Rome of the passage “Give what you command, and command what you will” (see 10.29.40) and took offence—the first seeds of future controversy have already been sown. And if one might imagine a “Projects Underway” box on his desk at this time, it would have been brimming over with undertakings ranging from the first pages of *The Trinity*, to beginning chapters of a *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, to initial drafts of various anti-Manichaean and anti-Donatist texts; to about-to-be delivered sermons or

psalm expositions, to a remarkably diverse correspondence from all parts of the world clamoring for response. It ought to come as no surprise that throughout this period we will often hear Augustine lamenting that he has too much to do—and not enough time for the solitude, prayer, and projects dear to his heart.

Late in life, as he reviews his own literary output—a work he called his *Retractations* (*Reconsiderations* is a good rendering of the Latin title), he is well aware that although he abandoned the profession of what he disparagingly called “selling words” (see *Conf.* 9.5.13), he nonetheless found himself in the “word profession” (*ministerium sermonis*, see, e.g. *s.* 71.1) after all—though now at the service of The Word, God’s Word. Looking back at some four decades of writing he is shaken by the words of the *Letter of James*: “If anyone does not offend in word, he is a perfect man” (3:2).

I do not claim this perfection for myself even now when I am old, and even less in early manhood. I had begun to write or to speak to the people, and so much authority was attributed to me that, whenever it was necessary for someone to speak to the people and I was present, I was seldom allowed to be silent and to listen to others . . . (*retr.* prol. 2)

Without a doubt, this now churchly “business of words” was well-underway by the year 404—and in fact we have a remarkable homily dated precisely to that year--and despite the 1600 years of history and culture that separate us, I would like to suggest that there is much from Augustine’s own words that we can hear with profit, especially as we celebrate his feast day this August 28th, 2004. Sermon 162A was likely preached in Carthage, perhaps in June of 404. It reveals an Augustine deeply involved with and struggling to address issues that remain as contemporary as ever. His Christian community is a divided community, these divisions cutting across household and neighborhood. There is the obvious division between Catholic and Donatist—Christian

communities that read the same scriptures, celebrate the same sacraments, revere the same traditions—but find themselves unable to talk to one another—and worse. In the name of religion violence has even broken out: the Donatist bishop Crispinus whom Augustine will refer to in the sermon (see paragraph 8) found himself the subject of a criminal suit by Augustine and Possidius, after the latter, friend and fellow-bishop of Augustine, had barely escaped with his life after being attacked by one of Crispinus' Donatist clergy. But Augustine is also well aware that such events and even worse had made it difficult for the Catholic community to respond in an evangelical way to such a state of affairs: love—*caritas* was not the first thing to cross the mind of his Catholic community when they heard the word *Donatist*. A community gathered for Eucharist somewhere in Carthage in June of 404 offers Augustine the opportunity to remind himself and his faith community about the way of Christ, which is always the way of love:

It is a good thing to speak about love to those who love [love], by which very love whatever is loved is loved well. (*Sermon 162A.1*)

These are the opening lines of the sermon and “love” occurs directly and indirectly six times! There’s no missing what this sermon will be about!

While we don’t know the place in Carthage where this Eucharist was being celebrated (we know from his sermons that he was frequently invited to preach in a variety of Carthaginian churches) nor the exact occasion, we do know what the readings of the day were: the first reading was 1 *Cor.* 12: 31ff., Paul’s panegyric on love, and the gospel was *John* 15:1ff, “I am the vine . . .” Augustine has a wealth of scriptural-theological wisdom to explore together with his gathered faith community. Perhaps it’s worth noting, simply because it is easy to lose sight of, that all of Augustine’s preaching-

teaching begins and ends with the scriptures. He has high expectations of himself as preacher-teacher regarding a ministry grounded in and driven by the Word of God. He likewise has high expectations of his community: that their lives of faith be grounded in and driven by the Word of God. Both he and his community stand as a challenge to our own preaching and to our own receptivity to the Word of God! Together, Augustine and his community, they will seek to let the light of God's Word be their way, their truth.

In the course of this homily that certainly approached an hour in length Augustine lays out an understanding of love that is both theologically deep and spiritually challenging—precisely what we might expect to find in the Scriptures! I would like to highlight only some of the contours of his exposition with the hope that it will entice you to go to the text itself (the English text is available in *Sermons III/5, The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., editor John Rotelle, O.S.A., New City Press, 1992, pages 145-166). What better way to celebrate the Feast of Saint Augustine than to spend some time with Augustine himself!

Taking his cue from Paul's own words, that love is the *supereminentissima via*—the *most excellent way* (1 Cor. 12:31: Augustine's Latin "*supereminentissima*" is what we might call a "superlative superlative": nothing surpasses this way), Augustine explores the implications of the Apostle's assertion. Paul has been lauding a variety of Christian charisms (*dona*, gifts is Augustine's term): eloquent speech, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity, even martyrdom. Yet it is clear that though these gifts seem to stand on their own as remarkable and praiseworthy, they are all rendered relative by an even more important consideration:

All of these are great and holy (*magna atque divina*) **if** they are established upon the foundation of love (*in fundamento caritatis*) and spring from love's root (*de radice caritatis exurgant*). (1)

No matter what our accomplishments, if they do not flow from and are not built upon love, they are worthless. Augustine insists upon a truth that we know is at the heart of his spirituality: love.

Augustine goes on to prove his point by looking at some prominent examples from Scripture. King Saul, after he had lost God's favor and became a persecutor of David (see 1 *Kings* 19:18-24, LXX), nonetheless was able to prophesy—he had the prophetic gift; Caiphas the high priest likewise prophesied during the trial of Jesus (*Jn.* 11: 50-51)—he had the prophetic gift. In particular, with the story of Saul and David, Augustine draws some contemporary parallels—*sicut modo, nam et hodie contingunt haec* (2): “just as nowadays,” “such things even happen today.” One thing Augustine always insists upon is that the scriptures are not just about the past—they are God's word for us **now, today!**

Augustine goes to great lengths to highlight how outstanding were the gifts of Saul and Caiphas—suggesting the seductive attractiveness of “attention-getting” accomplishments vs. the often routine and seemingly insignificant demands of love. In some strong words he says that to have great gifts and, by way of implication, do great things, without love, leads to judgment, not accomplishment (*non ad adiutorium sed ad iudicium*, see 3).

It is nothing great to have great gifts, only to use them well is; and only love does this. (3) [The Latin is carefully constructed: *non magna habere magnum est, sed bene uti magnis magnum est; non autem utitur bene, qui non habet caritatem.*]

Keeping priorities straight—that is Augustine's concern.

And lest his listeners begin to see all of this as theoretical, Augustine makes a deliberate turn towards living, basically interchanging the word *caritas*—*love* with the Latin phrase *bene vivere*—literally “to live well” but here clearly understood as living

virtuously, living a holy life. No one can “live badly”—*male vivere* and claim to have love. Perhaps Augustine is deconstructing the perennial temptation that comes from the gospel love command: to use it as an excuse for avoiding the truth of our own behavior.

. . . living well (*bene vivere*) can only come about through love—a good life is what love is all about, and no one having love can live badly (*male vivere*): to live well (*bene vivere*) is nothing other than to be filled with love. (4)

Augustine is well known for his grammatical/logical reversals. His most famous is his reversal of “God is love” to “love is God.” Indirectly Augustine seems to be doing the same here: “*bene vivere*” is “*caritas*,” “*caritas*” is “*bene vivere*.” Our day-to-day behavior cannot be separated from love, love can only be manifested in our day-to-day behavior.

With all this emphasis on gifts and living, Augustine is well aware that a constant source of life’s tensions comes from the immediate realization in all real-life situations of difference: our gifts are not equal, our life-situations are not one and the same, some *seem* to be more blessed and gifted than others. Augustine takes the notion of love to an even deeper evangelical perspective by directly confronting this daunting and often disconcerting reality by inviting his hearers to undertake a profound realignment of perspective. He will draw upon the Pauline notion of the Body of Christ as well as the Johannine image of vine and branches.

You see, whatever my brother or sister has, if I’m not jealous, and I love, then it’s also mine. I don’t have it in myself, but I have it in them; it wouldn’t be mine, if we weren’t in one body and under one head. (4)

Diversity, drawing upon the image of the body, may at first glance seem to be divisive—but only if we operate out of envy or jealousy. Love refocuses our thinking to see difference(s) in the light of our bond of love with Christ our head. Our difference with Christ **does not** preclude a mysterious bond of love and unity; it **does** lead us to

thankfulness and praise. That same bond of love unites us with fellow-members of the Body of Christ in an equally mysterious way, calling forth a similar sense of thankfulness and praise. Augustine never underestimates the demands placed upon us by this change of perspective—the *Rule of Saint Augustine* makes this emphatically clear. The reality of difference is not just an ancient problem—and so Augustine’s call to a thoroughly Christ-centered response to this challenge is as contemporary as ever!

Which is why it is worth emphasizing one further perspective on this demanding exploration of the complexities of Christian love. It is a development and consequence of what Augustine has been unfolding regarding the need to see difference in a theological light. Once again he uses the image of the body: the functions are many, health is one (*officia diversa sunt, sanitas una est*, 6). **Love** is just another word for **health**: just as a body working together in its diversity is a sign of health, so the Body of Christ working together in its diversity is an indication of its health, that it is bound together by the love of Christ. The equation becomes, if I may draw upon Augustine’s own words, “*sanitas = unitas = caritas*” – “health = unity = love.”

... health, which is common to all the members, is more valuable than any function of the individual members. (6)

Augustine invites us to consider the health of “the body,” i.e., “the community” not just in terms of **myself**--an important and vital member but still individual, particular--but in terms of the “whole”: what serves “*sanitas*” precludes partial or narrow visions, such that even an “eminent” member may require amputation for the sake of the whole!

At this point in the homily Augustine confronts the particular challenge facing his Catholic Christian community: the Donatist crisis that was certainly threatening the health of his community. The details are not necessary here but Augustine’s overriding

response to the separatist temptations is: *Catholicus sum—I am Catholic* (10). To be Catholic is to think of the whole (*Catholicus totum tene*). *Catholic* is not a partisan word for Augustine: it precludes partisan and partial thinking.

Perhaps that is the final and chief exhortation Augustine might wish to leave with us on this Feast of St. Augustine 2004. We live in a world, in a Church, in a community that still struggles with the demands of love. Just as in his own day, so in our day, Augustine doesn't offer a facile recipe: do such-and-such and all will live happily ever after. Rather he offers us a starting principle, a way of thinking about love, a foundation value that must guide all our particulars: *Catholicus sum—I am Catholic*. "Who I am, who we are, what I do, what we do" must always be grounded in a love that embraces the *whole*.

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