

Homily at the celebration of 750 years since the Grand Union of the Order of Saint Augustine

Hammersmith, London
St. Augustine's Church
10 May 2006

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1. At different times in the story of a religious family, you can hear the sounds of a new song being sung. Usually it is the first song, the one sung at the important moment of foundation. Often the melody returns through the years and wants to be sung again, maybe in a new key and perhaps with updated lyrics. That's why we are making such a big event of the 750th anniversary of the Grand Union of 1256. We still believe in that song.

St. Augustine once said "Anyone who has learned to love the new life has learned to sing a new song." (Sermon 43,1) He added that the song is new because the people that sing it are new, and Christ has made them new (In Ps. 97,1). What was it, then, that was so new about those men and their song back in the 13th century when they stood at the dawn of the Augustinian Order, and what had Christ done in them?

2. Actually there were two important events within the space of twelve years that could be said to have made up the foundation of the Order of St. Augustine. The first was the so-called Little Union, the "hermit" union in Tuscany". In the year 1244 sixty-one eremitical settlements in the outlying areas of Lucca, Pisa and Siena joined together, took on the Rule of St. Augustine for the first time and, under the direction of Cardinal Richard degli Annibaldi, established the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine of Tuscia. We don't know a whole lot about this new order. But we do know some names, some places, some dates and some events. Most of all, we are aware of their enthusiasm and the resultant rapid expansion of the Order beyond Tuscany and over the Alps, even to Clare Priory in England in 1248.

The spirit of the new order was contemplative, a continuation of the eremitical life from before. But there was a different slant now, given by Augustine's Rule. To the previous life of prayer and penance he added the distinguishing notes of common life and fraternal love. To the concentration on the local hermitage, he gave a much broader horizon to their unity and identity.

The second foundational event is the one we are celebrating today, the Grand Union of 1256, 750 years ago in the convent of the Tuscan Hermits of S. Maria del Popolo in Rome, when five eremitical orders – the Augustinian Hermits of Tuscia, the Hermits of Blessed John Bono, the Hermits of Saint William, the Brettino Hermits, and the Hermits of Monte Favale - joined forces and lives and started out on a new path now as a Mendicant Order. This time the song definitely went into a new key and changed its lyrics considerably. The hermits became friars. The strictly contemplative life went to being active as well as contemplative and took on its fullest expression as an apostolic fraternity reaching outwards.

The Mendicant Movement, to which the Augustinians were added by the Holy See, was a revolutionary answer to a revolutionary situation in 13th century Europe. There was a need for new evangelization. Europe's life had been profoundly altered by a sea change in the economic and social orders, particularly in her cities which were burgeoning and boiling with activity. In this new situation the faith needed to be re-proposed to urban dwellers and refitted, so to speak, to new ways of being. To do this, religious were called to move off the hill tops and out of the woods into the major cities of Europe

So, from places like Rosia, on the country road to Massa Marittima, and from S. Maria in Montepescchio deep in the Ombrone valley the new friars moved within the walls of Siena. Priors and friaries were established in Lucca, Milan, Venice and most other Italian cities. Beyond the Alps Augustinian houses grew up almost as quickly as the European capitals themselves were growing.

3. In the history of the Augustinian Order there is no particular foundation myth. There are no charismatic figures to point to, no miraculous events, no breathtaking manifestations of divine will. It was all rather matter of fact. The Mendicant Movement was working well at this point. Church authorities, who had sharp powers of observation and a good organizational sense, saw it better to unite the divergent religious groupings that were existing at the time and place them within this Movement for the good of the Church.

4. That is how it looks from the outside. From the inside, however, more was going on. Perhaps we can now start to answer the question we put at the beginning: what was it that was so new about those men back in the 13th century when they stood at the threshold of the new Augustinian Order and sang a new song? And, what had Christ done in them?

First of all, there was their courage and freedom. At that time a major change was happening to their life styles and the new path wasn't all that clear. They themselves were so diverse, coming as they did from the separate traditions of five constituting orders. How do you create unity and purpose out of all that? In fact, some turned back.

Secondly, they exhibited an extraordinary sense of Church. They saw the merit of what was being urged on them by Church authorities and, with great detachment and not a little love, were willing to cooperate despite the loss and uprooting it would entail. Solidarity with the whole Church was part of their song. The Mendicant Movement was a *Zeitgeist*, a spirit of the times, within the Church at large.

Finally, they had Augustine. Not only was his Rule at their center. Be he was! They took him on as a father. They named their churches after him. They gave him a prime place in their liturgy. And, they studied his works.

And he gave them his restlessness and searching soul. He directed them in the art of living together in one mind and one heart on the way to God. They caught his passion for truth. And they absorbed his extraordinary pastoral zeal. All this went to project an Augustinian charism that drew the people to them and which the Church had great need of at the time.

The song was new because the people that sang it were new, made new by Christ. That is what we seem to detect in our early history: not just an ecclesiastical decision, but a new song.

5. It is a worthy and noble thing to celebrate an occasion like the 750th anniversary of the Grand Union. It's a daring thing, however, to own it and to want to sing the same song. To do so means to confirm the original spirit and call it one's own. Maybe that courage, detachment, sense of Church and Augustinian originality are being asked for again.

Could the song of 1256 really play again? Can the melody come back and stir us up? That's the chief reason why we are celebrating the Grand Union. Just as in 1256, it's not clear yet where we need to go. We may still be too close to the Council. What does the Church want of its Augustinian religious? What do people in general want from Augustinian religious? Most likely it is to be ourselves, to be consistent with our past and courageous towards our future. The Order has returned to Augustine, as the council asked us to do. We have studied our early history and origins, even though many still need to do so. But we haven't walked a lot on new ground. We have done some singing, but not much walking. Maybe we need some of that freedom that characterized our forefathers in 1256.

6. Recent years have seen a lot of talk about the Augustinian Family: Augustinian hands reaching across national borders in collaboration, tightening the net of our world-wide brotherhood; Augustinian friars and sisters and members of different Augustinian congregations together with Augustinian lay people, all taking common inspiration from Augustine's charism, emboldening each other and working together in various projects throughout the world. This sounds like our song in a new key. It is said that Christians of the future will necessarily be more contemplative as they live in a secularized world. This too sounds like our song.

The Good Shepherd has been in the air this week since Good Shepherd Sunday. Christians this week have been told to take heart and follow him. He's the one who knows his sheep ever so well; and his sheep know him and trust him. He knows where to go. He will lead us and walk along with us. He will embolden us. Some shepherds like to sing as they walk along with their sheep. The Good Shepherd's song is always a new one. We Augustinians have trusted him for a long time now. Let us now sing with him again.