

REFLECTION – ST AUGUSTINE and SYNODALITY

10 May 2023

Good afternoon and thank you to Sr. Roxanne and to all of you for this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on Synodality, Saint Augustine and, since we are speaking of Augustine, we must also include our brother from the Canons Regular, St. Peter Fourier. To be honest, I did not know much about him, other than learning about him and Alix Le Clerc, from my friend Elaine Polcare, with whom I worked at Merrimack College in the USA for many years and has been a dear friend for many more years. In doing just brief research about Peter Fourier, I learned that he was Canonized in 1897 by Pope Leo XIII (of *Rerum Novarum* fame). Pope Leo, grew up in an Augustinian Parish not far from Rome, Carpineto Romano, and he is also the Pope who canonized Rita (of Cascia) and also St. John Baptiste de la Salle.

I bring you the greetings of our Prior General, Alejandro Moral Antòn and all of the Augustinians here in our Curia. You are most welcome to be here. We are in the midst of a process of Synodality in which the Universal Catholic Church is calling us to discern and participate. We are called to discern, to listen, to reflect on what it means for us to be part of a synodal process. What it means to “walk together” as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to participate as the Body of Christ. We live in union with each other as the Whole Christ, each bringing our own gifts and talents and lived experiences. Today I would like to dedicate the time we have to explore one of the three pillars of the Synodal process. There are three pillars: Communion, Participation and Mission. I would like to focus our time this morning on Mission.

One of my assignments as an Augustinian was to Villanova University, I worked in the mission effectiveness office. Some called our office "Mission Control" (like NASA), others "Mission Impossible" (like a Tom Cruise movie). We, on the other hand, called it Mission Effectiveness. We tried to focus on what our mission was as an Augustinian University. The University had a Mission Statement, but sometimes these statements simply become words on paper if they are not integrated into the daily activities of the University community.

All of us have our mission and I would like to spend some time this afternoon reflecting with you on what it means to have a mission and how it relates our religious life and the Synodal process. We may not have written our personal mission in a formal statement, but we all have a mission in our lives. Sometimes when we hear the word mission, we think of going off to some distant country. Some of our greatest saints and blessed have been missionaries who have answered the call to travel far from their homeland to spread the message of the Gospel to others. This mission work, as we know, is very important, but it is not the only sense of mission one is called to do.

This past Christmas season, I was able to spend a few days assisting our Augustinian Contemplative nuns in Lecceto (Tuscany). One of the nuns there celebrated her 100th birthday back in September. When I arrived in December, Sr. Gemma was feeling quite weak and so was confined to her bed most of the day. The superior, Sr. Carmela, invited me to go up and visit with Sr. Gemma for a brief period. When I entered her room, Sr. Gemma was in bed but was very alert and grateful for a visit. I asked her if she needed anything, and her response is one that I will never forget. She said, “Paradiso Padre, solo Paradiso”... “Paradise, Father, only Paradise.”

Sr. Gemma was certainly aware that her mission here on earth was coming to a closure, and she was aware of the goal of her mission. It was clear to her that the ultimate goal of her mission was heaven, paradiso! What a great lesson she taught me. As we reflect on our mission, we should always be aware of the goal that drives us in our mission. What the purpose of our mission is.

The document, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, composed by the International Theological Commission reminds us that:

Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission. *Ecclesia peregrinans natura sua missionaria est*; she exists in order to evangelize. **The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel.** Every baptized person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelization. (par. 53)

We can immediately see that it is the WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD, who are called to proclaim the Gospel. How can we do that. Peter Fourier had a clear mission in his life and was known for his humility (like so many saints.. there must be something good about humility that leads to Sainthood. Humility is the way to reach God. In Augustine's prologue of the *Tractates* on the First Epistle of John he wrote, "where humility is, there is love."¹ Humility is what will strengthen us to perform the ministry we was called to do. Humility commands us to reach out in love to our neighbor, especially to the poor and to those who are in need. The gospel underlines the importance in the life of every Christian to imitate the humility of Jesus Christ. It is in Christ that one receives the greatest lesson in humility and the way of humility comes through no other source. Augustine impresses on the congregation the importance of the cross in this imitation when he declares, "He [Jesus] is exalted indeed. Are you looking for a ladder? Look for the wood of humility, and you will attain your goal."²

Peter Fourier was dedicated to evangelization through catechesis and assisted Alix Le Clerc in determining her life's mission of education. Humility includes the recognition of knowing who we are so that we can be in right relationship with our sisters and brothers.

In a practical way, we understand that Canon Law helps to guide us and govern how we operate as an organization. It helps to organize our mission to evangelize as a universal Church. There are times I can get lost in the tangled web when so many laws are put upon us. I am comforted though, that at the very end of Canon Law, the last canon, number 1752, reminds us of what is most important. It is not the small but necessary details that make up all the previous laws that becomes most important. Canon 1752, the last of all the Canon Laws states: *the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes.* The salvation of souls. Let's keep that in mind as we explore our mission. Is it for the salvation of souls that we continue to lead and guide the members of our communities. Is it for the salvation of souls that Augustine, Leo XIII, Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc dedicated their lives.

¹ *ep. Io. tr. Prologus*, (SC 75:106). "ubi humilitas, ibi caritas."

² *s. 70A, 2 (= Mai 127, 2; MA 1:369)*. "Excelsus certe. Quomodo ad eum pervenias, scalas quaeris? Humilitatis lignum quaere, et pervenisti."

A key aspect of Augustine's ministry came from his reading of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, "*For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.*" (1 Cor 10:33) His ministry was one that found its meaning in this Pauline phrase that would inform him and shape the mission he had in life.

Why do we participate as the Body of Christ in our pilgrim journey of walking together? Why do we live our Christian lives. In the middle of Letter 21 which Augustine wrote to the Bishop Valerius who ordained him, Augustine answers a hypothetical question which he imagines the bishop posing, Augustine asks the following in the Letter:

*But how am I to exercise this ministry for the salvation of others, **not seeking what is beneficial for me, but for many, that they may be saved?** (1Cor 10:33) (ep. 21)*

When he inserts 1Corinthians 10:33 into the text of his letter, he is revealing a keystone of his spirituality. Augustine's understanding of the *why* of his participation as a member of the Body of Christ is that it must be for nothing less than the salvation of the people in his care. This is the point which he found most challenging. The sense he has of being held accountable for the salvation of the other person is a duty which he does not take lightly. I believe that this is the reason he describes his ministry with expressions such as one being filled with perils or as a dangerous task. (See: *ep. 21*)

The scriptural passage leading up to 1Corinthians 10:33 is, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." In *Letter 21*, Augustine sees that he is able to give God glory, when he offers his ministry for the salvation of the other. Thus, the glory of God is made manifest, not by seeking what benefits the self, but of the many so that they may be saved. In doing this, one immediately recognizes the critical place which the virtue of humility has in this self-surrendering process. It is humility which allows Augustine to recognize the others in his life, which then compels him to be mindful of working for the other's salvation in the ministry he is about to perform. How is the path of humility present in our own lives as we walk along the synodal path together?

Humility, so deeply rooted within Augustine, informs his thoughts, guides the choices he makes in life, and animates him into action. As a humble servant of God, he recognizes the responsibility that he has not only as a minister, but also as a Christian, and he shares this responsibility with all who are Christian.

Possidius tells us that Augustine was "always solicitous and most vigilant for the good of the universal Church."³ Whether in front of his congregation in Hippo or speaking before the synod of bishops of North Africa at a council in Hippo, Augustine was aware of this call to be available for the service to others. The works he performed and the way he encouraged others to live their lives, were in response to the call of service.

Here is another example from Augustine's preaching which he so openly shared with his congregation. It is, in a sense, his mission statement.

What do I desire? What am I longing for? Why am I speaking? Why am I sitting here? What do I love for, if not with this intention that we should all live together

³ *vita Aug XVIII, 6*

with Christ? That is my desire; that is my honor; that is my most treasured possession, that's my joy, that's my pride and glory...I do not want to be saved without you. (s. 17.2)

Augustine performs his service imitating the good shepherd so that those for whom he finds himself responsible are brought to salvation. The self-sacrificing love which the good shepherd brings to his flock is the same selfless behavior that Augustine envisions he and all of us as baptized members of the Body of Christ and as co-ministers in the harvest of the Lord need to bring to our communities, congregations and institutes of education as we walk together on the synodal journey.

And so we would do well in our mission to have a foundation in a humble, self-sacrificing love for God and for neighbor. It must not be self-seeking but should always be for the benefit of giving glory to God. St Irenaeus tells us that the Glory of God is the Human being fully alive. That fullness comes when one recognizes in humility that any praise that is given must be directed to God. Augustine gives emphasis to this in his first Exposition on Psalm 113. He comments on the beautiful line from the Psalm.... *Non nobis domine, non nobis sed nomini tuo da gloriam....Not to us Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory.*

The most basic answer to why we participate in the Body of Christ, as the Body of Christ has its foundation in the primacy of love. Love is why the psalmists can compose a song of praise. It is the answer to why Augustine did everything in his ministry as bishop. Love is what the Bishop wanted to teach as the motivation behind his instructions to God's faithful. It is what motivates us to be followers of Jesus Christ. It is what inspired Peter Fourier to reform and eventually to found, along with Alix le Clerc, a new form of religious life dedicated to education. It is the foundation of what we have been exploring regarding synodality. Without the presence of love in all that we have explored there is nothing on which to base our identification of the Church being the body of Christ on earth. That body, the *Christus totus*, authentically responds to the vocation that we have received only if it is animated by love.

In one of the oft-quoted sections of Augustine's *Tractate* on the First Letter of St. John, we hear the Bishop imploring parents and all member of the community to respond to their call to action with love as *the* motivating condition behind every choice. It is what unites the members into one, the *Christus totus*, and animates its every move.

Once for all, therefore, a short precept is presented to you: Love and do what you will. If you should be silent, be silent out of love; if you should cry out, cry out out of love. If you should correct, correct out of love; if you should spare, spare out of love. Let the root of love be within; from this root only good can emerge. (ep. Io. tr. 7.8)

Pope Benedict XVI, in 2007, published his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. In it he highlights an important aspect of who we are as the Body of Christ and how our mission is connected to the Eucharist we celebrate:

The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God's love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church's life, but also of her mission: "an

authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church." (234) We too must be able to tell our brothers and sisters with conviction: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us" (1 Jn 1:3). Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ and to make him known to others... We cannot approach the eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people. Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the eucharistic form of the Christian life. (par. 84)

The mission of the church, our mission, has a direct connection to what we celebrate at the altar. The love that unites us at the Eucharist is the same love that compels us to evangelize in our communities, in our local churches and in communities and churches throughout the world. Our mission has its foundation in the commandment we receive to love God and to love one another.

The twofold command to love God and neighbor as an imperative that cannot be ignored. It is the command in which all God's faithful are called to live as members of the whole body of Christ, the *Christus totus*. We, however, are not left without the example of how to achieve this command. The example comes from the Head which enables the Members to achieve what has been commanded.

Our response to what we see in our Head, however, is not merely example, but is also realized as sacrament. We have taken note of the importance of the sacrament at the altar in the Eucharistic celebrations we have as the people of God. Augustine employs the word *sacramentum* to signify many things beyond the traditional liturgical sacraments. I want to offer for our reflection that the love which all God's people are called to render as part of our mission can also enjoy the title *sacramentum* in an Augustinian sense. When a person, in imitation of Christ, offers his or her life as a true sacrifice in service for the salvation of others, the account rendered is a *sacrum signum...a sacred sign*. (*ciu. X, 5*)

The example which Christ provides is not merely an external factor but becomes an internal reality. We, all of us, as members of the body of Christ, who authentically respond to the double commandment to love God and neighbor, respond in a sacramental way. That response, in fact, is the *sacramentum caritatis* in which Augustinian spirituality has its foundation.

Let us take a moment and listen to a passage from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians where he reflects on the universal mission of the church. In Chapter 3 of the Letter, he confesses:

To me, the very least of all the holy ones, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ, and to bring to light [for all] what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things.

Then, in addressing the Ephesians he prays that:

*Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, whose roots are grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the **breadth and length and height and depth**, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3: 18-19)*

For Augustine, the physical dimensions of Christ's cross signify the breadth, height, length, and depth of the love that Christ has for his people, the members of his body.

*Listen to the apostle saying to you, But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us too make it our boast, if only because we lean totally upon it. Let us all boast of it, good brothers and sisters, let us make it our boast. Perhaps it is there that we shall find both width, and length, and height, and depth. These words of the apostle, you see, somehow set up the cross before our very eyes. I mean, it has width, where the hands are fixed; it has length, where the post goes down from there to the ground; it also has height, which goes up a little from the crossbar on which the hands are fixed, where the head of the crucified is laid; and it also has depth, that is the part that is fixed in the ground and which cannot be seen. Notice what a great significant mystery (**magnum sacramentum**) it is, from that depth which you cannot see, rises everything that you can see. (s. 165.3)*

In Letter 55 Augustine reaffirms his understanding of the depth of the cross when he writes: “*But the depth of the cross, which is inserted into the earth, symbolizes the secret of the mystery.*” (ep.55,25) This secret of the mystery we can call Grace.

The dimensions of the breadth, height and length of the cross are outward signs and examples which Christ offers to the faithful for imitation as he rightly distinguishes them from the depth of the cross, that is the part of the cross that is hidden beneath the ground, but without which the cross cannot stand. That depth is the part that Augustine, and we can call the *sacramentum*, it is the place from which grace comes to us gratuitously according to God's secret plan. The faithful person's imitation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross through good works (breadth), patient endurance in times of suffering (length), and hopeful perseverance (height) are the external manifestations of the mystery of the sacramental salvific act of Christ.

We see that Jesus Christ is not simply the example, par excellence, of how to fulfill this desire but rather is the only way to fulfill it. He is the unique mediator between God the Father and us. Christ, himself, is the *Sacramentum Caritatis* given to the world so that the sacred mystery of his life, death and resurrection become the only possibility for the ultimate desire of God's faithful people to be realized. Our reflection touches upon one aspect of that *sacramentum caritatis* in the way it relates to our mission as the members of Christ's body.

Augustine exerted much energy informing his congregations of their mutual sharing in the need to do charitable works, to make the love which drives our desire and responds to our duty. The account which one of us must render at the end of our life will include all the efforts of making love real through the good works one performs in response to the Gospel message. Let us look at the following example: *So then, love God's law, and don't let all this be a scandal for you. I beg you, I beseech you, I exhort you all to be meek, to show compassion to those who are suffering, to take care of the weak; and at this time of many refugees from abroad, to be generous in your hospitality, generous in your good works. Let Christians do what Christ commands. (s. 81.9)*

We share in common our vocation as Christians. Our vocation to do as Christ commands. The common sharing of our vocation is at the very heart of Augustine's *Rule*. Using the passage from Acts 4, which we previously noted, he writes at the beginning of his *Rule*, “*The chief motivation for your sharing life together is to live harmoniously in the house and to*

have one heart and one soul seeking God.” (reg. I, 1) God is not only the common goal and treasure of living together, but is also the condition for the possibility of living together. Love unites the members of the community in God. This love reaches out not only to one’s relationship with God, but also with one another in community and also to our brothers and sisters outside of our community. It is what inspires the love of God and neighbor to become a reality in one’s life. God, made real in love, is not only the motivation but also the motivator. When love in God is accomplished, it makes real the ideal which many of our founding fathers and mothers, as disciples of Christ, set out to establish.

In his *Exposition* on Psalm 132, Augustine goes into greater detail of just how precious this ideal is for him. He quotes, “*See how good and pleasant it is where brothers (and sisters) dwell as one*” (Psalm 132:1), and finds scriptural support for not only his monastic ideal but also encourages this ideal as a goal for which all people should strive. He recognizes in this Psalm the beginning, the seeds for the common life that were planted in the people of Israel, but goes on to say that, “They were the first but not the only ones, for this love and unity did not reach them only to end there. The intense joy of charity came upon their descendants too.” (en. Ps. 132.2) This is why Augustine can declare with such delight, the beauty and sweetness he finds in this Psalm. This is what sparked the flame of that initial desire to live together in God and which fanned that flame in Augustine’s life and which continues to give life to that fire of love today.

Sharing the treasure of God within the common life is the love which compels its members to live in unity. For Christians, it is the sharing of Jesus Christ, his life, passion, death and resurrection, which makes that love a reality. As much as one participates in Jesus Christ, that one has no need of the material goods the world offers. Once again, Augustine makes this point clear in *The Work of Monks* when he writes that a member of his monastery is one who is “*no longer seeking what things are of his own but rather those of Jesus Christ, he has devoted himself to the charity of common life, intending to live in companionship with those who have one heart and one soul in God, so that no one calls anything his own but all things are held in common.*” (*De opera monachorum*, XXV, 32)

When one recognizes God as a common estate in the monastery, or in any community, then one is able to recognize more clearly the place of love, humility and self-sacrifice within that community. It is an altruistic love reaching out to the other. It is a love of God made real in the love of neighbor. It is in the love of neighbor where all that is good, sweet and beautiful that comes from living together, becomes actualized. By sharing God, one shares in the responsibility of being accountable for being stewards of that common estate. As part of the final account and judgment that one will receive, one cannot ignore how the sharing of God factors into the equation.

When the community of believers recognizes that its greatest treasure is the common sharing of God, “*whose temples they have become*” (reg. I, 8) then the realization of Augustine’s ideal happens within history. Community life is not seen as an abstract social organization, but rather in the concrete as the love of a person who is our neighbor. The greatest treasure, God, is best revealed when shared in mutual love among the living members of the community and when this is realized and actualized in one’s life, all the other common treasures find their proper places in comparison.

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, challenges us with these words:

“You too need to see the entirety of your life as a mission. Try to do so by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that he gives you. Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make, so as to discern its place in the mission you have received. Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today’s world.” (23)

To conclude, I would like to share these words from the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. It is a work that was mostly composed by Pope Benedict, but then published in 2013 by Pope Francis soon into his ministry as pope.

“My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.” (273)

Thank you again, for this opportunity to be with you today and I hope that this reflection can assist us all as we continue on our path of synodality discovering, and rediscovering, our mission as individuals, as members of religious communities, and as the people of God.

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