

Saint Augustine and His Pastoral Ministry

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Abstract: The article provides an insight into the pastoral experience of one of the famous and highly respected Fathers of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). From a worldly and highly ambitious young man who showed no interest in becoming a Catholic (and more so an ordained minister of the Catholic Church), we see how God, at a certain point, touched his life and converted him. Shortly before and immediately after his baptism in 387, Saint Augustine started founding communities to satisfy his monastic inclinations. Thus, he founded a community in Cassiciacum near Milan in Italy (386) and later on, upon his return to Africa, a community in Thagaste (388) and two more in Hippo (391, 395). He was ordained priest in 391 and was consecrated bishop four years later (in 395). He spent the last four decades of his life actively working as a minister of the Catholic Church, preaching, teaching, engaging himself in polemic with heretics and schismatics of his time, administering the sacraments, assisting the needy, sitting at ecclesiastical tribunal, and so forth. His pastoral experience has much to teach us today, both as church leaders and as lay believers.

Keywords: Saint Augustine, pastoral ministry, contemplative life (otium), active life (negotium), monasticism, theology

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Introduction

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) declared 2017 as the "Year of the Parish as Communion of Communities." In the 2012 pastoral letter "Live Christ, Share Christ" it is pointed out that the focus of the celebration would be on the building up of the parish as an authentic community of faith immersed in the life of its people.

The building up of a parish depends so much on the commitment and active participation in the life of the Church both of the lay faithful and of the pastors. The present article focuses on the latter – that is, on the role of the Church leaders in bringing about the desired edification of the local church and its members. To do this, the figure of one of the most prominent Fathers of the Church will be presented – Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) – and his pastoral life.

One of the usual images that we have of Saint Augustine is that of being a great pastor. By "pastor" we mean an ordained minister and a leader of the Catholic Church. Indeed, he was truly a great pastor of the Church from the time he was ordained priest (probably in the year 391) until the time of his demise in the year 430. His commitment to his vocation is beyond doubt. He faithfully carried out all the duties and responsibilities expected of a priest during the last four decades of his life. His pastoral life became more intense after his episcopal consecration which took place in the year 395, and this is well documented both in his writings and in the accounts of those who had the privilege of knowing him personally.

Notwithstanding his very active pastoral life, it might come as a surprise to some of us that Saint Augustine initially had no plans of becoming an ordained minister of the Church. Shortly before and immediately after his conversion, which happened in the year 386 (and we are talking here about what many Augustinologists would consider as the second stage of his conversion), he himself informs us in his autobiography¹ that he simply wanted to live a quiet and rather private life, away from the crowd, surrounded by intimate friends and a few family members, and to dedicate himself to what he terms as "*otium*"² – a technical Latin word which means a life of leisure devoted primarily to study of the arts (especially of philosophy and literature) and erudite conversations.³

¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 6.14.24.

² In some of Augustine's writings we also find corresponding expressions like "*liberale otium*" – leisure time dedicated to the study of the liberal arts (cf. *Soliloquies* 1.9.16; *On Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil* 1.2), "*otium philosophandi*" – leisure time dedicated to philosophizing (cf. *Against the Academics* 2.2), and "*christianae vitae otium*" – the leisure afforded by Christian life (cf. *Retractions* 1.1).

³ Maria Boulding, OSB. *The Confessions*. [The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century 1/1 (ed. John Rotelle)], New York: New City Press 1997, p. 155, note 76. Cf. Dennis

What made Saint Augustine abandon his initial plan of withdrawing from the world, from the so-called “*negotia publica*,”⁴ in order to dedicate himself to philosophical reflection, literary endeavor, scriptural study, prayer, and meditation? What were the repercussions of his decision to accept pastoral work in the Church? What can we learn from Saint Augustine as far as pastoral ministry is concerned? These are the main questions that we will discuss in our presentation. To answer these we would have to go through his writings and examine his life, albeit briefly, from childhood to adulthood.

The Conversion of Saint Augustine

While Saint Augustine was born to and raised by a very devout Catholic mother, Monica, he did not manifest any interest in becoming a Catholic during his childhood days. Africa, the land that had been a witness to many Christian martyrs during the early centuries, did not seem to have a strong influence on him either (in the sense of attracting him to become a Christian himself). Think, for example, of the famous martyrs of Scillium (the “Scillitan martyrs”) and of Madaura⁵ of the late second century, or more recently, of the bishop martyr Cyprian of Carthage (beheaded in ca. 258). Saint Augustine’s lack of interest in becoming a Christian, however, is understandable. For one, he had a pagan father, Patricius. And while Christianity at that time was gaining ground and paganism was losing it,⁶ the latter still had a considerable influence in African soil. We are in the context of the Roman Empire, after all, with all its long history of pagan beliefs, secular traditions, worldly values, and so forth. In other words, why would he want to become a Christian, with all its high moral demands, when remaining a pagan or adhering to a pagan religion could give him the freedom he needed to satisfy his desires? It is also possible that Saint Augustine, like most of his contemporaries, simply wanted to enjoy and live life as he pleased and to satisfy his worldly ambitions.

The adolescent years of Saint Augustine were not very different from his early childhood years. We continue to see him as very ambitious and mundane. But his contact with a Manichean benefactor, Romanianus,⁷ and later on with his coreligionists in Carthage gradually led him to take interest in religious

Trout, “Otium” in *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald), Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1999, pp. 618-619; Augustine, *On the Gospel of John*, tr. 57.3 and 57.6.

⁴ Cicero, *On Obligations* 3.1; and *Brutus* 7-9.

⁵ Augustine, *Letter* 17.

⁶ John O’Meara, *Young Augustine. The Growth of St. Augustine’s Mind up to his Conversion*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd. 1965, p. 29.

⁷ Augustine, *Against the Academics* 2.2.3-5.

and philosophical questions. His probable association with the Manicheans in Carthage would be strengthened by his personal search for wisdom especially after reading Cicero's "*Hortensius*" and initial disappointment with the Bible.⁸ However, Manichaeism was a totally different type of religion even if its members spoke about Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁹ Besides, Saint Augustine had other things in mind and his association with the Manichees was dictated by some vested interests. He needed them because they supported him materially while he was studying in Carthage.

The turning point of Saint Augustine's conversion took place when he was already in his early 30s. The famous "*tolle, lege*" ("pick [and] read") episode vividly recorded in his autobiography¹⁰ was the result of various experiences (such as his disappointment with Manichaeism, his encounter with some skeptic philosophers in Rome, his reading of Platonist writings, his admiration for bishop Ambrose, his familiarity with conversion stories like that of Marius Victorinus and of the court officials of Trier, his exposure to early forms of monasticism, and so forth). Such experiences further renewed his interest in the Sacred Scripture which, after an initial disappointment with it during his college days in Carthage leading him to put it aside for a while,¹¹ now provided him with inspiration and a new outlook in life. It was a decisive moment in his drawing closer to the Catholic faith. In fact, immediately after spending some time at Cassiciacum, in the company of close family members and intimate friends, he enlisted himself as a catechumen and during the Easter Vigil of 387, he received the sacrament of baptism in the Catholic Church.

Saint Augustine's Pastoral Life

One of the very first things Saint Augustine did after his baptism in Milan in the year 387 and after his return to Africa in the following year (388) was the conversion of his paternal house into a quasi-monastic community, where he stayed for about three years – that is, from 388 to 391. Possidius, his first biographer, picks up the story from where the *Confessions* end. He tells us how Saint Augustine left Thagaste to see one of the imperial agents (*agentes in rebus*) residing in Hippo Regius

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.10. While this passage in his autobiography suggests that he was not associated with the Manicheans prior to his reading of Cicero's work, we know that it was a Manichean who made it possible for Augustine to study in Carthage in the first place. His mother, Monica, must have provided him with some financial help while he was studying in Carthage after his father's death (cf. *Confessions* 3.4.7), but it would not have sufficed to send him through school if Romanianus' Manichean connections in Carthage did not assist him.

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.10.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29-30.

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 3.5.9.

at that time¹² and, beyond his expectations, was ordained priest by Valerius, the bishop of the place.¹³

Tears at his Ordination

Right from the very beginning, Saint Augustine was aware of the grave responsibilities that being an ordained minister of the Church entailed. For Possidius, this was the reason why he shed copious tears at the time of his priestly ordination, contrary to what other people thought. Thus he writes: “the man of God, as he told us, was applying a higher standard and was grieving at the many great dangers which the government and administration of the Church would bring upon him; that was the reason for his tears.”¹⁴ Others suggest that another reason behind such tears was the awareness that he was losing his “Tabor” – that is, contemplative life (*otium*) – the moment he accepted priesthood,¹⁵ or perhaps he was overcome by a sense of guilt for having once thought ill of clergymen and their congregations.¹⁶ And now he finds himself joining their rank! Possidius’ interpretation, however, was confirmed by Saint Augustine himself in one of his letters.¹⁷

Initial Reluctance

Saint Augustine started his pastoral ministry with a dose of reluctance due, in part, to his limited familiarity with the Sacred Scripture,¹⁸ which he was expected to expound on and preach, and to the minority status of Catholics in Africa at that time, whom he was expected to serve and defend as a Catholic priest in the face of the far more numerous Donatists in the diocese. As far as biblical exegesis was concerned, he considered himself as a neophyte in the face of more veteran Donatist theologians. We may mention, in this regard, the case of the Donatist lay theologian Tyconius whom many authors hail as “the most impressive theologian the African church produced before Augustine.”¹⁹ In fact, even in his mature years as a Biblical exegete of high caliber, Saint Augustine would continue to manifest certain dependence on Tyconius’ famous “rules of interpretation” (cf. *On Christian Doctrine* started in

¹² Augustine, *Sermon* 355.2.

¹³ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 4.1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.2.

¹⁵ Luc Verheijen, “Why Augustine wept when he was made a priest” in *Searching for God. The Contemplative Dimension of the Augustinian Experience* (International Course on Augustinian Spirituality, Rome, 1-19 July 1979), Rome: Augustinian Publications 1981, p. 156.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Letter* 21.2; cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1967, p. 139; Luc Verheijen, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Letter* 21.2.

¹⁸ James O’Donnell, *Augustine. A New Biography*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2005, p. 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

396, but completed in 426/427), either by adopting his hermeneutical principles in interpreting the Bible or by correcting what seemed to him as flaws in the latter's ecclesiology.²⁰ At any rate, acknowledging his limited familiarity with the sacred text, Saint Augustine, after his ordination, immediately requested bishop Valerius to give him some time off to dedicate himself to a deeper study of the Bible before preaching in public,²¹ and it was granted. Hence, the newly ordained priest did not carry out his duty to preach God's word until the beginning of Lent of the year 391. This marked the start of his nearly forty years of active pastoral work.²²

Introduction of a New Praxis

Bishop Valerius of Hippo certainly played a crucial role in Saint Augustine's pastoral training. His decision to address the assembly on that day Saint Augustine was ordained priest was not only prompted by his personal desire to have an assistant, given his insufficiency in preaching due to his lack of mastery of the Latin language and ignorance of the Punic tongue.²³ He also knew that a more serious situation in his diocese needed a young priest capable of coping with it.²⁴ There was, indeed, a strong need at that time for "a man capable of building the Lord's Church by preaching the word of God and salutary doctrine,"²⁵ as Possidius puts it. Hence, after ordaining him and giving him enough time to study the Scripture, Valerius immediately commissioned Saint Augustine to preach in the church, even in his presence. This was then a new practice in the Western church since priests were not supposed to preach in the presence of a bishop.²⁶ But Valerius certainly had full trust in his new priest, and this set a good precedent to other churches in Africa, such that, "following the good example given, some other priests began with episcopal permission, to preach to the people in the presence of their bishops."²⁷

Art of Preaching

Preaching is a fundamental aspect of a pastor's life, according to Saint Augustine. In fact, he sees a priest essentially as "a man who administers the word of

²⁰ Robert Kugler, "Tyconius' Mystic Rules and the Rules of Augustine" in *Augustine and the Bible* (ed. Pamela Bright), Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1986, p. 143.

²¹ Augustine, *Letter* 21.6.

²² Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo. Life and Controversies*, Norwich: The Canterbury Press 1986, p. 114.

²³ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 5.2.

²⁴ Christopher Kirwan, "A Priestly Life" in *Augustine*, London/New York: Routledge 1991, p. 5.

²⁵ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 5.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.3-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.5; cf. Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

God and the sacrament (*dispenser verbi et sacramenti*) to people.”²⁸ The situation in Africa, specifically in Hippo, at that time demanded the presence of a good preacher and a minister who possessed a profound knowledge of the Sacred Scripture. Taking cue from Cicero,²⁹ Saint Augustine stated that while preaching has three fundamental functions – namely, pleasing or entertaining (*delectare*), moving or persuading (*flectere*), and teaching or instructing (*docere*), the last one remains as its primary purpose.³⁰ Hence, a pastor is called to teach the people in divine knowledge and mysteries in order to build them up and transform their lives. To do this, he must first learn how to listen to God’s word; otherwise he will be preaching to others in vain.³¹

Polemic with Heretics and Schismatics

Saint Augustine was trained not only in the art of preaching. He was also trained in the art of dealing with the heretics and the schismatics of the time, specifically with the Manichees, the Donatists and the Pelagians, and also with pagans. He would willingly engage in debates with them whenever there was an occasion for it. Sometimes the people themselves would come to him to ask him to meet with heretics and schismatics, and Possidius says, “Augustine was ready, as the scripture says, to give answer to all who asked the reason for his faith and hope in God, and quite able to encourage people in sound doctrine and refute its opponents.”³²

Bishops’ involvement and engagement with heretics and schismatics during Saint Augustine’s days were not limited to debates, refutation by writing, exchange of letters, public preaching, and so forth. They also invoked whatever legal mechanism was available to have the dissidents punished according to the existing anti-heretical laws at that time. The Bishop of Hippo, like the other Catholic bishops, also seized occasions to appeal to the imperial court somewhat to put the heretics and the schismatics under control and to have anti-heretical laws implemented.³³ However, even in this case, Saint Augustine was against any harsh application of such laws and he campaigned for a more mitigated legal enforcement.³⁴

²⁸ Augustine, *Letter* 21.3; cf. 228.2; 259.2; 261.2; *To Cresconium* 2.11.13; *Against the Letters of Petilian* 3.55.67; and *Confessions* 11.2.2.

²⁹ Cicero, *On the Orator* 21.69.

³⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 4.12.27.

³¹ Augustine, *Sermon* 179.1.

³² Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 6.3.

³³ Cf. Augustine, *Against the Letter of Parmenian* 1.12.19 concerning a woman who, upon her death, left a bequest to the Donatist church. Her family appealed to the emperor to have such bequest invalidated on the ground of a 381 anti-heretical law.

³⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Letter* 133.2 for an example of the Bishop of Hippo’s innate kindness and mercifulness in dealing with sinners. Also see Maureen Tilley, “Family and Financial Conflict in the Donatist Controversy: Augustine’s Pastoral Problem”, *Augustinian Studies*, vol. 43/1-2 (2012), pp. 60-62.

Episcopal Consecration

While a big part of Saint Augustine's life as a pastor was spent on preaching and engaging in polemic with the opponents of the Catholic Church, he also did not neglect the other duties of his ministry (like the administration of the sacraments, assistance to the poor members of the diocese, and catechesis).³⁵

We would like to highlight Saint Augustine's relationship with the poor, at this point, for this is something that resonates quite easily with people today, who expect the Church and its leaders to show a particular concern for the needy. Possidius provides us a glimpse into the Bishop of Hippo's concern for the poor and how he tried to help them in any way possible, even up to the point of ordering the sacred vessels to be broken and melted down just to have something to give them.³⁶ He distributed to the poor from the same source on which the Church depended – namely, from the income derived from Church properties and the offerings of people.³⁷ He would also admonish the faithful never to neglect the donation box for the poor (*gazophylacium*) and the collection for the sacristy (*secretarium*).

For his part, Saint Augustine tried to live a very simple lifestyle in solidarity with the poor, we may say today. He never wore a signet ring; he never bought any house, field or villa; he was detached from the possessions of the Church and other temporal things in order to focus more on spiritual things and to free his soul from unnecessary anxieties; he was willing to renounce the properties of the Church and he preferred to live on people's offerings; his clothing, shoes, and bedding were simple; his meals were frugal and economical; etc.³⁸

Saint Augustine's pastoral life became even more intense after his episcopal consecration.³⁹ Again it was Valerius' move that led to his consecration as bishop, initially as a coadjutor (395-396) and later on as the sole bishop of Hippo (from 396 onwards). It was Megalius of Calama, who at that time was also the Primate of Numidia, who consecrated him in the year 395 – barely four years after his priestly ordination.⁴⁰ And it was a brave move on the part of Valerius to have Saint Augustine consecrated as bishop in apparent defiance of the existing prohibition to have

³⁵ Joseph Bernardin, "St. Augustine as Pastor" in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (ed. Roy Battenhouse), New York: Oxford University Press 1969, pp. 60ff.; and Maureen Tilley, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³⁶ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 24.14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.1-2; 23.1; 24.1-2; 24.10; 24.13.

³⁹ Joseph Lienhard, "Ministry" in *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald), Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1999, p. 569.

⁴⁰ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 8.1-4.

someone ordained bishop of a diocese when its bishop is still alive (cf. canon 8 of the Council of Nicaea).⁴¹ Possidius claims that Saint Augustine came to know about this prohibition only after his episcopal consecration,⁴² while some modern scholars say that “Augustine reads too much into the canon when he interprets it as forbidding the appointment of coadjutor bishops.”⁴³

The now bishop of Hippo continued the same work he did as a priest. However, his literary production became more intense, composing abundant books, letters, homilies, biblical commentaries, and so forth. Many of the writings which he started when he was still a priest were finished only when he was already a bishop.

Duties of a Bishop

The episcopal office demanded more than what the priestly ministry demanded of him. First, it meant more active participation in synods and councils.⁴⁴ Second, it meant attending to issues concerning ordinations and disciplining ordained ministers. Third, it meant dealing with civil authorities (although, as much as possible, Saint Augustine would refuse to intervene in civil affairs and petition to civil authorities).⁴⁵ Fourth, it meant being personally responsible for the administration of the Church's property (but, even in this case, Saint Augustine would prefer to delegate certain tasks to the more capable among the clergy).⁴⁶ Fifth, it meant more active involvement in the diocesan acts of charity, etc.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Philip Schaff – Henry Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. XIV, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1983, p. 20; and Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, p. 120. The context of canon 8 of the Council of Nicaea that led to the prohibition to have more than one bishop in a diocese was quite different from the pastoral situation in North Africa when Augustine was appointed bishop of Hippo. It dealt with the readmission of the so-called “*lapsi*” into the Catholic Church (some of whom were already bishops prior to their defection). However, the prohibition remained albeit not always observed by local bishops.

The phenomenon of the “*lapsi*” – the “fallen ones” – was quite common in North Africa in the aftermath of the Diocletian persecutions, which took place in the years 303-305. Those who fell away from their faith during the persecutions were requesting to be readmitted into the Church. Some refused to allow them, taking on a very rigid stand against it. Some scholars trace the origin of Donatism to such historical context. See Peter Brown, “Religious Dissent on the Later Roman Empire: The Case of North Africa”, *History* 46 (1961), pp. 83-101.

⁴² Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 8.5.

⁴³ Matthew O’Connell (trans.), *Possidius. The Life of Saint Augustine* (ed. John Rotelle), Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press 1988, p. 54, note 6.

⁴⁴ Agostino Trapè, *Saint Augustine. Man, Pastor, Mystic*, New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co. 1986, p. 253.

⁴⁵ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 20.1-2; cf. Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.1; cf. Joseph Bernardin, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁷ Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-127; and Gareth Matthews, *Augustine*, Malden, MA/Oxford, UK/Carlton, VIC, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 2005, p. 13.

Perhaps one function of bishops at that time that constituted a real burden on Saint Augustine's shoulders was that of sitting as judge in the "*audientia episcopalis*" – the episcopal court or ecclesiastical tribunal.⁴⁸ Emperor Constantine and other emperors after him acknowledged the jurisdiction of such court not only over members of the Catholic dioceses, but also over all those who would prefer to make recourse to it, both in religious and civil matters.⁴⁹ And a throng of people preferred to refer their cases to the episcopal court due to its "speedy and simplified procedures to the often prolonged and expensive formalities of the civil courts."⁵⁰ The work was so onerous that it entailed a great deal of sacrifice on the part of Saint Augustine. Possidius informs us: "Sometimes he heard cases right up to the dinner hour, sometimes he fasted the entire day, but he always examined the facts and passed judgment with an eye on the movements of Christian souls, that is, considering how each party was advancing or falling off in faith and morals."⁵¹

In his study,⁵² Maureen Tilley points out how the controversy between the Catholics and the Donatists rendered Saint Augustine's work at the "*audientia episcopalis*" more complicated as cases presented to it involved not only disputes over land ownership, property quarrels, wills and bequests, financial matters, etc., but also family issues involving internal divisions caused by religious questions. Thus, families were split as their members were forced to choose between the Catholic Church and the Donatist Church and follow the differing observances of the two.⁵³ Of course, the question was not limited to the Catholic-Donatist controversy. It extended to other Christian churches or faiths as well (for example, between the Catholics and the Arians).⁵⁴

Tension between Contemplative Life and Active Life

While keeping himself busy with the pastoral duties and responsibilities of his diocese, Saint Augustine still tried to find time to satisfy the innermost longings of his heart – the desire for "*otium*" which we have mentioned at the outset of our paper.

⁴⁸ Joseph Bernardin, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-77; and Joseph Lienhard, *op. cit.*, p. 569.

⁴⁹ Matthew O'Connell, *op. cit.*, p. 86, note 2. It was Emperor Constantine who recognized the bishop's court as one to which Christians could make recourse both in secular and religious matters. See Maureen Tilley, "Family and Financial Conflict in the Donatist Controversy: Augustine's Pastoral Problem", *Augustinian Studies*. Vol. 43/1-2 (2012), p. 49. Cf. *Theodosian Code* 16.2.12; 16.2.23; 16.11.1 on the exclusive competence of ecclesiastical tribunal over religious cases.

⁵⁰ Gustave Bardy, *Saint Augustin. L'homme et l'oeuvre*, Paris: Bibliothèque augustinienne 1940 (3rd ed.), p. 179; and Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁵¹ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 19.3.

⁵² Maureen Tilley, *op. cit.*, pp. 50ff.

⁵³ For some concrete examples of this, see Tertullian, *To his Wife* 2.4-5.

⁵⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Letter* 170.10.

Foundation of a Monastery for Clerics

At the start of his priestly ministry, Saint Augustine lived for a while in the monastery which he founded in Hippo in the year 391. It is what some writers call as “the garden monastery” (since it was founded in the garden adjacent to the church).⁵⁵ He continued to live there with the “servants of God” (*servi Dei* – a technical term which Saint Augustine prefers to use when he speaks of the members of his monastery),⁵⁶ following the way of life and rule established by the Apostles themselves (as reflected in Acts 4:32-35; Acts 2:42.44-47).⁵⁷ Later on, however, after his episcopal consecration, he decided to found another monastery – this time primarily for clerics, a “*monasterium clericorum*” – because he realized that the continuous visits of people coming to see him for one reason or another was disturbing the peace and quiet of the monastery.⁵⁸ Thus he writes:

When I became bishop, I realized that a bishop should show continual hospitality to those who visited him or passed through his diocese; otherwise he would be labeled inhospitable. But if such a custom were introduced into the monastery (sc. garden monastery), problems would arise. Therefore, I decided to have a monastery of clerics right in the bishop’s residence.⁵⁹

Reconciling “otium” and “negotium”

Saint Augustine would have preferred to live a quiet and somewhat secluded lifestyle surrounded by intimate friends and family members. This was what he did at Cassiciacum shortly after his conversion (year 386). He tried to replicate the same experience in Thagaste upon his return to Africa (in 388). We can say that right from the very beginning of his Christian life, he had monastic aspirations. He was a monk at heart and he tried to reconcile his pastoral obligations as a priest with his inner desire for peace and quiet meditation on God’s word as much as possible, reconciling “*otium*” with “*negotium*.”⁶⁰ Of course, there were instances when Saint Augustine expressed the difficulty he had encountered in doing so. Reconciling active life and contemplative life, indeed, is not easy.⁶¹ For him, nothing is sweeter than “to study

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.1.

⁵⁶ See footnote 77 on the usage of “*servi Dei*” in Saint Augustine.

⁵⁷ Cf. Augustine, *Rule* 1.4; and *Commentary on Psalm* 133.2.

⁵⁸ Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *Sermon* 355.2.

⁶⁰ Balbino Rano, “The Search for God in the Tradition of the Augustinian Order: A Requisite of the Common Life and A Source of the Apostolate” in *Searching for God. The Contemplative Dimension of the Augustinian Experience* (International Course on Augustinian Spirituality, Rome, 1-19 July 1979), Rome: Augustinian Publications 1981, pp. 186-187. On how these two lifestyles are symbolized by Rachel and Leah: cf. Augustine, *Against Faustus* 22.56, and by Mary and Martha, cf. *Sermon* 130.

⁶¹ Augustine, *Letter* 261.1.

the divine treasure, far from the noise of the world.”⁶² But his pastoral engagement, more often than not, forced him to give up such a “holy leisure.”⁶³ Thus he writes to Saint Jerome in the year 404: “Whenever I attempt to study scripture more diligently than the instruction of the people who listen to me demands, my ecclesial duties prevent me.”⁶⁴ Elsewhere he says:

As far as my own comfort is concerned, I would much rather work with my hands at set hours every day, as in properly ordered monasteries, and have other times free for reading and praying or studying the Scriptures, instead of suffering the torments and perplexities caused by the questions of others. But we are servants of the Church and servants, above all, of its weakest members.⁶⁵

Urgency of Love

We may raise a question at this point: What made Saint Augustine abandon his initial plan of withdrawing from the world, from the so-called “*negotia publica*,” in order to dedicate himself to philosophical reflection, literary endeavor, scriptural study, prayer, and meditation? There can only be one answer to this: it is his love for Christ and His Church.⁶⁶ Saint Augustine realized that it was love for Christ that made him want to become a monk in the first place. The first disciples gathered together to form communities because they were inspired by the teachings and examples of Jesus, and Saint Augustine simply wanted to imitate them. Christ was calling him to serve His Mystical Body – the Church – as an ordained minister, and he could not say no to Him. Commenting on the Transfiguration account (cf. Mt 17:1-8), Saint Augustine seems to address his own words to himself rather to Saint Peter. We read:

Go down, Peter. You wanted to stay on the mountain, but instead go down! Preach the word ... toil, sweat, suffer torments The fulfillment of your desire is in store for you, Peter, but after death. For the moment he himself (sc. the Lord) says to you: “Go down to toil on earth, to serve on earth, to be despised and crucified on earth!” The Life came down that it might die; the Bread came down that it might hunger; the Way came down that it might grow weary on the journey; the Fountain came down that it might thirst. Do you, then, refuse to toil? Seek not your own interests. Have love, proclaim the truth. Then you will reach eternity and find freedom from care.⁶⁷

⁶² Augustine, *Sermon* 339.4.

⁶³ Augustine, *City of God* 19.19.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *Letter* 73.5.

⁶⁵ Augustine, *The Work of Monks* 29.37.

⁶⁶ Luc Verheijen, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *Sermon* 78.6.

Dangers of Ecclesiastical Office

This is not the proper place to talk about Augustinian ecclesiology and missiology, or to discuss the way Saint Augustine sees the relationship between Christ and the Church, on one hand, and between Christ and those who believe in him, on the other, and how they are called to participate in His mission. Suffice it to say that Saint Augustine's love for Christ translated itself concretely into his love for the Church and all her members. He understood that certain sacrifices had to be made in the fulfillment of one's pastoral obligations and that being a priest or a bishop is far from easy. It is not only difficult and toilsome, but also hazardous.⁶⁸ Ordained ministers remain as men constantly "surrounded by the traps of temptations."⁶⁹ In other words, the office of priesthood is full of danger.⁷⁰ For one thing, there is the danger of pride occasioned by flattery and public admiration for priestly office.⁷¹ In his famous work, *The City of God*, he warns all those who aspire for high positions in the Church with these words:

Anyone who aspires to the episcopate aspires to an honorable task It is, in fact, a Greek word, derived from the fact that a man who is put in authority over others "superintends" them, that is, he has responsibility for them Hence, a "bishop" who has set his heart on a position of eminence rather than on opportunity for service should realize that he is no bishop.⁷²

Episcopate for him was not so much an office of honor, but one of labor – a "sarcina" or "burden,"⁷³ "for when constrained to go one mile to help anyone, he felt himself bound to go two."⁷⁴

Aside from the danger of pride and the many "traps of temptations" he was exposed to as a pastor, Saint Augustine also knew that a heavy responsibility rested on his shoulders for, in the end, "I must give an account of the sheep committed unto me."⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Letter* 21.1.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Letter* 250.3.

⁷⁰ Adolar Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life* (trans. Edmund Colledge), New York: Fordham University Press 1986, p. 194.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Letter* 22.2.8, and *On the Epistle of John* 5.15; cf. Luc Verheijen, *op. cit.*, pp. 157, 159; and Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine. His Contextual & Pastoral Theology*, Louisville/Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 2005, p. 118.

⁷² Augustine, *City of God* 19.19.

⁷³ Joseph Lienhard, *op. cit.*, p. 569.

⁷⁴ Joseph Bernardin, *op. cit.*, 59. Cf. Augustine, *City of God* 19.19, and *Letter* 48.1.

⁷⁵ Augustine, *Letter* 23.6.

Responding to the Needs of the Church

Pastoral responsibilities during the early centuries invited even monks from the quiet “*otium*” of their study and contemplation to respond actively to the needs of the church.⁷⁶ Saint Augustine, in this case, points out that sacrificing per se one’s personal desire for “*otium*” for the service of the Church through pastoral work is not enough. The act should also be properly motivated. He says:

If Mother Church asks for your service, do not accept from an eager desire to go out of the monastery (*variant reading: “with an eager burst of pride”) nor refuse from the tempting desire to do nothing. Instead, obey God with a humble heart Do not prefer the quiet of contemplation to the needs of the Church, for if no one among the good were willing to help the Church in begetting new children, you yourselves would not have come to birth in her.⁷⁷

The fact that even monks during Saint Augustine’s time were sometimes called to involve themselves in the active life of the Church does not mean that they had to totally give up their monastic aspiration. Let us remember that monasticism is not an isolated reality. It is rather a part of the life of the Church – in fact, “a more honored member of the Mystical Body.”⁷⁸ It is the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that gives life to the monasteries.⁷⁹ It is her faith that gathers men into a society or “community in which brotherly love can operate.”⁸⁰ Being honored members of the Church, monks are called to a closer collaboration with Christ, and Saint Augustine clearly understood this. Adolar Zumkeller explains:

As Augustine’s conception of the Church matured toward the Pauline notion of the Mystical Body of Christ, so his ideals for monastic life became more deeply rooted in the idea of this Mystical Body. More and more he came to see monasticism as closely, organically related to the Church’s entirety With this, he became more convinced that it was the vocation of monasticism to share in the labor of making the Body of Christ perfect.⁸¹

This has led some authors to affirm that Saint Augustine’s ideal of “one soul and one heart intent upon God” (*anima una et cor unum in Deum*),⁸² as we read in his monastic Rule, “is not a monastic but an ecclesiastic and, therefore, supra-monastic

⁷⁶ Augustine, *Letter* 48.2; *Tractate* 57.3-6 on the Gospel of John; and *Against Faustus* 22.56.

⁷⁷ Augustine, *Letter* 48.2.

⁷⁸ Adolar Zumkeller, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁷⁹ Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm* 133.1.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed* 9.21.

⁸¹ Adolar Zumkeller, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁸² Augustine, *Rule* 1.3.

ideal. The monastic life is an excellent means to achieve what the Church means to be, viz. the body of Christ.”⁸³

Monastic Involvement in Pastoral Life

The very fact that Saint Augustine prefers to use the expression “*servi Dei*” (“servants of God”) instead of “*monaci*” (“monks”) when he talks about the members of the communities he founded is very indicative. It helps us understand how he looks at monastic life itself: it is a type of service to the Church.⁸⁴ Therefore, those who live in monasteries must always remain open to the possibility of serving the Mother Church even outside the confines of their cloisters in order to respond to her needs.

Saint Augustine’s intuition about the need for monks to be open to the Church’s pastoral life anticipated by some eight centuries what the Augustinian hermits or those who followed the Augustinian monastic *Rule* did upon the summon of Pope Innocent IV, with the bulls “*Incumbit nobis*” and “*Praesentium vobis*” in the year 1243 – that is, that they had to come together to form one Order and enter the urban center. It was a move from a purely contemplative lifestyle to a semi-contemplative and semi-active way of life. Some authors would later say that this shows how the apostolic dimension was an essential part of the Augustinian life. While the “soul” of the Order remains its “Augustinianness” – that is, the teachings and examples of Saint Augustine, the apostolate constitutes the “body” that encapsulates such “soul.”⁸⁵

Properly Motivated Pastoral Service

Needless to say, it is our love for Christ that should motivate us in our pastoral ministry. Better yet, it is our love for God that should motivate everything that we do as Christians. Saint Augustine somewhat echoes the exhortation of Saint Paul: “the love of Christ urges us on” (2Cor 5:14), while he speaks of Christ as the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6). He says:

It is the love of truth that looks for sanctified leisure (*otium sanctum*), while it is the compulsion of love (*necessitas caritatis*) that undertakes righteous engagement in affairs (*negotium iustum*). If this latter burden is not imposed on us, we should employ our freedom from business in the

⁸³ Laurens Van der Lof, “The Threefold Meaning of *Servi Dei* in the Writings of Saint Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies*, vol. 12 (1981): p. 56.

⁸⁴ While Saint Augustine initially took the expression “*servi Dei*” to refer to Christian believers in general, he later reserved it to refer to a select group from amongst Christians – that is, first, to ascetics, and later on, to monks: Van der Lof, *ibid.*, pp. 47, 49, 51, 56 and 58-59; cf. David Alexander, *Augustine’s Early Theology of the Church. Emergence and Implications* (386-391), New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2008, p. 234; and Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁸⁵ Balbino Rano, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

quest for truth and in its contemplation, while if it is laid upon us, it is to be undertaken because of the compulsion of love. Yet even in this case the delight in truth should not be utterly abandoned, for fear that we should lose this enjoyment and that compulsion should overwhelm us.⁸⁶

As to the monks' pastoral service to the Church out of love, Laurens Van der Lof explains: "the bond between the monks and the whole Body of Christ shows itself in their mutual support and assistance, which Augustine regards as a kind of exchange of love."⁸⁷

Some Pastoral Teachings from Saint Augustine

At this point we would like to highlight some insights that we can learn from Saint Augustine's pastoral experiences. We shall limit ourselves only to six points.

1. Pastoral work presupposes profound knowledge of and familiarity with God's word

Even before Saint Augustine was baptized into the Catholic Church, he already started reading the Sacred Scripture on his own,⁸⁸ perhaps under the influence of Bishop Ambrose.⁸⁹ He was particularly interested in the letters of Saint Paul, whose passage from Rom 13:13-14 had a very strong impact on his conversion in Milan.⁹⁰ Later on, it was the Bible that inspired him to form communities as a concrete expression of his ever deepening love for Christ. When he accepted to become an ordained minister of the Church, the sacred text continued to be his source of inspiration. He continued to read and meditate on it, preach it, and defend the Catholic doctrines using it. As a priest, it was the common battle ground for him and the opponents of the Church. It was this deep knowledge of and familiarity with God's word that made Saint Augustine a very effective Church leader and worker in God's vineyard.

2. Pastoral work should be imbued with a contemplative spirit

We have seen an attempt on the part of Saint Augustine to reconcile "*otium*" (contemplative life) and "*negotium*" (active life), or at least to strike a balance between the two. He himself recognized the difficulty in doing so. As a priest, he realized how most of his time was taken up by pastoral work. However, notwithstanding his busy

⁸⁶ Augustine, *City of God* 19.19.

⁸⁷ Laurens Johan Van der Lof, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁸⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* 7.21.27.

⁸⁹ Christopher Kirwan, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29.

pastoral works, he still tried to find time for personal study, prayer, and meditation whenever his schedule would allow him, be it by day or by night.⁹¹ At the same time, he understood that there cannot really be any contradiction between the two, since both should be inspired by one and the same love for God and his Church. The image that we have of Saint Augustine as an ordained minister is that of a person active in prayer and prayerful in action, which shows that one needs not abandon his love for prayer, meditation, and study of the Scripture if he wants to serve the Church actively. He simply has to be contemplative in action and active in contemplation. Hence, hectic pastoral work is not an excuse to neglect one's prayer life. Many of the most active saints of modern times (like St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta) teach us the necessity of praying before engaging one's self in active service to others.

3. Pastoral work entails daily sacrifices and simplicity of life

Saint Augustine would have preferred to live a quiet life of leisure (*otium*) away from the public eye. He was happy enough living in a community surrounded by friends and family members. But when the Church called for his service, he accepted it notwithstanding his initial reluctance. This was just one big sacrifice that he learned he had to make for God and the Church. As a priest, he later realized what other sacrifices he had to make as most of his time and energy were spent on pastoral work. Thus, he had to sacrifice not only his personal desire for quiet study and contemplation, but also his own comfort and convenience. His ministry would sometimes make him skip meals, miss sleep,⁹² deal with undesirable people, and so forth. He also had to give up a luxurious lifestyle, which a person of his rank could very well live if he had wanted to. Instead he chose to live a very simple and frugal way of life, as Possidius bears witness to.⁹³ This certainly has much to remind Church leaders today. They are reminded to live modestly, to be detached from material things, and to demonstrate a sincere preferential option for the poor.

4. Pastoral work should be motivated only by love of God and desire to serve Him

While it may result easy for some men of the Church to make sacrifices of various kinds, Saint Augustine insists that it is not the act per se of making sacrifices that counts, but rather the motivation behind it. Any sacrifice that a priest may make, if it is tainted with pride and selfish motives, is of no value. The same principle holds true for all the good things that a pastor of the Church may accomplish: every single pastoral work should be motivated only by love of God and a sincere desire to serve

⁹¹ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 24.11; cf. Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁹² Augustine, *Confessions* 10.31.43-47.

⁹³ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 22.1-5; cf. Gerald Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.

Him and His Church. It is the “compulsion of love” that we mentioned earlier⁹⁴ that should urge us on. This also explains one of the famous quotations we have from Saint Augustine: “Love and do what you will. If you keep silence, keep silence in love; if you speak, speak in love; if you correct, correct in love; if you forbear, forbear in love. Let love’s root be within you, for from that root nothing but good can spring.”⁹⁵ He demonstrated this even in the way he dealt with the heretics and the schismatics of his time, campaigning for a mitigated application of the then existing laws against the enemies of the Catholic Church.

5. Pastoral work presupposes full-time commitment

Unlike other works governed by a fixed daily schedule (like the eight-hour office work we are all familiar with), the work of a pastor of the Church goes well beyond such a time frame. Ministers of the Church are expected to be at the service of God’s people full time. This explains the level of commitment that Saint Augustine dedicated to his pastoral work. He would carry out his priestly functions throughout the day and even at night he would dedicate himself to prayer, meditation, and the study of the Scripture.⁹⁶ His work as judge presiding over the episcopal court (*audientia episcopalis*) sometimes made him skip meals and fast. Whenever people came to him for instruction, he was always ready.⁹⁷ He would never refuse any offer to hold a dialogue with his opponents. He was an indefatigable preacher and teacher both in private and in public, in writing or speaking.⁹⁸ He practiced hospitality at all times.⁹⁹ All these demonstrate how selfless Saint Augustine was as a priest and how he took his pastoral ministry seriously.

6. Pastoral work should contribute to the constant edification of Christ’s Body

The results of Saint Augustine’s pastoral work are famous and highly acclaimed not only in the African soil, but also in regions overseas.¹⁰⁰ It spread the fragrance of Christ throughout the continent and outside of it;¹⁰¹ it brought about the conversion of sinners, the reconciliation among enemies, the proliferation of

⁹⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 19.19.

⁹⁵ Augustine, *On the Epistle of John* 8.7.

⁹⁶ Augustine, *On Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil* 1.3.6; cf. Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 3.2, and Agostino Trapè, *op. cit.*, 255.

⁹⁷ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 6.3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.6.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7.4.

monasteries all over Africa;¹⁰² it led many to the faith; it promoted peace and unity within the Church;¹⁰³ etc. All of these show how Saint Augustine's service to the Church truly resulted in the edification of its members. True to his words, he was, indeed, a servant of the Church and a servant, above all, of its weakest members.¹⁰⁴ He served others because it was his way of serving God. He dedicated himself totally to pastoral work not for any personal gain,¹⁰⁵ but simply to be "a lamp lit and burning and raised on a candlestick" so as to give light to all who were in the house (cf. Mt 5:14-16).¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

The life of Saint Augustine is a demonstration of how God's grace can work in the life of a person. From a self-centered individual full of worldly ambitions and who initially manifested no interest in becoming a Christian (and more so in becoming an ordained minister of the Church), we see how God came to touch him at a certain point, called him back to Himself, and transformed him into one of the most qualified pastors of His vineyard.

The duties and responsibilities of priesthood at first somewhat frightened him. The tears he copiously shed on the day of his ordination attest to this. But his natural talent and the initial training the bishop of Hippo at that time provided him gradually molded him into one of the finest ministers of the Catholic Church. His dedication to the study of the Scriptures paid off, and soon he became one of the ablest preachers of God's word. This also enabled him to face the heretics and the schismatics of his time, either rebuking their wrong teachings or winning them to the Catholic side.

As priest (and later on as bishop), Saint Augustine tried to reconcile or, at least, strike a balance between active and contemplative life. He remained a monk at heart while immersing himself completely in the daily affairs of the Church. He sees no contradiction between the two, since for him monks – the members of his communities, in particular – were all "servants of God" and are called to play a special role in the edification of Christ's Mystical Body. The desire for a quiet life dedicated to silent prayer, meditation and study of the Bible should never be an excuse for anyone to refuse to respond to the needs of the Church.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 11.1-5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 11.2.

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *The Work of Monks* 29.37.

¹⁰⁵ Luc Verheijen, *op. cit.*, 158.

¹⁰⁶ Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 5.5.

The pastoral life that Saint Augustine lived entailed countless sacrifices, which he willingly accepted because the love of Christ urged him on. God's word was his constant source of inspiration throughout his life as a pastor. He dedicated himself selflessly and totally to the service of the flock entrusted to him. He served God and the Church with full commitment until the last moments of his life. And thanks to all these, the Catholic Church has a luminous model of pastoral ministry to present to us.

It is said that the chief characteristic of Saint Augustine as a pastor was his penetrating insight into both divine and human natures. Indeed, he used such capacity in his dealings with the world of his time and its problems. "His advice and activity were conspicuous for sound common sense, breadth of view, psychological acumen, generosity, and fairness. He was tactful, yet direct. There was a natural dignity to all his actions."¹⁰⁷ These are but some of the characteristics that a pastor must possess and the Bishop of Hippo clearly demonstrated to possess them all.

The teachings and examples of Saint Augustine are not only for us to know and learn. They are there to inspire us, to guide us, and for us to imitate. This will be the highest honor that we can render to the Bishop of Hippo – a Father of the Church, a Doctor of Grace, our Patron Saint, our guide and friend.**PS**

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