

# THE AUGUSTINIAN PARISH

Anthony Banks, O.S.A.

We share a common purpose with many parts of the Order of St Augustine throughout the world in seeking an Augustinian identity for the parishes we hold as our own in perpetuity or the parishes we staff pro tem.

The dilemma in speaking of Augustinian parishes is where to begin. There are two inherent difficulties in starting with St Augustine and talking about parishes. The first difficulty is that the Order of St Augustine does not owe its place in history simply to St Augustine. Credit must also be given to the hermits of Tuscany who, nine centuries after Augustine, responded to the needs of the Church and the initiatives of the papacy. The hermits bring their history of contemplation to their new beginnings in active ministry. They enter the mendicant lifestyle and all that this will entail. Therefore we must have a multi-focus when we speak of the spirituality of an Augustinian parish, of the liturgical life of the Augustinian Parish or the Augustinian approach to pastoral care.

In these Augustinian terms the community life lies at the heart of our ministry. Our ministry is based on the local Augustinians modelling what it is to be church – to pray together and to hold all things in common. But simply being a model would leave us as the hermits of the thirteenth century from whom we are descended. In 1244 and again in 1256 the earliest Augustinians moved to the towns and cities of Europe to operate in the service of the ever-growing populations of those boroughs. They came to serve the people responding to the call of the papacy and they did so as mendicants begging for their supper, proclaiming the Gospel and serving the needy. For the most part they did not become the episcopally endorsed religious leaders of the town but served in shrine churches and chapels supporting the work of what in time would become the “Parish Priest”

Our second difficulty arises from the era of Augustine as there was not a parochial mentality in the Church – this was a church centred on the cathedra of the Bishop. The structure of the Church of yesteryear does not readily lend itself to comparison with a thirteenth century church evolving in the renewed cities of Europe, let alone with today’s structures of sprawling diocese and multiple parishes. Distinguishing a model or modus operandi for an Augustinian parish from the past is not simply possible.

When the hermits move and the Augustinians begin, freedoms are given to them which made the Order government and conventual life immune from the jurisdiction of

the local bishop. By 1294 this had been extended by the papacy to true exemption and in 1303 further extended to equate with those privileges granted previously to the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Remember that the papacy was in frequent conflict with local bishops (their brothers!) and the papacy believed that the new mendicant orders would be their best advocates and missionaries.

The formation processes within the new Orders were stronger than any preparation for diocesan priesthood in the thirteenth century. Thus the preachers and the confessors of the new religious Orders were better equipped for ministry and they appeared to have earned the esteem and the respect of the Christian people. The Augustinians were entitled to preach in any Church of the Order or in the public squares but only if, as individuals, they were granted the right to preach by the Prior General. The roles of preaching and acting as confessors were not just privileges of the early Order; they were considered to be of the essence in the Order and its growth. Definitories and Provincial Councils had to confirm that the life and the doctrine of the individual was appropriate and knowledgeable; candidates underwent examination. The norms of the early Order established that practices outside of the regular practice of religion were to be discouraged; for example Augustinians could not remove their habits for public scourging which had come into vogue as popular piety.

From the earliest days of the Order we can see that the Augustinians sought to implement moderate reform in a Church which was struggling to cope with the changes occurring within society. The Augustinians took scholarship seriously and they held the proclamation of the Word to be at the heart of their ministry.

We also need to understand the milieu in which the mendicant orders including our own came into existence. In Europe in the twelfth/thirteenth centuries we see an era with profound economic changes; these include the rise of capitalism, a surge in trade, growth of cities, and the emergence of the middle class as a real force in society. In addition, political change moved society away from feudalism and there developed an upsurge in the power of regional monarchs, leading to the establishment of nation States. The population of Europe doubled in three centuries and urban drift became the new phenomenon. In the cities they saw the emergence of crafts and trade activities. Society moves from dependence on family units to interdependence through trade and commerce. The building blocks of contemporary society are sown as corporations, companies, guilds, partnerships and fraternities, all becoming driving forces within the societies of the time. But as power centred on kings and princes the new forces of the middle class develop and they will eventually challenge the great lords of the State and the Church.

Academically the medieval world challenges with the rise of universities across Europe. The intellectual world, open mostly in the past to monks behind cloistered walls, becomes a significant factor in the lives of the wealthy. The mendicant orders seized the opportunity and became linked with these new institutions, in way that made them

significantly different to the response of the diocesan church. The Augustinians approved a program called the General Studies of the Order. With the Constitutions of Ratisbon came the creation of centres in all provinces with two professors, one in Scripture and a second who would give lessons in philosophy and logic. In writing about the developments within the Order a former Prior General wrote that the Augustinian tradition has always reflected openness to the emerging and changing needs of the Church, faithfulness to her call and awareness of her mission.

The Augustinians developed their own unique quality: fraternal life in community. Community life was seen by the papacy as an answer to some of the strange ways of living religious life that had evolved from the solitude of hermitages. St Augustine acquired a special place in the new Order which adopted his *Rule* as its cornerstone. There were differences from the life envisaged by Augustine.

The new Order lived in convents not monasteries. They started from a viewpoint of the basic equality of God's children. Each had to abandon their goods so that there could be no discrimination among the members. The mendicants came to admit lay brothers and had a prior (the first among equals) rather than a lord or abbot. Priors were elected for a term as opposed to life-long offices. The new mendicant orders including the Augustinians were somewhat centralised with a Prior General. Members could be moved from one house to another and made their profession not to the head of the house but to the Prior General.

The early life of the Order does not give us immediate identification with the life of the parish but it highlights the emphases that still permeate the Order today. A parish staffed by Augustinians should be responsive to the needs of the Church in the contemporary world. The emphases on learning and love of the Scriptures and theology would be present and the preaching should be bold, challenging and reflective of the Gospel message. There must be fidelity to the Scriptures yet interpretation of the Gospel message in light of the needs facing Church and society. The Augustinians are called to work within the framework of the local diocese but to encompass a Church that is universal. As such they are called to question local structures politely but firmly when they clash with the general ethos of the Church.

What has been done by others before me in the United States of America is to develop a series of principles for Augustinian parochial ministry. These papers draw most of their principles directly from St Augustine. I will place those principles in a slightly different framework coming out of my Australian experience.

The authors asked what might St Augustine expect to see in an Augustinian parish if his key principles for operation of an effective community are laid out besides the body of books and letters we have inherited from him?

Our North American brothers have identified the following principles:

*Unity and Harmony*  
*Stewardship*  
*Care and respect for the individual*  
*Worship*  
*Moderation and Self-Denial*  
*Mutual care*  
*Humility*  
*The common good*  
*Reconciliation*  
*Authority and obedience as service*  
*Ongoing conversion*  
*Freedom under grace*

We know from Augustine's writings that he considers the Church encompasses both the human world and the world of the saints and the angels. The great Augustinian scholar Tars van Bavel wrote of distinctions that make an understanding of the Church that is dynamic, interconnected – a living organism. Those distinctions include:

*The terrestrial church and the celestial church*  
*The church in time and space and the church as City of God*  
*The pilgrim church and its eschatological fulfilment*  
*The Church as institution and as body of Christ*  
*The church as sociological entity and as lived relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit*  
*The holy church and the sinful church.*

In an Augustinian parish we might therefore expect to see something of the following:

1. An anticipation of the life of the coming of Kingdom where believers seek to share common beliefs and practices yet where we expect one another to let each other down from time to time.
2. We are drawn as individuals and as community to follow the will of God, but we know only too well that we are often drawn to simply meet our own needs.
3. We are part of the greater church and acknowledge both the inherent values of structure and organisation while creating the possibilities of being agents of challenge and of change. Augustine was one who supported the authority of Rome.

4. We offer a sacramental and ecclesial life that is subordinated to faith in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. Only love is the wedding dress of the true Christian (*En Psalm 49.23 Ep John 3.3-5*)
5. For a person to wish to form part of the true body of Christ they cannot leave the visible unity. The Church cooperates with Christ and the Holy Spirit in bringing spiritual life to others by proclaiming the truth. This includes the forgiveness of sins.

The hermits offer us the possibility of bringing contemplation to the lives of the active. And these active people include us. By tracking back to Augustine himself, and acknowledging the work of contemporary Augustinians in spirituality we bring to the people to whom we minister the three core elements of Augustinian spirituality. We move out in curiosity to examine our world. Action leads to reflection and in Augustine this is found in the inner journey in which we see seek Christ the teacher, Christ the light. But our mendicant tradition reinforces the next part of the spiritual journey; we must move beyond where we enter immersion, or participation, into mystery. The core action of Augustinians in parish life is to bring that spirituality to bear in the lives of the Augustinian community and then into the lives of the greater parish community. At the heart of the Augustinian parish there needs to be reflexive praxis which enables the Augustinians and their parishioners the opportunity to reflect on the gifts of life which are found in normal life.

If we truly believe in the restlessness of heart of Augustine, then we need to identify such yearnings in ourselves. The personal witness of our struggle with such restlessness, with the call of Christ will then permeate the lives of others whom we serve. As Augustinians this may be our best gift to humanity – to identify this inner call from God which promotes the individual and collective turn to the transcendent. Small groups which reflect on life through scriptural reflection need to be at the core of our parish life if we as Augustinians are to be true to ourselves. The preparation of concomitant material from the writings of Augustine could then enhance these reflections.

From such restlessness and reflection should arise the possibility of appropriate pastoral care which arises as compassionate service in the name of the Body of Christ. When we as Augustinians express ourselves in terms of our personal and collective experience of vulnerability then we allow others to express what is core to their being; this may include the issues of married and family life, care of aged, enhancing our commitment to pro-life stances, provision of care for the marginalised, and an openness to solidarity with the oppressed of this earth. Such possibilities arise when we express our openness to conversion and mystery. It is not sufficient to simply provide sacramental structures without providing the means by which the realities of our lives can be knowingly expressed within the sacraments.

The task of parochial life to invite people into Prayer and Worship, to participate in the sacramental life of the Church cannot be undertaken in isolation. To start at this point without appropriate forums for reflection, for enabling the movements of the human heart outwards and then inwards is to neglect our Augustinian heritage. If we are to invite people to be the Body of Christ for others, to truly celebrate the communitarian aspects of Eucharist which are our heritage from Sermons 227 and 272, we must call them into service and to understand themselves as grains crushed into the common bread and grapes poured into the common cup.

The Augustinian parish will look to go beyond the events of the sacramental liturgies. From the common sharing of restlessness, of call and response, of experience and interiority there will be an enabled response which will heighten the previous pastoral responses. This in turn will mark an openness to enter into dialogue with one another and with others of different faiths. Augustinian parishes, despite experiences which might make us think otherwise, will be open to ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. By the witness of their lives parishioners become an evangelizing community proclaiming the presence of Christ through their words and their actions.

From these we can attempt to draw a picture of the living Church that should be present in every Augustinian parish.

- **Church as product of creation**

The very act of creation comes out of the life of the **TRINITY** where the communion that is love expresses its love through creation and communication with the created. The ideal for every parish is an expression of this communion in which we acknowledge the presence of the Trinity residing in us. We become brothers and sisters when we see in one another this wonderful expression of communication from a loving God. Yet is that what we see in our parishes? Our church knows of twin practices that devalue the Church, each in a different way. Privatisation of religion, wherein the practice of the faith involves merely me and my God is the first of these lies. We all see people at our liturgies who want nothing to do with community, yet still deal with their (not our) God. The second problem within our Church is when we become corporatized, speaking of statistics and numbers, too large to share intimately within the community providing service but little in communion.

- **Church as the place where the transcendent and the immanent meet**

The **EUCCHARIST** will be the core experience in which we seek such communion or community. This living communion of love will express in sincerity that we are the bread broken for another, the blood poured out for each other. We will acknowledge Christ as the Head as we seek to become part of the body of Christ through divine love (grace).

- **Church as the centre for witness, courage, justice**

In the expression of *communio*, the members of the communion will give forth the good odour of Christ in the holiness of our lives (Rule VIII.48). The life of the community will be such that all members of the community will recognise the universal call to holiness and respond to that **BAPTISM**al call. Thus Easter is at the heart of all good Church life and the Easter Vigil is the core liturgical event in the life of the Church. Each Sunday is a celebration of Easter. Liturgy will always be seen as an event in *communio* and ministries will be developed and education programs for ministers and for the community.

The catechumenate offers the model for calling people deeper into the life of the Church. It allows men and women to share a common journey and to become immersed in the faith life of the whole community. But some parishes have not yet formed a catechumenate while others have let the catechumenate become the property of a small group of members. The greatest witness to faith in our parish often comes not from the clergy or the religious community but from the personal stories of members of our faith community. Do we allow them to become agents who break open the Word of God?

- **Church as a centre for evangelisation**

Just as the apostles were sent out on **MISSION** so our parishes must be outward looking in the task of the proclamation of the Gospel. This calls for radical proclamation rather than mundane processes, for reviewing the signs of the times rather than mere acceptance of regularity of set practices. Like the 13<sup>th</sup> century mendicants we must be ready to see where Christ calls in our day and proclaim such communication.

Do we believe in the parishioners as missionaries and do we embrace them so as to enable them to be effective in their proclamation. If we believe in the sharing of the Word, of stories of faith and of the small group practices that enable this to occur are they at the radical heart of our parish life?

- **Church as embracive of all walks of life**

Augustine forms communities of lay people, of clerics and advises on the formation and life of “holy” women. His was a Church that knew the regular life of the Church. As such he cherished the clerical order for its service to the Church but knew the Church as something far greater. The Augustinian parish is one in which the Augustinians first and foremost are there to be Christians with the people, and then to act in service for the people. **STRUCTURE** is core yet hierarchy can be minimised. The core talents of the community should be called forth to be at the service of the community.

- **Church as a body of pray-ers**

The Augustinian community is a model of **PRAYER**. To live with a spiritual love requires taking time to reflect on the goodness of God. It occurs within the framework of the common life. An Augustinian parish finds places and times where members of the community can pray together. There should be special honouring of the Prayer of the Church (not the prayer of the clerics). No Augustinian parish should know only liturgical prayer. Opportunities to support one another in prayer through contemplation, meditation and praise and worship should be offered. Leaders in prayer should be recognised and educated, regardless of their walk of life.

- **Church as source of forgiveness and care**

As part of those who aspire to the Kingdom (or City) of God, and who seek to co-build that Kingdom with our God we know that expectation and realisation are two different things. An Augustinian parish allows all those who know their weaknesses to seek **RECONCILIATION** with the community of love and encourages the community to always embrace and call back those who feel outside the community. Such a spirit comes from those who believe that the Spirit is imbued in creation and utters forgiveness as the true means of renewal and hope.

- **Church as pursuer of goodness for the greater community**

We carry the spirit of this Trinitarian love beyond our community to the world. No one works for themselves but for others. We seek to bread for others and to offer ourselves in the bread that is blessed. Life for Augustine could only be undertaken from the inside “out”. In Augustine’s Rule he constantly refers to the movement in **INTERIORITY** so that tasks can be undertaken, life can be properly lived. No Augustinian parish could call itself such without bearing a pulse of actions that seek to transform the local world. And inherent in such ministry is the reflection space that keeps asking whether community is being built, whether communion has been established.

- **Church as radical heart of love to the world**

We seek **JUSTICE** for others. Out of reflection comes action in love. And out of such action is the base of true witness to the love that sustains us. **MINISTRY** is the privileged point at which we have encountered the face of God. Like our God we need to respond to the graciousness of the love accorded to us and so we seek to be the community of faith, the community of prayer, the community of charity, the missionary community.

- **Church as transformative leadership in love**

The Augustinian parish is one that seeks **EMPOWERMENT** for the individual so that new talents, developed in the Spirit, can be borne into the life of the community. This requires an attention to education. Following Augustine such



education takes place in stories told, scholarship undertaken, art fostered, rituals enacted and Scriptures proclaimed and broken open.

In our parishes we should find the space where the community can search for God. The community will seek to hold goods in communion for all and for all those who will come in the future (ecology). In our parishes we will see that service arises out of charity, not simply compassion. This deep love should characterise the essence of the Augustinian parish.

And to all this the Augustinians are models who echo the beauty and the frailty that is community and church. How they do that can be a chapter for another time!!!