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# ST. AUGUSTINE

## AND THE *environment*

St. Augustine, who lived in North Africa during the late fourth and early fifth centuries of the Christian era, has nothing specific to say on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

However, Augustine—like Paul before him—had a radical change of heart inspired by his knowledge of and belief in Christ as the Son of God. Both men are admired for their much publicized (even by themselves) conversion experiences. In Augustine, that experience was an ongoing process, from the womb that bore him to the tomb that received him 76 years later. Both Paul and Augustine, spiritual masters in their own right, were, to be more accurate, followers or, better, disciples of Christ.

This is my starting point for presenting what Augustine has to say to us about our environment: The foundation of it all is Christ—not Augustine, not Paul, not anyone else. Augustinian God-talk centers on and emanates from Augustine’s relationship with Christ.

To be an Augustinian university means to follow Christ in an Augustinian fashion: in a personal, ongoing relationship and process of conversion. We are always “on the way,” never fully arrived, walking in the footsteps of Augustine, informed and enhanced by his personal and communal experience. That ongoing relationship and conversion process can help us better understand how a follower of Christ can interpret the world in which we live—in this case, our environment. To the extent that Augustine’s experience enlightens us on that path, we are Augustinians. We follow Christ in an Augustinian manner.

Among Augustine’s most famous works, admired—and sometimes even read—by many people throughout the ages, are *The Trinity*, *The City of God* and *Confessions*. These works can illumine Augustine’s understanding of the issue of the environment (see sidebar on Page 9). Here, however, I will center on a document that has been read avidly and followed by many more people over the centuries: Augustine’s Rule of Life, which he wrote at the age of 43, some 10 years after his baptism. To foster and facilitate for his contemporaries the path walked by the early Christian community (see Acts 2:32–37, 4:42–47), Augustine gathered, in eight brief chapters, basic principles that could be applied and adapted by families, nuns, monks and clergy.

I encourage you to peruse the Rule of Augustine, not to satisfy curiosity or discover the foibles and peculiarities of people’s lives over sixteen centuries ago, but rather to entertain how Augustine’s presentation might lead us to a better life: enough for all, always (a concise way of defining sustainability).

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## DIGNITY

The first principle emphasized by Augustine regarding sustainability is dignity, the innate worth of each and every human being. We are all of infinite worth. “Honor God in one another whose temples you have become” (Augustine, Rule, I, 8). Discover God, honor God, in ourselves and one another, aware that no one is worth more or less. Our worth resides not in what we have but in who we are: the image and likeness of our divine Creator. Truly, as Augustine states in one of his most celebrated, and often paraphrased, expressions: “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We are invited and destined to become more divine, more like God, more relational, as the Trinity itself is. The more we relate, the more human we become.

Remember, Augustine was writing in North Africa, the land of his birth, for men and women of various races, as well as diverse social and economic strata. There were affluent landowners; those of a more humble, rural background, indigenous people, the Berbers (like Augustine’s mother, Monica); and those who aspired to be accepted in the declining but imposing social network of the Roman empire (like Augustine’s father, Patricius). All were invited to find God in themselves and one another. In Augustine’s community in Hippo, the previously wealthy learned to live in harmony with former slaves. No one was entitled to take sole ownership of what God had gifted to all. The more we share, the more Christlike we become.

Tarsicius van Bavel, an Augustinian scholar of the 20th century, wrote the following in his introduction to the Rule:

*We could characterize the Rule of Augustine as a call to the evangelical equality of all people. It voices the Christian demand to bring all men and women into full communion. At the same time it sounds an implicit protest against inequality in a society which is so clearly marked by possessiveness, pride and power. According to Augustine, a monastic community should offer an alternative by striving to build a community that is not motivated by possessiveness, pride and power, but by love for one another. And, in this sense, the Rule of Augustine is also socially critical.<sup>1</sup>*

## COMMON GOOD

Another significant principle of the Augustinian way of living and following Christ more faithfully is the common good. Augustine clarifies in the Rule: “The more you are concerned about the common good rather than your own, the more progress you will know that you have made” (V, 2). Caring for and about what we hold in common is our vocation.

Creation itself is our common good; the earth, our common home. They are gifts of God to all, including future generations. They are not to be enjoyed by only a few of us, but to be shared, just as God has shared them with us. This is the Augustinian golden rule for a sustainable life for all,



a veritable ecology based on justice, or right relationships on four levels: how we relate to ourselves, to our Creator, to one another and to the rest of creation.

Let me stop here. Augustine's Rule on the topic of sustainability or the environment has not been exhausted—far from it! But I invite you to discover for yourself and, hopefully, share with others how the two remaining principles of Catholic social thought, subsidiarity and solidarity, are also present in the document and how they, too, might be applied to the environment. That is what this presentation is about: Catholic social thought to encourage and guide social action on behalf of a better world in which we show that there is truly enough for all, always. ♣

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<sup>1</sup>Tarcisius Van Bavel, *The Rule of Saint Augustine* (Image Books, 1986), 8.

## GOING DEEPER WITH AUGUSTINE

### **A principle underlying Augustine's spirituality and encouraging social responsibility is that God created all that exists for everyone:**

*"Do you think it's a small matter that you are eating someone else's food? Listen to the apostle: We brought nothing into this world. You have come into the world, you have found a full table spread for you. But the Lord's is the earth and its fullness. God bestows the world on the poor, he bestows it on the rich."*  
(Sermon 29, 2)

*"The possession of goodness is by no means diminished by being shared with a partner either permanent or temporarily assumed; on the contrary, the possession of goodness is increased in proportion to the concord and charity of each of those who share it."* (City of God, XV, 5)

### **For Augustine, as for Christ and so too for Christians, helping the poor is a matter of justice, not merely charity:**

*"Christ who is rich in heaven chose to be hungry in the poor. Yet in your humanity you hesitate to give to your fellow human being. Don't you realize that what you give, you give to Christ, from whom you received whatever you have to give in the first place?"* (Commentary on Psalm 75, 9)

*"You give bread to a hungry person; but it would be better were no one hungry, and you could give it to no one. You clothe the naked person. Would that all were clothed and this necessity did not exist."* (Tractate 1 John 8, 8)

### **Far from any pantheistic interpretation, Augustine declares that we can discover something of God in nature, but God is not identified with nature:**

*"This is what I love when I love my God. And what is this? I put my question to the earth and it replied, 'I am not he'; I questioned everything it held, and they confessed the same. I questioned the sea and the great deep, and the teeming live creatures that crawl, and they replied, 'We are not God; seek higher.' I questioned the gusty winds, and every breeze with all its flying creatures told me, 'Anaximenes was wrong: I am not God.' To the sky I put my question, to sun, moon, stars, but they denied me: 'We are not the God you seek.' And to all things which stood around the portals of my flesh I said: 'Tell me of my God. You are not he, but tell me something of him.' Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried: 'He made us.' My questioning was my attentive spirit, and their reply, their beauty."* (Confessions, X, 9)