

Translated into English in January 2007 by Fr Joseph Fredette a.a., from the French magazine of the Augustinians of the Assumption "*Itinéraires augustiniens*". The original article was written by Jean-François Petit a.a. Uploaded with permission.

## **Community Life**

### **From the ideal to reality**

*We exhort you in the Lord to persevere faithfully  
in your holy vocation until the end.* (Letter 48 to Eudoxius)

To understand the Augustinian concept of community life, one must place oneself in the context of the time. At the end of the IVth century, many thought that expansion of Christianity was finished: it was "spread throughout the world". Heretofore, it was time to organize the forms of community life. Since the resurrection of Christ, Christians considered themselves already in the final times. The world's population seemed assured. The task that needed to take place was to set up a spiritual people. Community life was to integrate itself with this perspective.

In general, when it is a question of justifying community life, Augustine refers himself to the first community of Jerusalem (*Acts* 4:31-35), since it traced the ideal for a radical Christianity, the anticipation of the celestial Jerusalem. But in order to discover the richness of his idea of community life, one must not only look at his Rule, in which this ideal is expressed. Sermons 355-356 and the *Letter* 211 give precious insights not only of the ideal, but also on the reality as it was lived, and at times lived badly, in the monasteries of Augustine. Let us now strive mainly, starting with these two documents, to elucidate its main concrete traits.

#### **1. Renunciation of personal goods**

##### **"All was held in common for them"**

The community is "*one heart and one soul, tending toward God*", according to the expression of the Rule. "*We must imitate the saints mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles*", declares Augustine in sermon 355. The consequences of this are very clear: "*No one said that something belonged to him but all was held in common by them*". Therefore we can say that the first condition to be a disciple of Christ was the giving up of material goods" this was called "*spiritual communism*."

Concerning poverty, Augustine made no compromises. He says that, having come to Hippo, he brought nothing with him, having only his clothes as baggage. He had sold his things in favor of the most needy. His first companions were attracted by this simple life and its poverty. Together, they lived "*under the regime of the community*." No one had the right to own anything whatsoever.

This disposition had its difficulties. Sermon 355 presents an example that clarifies this: a priest of the Hippo community, Januarius, had kept some goods when he came to the monastery. He even had a will before dying in favor of the Church, even though he had

children who were minors to whom these goods should have been given once they reached the age of majority. It is with sadness that Augustine refuses this inheritance and firmly condemns Januarius' attitude, which is totally opposed with the commitment he had taken.

*"[Januarius] had made profession to live in community: this is what he should have kept. He didn't own anything? Therefore he didn't have any will to make. He owned something? Therefore he didn't have to pretend being our companion as if he were one of the poor of God."* (S. 355:3).

Augustine had the reputation of not accepting inheritances in favor of the Church. In reality, if he refused some of them, he had good reasons to be wary of them. Thus, he didn't want the inheritance of a ship owner, Bonifatius: it was because he didn't intend to transform the Church into a company of maritime transports!" The case was even more delicate since, in the case of a shipwreck, the crew would have been tortured to gain admissions on the cause of the disappearance of the ship. The Church would then have had to pay indemnities while, each day, *"there are so many indigents who call upon us, there are so many that we have to leave some in their sadness because we don't have enough to give to all of them"* (S. 355:5).

It doesn't matter what he thought about receiving inheritances in favor of the Church, concerning community life, Augustine's conclusion was without appeal: *"Whoever owns something must sell it and distribute the price he got for it, give it away or put it in common..."* He even so far as to impose this rule on all his clerics. He didn't want any "hypocrites." In his eyes, *"it was evil to break one's promise but worse to pretend to have made a promise."* He readily quoted Scripture: *"Better a vow unmade than made and not discharged"* (Eccl. 5:4).

However there were situations, evoked in sermon 356, where Augustine accepted that a monk retain the property of his goods; this made some of his auditors gossip. He mentions in particular the case of his nephew, Patricius, who was part of his community and who had retained his goods. The case was about to be settled. Patricius who had just lost his mother was in fact able to sell his tracts of land. He was not able to do this before since his mother the beneficiary until she died.

*"Between him and his sisters, there are certain points that need to be settled without delay, with the help of Christ, so he too is able to do what a servant of God should do and that which his commitment involves like the reading that has just been made specifies"* (S. 356:3; cf. Acts 4:32).

## **2. Charity does not seek one's personal interests**

Why such an insistence on poverty? There were, in the very numerous bishops, some who did not share the Augustinian ideal of community life imposed on the clergy. It is probable that Augustine launched this movement, except if it was Alypius. In any case, his writings reveal a radical opposition between *proprium/commune*: charity, *"that does not seek its own interests"* (2 Co 1:5), presupposes the putting in common of one's goods: It places the common good before the personal good. And that is the touchstone of any spiritual progress:

*"You will know that you made only as much spiritual progress as you have cared more for the common good than for your personal interests."*

This opposition shows forth two antagonistic loves. There is an egotistical love born of pride. The soul turns away from God, the universal good, to enjoy its own power and glories because of this in the inferior goods. Such a love is desirous of material goods, which are shared only once they are divided. One cannot appropriate them without depriving someone else of them.

However there exists another love by which spiritual goods are common to all. It is in virtue of this love that Augustine and his companions in poverty have stripped themselves of their goods to live in community. *“That which was common to us was a large and infinitely rich domain, God Himself”* (S 355:2). Among those at the monastery, the deacons were especially concerned by this obligatory disposition to poverty:

*“The deacons are poor through the grace of God; they wait for the mercy of God; they don’t even have anything with which to do works of mercy: having no riches, they have turned away from the desires of the world. They live with us in our common companionship; nobody isolates them from those who brought something. The unity that comes through charity is to be preferred to any advantage coming from worldly inheritances”* (S. 356:8).

It is true that, according to G. Madec, Augustine had to deal differently with his priests. In 396, he had reunited all of them at the Episcopal house and asked them to renounce their personal property. The “crisis” of 425 that sermon 355 evokes show that the application of this measure was difficult. But at the Epiphany of 426, in sermon 356, Augustine notes a return to normalcy. He reminds everyone in especially firm words the requirement that all must follow:

*“The one who shall want to possess something on his own, to live from his own goods and go against the precepts that are ours, I am not satisfied to say that he will not live with me; he will not be part of the clergy”* S. 356:14).

Therefore, the renunciation of personal goods in community life is an invitation to a true and generous love. For Augustine, this love opens man to God Himself, whereas a love that takes up all one’s time has him withdraw into himself. This radical renunciation remains the condition for harmony in community life.

The ideal of community life is evoked in Psalm 132: *“How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers.”* According to Augustine, this verse seems to have given birth to monasteries. It is an encouragement addressed to brothers and sisters to dwell in community life. However, this model does not exclude other lifestyles.

In order to better understand this, it may be useful to refer to other writings of Augustine. In the *City of God*, Augustine distinguishes three types of life: leisure, action, and a union of both (XIX:19). Each person is free to choose the one that is best suited to him/her. Leisure must be open to the search for truth. However, it must not let one forget the concern of usefulness to one’s neighbors. Action must be upright and useful, but it must be make us become attached to the vanities of this world to the point that we forget to seek God. Even if it is better to apply oneself to studies and contemplation, one is not to refuse functions when charity demands them.

Religious life is at times a scandal for Christians, insofar as its reality does not correspond to the ideal. In a writing entitled: *The Work of monks*, Augustine reminds monks that they are to avoid being causes of scandal: *“Therefore show your compassion and mercy by proving to men that you do not seek and easy life in leisure but rather the kingdom of God, through the narrow and difficult road of this profession.”* Under the monastic garb can be hidden “hypocrisy.” Religious are not, for example, spend their time in trips, try to visit their families too often or, what is even worse, take part in the trade of relics or martyrs...

### **3. The search for agreement “Only one soul and one heart”**

Letter 211 to nuns, dated as 423, gives the clearest insights into another deficiency. The absence of agreement, an aspect that is yet basic to community life, as Augustine reminds right from the introduction of the Letter:

*“I am thinking of your numerous society, of the chaste love that unites you, of your holy life, of the abundant grace of God given to you: It is to this divine grace that you owe the fact that you not only renounced marriage but also chose community life, so that there would only be among you one soul and one heart” (L. 211:2).*

One must say that there is “danger in the house.” When Augustine rejoices in seeing the Donatists return to the unity, “schisms” are happening inside the monastery! The motive is clearly evoked. When a new superior (a priest) arrives, the sisters, with antipathy toward him, revolted against the prioress of their monastery. Troubled because by so much agitation, the priest preferred retiring. However calm was not to return as a result of this.

So, in order to reestablish peace, Augustine is obliged to remind them of all the basic rules of community life, just as he had formulated them for the men, while taking into account the feminine condition.

*“First of all, since you are reunited in a community to live in harmony in the house, you need to have only one heart and one soul in your search for God. Let none of you say: this is mine, but rather let all things be in common among you. Let you sister superior distribute to each of you the food and clothing not equally – for the state of your health is not the same – but rather to each according to her needs” (Letter 211,5).*

What is the question? The women who were formerly solidly set up in the world could find it difficult to agree to a new style of life where goods were to be held in common. On the opposite, those whose condition was more modest were tempted to thoughtlessly make use of goods that they would not have had in the world. But these differences on the social level could also have consequences on their behavior. With disdain for the richest nuns in the world there was pride on the part of the poorest, now that they had become the companions of those that they didn't dare approach in the world. Augustine addressed himself constantly to these two categories. He found it detestable that at the time that the rich women became “rough for themselves; the poor ones became “delicate.” Because of these different social origins, agreement among them was not easily acquired.

#### **4. The difficulty of living the ideal daily**

Other difficulties were to come about, if we are to believe the Rule. Since the first nuns were not necessarily cloistered, Augustine asked them, just like the religious men, to stay together when they went out. He denounced the nuns “with hair floating in the wind, who “enjoyed being looked at.” He saw in this a hint of a lack of education, or even of chastity:

*“It is not only by touching, but also by sentiments and looks that evil desires are exchanged. Do not say that your hearts are pure if your eyes are impure since the eye that is not chaste is the messenger of a soul that is not pure” (Letter 211:10).*

However one should not think that Augustine abused of his authority. He showed a very paternal tenderness, especially toward the sick nuns. He dispenses them from fasting. If illness makes them weak, all should be done so that they regain their strength, starting by having recourse to a doctor. A sister was specially charged with the care of convalescents. In certain cases, the prioress would have to do what was needed for them to preserve their health. But this is not a reason so that, once they have returned to good health, that they should act as they did when they were ill!

This attention to persons also was manifest in the handling of inevitable contestations or conflicts among the nuns. For Augustine, if each one looked to the interests of the others before her own, the disagreements would be less numerous! But in certain cases, it is necessary to intervene: if the simple warning by a sister

to another is not sufficient to obtain a change in the conduct, then Augustine advises to advise the prioress. Perhaps she, acting with discretion, could impose a secret correction that would produce the desired effect without the obligation of having the thing become public knowledge. But if that is still not sufficient. The testimony of two or three other nuns is to be solicited. If the sister in fault admits it, then Augustine asks that she be forgiven and that they pray for her, or if she refuses to admit her fault, then one should not hesitate to take sanctions that could go all the way to evict her from the monastery.

A decision of this sort is not to be made lightly. It is desirable to avoid coming to such an extreme solution. The prioress is not there to sanction others. She must first be “a model of good works.” Her position consists above all to animate the community:

*“Let her correct those who are restless, let her encourage those who lack courage, let her support the weak and be patient toward all, may she willingly accept the rule and impose it in trembling; may she desire to be loved by all of you more than feared: (L. 211:15).*

Since the community is the habitual place for pardon, the prioress is also to let herself be advised and should not constantly intervene. Many conflicts can be resolved without her intervention. Mutual forgiveness may be sufficient to reestablish harmony:

*“If two sisters have offended each other, they are to forgive each other because of your prayers, since the more frequent your prayers, the more they are to be holy. The one who tends to get angry and always hurries to ask forgiveness of the person that she has wounded is worth more than the one who gets angry more rarely and is not in a hurry to ask forgiveness” (L. 211:14).*

Agreement is also born of simple things, such as the respect for the time and the place for prayer. For Augustine, it is not desirable that the oratory be used for other things. Those who would like to go there to pray could do so no longer. And on this same subject of prayer, Augustine feels obliged to remind people of some evident things:

*“When you pray to God with Psalms and hymns, may your heart live what the voice makes known; only sing what is to be sung; as for what is not made to be sung, do not sing it” (L. 211:7).*

During the meals, they would read Scripture and disputes could arise. Augustine invites to listen “*without noise and disputes.*” Just as the body receives nourishment, the ears receive spiritual nourishment, the Word of God. It is clear, the remarks of Augustine are often very prosaic. He strives first of all to resolve concrete problems. The final recommendations of Letter 211 are identical, as the rest, to the conclusion of the men’s Rule:

*May the Lord grant you the grace to observe these precepts with love, as lovers of spiritual beauty, spreading by your life the good odor of Christ; not with servility, as if we were still under the law, but freely, since we are fixed in grace” (Letter 211:16, and Rule 8).*

*Non sub lege, sed sub gratia! (Rm 6:14)* According to Verheijen, these final words hold the key to Augustine’s thought. In the monastic life, a spirit of freedom should reign. To be sure, one should not limit the Rule to precepts. Community spirit must go beyond the useful level to truly arrive at a depth where meeting this spiritual beauty, Christ Himself, becomes possible.

## **5. The search for spiritual beauty**

This theme of the beauty of Christ is deeper than it seems. J-M. Fontaine recently presented and defended a thesis that brings new light on this question. In order to help people better understand the originality of Augustine, he draws a parallel with Jerome. Let us first listen to him:

*“If [Jesus] did not have something striking in his face and eyes, the apostles would never have followed him immediately and those who came to arrest him would not have fallen down” (L. 65:5).*

Augustine argues differently:

*“{Jesus} appeared to be ugly to his persecutors and if they hadn't judged him ugly, they wouldn't have aggressed him they way they did; they wouldn't have beat him with whips; they wouldn't have crowned him with thorns; they wouldn't have spit on him. They didn't have eyes that could see the beauty of Christ” (En. In Ps. 127:8).*

True beauty resides in fact in charity. Man reflects the beauty of Christ when, through charity, he tends toward Christ, when he seeks His embrace. In fact the religious community assembles “*lovers of spiritual beauty*” who are also “*lovers of wisdom*”, philosophers. Love of beauty manifests itself in harmony, order, and unity. This wisdom takes on the human nature; it recuperates a multiplicity of beings that make it up; it reunites human creatures that are scattered or the human creatures that are dispersed. The “*lovers of beauty*” reunited in a community must desire to possess this beauty, that they strive to give birth to it and create it.

L.-M. Fontaine concludes that Augustine does not condemn the love of perceptible beauty since Christ Himself had most likely experienced it, but he did condemn a kind of “*esthetic lethargy*” that paralyzes our spirit, which is submissive to the senses, stopping it from desiring a higher beauty that is more beautiful. It is this search for beauty that cements a lasting friendship those who are united together thanks to charity “*that is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that was given to us*” (Confessions IV, 4:7, quoting Rm. 5:5). We can see that the commitment to community life presupposes a capacity for wonder when looking at Creation and a deep capacity to invent.

Community life must finally realize the common aspirations of Christian life and even in short ancient life, just as the philosophers Plato and Plotinus had dreamed. This ideal, founded on friendship, involved helping one another and a search for Wisdom. For Augustine, religious life realizes this classical ideal of friendship. Christ is the Wisdom of God. The “*lovers of spiritual beauty*” are disciples of this Wisdom. They pursue it in liturgy, a place where a formation and growth in Christian life takes place, but also mutual assistance.

*“Therefore, the law of Christ is charity and charity does not take place unless we mutually carry our burdens... When you were sick, your neighbor carried you; you are well now, carry your neighbor... But when you will have taken him/her, don't stay in one place; walk. By loving your neighbor, by taking care of him/her, you go forward! Where do you direct your steps if not toward the Lord your God...”*

Love of God and love of neighbor, finally here is what is essential to Christian life for Augustine- therefore for community life. This is what he underlines in Letter 48, written to Eudoxius who had questioned him on the attitude that monks solicited for a ministry should have:

*“Concerning you, brothers, we exhort you in the Lord to persevere faithfully in your holy vocation. If our Mother the Church requires your services, avoid an excessive ardor and being too much in a hurry, as well as a casualness that by its charm could distance you from her. Obey with serenity to the voice of God. Let you heart have gentleness for the one who governs you, who leads with justice those who are meek and humble of heart and teaches them holy paths.*

*Do not prefer your tranquility to the needs of the Church and remember that is some men had not helped her in its giving birth, you would not have been born to spiritual life.”*

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