

Augustine on Monasticism

Fr. Hugh Feiss

Introduction

St. Benedict's sources were varied. Through Cassian and the Rule of the Master Benedict learned much from Eastern monasticism about monastic discipline and training, much about humility, obedience and asceticism. However, he also learned much from the wider Patristic tradition and from St. Augustine. From the latter he learned the importance not just of community, but of patient, self-forgetful love among the members of a community. This legacy is summed up in the next to the last chapter of the Rule of Benedict, which is devoted to "the good zeal that monks ought to have":

The monks should practice this zeal with the warmest love: "Let them strive to be the first to honor one another" (Rom 12.10). They should bear each other's weaknesses of both body and character with the utmost patience. They must compete with one another in obedience. No one should pursue what he judges advantageous to himself, but rather what benefits others. They must show selfless love to the brothers. Let them fear God out of love. They should love their abbot with sincere and humble charity. Let them prefer absolutely nothing to Christ¹, and may he lead us all together to everlasting life.

Augustine's Monastic Life

Augustine was always interested in community and in friendship, though we must be careful not to confuse the two. As a young professor living in Milan, he and his intellectual friends tried to start a community based on the search for truth (which the philosophers thought involves avoiding pursuit of wealth, honor and sexual pleasure).

Many of my friends and I were greatly exercised in mind as we talked together and shared our loathing of the annoying upheavals inseparable from human life; and we almost made up our minds to live a life of leisure, far removed from the crowds. We would set up this place of leisurely retirement in such a way that any possessions we might have would be made available to the community and we would pool our resources in a single fund. The sincerity of our friendship should ensure that this thing should not belong to one person, and that to another.... But some of us were already married and others hoped to be, and as soon as we began to consider whether our womenfolk would consent to these arrangements the whole elaborate plan fell apart....²

This reminds one of St Francis' provisions for the friars: they were to have an opportunity to spend time in prayerful retreat at a hermitage. Some would devote themselves exclusively to prayer, while others, acting as their "mothers," would take care of the group's physical needs. In any case, after the experiment with his friends in Milan, Augustine realized that lasting community life with the sharing of goods was not possible without celibacy.

When Augustine returned to Africa, he lived with some friends and relatives on his family property at Tagaste: 388-391. They prayed, studied the Bible, discussed, and wrote. Already there

was dispossession of private property. There seem to have been four key components to Augustine's monastic use of time in this Tagaste monastery: labor, reading, prayer, and study of Scripture. The emphasis on learning may be in part Augustine's own personal contribution to the monastic tradition. Some have claimed that this community was not a Christian monastery, but a philosophical community. However, it does seem to have been a monastery occupied by the "servants of God" (*servi Dei*) or a "society of brothers" (*societas fratrum*), two words Augustine preferred for describing what others called "monastics."

Then Augustine moved to Hippo where he became a priest. He talked his bishop into letting him form a monastic community near the cathedral: the Garden Monastery. This was a community of laymen, some of whom came from the monastery in Tagaste. Augustine asked for some time to prepare himself for preaching. During the time granted him, he wrote some biblical commentaries. In the *City of God* he wrote: "We should not so surrender ourselves to the leisure of contemplation that we forget to help our neighbors; nor should we become so immersed in activity that we lose our longing to contemplate God in recollection" (CD 19.19). This seems to have been his unswerving practice, and it was the ideal of most medieval religious writers as well as a dictate of common sense.

Augustine was consecrated a bishop in 396. He decided he could not still live with the monks in the Garden monastery, so probably at this time he wrote the Rule we have today (*Praeceptum* = Letter 211) to guide the community after he moved next door. Then he asked his clergy to live the common life with him, another monastic effort. Not all of the clergy were anxious to join him, and he left the choice up to each.

All of this makes clear Augustine's dedication to Christian community. Like St. Basil in the Eastern church, Augustine converted to Christianity and became a monk almost simultaneously. One factor in his conversion was the example of the Eastern monks whom he heard of through two friends who had been to Trier:

A man named Ponticianus, who held an important post at court, came to our house to visit Alypius and me..... He began to tell us about the monk Antony of Egypt, whose name was illustrious and held in high honor among your servants, though we had never heard it until this moment.... We were stupefied as we listened to the tale of the wonders you had worked within the true faith of the Catholic Church, especially as they were more firmly attested by recent memory and had occurred so near to our own times.... His discourse led on from this topic to the proliferation of monasteries, the sweet fragrance rising up to you from the lives of monks, and the fecund wastelands of the desert. We had known nothing of all this. There was even a monastery full of good brothers at Milan, outside the city walls, under Ambrose's care, yet we were unaware of it.

Ponticianus went on to tell about an incident that happened when he was with the imperial court at Trier. He and three colleagues went out for a walk. Two of them came across "a cottage where some servants of yours were living, men poor in spirit, the kind to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs." There they found the *Life of Antony*. They were so moved by what they read that they left the court and became monks. Their fianc\Es likewise dedicated their virginity to you."³

Monastic Writings

Augustine's Rule, the Praeceptum, is short. It says little about the form of common prayer. He also wrote a treatise called "The Work of Monks." He encourages monks to try to support themselves and to serve as spiritual guides. In Letter 48 he tells some monks not to refuse holy orders when church the needs them.

The Praeceptum deals with a few points at length. It seems to be a set of rules written down as needed. The main theme is sounded in the first chapter: that monks or nuns are to live together in love; that is the reason they come together. The rest of chapter one deals with sharing of goods, an expression of the basic theme. There follow six chapters on various topics, before the conclusion in ch. 8, about love again.

The Praeceptum begins: "The chief motivation for your sharing life together is to live harmoniously in the house and to have one heart and one soul seeking God (in deum)." Augustine's ideal of Christian community echoes the picture of the earliest Christians given in Acts 4.32-35: "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own but they had everything in common." Oddly enough, Augustine first interpreted "one mind and one soul" to be a reference to the individual's personal integration because of the Resurrection (an interpretation which had Plotinian overtones). By the time he wrote his rule he understood the phrase properly. As he says elsewhere, one cannot be one with the Trinity unless the Spirit makes us one with each other. This oneness comes from seeking God together (in deum).

In his treatise on The Work of Monks he deals with the problem of having both former aristocrats and poor people in the monastery. The former aristocrats may not be capable of the same level of asceticism as the aristocrats. Hence, the need for mutual love and support. To each what he needs.

In a reverse of his early misinterpretation of Acts 4.32 he says that the psalm which says "Behold how good and how pleasant it is that brethren should dwell together as one" refers to monks. The word for "one" is monos, which means alone; hence, monks are those who form a community in which all are one alone, that is perfectly united with each other.

Another section of the Rule urges the monks to look out for each other and warn each other if one sees another slipping into a fault. The warning should first be given privately, then with others, then to the superior (Mt 18: 15-18). Nothing vindictive is involved.

Then the end of the Praeceptum is a prayer:

The Lord grant you the grace to observe these precepts with love as lovers of spiritual beauty, exuding the fragrance of Christ in the goodness of your lives; you are no longer slaves under the law, but a people living in freedom under grace.

Augustine mentions grace, freedom, and spiritual beauty. Beauty reveals itself to us.⁴ The monks are to be like smoke from the incense bowl which is Christ. Augustine's vision is one of freedom under grace; not of ciphers.

Finally, in his book *On Christian Doctrine*, which he began about the time he finished the *Confessions*, Augustine says that those who are not capable of mastering what he has written need not worry, for "the form of one's life says as much as an abundance of words" (*quasi copia dicendi forma vivendi: De doct. Christ. 4.29*) We are all to be imitators of Christ who is the Word of God. As such our lives are an expression, a rhetoric, of God. In his notion of community he drew on classical forms: philosophical community, Ciceronian friendship, Neoplatonism. Here he draws on classical rhetoric; monasticism has a rhetoric, is a discourse about God by Christians. Hence, in the middle chapters of the *Praeceptum*, Augustine worries about public conduct and good example. In the conclusion quoted above, Augustine links ideas of love with way of life (*conversatio*): which is like incense, a Christ-centered life proclaims the gospel. The monastic life manifests, love, unity, rest in God, thankfulness, dwelling in Christ.

In an interesting article, Willemien Otten argues that about the same time he wrote the *Confessions*, Augustine articulated his views on the relationship between consecrated celibacy, monasticism in a broad sense, and marriage. He taught that marriage is a great human good, a bond of friendship, which is nourished by intercourse and nourishes children, though celibacy is abstractly considered a higher gift, and martyrdom higher than either (for which both may qualify). Both the celibate and the married should imitate Christ and walk in his path. Monks can fit their feet in his footsteps more easily. He wants monks to work so that they are not too isolated from the Christian community. There is, he said, only one Christian commonwealth.

I would like to conclude this brief overview of Augustine's contribution to the monastic tradition with three related bits of evidence.

Possidius's Life of Augustine

Possidius was a disciple of Augustine for 40 years and was present at his master's deathbed. Possidius joined Augustine's monastery at Hippo early in the 390s, became a priest and moved to the clerical monastery, and finally became a bishop. After Augustine died, Possidius made a complete list of Augustine's works, called the *Indiculum*. Then, in the decade after Augustine's death in 430, he wrote a life of his saintly mentor.

A summary of his *Life* recapitulates what we have said above. He describes Augustine's conversion, evidently to emphasize the fact that Augustine's turn to monastic life was a concomitant of his baptismal conversion, not a holdover from his Manichean days. Then, Possidius says Augustine went to Tagaste with some friends and lived for three years with some friends on his home estate, which had been turned over to religious use. According to the most compelling interpretation of Possidius' text, they devoted themselves to fasting, prayers and good works and studied the Bible. It was a community of monks. Some scholars think that Augustine's friend, Alypius, wrote a rule for this community. We will return to that Rule, which is called the *Ordo Monasterii* and is different from the Rule of Augustine we discussed earlier.

Augustine was then ordained and moved to Hippo. There, as we know, he started another monastery within the precincts of the Cathedral, called "The Garden Monastery." Possidius tells us that there was a strong emphasis on living the apostolic life (cf. Acts 4) and holding all goods in common so that they might be shared according as each had need. In his description, Possidius seems to quote Augustine's own Rule. Possidius goes on to describe how members of "The Garden Monastery" came to be ordained. About ten of them became bishops, and some of their clergy also became bishops, so that the influence of the monastery spread very widely.

Next, Possidius describes how Augustine was made bishop. Augustine then moved into the episcopal residence, because, as Augustine said in a Sermon (356.3), a bishop must extend hospitality to all who arrive, and that would not be fitting in a monastery. This strikes someone familiar with the Benedictine tradition as a bit odd, but it is conceivable that the stream of guests coming to visit a bishop in those days would simply have overwhelmed a small monastery. Anyway, Augustine, the bishop, now established yet another monastery, this time for willing members of his clergy.

This suggests that clerical and monastic vocations were very intertwined in the North African Church. Firmus, for example, joined one of Augustine's monasteries--probably The Garden monastery--after hearing him preach. After having served several times as a messenger between Augustine and Jerome (who was in Palestine) Firmus later became a priest.

When Possidius became a bishop himself, he had great difficulties with the Donatists, a schismatic, rigorist group, with whom Augustine himself also fought. Possidius is particularly hard on the Donatists' Circumcellions, who seem to have been the Donatist equivalent of monks. They may have called themselves "monachi," thereby giving the word a bad name.

Possidius says that in Augustine's final, episcopal monastery, the monks wore modest, adequate clothes--nothing fancy, nothing tattered. The same was true of food: frugal, but adequate. They had meat, herbs and vegetables sometimes, out of consideration for guests, and also some wine. They were very hospitable. Augustine was more interested in reading and discussion than in eating. He had carved on the table: "Whoever slanders the name of an absent friend, may not as guest at this table attend." Possidius thus makes it clear that Augustine's asceticism was not marred by any Manichean disparagement of material creation. This text implies both reading and conversation at the episcopal monastery, whereas the Preceptum 3.2 indicates only reading (at the Garden monastery).

Finally, on his deathbed, Augustine performed the only miracle narrated by Possidius. A sick person asked to be cured by having Augustine lay his hand upon him. Augustine said that if he had such powers he would apply them to himself. He did lay his hand on the man, and the man was cured. Augustine was very reserved about miracles. This contrasts sharply with early Eastern monasticism and suggests that Augustine was not much influenced by Eastern monastic precedents.

Alypius' Ordo Monasterii

This brief rule used to be known as the Regula Secunda. A great modern scholar of Augustine, Luc Verheijen, concluded that it was written by Augustine's friend Alypius for the Hippo monastery after Augustine was made a bishop. Before that, at least one scholar had attributed this rule to St. Benedict. The rule contains only 379 words. Its first line captures the essence of Augustine's monastic vision: "Before all else, dearest brothers, let us love God and then our neighbor also, because these are the weightiest of the commandments given to us." It is an interesting sidelight of history that many monasteries who followed the Rule of St. Augustine (Preceptum) added this line at the beginning of the rule.

Then in short, crisp sections, the Ordo Monasterii lays down the rules for the divine office. What takes St. Benedict many chapters is dealt with in a single paragraph, in part because the author doesn't spell out the psalms for each hour of each day of the week.

Then come some succinct mostly one-line regulations about property ("we desire to live the apostolic life"), murmuring, obedience, silence at table, business outside the monastery (go out in pairs), restraint in speech, and discipline: those who are not living the rule should be warned again and again, and if of the right age, flogged. The rule ends with the promise: "Observing these things in the name of Christ faithfully and piously, you will advance and we will have no little happiness over your salvation."

Augustine's Commentaries on Psalm 132 and 99.

Augustine wrote a feminine version of his Rule in Letter 211. In these two psalm commentaries he reflects on the monastic calling of men and women respectively.

Augustine preached his commentary on Psalm 132 in 407 AD in his Cathedral. Monasteries, he says, have their origin in the church which originates from Christ. Christ is invincibly bound to the church. The Spirit animates the devout fraternity (fraternitas pi) which is the monastery. Monks emulate the martyrs: their life is a continual dying to oneself, to be understood in the light of the cross and its redemptive value. Grace makes the monk's life in Christ possible. Both those in monasteries and other Christians are to manifest the love and unity described in Acts 4. Sadly, there are people who do not live up to their callings in both categories of Christians.

In his sermon on Psalm 99 he notes that just as some clergy are unworthy, so there are nuns who are devoid of discipline and are busybodies or proud. Yet, one should not for that reason censure the consecrated life. The goal--Augustine's dream--is of the one Christ, head and members, joined in love.

Conclusion

Returning to the Rule of St. Benedict where we started, we might note that the places where Augustine is echoed in the Rule of St. Benedict are those which deal with community of goods, conduct in the oratory, the dictum "let mind and voice be in harmony," receiving gifts from

relatives, serving the brothers without murmuring, the superior striving to be loved rather than feared and remembering that he has to render an account of those entrusted to him, gyrovagues (Augustine's words refer to the Circumcellions), loving the brother but hating the sin, seeking to profit rather than to preside, spending appointed time in work or reading and thus avoiding idleness. But Augustine's main contribution is not in details: it is in the vision of the monastery as a Christian community of people who love one another as Christ loves them.

Augustine was a pioneer in uniting monasticism and scholarship, monastic asceticism and community life, and monastic life and priestly service.

For oblates, the lesson of Augustine is his vision of Christian community. Community is a very difficult task for Americans at the beginning of the 21st century. Our culture has pushed individualism to what one hopes are its outer limits. As a result, people find themselves very alone and without a vision of what community should be. This affects our families, our parishes, our monasteries, our cities, nation, and our attitudes toward other nations. No more than Augustine will we be able to achieve perfect harmony or a perfect reflection of Beauty Absolute. But like him we hunger for community, and like him and St. Benedict, we can honor one another and bear one another's burdens.