



RELIGIEUSES DE L'ASSOMPTION

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Dear Sisters,

Several times during the past two years we have been reminded of the coming Centenary of St. Augustine's conversion. I have encouraged you to get to know him better. After our meeting of the General Council of the Assumption, you received a letter announcing the celebration of the Centenary, and "Partage-Auteuil" printed at the same time a letter of Father Stephan to the Augustinians of the Assumption. Now we are at the threshold of the Centenary which will open on 24 April, a year before the Baptism of St. Augustine, Easter 387, sixteen hundred years ago!

Magne Pater Augustinus. Augustine is so great, has had such profound influence on the Catholic Church and the spirituality of the Latin Church that we are perhaps unaware of how much we owe him. It is our heritage and it is good to be able to go back to the beginnings to dialogue with our ancestors, as the Africans would say.

Perhaps understanding Augustine better will help us to understand ourselves better, our culture and the moment in history that we are presently living. We might hope to treat in a creative way those precious elements of our heritage that we esteem and not only want to live more deeply today but also to foster for the future.

We are going to celebrate the **conversion** of St. Augustine. You are familiar with the story. The "tolle lege" and "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ"... in the garden. This incident is but a moment in the long history of conversion. I don't know what the word "conversion" conjures up in your minds or how you imagine that we might celebrate a conversion. I do not intend to propose new or additional centers of interest, one more thing to think about or do. In turning our attention towards St. Augustine, I would like to direct our minds and hearts towards the essential, to provoke a better focusing and to cast a fresh light on every day reality. May the following suggestions invite you to seize the grace of your own experience and to advance personally, as well as in community, on the way of the City of God.

GOD ALONE

Augustine tells us that he was held back from becoming a Christian by a "woman's love". Celibacy however was not obligatory; Augustine, as a Christian, could have married. Thus his conversion is not so much a renunciation as a preferential choice. He chooses God Alone.

"The Confessions" leave us with the impression that from the moment of his conversion, Augustine lived entirely for God and with God. Henceforth, nothing is marginal in his life. Nothing is denied, nothing needs to be hidden. The entire reality of his life, inside and out, is exposed, is laid open before God.

Not only open like the page of a book, but taken up in a loving relationship. Augustine believes that the Lord is constantly active and everywhere present in his life, and that the same Lord seeks him, Augustine, ceaselessly. God is the most exciting reality of his existence. Because of Him everything is matter for his search and for his desire, everything is occasion to learn, to dialogue and to love.

As a result of this loving presence of God, Augustine reveals in “The Confessions” a total and humble acceptance of himself, of his life, of his history, of the persons and events which have touched, formed or deformed him. His memory serves only to plunge all into the infinite divine Mercy. If he himself is inconstant and weak, if circumstances and events are changeable and unpredictable, never mind. God does not change. God is. God is all. He becomes the reference and measure of everything else. Such is the truth of God. Such is the truth of Augustine.

This faith of Augustine was acquired at great cost but remained unshakeable.

Augustine is a lover, a man of desire. He had ardently sought truth and goodness, all that could satisfy him and which could merit the gift of his life, his love, his all. Strengthened by the grace of his conversion, Augustine is so convinced that his All is God and that God alone can satisfy the immense desire of his heart, that everything else weighs little in the balance.

At the same time he can feel attracted by creatures and the good things of this world, but he realizes that they are only a reflection, a reminder, just a part of the whole. And it is the whole that he desires, in its entirety – for which he was created.

Over and over again he expresses his own desire and the importance of desire for us. The whole of Christian life is holy desire. To pray is to desire and to desire is to pray. Desire enlarges our capacity to receive. Let us desire that we may be filled.

Have no illusions. Augustine’s desire was not without problems. While most of his prayer (that he wrote down for us) is concerned directly with God, a great part is concerned with Augustine’s own weakness and sinfulness. Divided and inconsistent, a problem for himself, he struggled with a wayward will and the desires of flesh and spirit which spring from a misdirected self-love. He knew the scandal of sin in self and in others and the torture of inner conflict. Augustine had to beg God that he might desire Him Alone.

Suddenly we feel closer to Augustine; his experience is also our own. Our problem is similar to his. Many little desires tug at our hearts. We don’t really want what we want. Not yet.

In fact, had not St. Augustine received the grace of conversion when he had finally decided that he really wanted to be chaste?

It is the same for us. It is a question of will. But – and this is capital – a will motivated and moved by love; not by necessity, nor obligation, nor constraint but by that which we value most, by that in which we can find our delight – our treasure.

For our will to be thus attracted and motivated, we have to keep placing ourselves before that which we love - allow ourselves to be attracted. We need to fill our souls with Goodness, to be penetrated with the Truth, to live in the presence of God. This means moving in a world of faith. Certainly Faith is a gift; it is also a free response.

We consecrate a good amount of our time to liturgical celebration, to study of the Bible and to spiritual reading. If we are filled with enthusiasm for God, if we find our delight in seeking and knowing Him, if we are happy to belong to Him and to adore Him, then our contemplative life is rich and full. Without this desire to live fully our existence – that is in faith – our days as Religious of the Assumption will seem to us heavy and

over structured. Our contemplative style of life is no luxury for those who seek God. It creates the necessary environment for our hearts.

JESUS CHRIST

By the time of his baptism, we can assume that Augustine knew Christ as the Incarnate Word, God came to mankind as Mediator and Model. But he had only begun to know Jesus Christ as his Redeemer and Saviour. The “Dialogues” written soon after his confession are very philosophical. Christ, even in the “Soliloquies” seems very abstract and lacking in warmth as compared to the Christ of his later works.

On reading his works, one has the impression of a growing devotion to Christ as Augustine lived his faith. Devotion is a weak word: let us speak rather of a loving relationship with Christ and of the importance Christ assumed in his life.

The “Confessions”, written more than ten years after his conversion, give us a glimpse of his deepest feelings and convictions concerning Christ. They show us how life with Christ can transform the mind, the heart and the whole person.

Christ became for Augustine, the centre of his existence: the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is not only the interior Master but also the Healer, the one Mediator, the Saviour, our true home.

The discovery of the Scriptures was decisive. Augustine believed that Christ is sacramentally present in the Scriptures and that they are a path of Salvation, as the humanity of Christ is. What had first put him off now attracted him – their accessibility, even to the most simple and uncouth. Through his assiduous study and his loving contemplation of the Scriptures, the experience of God for Augustine, became more and more “christic” – biblical and ecclesial. He found in the Word not only a remedy for his soul but also his chaste delights. God spoke to Him through the Scriptures and his prayer, his preaching and his writings were nourished by them.

The humility of God in Jesus Christ never ceased to amaze Augustine and it brought him ever closer to His humanity, then to all humankind. The bitter experience of sin and his powerlessness to reach God on his own, made him ever more aware of God’s merciful condescension. (Philippians 2 recurs like a refrain in his writings – more than 1100 times). His God became the God, Father of Jesus Christ.

It would be interesting to try to trace the development of Augustine’s knowledge and love for Christ. Perhaps someone has already done so, but that is not my point...

Each one of us has a personal history of her own with Christ. We should be able to go back and trace its development. If you are a “cradle catholic” perhaps you have never known life without the presence of Christ. Perhaps you have also taken that presence for granted. Have you ever considered what life would be without Him? What difference does Jesus Christ really make?

Life for Christians is the same as that for everyone else on the face of the earth: the same good or cruel events, the same chances and deprivation. The world is the same for all: beautiful, mysterious, sometimes frightening. The wars, the famines, the sicknesses, affect all indifferently. What difference does it make to live life with and in Christ? What would your world have been without Jesus Christ, without the Church: the community, the sacraments and the liturgical year?

You also have experienced conversion: look back to your first conversion, the moment when you first said “yes” to Christ and set out to follow Him. What were the circumstances? What attracted you or made you decide? What were you like at the time? How has the journey been since then? In your relationship, what have been the important moments of joy, sorrow or decision?

And now? Who is Christ for you? Who are you for Him? (It would be worth while writing Him your replies).

Of course, there is no going back and we should have no desire to do so. The challenge for today is to maintain or rediscover that simplicity and absolute quality of our first response.

Christ calls us to follow Him. We have never “arrived”; He is always before us. He is going up to Jerusalem – not right away – but He invites us to enter into a process, that of discipleship – of one who follows, who renounces, who loves, who carries his cross. His way always demands more, the “magis”. Our itineraries will be different – each one is unique – but the Way will always be the same.

If our relationship with the Lord loses something of its vitality, this rarely arrives because of sufferings or difficulties, or even because of doubts concerning faith. It happens because we have been less attentive, less aware, less ready to give, less faithful. This “less” can bring about a crisis of faith, weaken it or gradually extinguish it.

There are also certain sure obstacles to our communion with Christ.

- Bitterness and resentment, the refusal to forgive cannot co-exist with love. Such attitudes may seem like single events or instances, but they poison the entire heart and all its works.
- An attachment, however small, can cut the current of our love for the Lord. The heart is riveted, as it were, to that one spot. On this point the teaching of Christ is formal: one must be ready to renounce anything and everything to follow Him. Attachments are not only to persons and to things. We can be equally attached to our work or to our comfort, to a cause or to a combat. We can even be attached to our resentments. The obstacle does not lie in the attachments against which we struggle, for that shows the heart is not fixed on the object, but in the attachments that our heart consents to.

There are two other obstacles that I have observed in religious. They are deceptive in appearance and not immediately recognized.

- Everyone knows that routine is the mortal enemy of love. Less attention is paid to superficiality. Like couples who are afraid of confronting each other on a deep level and who maintain a hectic social life, some of us have an equally hectic spiritual life: prayer groups and new methods of prayer, a multiplicity of sessions, apostolic meetings or formation courses. Much spiritual talk but little taste for confrontation with self in silence. Little feel for humble concrete realities. The true capacities of the heart lie untapped.
- The other obstacle is a quiet despair which sets in as a result of tepidity and calmly undermines the spirit. We no longer dare to believe in the life and joy promised us by the Gospel. The reality on which our Christian life rests seems less real. We no longer dare to hope for sanctity. Under pretext of realism we accept our mediocrity. It is a form of sin against the Spirit. A death has already set in.

If a deep relationship is to succeed it presupposes presence, attentiveness, and a constant investment of oneself. How much more in a relationship of faith. Love for Christ which does not express itself in gratuitous gestures, affectionate thoughts or concrete acts, quite simply is not love. Love cannot bear to be idle. It is infinitely creative. It has invented sacrifice, penance, asceticism as a means of assuaging the need to love, or to increase the capacity for love. Didn't M. Marie Eugenie tell us: “What is missing today in your joy is missing in your sacrifice.” A simple question of anthropology!

Jesus never stops thinking of us; he is present in all that touches our lives. Today, as for Augustine 1600 years ago, Christ, the living word of the living God, comes to meet us in the Church through the Scriptures. The beauty of his person draws us, his message enlightens us. He explains to us the meaning of our life and takes our life into his own. Day after day, his Good News manifests the true dimensions of our existence and is written into our history – as if there were a blank page opposite each page of the Gospel. This message is both judgment and salvation, for, at one and the same time its light reveals our sin and opens the way to life.

APOSTOLIC CHARITY

Tradition has named Augustine the Doctor of Charity. In one way or the other, love dominates his works as it dominated his life. He constantly comes back to the great commandment, the double commandment of the love of God and of neighbor. For him, all of Sacred Scripture is oriented towards this command. Love is its meaning and its fulfillment. Jesus is the model and the Way. Just as I mentioned above that we can trace a development in Augustine's experience and teaching concerning Christ, so I believe that the same can be said concerning love.

Augustine seems to progress from a position that the love of God comes first, then the love of neighbor – we can grow in love of God by loving our neighbor – to a position which confounds the two in a single, undivided love. He seems to shift the accent from God as object of our love to God as Love itself. “God is Love”, says St. John: “Love is God” discovers Augustine and dares to write in a rather startling way. Love is poured out in our hearts by the Spirit and the experience of love for our neighbor is an experience of God.

As for us all, Augustine learned to love by experience, by practice. Psychologically, he did not start off from an ideal family situation: his mother was extremely possessive and his father was not only an unfaithful and difficult husband, but did not seem to have been close to his son. From what we can gather about his temperament, Augustine was sensitive and emotional, probably timid and slow to give himself. He was proud (not without reason) and was unduly concerned by what others thought about him and his writings. So introspective, he was undoubtedly quite self-centered. Whatever his temperament, he loved...

Friends were an important part of his life and he apparently had a gift for friendship. He sought retreat and solitude but also sought good company and revealed a tendency to create community wherever he was. Spontaneously, he surrounded himself with companions who shared his tastes and ideas. He was community-minded in sin, just as he was in the search for truth, in his conversion, in his love of contemplation and his apostolic vocation. One heart and one soul intent upon God is the final expression of his community ideal.

From the beginning of his Christian life, Augustine realized that following Christ he was embarked on a way of love. People flocked to him for instruction and counsel; he must have responded or they would not have continued to come – or his friends to complain!

Quite literally forced by the people to become their priest, Augustine gave up his solitude with its intellectual and spiritual pursuits more or less of his own choice. In imitation of and fidelity to Christ, he began a life for others. Still he might have hoped for a certain tranquility in his contemplative community; four years later, he was bishop.

Another conversion: perhaps more difficult than the first. Priest, bishop, he was called to let go of his own life, his own projects and plans. Never again would he be free of the cares of his diocese and of the Universal Church. But the great St. Augustine whom we know would probably never have existed had he not become Bishop of Hippo.

He was drawn back into the cares and problems of ordinary men and of everyday life – Bishop, but also administrator, judge, father to the poor – he was led into a constant gift of his talents, his time, his energies to Christ in the Church. It was a commitment of his whole being to all the people of his diocese, to all who came to solicit favors and services of all sorts. For him, the Church was not a mystical reality in the abstract; when he was at his work-table, or at the altar, the Church was his flock: familiar persons, familiar situations of holiness and sin. As shepherd, he was brother and servant to all – so that one day all together, they might live with Christ.

The career that he had renounced was forced back on him. He preached untiringly, adapting himself and his language to his people and their needs. Despite the burden of his pastoral responsibilities, he found the time

to produce the immense corpus of writings that we possess today and which has formed so many generations of Christians down through the centuries.

His life was the same as his message. Seeing our need, Christ gave his life for all; we too, must have compassion on all in need. Every man is, in truth, the neighbor of every other.

In apostolic charity, Augustine's contemplative love found its true dimensions and its fulfillment. The same love which made Augustine seek God alone in a monastic style of life thrust him into the intense activity of apostolic service. It was the logical outcome of all his understanding of the double commandment of love, of all he had contemplated of the Christ of the Scriptures.

Our vocation as Religious of the Assumption follows this same model: a personal love for God seeking our happiness in Him Alone, an extensive love urging us to go out towards others. Apostolic Charity means loving as Christ loved. There is no mission, no apostolate, no profession, no work, no service, no undertaking for us, which has any other motivation than love. This love expresses itself in a multitude of ways. I would like to stress for us zeal, dis-interestedness, the attitude of servant, the gift of self.

You cannot belong to the Assumption without **zeal**. Zeal springs from an ardent love of God; the awareness of all that He is and of all that He wants to be, should be, for us. It is born of a boundless compassion for our fellow human beings especially for those who are in direct need and who do not know the God of Jesus Christ and therefore do not count on Him, abandon themselves to Him, and let Him be their God.

At the Assumption, zeal is inseparable from magnanimity, goes beyond all ideologies, banishes pettiness, has no time for comparisons or rivalries. It is a special virtue to those who love the Kingdom, who care to believe that God wills it on earth now and who accept to spare no effort as they do everything in their power that it may come. Zeal inspires prayer which pierces the heavens.

Zeal is not a question of a passionate nature nor an energetic disposition. It burns in the heart of anyone who has lovingly "studied" the heart of Jesus. It grows through familiarity with Him, through labouring with Him, under his yoke. It grows from contact with the poor, with the suffering and ignorance of the multitude. It does not matter how much you feel its ardour. It is measured by what it impels you to do for God and the Kingdom.

Dis-interestedness, like zeal, is an absolute requirement for anyone who pretends to labour for the Kingdom. It is a quality of love that we must constantly cultivate, one that is not easy to acquire. Dis-interestedness means that we are not looking for gain or affection, for praise or approbation for ourselves. We renounce these returns because we are supremely interested in the good of the other, thoroughly occupied with the affairs of the Kingdom. Such an attitude cannot be simulated over any period of time: very quickly it becomes quite clear to others, if not to ourselves, why and for whom we do what we do.

Dis-interested love detaches us from what we are doing – a particular job or a career; all that matters is the persons to whom we are sent. Our work is determined by our mission. Prayer for others and our readiness to contribute to the work of others are tests of our dis-interestedness. In both bases we give up receiving credit for our labours.

I do not think we can be truly dis-interested in our work and in our relationships until we have realized that we are already loved, cared for and watched over by an infinite Love. We are quite sure to be looking out for ourselves unless we are convinced that God is doing such a perfect job of it that we do not need anything else. God has loved us first; He has given us the power to love, to love with His own Love. Believing all this, may suppose a great effort for some of us, depending on our experience.

The strange paradox is that people who do not seek a return, generally have the impression that they are overpaid.

To those whom He has chosen to be with Him and to be sent, Jesus confides that they must become the **servants** of all. (The word in Greek for servant is the same as for slave!). Jesus is, as in all that He proposes, the perfect example. When we contemplate Jesus as Servant in the magnificent passages of Isaiah or at the feet of his disciples, we grasp something of the grandeur of service, something of its godliness. In fact, according to one of the parables, in Heaven the Master will seat us at table and serve us. If that is the way it is in Heaven, God must enjoy serving and service must be a pleasure!

So much for our meditation. For most of us if it is not so easy to be at the service of those around us, to let others have rights over our time, our talents, our very selves. Our work, however, is a service and we are servants not only of the Church, or of Truth or of a cause – but of persons. It is quite frightening to see sisters who have not even a spirit of service, who do not seem inclined to go out of their way for others – for all others! - to give a helping hand, to persevere in humble community tasks. They are “mercenaries”. They do exist. It is, on the other hand, immensely consoling to see those sisters who have an eye for what has to be done and who, spending their whole day in serving, always seem positively pleased to render an additional service. They also exist.

If we have not learned to serve, it is high time to place ourselves in Jesus’ school. Here again, the paradox is that, once you get the “hang” of it, service is a pleasure.

What can I say about the gift of self? It is the very essence of love and there is no love without it. It is the whole of the Gospel, the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not use the word love that often, but his life and teachings, his works and acts are a continuous self-giving. It is the constant activity of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what we celebrate and commit ourselves to at every Eucharist; this is why we want to participate in the Eucharist every day.

“Freely you have received, freely give”. All has been given us. Take and give... the more we enter into this movement, the more joyfully we give away our possessions and our very life. We pass through moments when it is hard and moments of greater ease; that is the rhythm of learning perfect love.

The gift of self is a mentality to be created, an attitude to be formed, a constant striving. It is a way of life and it is the religious life as M. Marie Eugenie understood it: a particular way of entering into Christ’s mission of universal redemption – by the sacrifice of our life.

Without this weight of apostolic love, our contemplative life at the Assumption is not authentic. M. Marie Eugenie designed our life style to correspond to our vocation of zeal for the Kingdom. The chance of our Assumption life is that it leaves very little room for our egoism, if we give ourselves wholeheartedly to it. We are drawn out of ourselves, almost forced out of ourselves, by the demands of our prayer and our apostolate.

You may wonder why I insist on repeating the obvious, what you know by heart. I want to keep the Gospel message “up front”, uppermost in your hearts. There are so many competing modes of approaching, analyzing, reacting to the events, situations and persons that the utterly simple and straightforward manner of the Gospel may not have the first place. We must try to penetrate more deeply into the Gospel and into our culture; one continually casts light on the other. But, for a Christian, the Gospel offers the only response possible.

I put the ideal before you. It is divine. The way is the humanity of Jesus married to our poor humanity.

I end this letter only on Trinity Sunday. In the meantime I have been to England and Scotland and back. I had thought when I began this letter that it would be short and easy to write. As it turned out, it led me deep into the works of St. Augustine and into the “workings” of my own soul, as well as that of the Congregation.

My three points became many more; the themes overlap and repeat each other. They will appeal to you differently according to your age, your spirituality or the grace of this particular moment in your life. If one or other is a message for you or a call to conversion, I shall be amply repaid. Perhaps you will also feel closer to St. Augustine or have the desire to know him a little better. I have purposely avoided quoting him, but depending on your familiarity with his writings and thought, you will find fewer or more silent borrowings.

First of all to him, and then to you, I apologize for the very rapid resumes of his life and his thought. They do not pretend to be complete. I only hope I have not altered the truth to reflect my own ideas.

The Christian life is a process of conversion, and a long life means a long process of conversion.

One with you on the way,

Sr. Clare Teresa, r.a.
Superior General