

Our Daily Bread?

An Augustinian Perspective on Poverty and Hunger

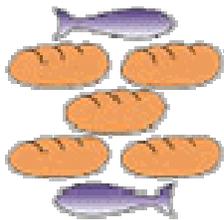
Poverty and hunger are two current problems, but not two new problems, for they have existed in other places and times throughout history. They were certainly present in the north of Africa at the time of St. Augustine.

As a pastor concerned with the major problems of his times, Augustine frequently referred to hunger and poverty in his preaching. He constantly refers to these topics, relating them to three significant Biblical texts:

- The parable of the rich glutton and the poor man Lazarus --Luke 16: 19-31
- The last judgment and the works of mercy --Matt 25: 31ss
- Paul's exhortation to the rich about the dangers of avarice and the need of sharing our goods --1 Tim 6: 7-19

These texts indicate the basic lines of Augustinian thought on these topics. We will summarize them here in four points:

Knowledge of Social Conditions and Concern for the Poor



Augustine knew well the social circumstances of his people. As well as the rich minority, he knew the world of the countless beggar, the poor majority who suffered hunger and daily requested help from him. --See Sermon 9: 19; Sermon 14: 1; Sermon 155: 5

God made the world for all, Augustine comments, but human pride seeks the accumulation of wealth. Although all have the same skin, all do not have the same dress. All were born naked, but now some swim in abundance while others don't have anything. --See Sermon 39: 4; Sermon 61: 2; Sermon 177: 6-7

For that reason Augustine continually looked to the poorest. He even sold off the sacred vessels in order to be able to help the poor. They were his special guests on the anniversary of his episcopal ordination. He interceded continually for them before the community. He became *the beggar for the beggars*. --See Sermon 66: 8 The Bishop of Hippo almost always included at the end of his preaching the same words: *Don't reject the poor or Think of the poor or Give to the poor what you have gathered*. --See Sermon 41: 6; Sermon 25: 8; Sermon 122: 6

Poverty and Wealth

The Augustinian perspective on poverty and wealth does not remain merely on the level of awareness of social circumstances and solidarity with the poorest. Augustine frequently invited his listeners to discern the causes of this situation. He openly criticized what today we would call *materialism* and *consumer society*.

Although they are worth less than interior riches, the goods and wealth of this world are not bad, Augustine proclaimed. They are good, but they can make human beings neither good nor happy.

Material goods are, on the other hand, extraordinarily dangerous, because they lead to arrogance and avarice. *Avarice is the worm of wealth. It is very difficult for one who is rich not also to be arrogant.* --Sermon 39: 4

Avarice corrupts the human heart. We don't only use material goods; we allow ourselves to be enslaved by them, and they induce us to betray the love of God and one another. --See Sermon 50: 5-8; Sermon 61: 2; Sermon 177: 3ss; Sermon 162: 3

From an Augustinian perspective, we could say that the problem is not in being rich, but rather in wanting to be rich. The problem resides in the lust for wealth, in avarice, greed and arrogance. Materialistic selfishness that forgets God, rejects the poor and is incapable of sharing is, in fact, capable of doing anything in order to earn and to accumulate wealth. --See Sermon 39: 3; Sermon 61: 10; Sermon 14: 4, Sermon 85; Sermon 86

This is radically opposed to the Reign of God, in which the poor and humble are the first, symbolized in the parable of hungry Lazarus and the rich glutton. God doesn't listen to the rich glutton because the rich glutton did not listen to the poor, hungry Lazarus. The rich glutton rejected Lazarus and made fun of the prophets. He didn't want to share material goods and so neither will he share happiness in heaven. In him are united arrogance, incredulity, greed and the lack of solidarity, comments Augustine. -- See Sermon 41: 4ss; Sermon 367: 2

Charity and Sharing of Goods

Notably different, certainly, is the correct attitude from the human and Christian point of view, which Augustine unfailingly reminded everyone: to give, distribute, share. *If you have money, share it, Don't give your hand rest from giving, Give as much as you can, and If you have a lot, give with more reason; if you have little, give what you can.* --Sermon 61: 3; Sermon 389: 1; Sermon 86: 17; Sermon 60: 6; Sermon 359A: 12

On the other hand, it is not simply a matter of giving from what is superfluous, but of really sharing what one has. Augustine's demanding attitude is based on his peculiar and interesting form of understanding private property. It is always in a relative sense, according to the whole tradition of the Doctors of the Church, and subject to the principle of the Common Good, as contemporary Catholic social teaching underscores.

God is the only absolute owner of everything. Only God can truly say *This gold and silver are mine.* Everyone other than God is a mere administrator of what God has given, and is truly entitled to possess only what one uses correctly. --Sermon 50: 2

Augustine underlines that *All that you have which is extra is needed by others, What you have more than enough of is needed by the poor.* He affirms clearly that *You possess what belongs to others when you have more than enough for yourself* and that *It is a kind of robbery to not give to the needy what you have more than enough of.* --Sermon 39: 6; Sermon 61: 12; Com. to the s. 147: 12; Sermon 206: 10

Christ and the Poor

Here again we have an example of Augustine's fine psychological analysis being intimately united to a solid theological reflection. His thought is inspired, in this case, by his reflection on Matthew 25: 31ss and on the concept of the *Whole Christ*. Christ became poor and is present in the poor, who are the favorite members of his Body or Church.

Christ is at the same time rich and poor: as God, rich in heaven; as human, poor and among us, still hungry and in need, because *Here he is poor and in the poor.* --Sermon 123: 4

Today Christ is hungry in the poor. --See Sermon 390: 2; Sermon 32: 20 *You give to Christ when you give to the poor*, Augustine states. *Listen, then, for a moment and meditate as you should just how great merit it is to have fed Christ and what an enormous crime it is to have ignored Christ's hunger.* --Sermon 389: 6

For that reason, from an Augustinian perspective, one can state that it is not possible to be Christian and to live with your back turned to the problems and the sufferings of the needy. *The sacrifice of a Christian is to come to the aid of the poor*, and *The great wealth of a Christian are the needs of the poor, if we understand where we should store what we possess.* --Sermon 42: 1; Sermon 302: 8

Not incidentally did Augustine consider as the perfect model for Christian life the practice of the Jerusalem community (--Acts 4: 31-35) that included overcoming poverty by means of the sharing of material goods, an ideal that he continually proposed to his own flock and that he strove to exemplify in his own monastic community.

By Way of Conclusion

If Augustine Were Alive is the title of an excellent reflection on Augustinian spirituality by Augustinian of the Midwest Theodore Tack, O.S.A. A suggestive title that reminds us that we have the challenge of discovering what Augustine would say and do if he lived today. We are not able to limit ourselves to simply repeat what he said and did in his time. Our times are different. And so, with this thought in mind, we propose some readings for reflection.

- Saint Augustine, [Sermon 85](#) (Benedictine numbering) (Opens new window) and [Sermon 86](#) (Benedictine numbering) (Opens new window) (perhaps the best Augustinian synthesis on the poor and poverty)
- United Nations Development Program, [Human Development Report 1999](#) (Opens new window) (on the distribution of wealth in the world)

Here are some questions for personal reflection and community dialogue:

1. Do we know the social circumstances of the poor and hungry, or are we too enclosed in our own world, insensitive to people's problems, especially those of the poorest?
2. What aspects of Augustinian thought on this topic are worthwhile to be taken into account today?
3. What are we doing to become more aware of the problem of hunger and poverty, and to contribute, insofar as we can, to their solution?
4. What can we do today in this aspect, as if Augustine were alive among us?

--Adapted from *Justice and Peace: An Augustinian Contribution to Topics of Justice and Peace*, bi-monthly bulletin of the Augustinian Secretariate for Justice and Peace
http://www.midwestaugustinians.org/justpaxpoverty_aug.html