

“The Spirituality of Living in Community”  
a conference given by: Fr Brian Lowery, Prior of Convento  
S.Agostino, San Gimignano, Italy

## **Introduction**

Using the word, “spirituality” is a bold but enlightened way of speaking about “living in community”. For I am convinced of three things:

- 1.) Living in community asks from each of us the very finest of human qualities, so fine that we would dare to call them “spiritual”. They belong to the very depths of our person.
- 2.) I would add that these qualities are often gifts of the Spirit of God, another reason to call them spiritual.
- 3.) Living in community further enriches these fine qualities and deepens our relationship with God.

So, it is a two way street. Community living asks and it gives. That’s the approach I am going to take during this weekend.

A quick look at some different kinds of community, so that we can determine what we are talking about when we speak of community living:

- 1.) Monastic: full-time involvement and total commitment; share place, share time, share material goods, have a common purpose,
- 2.) L’Arche of Jean Vanier (men and women living full time together with mentally or physically disabled): share place, share time, share material goods, have the common purpose of integrating the disabled,
- 3.) Fede e Luce, also of Jean Vanier (regular encounters of a day or half day: mentally or physically disabled , parents and “friends”); momentarily share time, share

- place, have common purpose of integrating disabled as well as their parents,
- 4.) Possible Via Francigena community: long term, degree of sharing yet to be determined, purpose of serving pilgrims in name of Church,
  - 5.) Federazione di Agostiniani Secolari: monthly encounters, purpose of deepening Augustine's spirituality in lives; they consider themselves a community without very frequent contact: used Ratziner's book *La Fraternita' Cristiana*,
  - 6.) Augustinian Volunteers: a year live together, share place; share time, share material goods to an extent, purpose of giving different kinds of service,
  - 7.) Yours? TIME FOR BRIEF DIALOG

This weekend we are going to talk about your living in community and look for some light from the Rule of St. Augustine. I'm not trying to make friars or nuns out of you. It is simply that Augustine, while writing a rule for his monastery, touched upon principles that are helpful for all kinds of communal living. call for those finest and deepest human qualities, and promote them. He had a way of touching the interior reality of things that go on in everyday life. You might say he went to the heart of the matter.

First of all, let's put Augustine's Rule into context historically.

Basil - East (Asia Minor) - 4<sup>th</sup> century

Augustine - North Africa - 4<sup>th</sup> century

Benedict - Italian peninsula - 5<sup>th</sup> century

Francis - Italy - 13<sup>th</sup> century

There have been many other rules written since then, but these are the main ones that have influence.

Note well, the Rule of Augustine was written 1600 years ago and in Northern Africa. It won't necessarily speak the way we do and it doesn't say everything there is to say about living in community. But, then, who could? I would

say its age is important because if it is still looked to for guidance in living community, it must have said something that made it survive all these centuries.

The Rule of Augustine is short compared to others. He wrote it after having lived some years as a layman in a community of friends after his conversion, then as a priest in Hippo together with lay monks. Finally, with all that experience, as a new bishop he wrote a rule for the community he had just left and continued to live it himself with the priests of his local church. The Rule doesn't go into specific details and regulations about prayer times, ascetical practices, etc. And it presumes rather than presents a theology of monastic life. Rather it seems to revolve around human relationships and love as the basis for the common life of people seeking God. And that is why it can be of interest to anyone desiring to live community today.

So, let's begin to read the Rule. You have your copy. I'll point out the passages that can interest us.

### **Chapter One. The basic ideal: mutual love expressed in the community of goods and humility**

***BEFORE ALL ELSE, LIVE TOGETHER IN HARMONY, BEING OF ONE MIND AND ONE HEART ON THE WAY TO GOD. FOR IS IT NOT PRECISELY FOR THIS REASON THAT YOU HAVE COME TO LIVE TOGETHER?***

He gets right down to the point and states "the reason that you have come together". And note: the reason is to "live together in harmony" and to be "of one mind and one heart" and, doing so, to be "on the way to God". Let's look at that more closely.

Augustine's words echo Luke's description of the early Church of Jerusalem in the *Acts of the Apostles*: And they

were meant to. Luke's words were: *The whole group of believers was united in mind and heart; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common* (4, 32). Oneness of mind and heart is another way of saying "love", emphasizing its unifying power on people. Augustine, however, adds his own words: "on the way to God". The exact words were *in Deum*. For those of you who know Latin, as an accusative *in Deum* is dynamic and moving. It shows direction. Here is our first example of the two-way street:

The members of a community are asked to give: effort towards harmony, striving to have one mind and one heart. But then they receive. What do they receive? Movement forward as they seek union with God both individually and as a community.

Augustine's words also echo a famous Vatican II description of the Church: "The Church in Christ is in the nature of a sacrament - a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of all men and women" (LG 1, 1). Living together in harmony is another way of saying the Council's word "communion". "Communion" is another way of saying "love". Augustine puts the living of community into a broader context, namely the whole Church and the unity of all humanity. Community can never be looked at only in itself. The rest of the Rule is nothing more than filling out the basic principle of love and unity.

I think it is worthwhile mentioning that Augustine's temperament had a great amount to do with this vision. He had a natural capacity for friendship. His personality attracted many people to him and he loved their company. He once said in his *Confessions*: "I could not live without friends". Historically we know many of their names and we know a lot about them. The process of making, keeping and deepening friendships has a lot to do with living in community.

Augustine goes on:

**AMONG YOU THERE CAN BE NO QUESTION OF PERSONAL PROPERTY. RATHER TAKE CARE THAT YOU SHARE EVERYTHING IN COMMON.**

Obviously in most community arrangements there cannot be complete communion of material goods as there is in a monastic community. After stating the purpose of coming together, Augustine goes right to the question of putting all things in common because he was aware of how material things can divide people, and that would contradict the monastic ideal he had just given. That's why in the monastery there would be no personal possessions, but all would be held in common. The community he was proposing would be a protest against competition, accumulation of wealth, unjust distribution and other evils prevalent even in those times, that could cause wars, poverty and suffering in the world.

But there is a kind of communion of goods even in communities like yours. And the sharing could have a similar positive effect on you. What do you think? You certainly have space in common (dining room, tv room, other?). Maybe there is a kitchen and a refrigerator? You also have air, or better, the atmosphere of the house. All these are common possessions. ANY THOUGHTS ON THIS?

Regarding the community of goods in a monastery, Augustine continues on about how things are to be distributed and touches on a very important aspect of any community. First what he says:

**YOUR SUPERIOR SHOULD SEE TO IT THAT EACH PERSON IS PROVIDED WITH FOOD AND CLOTHING. HE DOES NOT HAVE TO GIVE EXACTLY THE SAME TO EVERYONE, FOR YOU ARE NOT ALL EQUALLY**

**STRONG, BUT EACH PERSON SHOULD BE GIVEN WHAT HE OR SHE PERSONALLY NEEDS. FOR THIS IS WHAT YOU READ IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: "EVERYTHING THEY OWNED WAS HELD IN COMMON, AND EACH ONE RECEIVED WHATEVER HE HAD NEED OF (4, 32; 4, 35).**

Again, there are things in this passage that do not pertain to your life in common. No superior is distributing food and clothing to you. But what Augustine says about people having different needs reveals how much he appreciates the importance of personal differences. In any community we encounter a great variety of backgrounds, talents, experiences, social levels, cultures, temperaments, physical health, and many other things that create a great variety of different needs. I imagine this is especially true in your community. That sure can complicate things, can't it? Wouldn't it be nicer if we were all the same and had the same requirements? No, I don't think so.

Augustine never wanted a colorless uniformity. We would say today: not a melting pot; rather a salad. You can only have a good community when each member can be his or her own full self. Community must be made of mature persons with a certain degree of their own self-sufficiency. You have a community that works when people's differences are respected. At the same time, however, you can only have a community that works when individuals are willing to give up some of their autonomy for the good of all. So a certain tension appears, and I'm sure you have already met it, between what is similar about everyone and what is different; between the needs of the group and the individual needs; between the common good and the individual good. QUESTION: I KNOW THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENCES AMONG YOU. WHAT IS IT THAT IS SIMILAR AMONG YOU?

Does all this fit with the idea of “spirituality”? We are talking about wisdom and judgement, about going beyond self. One of the notable qualities of Augustine’s Rule is the almost complete absence of emphasis on asceticism, that is, leading an ascetical life by denying oneself food and drink or by self chastisement. The accent shifts more to life in a community as a victory over self-seeking. He sees the cost of love in giving to the common life as a real asceticism. My own experience has taught me that living community as Augustine proposes it calls forth all of the virtues ever mentioned in the New Testament.

Getting back to the two-way street idea, community asks and community gives. All that we just saw it ask is also what it gives: a growing up humanly, a going beyond self spiritually, moving further along one’s pilgrimage to God.

The next part of Chapter One is a bit longer. It talks about the complexion or make-up of the community. Let’s go on further:

(READ 4, 5, 6 and 7)

In the late Roman period religious communities could be composed of people from all sorts of backgrounds and levels of society. Men from wealthy and noble families came to the monastery and often brought with them tidy sums for the common pot. Men from peasant stock also came as well as even freed slaves. Augustine welcomed them all as equals and gave them the same ideals we have been talking about. No easy undertaking. Such a community became a sort of social protest against Roman class order and institutional rigidity.

Within this Chapter One he warns them all to be on the alert for certain dangers in their new state of life. For instance, to those who came from a lower strata of society he said not to look in a religious community for what they could not find outside, nor to pride themselves because they now share life

with people whom they would not have dared to even approach before, namely men of culture and influence. On the other hand, he warns those who came from a higher class not to look down on their brothers who came from a position of poverty, nor to feel good about themselves because they had brought wealth to the community. In short, neither the attitude of “movin’ on up” nor that of insufferable smugness.

And here we meet up with what Augustine always recommended to anyone who ever asked him for spiritual advice: the virtue of humility. This for him was the basic virtue, not just one among many, but the one that underlies all other virtues. It is the fertile soil of love.

Now, what is humility? Allow me to offer some of my own ideas. One way of looking at humility is: living according to truth. Maybe you can call it a radical realism about your own self. And one truth about my own self that is absolute and fundamental is the following: I AM NOT THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE! Obvious, right? No! Sometimes down deep we are not convinced.

On the other hand, one thing that is not humility is saying “I’m nobody”, “I don’t count”, “I’m the last in the pack”, “I’m not important”. Not true! Even though I am not the center of the universe, I am important. I am very important. But so are you important, and so are you ... Humility is putting myself in the right place among everybody else. The right place! And that’s the only way to live in community: to consider everyone as important as you. This might not be all there is to the virtue of humility, but it certainly is a great start. It can be quickly transformed into respect, considerateness, patience with others, willingness to sacrifice, ability to ask forgiveness, ability to forgive and all those other things that are so necessary to make community work.

St. Augustine also speaks in this chapter of pride, the opposite of humility, that ruins our good works. But I think it

more as the best way to sabotage community. This is a message I frequently give at wedding ceremonies: the need to turn the kaleidoscope and take oneself out of the center, lest he or she ruin the nuptial community.

He now ends Chapter One with this summary exhortation, very similar to its opening, forming a sort of closure:

***YOU ARE TO LIVE TOGETHER, THEREFORE, ONE IN MIND AND HEART AND HONOR GOD IN ONE ANOTHER BECAUSE EACH OF YOU HAS BECOME HIS TEMPLE.***

The word, “honor”, is an active form of the humility I just spoke about. “To honor others” is not a bad word for all we have been saying. Perhaps today we would speak more of “respect”. But I tend to like “honor”, because it says even more than “respect”. It is a word sometimes used for God, and here Augustine is saying that, since God dwells in each person like in a temple, then maybe, just maybe, to honor another person is to honor God. Augustine did not distinguish between the love of God and the love of the person next to you. A mentor of mine, Tars van Bavel, says this of the word, “honor”:

When we hear the expression “to honor God”, we are immediately inclined to think of worship of the divine in the form of prayer, adoration or meditation, in liturgy, the Eucharist or the other sacraments. But when he thinks of worshipping God, Augustine thinks in the first place of the love relationship between people, of loving the sister or the brother alongside one. For Augustine the first form of worship is to be found in a good community life. This even precedes prayer which in the Rule comes only in the second chapter. (Tarcisius van Bavel, O.S.A., *The Rule of*

*Saint Augustine, with Introduction and Commentary*, London 1984, Darton, Longman and Todd, p. 58)

Honoring other persons is active humility because I actually go out of my way to lift up these persons. Let me give you an example. When a person speaks in what may seem an offensive way, I try to put him or her in a good light and generously interpret what they say. It just may not mean what it could seem to mean. I give them the benefit of the doubt. I think that this old phrase, "to give someone the benefit of the doubt", a good English expression for which I don't know a foreign language equivalent, reveals great spirituality. First of all, doubts exist. How hard it is to know just what is going on inside a person and just what he or she means when they say something we don't particularly like, especially in an international setting. If only we could admit the doubt and give a kind and understanding interpretation. There is humility at work, living by truth, i.e. the truth that full communication can be nigh on impossible and I can be wrong about how I read a person's words and even actions.

That's it for the opening of the Rule of St. Augustine. We'll pick more later on.