

Augustine of Hippo as promoter of unity

Agustín de Hipona
como promotor de unidad

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Abstract

Augustine can be considered an advocate of the unity of the Church, a man of prayer and dialogue, a minister of the Word, and a shepherd deeply touched by the humility of Christ. He preached with a strong passion for Christ and the Church, encouraged the faithful to undertake a pilgrimage of the heart, building the ministry of unity and peace, in a spirit of togetherness. The richness of the spiritual themes in his homilies (*Sermones*), the *Tractates on the Gospel of Saint John* (*Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium*) and the *Expositions on the psalms* (*Enarrationes in psalmos*) can be a foundation for ecumenism today. These works are very important for the study of his theology and spirituality, and are a necessary complement to his more doctrinal writings. They show how Augustine presented complex theological thoughts to the faithful, how he acted as bishop and pastor, and how he tried to be a promoter of the unity of the Church.

Keywords: Saint Augustine, Christian unity, Church, theology, spirituality



Resumen

Agustín puede ser considerado como un defensor de la unidad de la iglesia, un hombre de oración y diálogo, un ministro de la palabra, un pastor profundamente conmovido por la humildad de Cristo. Predicaba con una fuerte pasión por Cristo y por la iglesia, alentó a los fieles a emprender la peregrinación del corazón, construyendo el ministerio de unidad y paz, en un espíritu de unión. La riqueza de los temas espirituales en sus homilías (Sermones), los tratados sobre el Evangelio de San Juan (*Tractatus en Iohannis Evangelium*) y las Exposiciones sobre los salmos (*Enarrationes in psalmos*) pueden ser la base para el ecumenismo de hoy. Estos trabajos son muy importantes para el estudio de su teología y espiritualidad, y son un complemento necesario de sus escritos más doctrinales. Muestran cómo Agustín expuso pensamientos teológicos complejos a los fieles, cómo actuó como obispo y pastor, y cómo trató de ser un promotor de la unidad de la iglesia.

Palabras clave: san Agustín, unidad cristiana, iglesia, teología, espiritualidad



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Prayer as “A Togetherness in Silence with God”

Augustine preached from the heart and the richness of his own faith; the Bible was for him an inexhaustible resource. At the same time, he felt united with the faithful to whom he spoke. On the one hand, the minister stands face to face with God, on the other hand he stands face to face with the faithful.

“We are Fellow Students in One School” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 16, 3)

Augustine had gradually discovered the Word of God and listened to it attentively (Lawless 675-677). In the fourth book of *The Christian Doctrine*, Augustine urged the minister not only to study the Bible but also to pray: “Be a man of prayer before being a preacher” (*doctr. chr.*, 4, 15, 32). The preacher is not just a thinker, but someone who begins by listening to the voice of the Lord in prayer (Fitzgerald 188). Augustine prepared himself to preach by prayer and meditation. He emphasized not only his own prayer for the faithful, but also the prayer of the faithful for the preacher.

In his sermons Augustine developed a dialogical preaching style, which had the tone of a family conversation. Augustine addressed the faithful directly, inviting them to listen together to the Word of God. Through direct contact with the faithful, he would ask them questions and invite them to examine together what was not yet understood. *Simul quaeramus* (“let us search together”) returns as a refrain in his homilies (*Io. ev. tr.*, 18, 6). Augustine called the faithful to enter with him into the mystery of God’s Word. Preacher and audience are united as listeners to the eternal Word. Therefore, he invited the faithful: “Listen with me” (s., 261, 2). Both the preacher and the faithful need a deep and inner relationship with Christ. They are fellow students in one school. They all have one Teacher (*Io. ev. tr.*, 16, 3). It is Christ who in fact preaches. Augustine wanted to feed others from the same table at which he himself was fed (*Io. ev. tr.*, 2, 1): “I offer you a food by which I myself live; I set upon your table the food with which I satisfy myself. I am a servant, not the master of the house” (s., 339, 4). Christ is the inner Teacher. The human teacher can do his best, but it is always Christ who is the true teacher of the heart (s., 262, 2). Thus,

He who teaches in hearts has his chair in heaven... Let Christ be in your heart; let his anointing be in your heart, so that your heart may not be thirsting in a desert and having no springs by which it may be watered. There is therefore, an Interior Master who teaches. Christ teaches, his inspiration teaches. (*Io. ev. tr.*, 3, 13)

Ecumenical dialogue may be inspired by Augustine's concept of praying, which is "a togetherness in silence with God." Many times, the brothers of the community of Taizé are impressed with how young people are able to remain for a long while in the church in silence. In Taizé, young people learn how to become silent and "at the same time to let this silence become an inhabited silence." They discover silence as richness, as a kind of discipline which can teach them how to listen. During their stay, young people find one of the brothers who wants to listen to them. Brother Roger from Taizé repeated that the brothers are not spiritual masters: "They are not called to give advice, but above all to be people who pray and who listen" (Brother Aloïs 62). Brother Roger was deeply inspired by the vision that Augustine had of prayer and by his willingness to smooth the path for those who were seeking God. Indeed, he posted in his room a text of Saint Augustine that had a fundamental importance for him:

Therefore there is a voice of the heart, a language of the heart ... It is that inner voice which is our prayer when our lips are closed and our soul open before God. We keep silence and our heart speaks, not indeed to the ears of men but to God. Be certain. God will know how to listen to you. (*en. Ps.*, 125, 8)

The prayer of Taizé is a very accessible way of praying with simple and meditative songs, with a repetitive character, rooted in the monastic tradition. This kind of prayer can be compared with what Augustine calls *invocatio* ("invocation"), which emphasizes a stronger personal relationship with God. Augustine preferred short prayers, which are easy to repeat frequently. Prayer is not a matter of using many words, but of giving strength to desire. This way of praying touches the hearts of thousands of young people who go to Taizé.

The Prayer of Christ for Unity

According to Augustine, prayer is a matter of desire and yearning (Quicke “Saint Augustine” 196-198). Desire is the heart of prayer: “Longing is the bosom of the heart; we shall receive if we would stretch out our longing as far as we can” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 40, 10). Augustine called the faithful to pray and to long for God, to deepen and to widen their holy desires.

Our prayer is a participation in the prayerful desire of Christ for unity. Through his prayer to the Father at the Last Supper (“That all may be one”) Christ has taught us to pray. Augustine also meditates on the significance of the cry of Christ on the cross. His cry becomes a prayer for unity. His cry is united with the cry of all humanity: the cry of the children who die of hunger, the cry of those who are ill or persecuted. We all are one human person in Christ. His head is in Heaven and his limbs are suffering and toiling on Earth. His cry will be our cry. His prayer is our prayer. Our prayer is his prayer. Emphasizing the intimacy of the union between Christ and his members through prayer, Augustine evokes the unity of the whole Christ, in which we love and pray. Head and body, head and members are one Christ. Christ prays for us as priest. He prays for us as our head in the body of the Church. Our prayer is a participation in the prayer of Christ. As soon as Christ begins to pray, we may understand that we are in him, that we may share our prayer with him. The body of Christ is praying, the one Church of Christ is praying, the unity of head and members is praying: “This body of Christ, this one church of Christ, this unity that we are—this is what cries from the ends of the earth” (*en. Ps.*, 60, 3).

Augustine’s dialogical preaching is based upon listening together to God’s word in silence. In the line of Augustine, we affirm that ecumenical dialogue must be nourished and inspired by the Holy Scripture. The Holy Scripture is as food for the soul and source of spiritual life. Dialogue is more than an exchange of ideas, it is also an “exchange of spiritual gifts” (John Paul II “*Ut unum*”). Prayer is the soul of dialogue. The ecumenical movement was driven by a spiritual movement built upon the desire of Christ for unity. Its underlying strength is the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.” In this

way our prayer becomes a participation in the prayerful desire of Christ: "That all may be one."

Unity in Christ

Christ is central in the preaching of Saint Augustine and his spirituality is a Christ-centred spirituality (Ceriotti 182-194; Madec 845-908; Mallard 464-470). Augustine's reflection on the Church takes the person and the works of Christ as the point of departure. Augustine constantly refers to the figure and the person of Christ. The unity of divinity and humanity in the one person of Christ is the spiritual source of unity between God and man and among men. The word of God became man to be our Redeemer and Saviour. Christ is the reconciling Mediator who came to take away the separating wall, which is sin. Christ is not only the Conciliator between God and man; He is also the author of the unity between men (*Io. ev. tr.*, 36, 4; Cipriani "Molti 93-99).

***Christus Medicus* ("Christ Physician")**

Developing the concept of *Christus medicus*, Augustine presented a theology of healing and redemption (Berrouard "Le Christ" 854; Arbesmann 1-28). Because of his own life experience the theme of *Christus medicus* was not a purely academic exercise. He turned it into deeply personal prayer. At the beginning of Book Ten of the *Confessions* (*conf.*, 10, 3, 4) he speaks to God as his "inward Healer", yearning and longing for the healing touch of Christ, the divine Physician: "I do not hide my wounds: you are the doctor, I am the patient, you are merciful, I am miserable" (*conf.*, 10, 28, 39). The healing power and practice program of *Christus Medicus* are drawn upon by Augustine to lay out what he calls God's "medicinal saving economy, a 'dispensatio medicinalis'" (*Io. ev. tr.*, 36, 4). This is God's "healthcare program" for humanity, where Christ is indeed doctor and medicine and health itself. A wide range of terms is used by Augustine to highlight the therapeutic action of *Christus medicus* (Eijkenboom 74-130; 168-204). Christ is compared with a physician who cures sick eyes with salve. Christ applied stinging salves, the commandments of justice and love on the eyes of our heart (*Io.*

ev. tr., 35, 6). The “Word that was made flesh” became a medicine for us. He carried the wounded to the inn to be healed (*Io. ev. tr.*, 41, 13). Christ is the divine Healer of mankind’s spiritual diseases. According to Augustine, Christ is the Universal Physician insofar as everyone needs him because of their spiritual illness (*Io. ev. tr.*, 7, 18).

While Augustine describes the pedagogical and exemplary aspects of the medical activity of Christ in the incarnation, he highlights the soteriological meaning in Christ’s death on the cross. The suffering and the death of Christ on the cross became a medicine for our diseases. Jesus Christ is the only physician who can heal the wounds, inflicted by sin. Christ is the wounded Healer. He was beaten, whipped, besmeared with spittle, crowned with thorns, hung upon a cross, deprived of life, wounded by a spear, taken down from the cross and interred in a tomb. He is the divine Physician who cured our wounds while enduring his own.

Augustine describes the moment where the soldiers opened Christ’s side, and immediately there came out blood and water. Augustine interprets this piercing as the door of life, which was thrown open. From Christ’s pierced side the sacraments flowed (*Io. ev. tr.* 120, 2; Schreiter 98-102). Augustine explains that blood refers to the remission of sins: “Water provides the proper mix for the health-giving cup; it offers both bath and drink” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 120, 2). The death of Christ is the medicine of our diseases. The example of Christ as the wounded Healer may serve as a call for all Christians to imitate the merciful Lord who heals the wounds of the heart.

***Christus humilis* (“The Humble Christ”)**

The humility of Christ is an essential aspect of Augustine’s spirituality. Christ is the Master of humility (*Io. ev. tr.*, 25, 16). Christ is the humble Physician who came to heal the wounds caused by pride with the medicine of humility (Ruddy 91). As the divine Mediator, Christ reconciles through humility all that divides humanity. The second chapter of the letter of the apostle Paul to the Philippians (2, 6-11), in which Christ is humble and self-emptying, had inspired Augustine (Verwilghen 301-310). The humbled son has become the model for humility, the source of Christian behaviour

(*Io. ev. tr.*, 51, 3). More particularly, Augustine develops a profound meditation on the humility of Christ when the Lord washes the feet at the Last Supper. This gesture is not only an example of humility, but also an act of fraternal love: “We have learned humbleness from an Exalted One; let us, humble in our turn, do what the Exalted One did humbly. Great is the commendation of humility” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 58, 4). When the Lord says that even the man who has bathed has need to wash his feet, he refers to baptism, according to Augustine. By baptism a man is wholly washed, because baptism cleans all sins. Yet man continues to walk, the ground is stepped on and dust sticks to the feet. This means that, even baptised, man continues to experience sin. Therefore, Christ—who intercedes for us daily—washes our feet for us. In the Lord’s Prayer, we confess daily that we need to wash our feet, to direct the ways of our spiritual steps, when we pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” No matter how much progress we have made in the practice of justice, we may know that we are not without sin. Christ again and again washes our sins away by interceding for us when we pray to the Father, who is in heaven to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. The forgiveness symbolized in washing of feet takes place after baptism, and needs to be done continually for the remission of sins. Augustine highlights the community aspect of the prayer of the Lord when he concludes:

Let us forgive one another our sins and let us pray, one for another, for our sins and thus in a way wash one another’s feet. It is our part, by this gift, to apply the ministry of love and humility. (*Io. ev. tr.*, 58, 5)

Many times Jean Vanier has reflected on the importance of the gesture of the washing of feet in the community of l’Arche. He emphasizes that this gesture not only plays a role in their communities as sign of service, remission and unity, but also in the encounters of Christians from different ecclesial communities. The washing of feet is an ecumenical gesture (Vanier 25-35). According to Congar “the threshold of ecumenism can only be crossed on one’s knees” (Congar “Dialogue” 130). In 1963, at the end of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI descended the steps of the papal throne in St. Peter’s Basilica and laid the tiara on the altar in

a dramatic gesture of humility, and as a sign of the renunciation of human glory and power in keeping with the renewed spirit of the Council. Since then, none of his successors has worn a tiara. Pope Francis celebrated the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper in Rome's Casal del Marmo juvenile detention facility, and washed the feet of some of the young detainees. In his homily the Holy Father referred to Christ's caress, because Jesus came just for this—to serve us, to help us.

The ecumenical movement could draw sustaining inspiration from a new start from the humble Christ, the wounded Healer, the divine Physician. Christ made his own broken body the way to health, to healing and new life. In our own woundedness we become a source of healing and life for others. The humility of Christ is an example for all Christians. The road to harmony is through humility.

The Holy Spirit. The Bond of Love

Augustine sees the Holy Spirit as the bond of love within the Trinity, within the world and between the world and God. He emphasizes the link between intra-Trinitarian communion and ecclesial communion. Reflecting on the unifying activity of the Spirit within the Trinity, Augustine affirms that the Holy Spirit gathers the Church into unity, inflames us to the love of God and neighbour, and brings fire and fervour to love.

The Spirit as Love

Augustine thinks of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love that unites the Father and the Son: “The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, as the substantial and consubstantial love of both” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 105, 3). The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Spirit is the community of both (*Io. ev. tr.*, 99, 6-7). Augustine not only describes the role of the Spirit in the Trinity as charity which unites the Father and the Son, but also his relation and activity towards human beings. The love of God does not stay locked up within God but is poured forth in our hearts, by the fervour of the Spirit. In other words, Augustine puts the emphasis

on the correspondence between the inner life of the Trinity and the economy of salvation, on the relationship between the eternal proceeding of the Spirit within the Trinity and his mission in the history of salvation. The Spirit, who unites the Father and the Son as the bond of love and peace, can unify with the same love so many hearts and the body of Christ. The union between members of a family or a community can be very strong, but not so strong as the unity in the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the source of love and inflames us to the love of God and our neighbour (tr. 15, 10, 17).

Augustine regularly describes the Holy Spirit as the gift of God—*donum* (Io. ev. tr. 15, 2; Cipriani “Lo Spirito” 77-80). Referring to Saint Paul (Rom 5, 5: “The love of God has been poured forth in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”), Augustine calls the gift of the Holy Spirit “the greatest benefit in us” (Io. ev. tr., 32, 9). Augustine quoted between 387 and 429 at least 201 times the verse of Saint Paul (Rom 5,5). The quotations were rather rare until 411, but they became very frequent in the period from 411 to 421, which was the period in which Augustine was involved in the controversy with the Pelagians over the question of grace (La Bonnardière 657-665). Augustine defended the necessity of the grace and the help of the Holy Spirit in the imitation of Christ.

The Spirit as Soul of the Church

The Holy Scripture testifies that the Holy Spirit is not only the source of Love but is rather the love itself. The Spirit as love is not an abstract idea, but He is the substantial love of the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the power of God’s love, which has been poured forth in our hearts. Therefore, the Spirit says something not only about God but also about us. God is Spirit and the Spirit is the gift of God in us. Charity enables humankind to approach God and to become one soul and one heart. Augustine makes here the comparison between the activity of the Spirit in the body of Christ and the spirit or the soul in human nature. As the human body is enlivened by his spirit, the body of Christ, which is the Church, is enlivened by the divine life of the Spirit of the Father and the Son (s., 267, 4). The

body of Christ can only live from the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church (Cipriani “Lo Spirito” 126-136).

Referring to the charisms mentioned by Saint Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, Augustine reflects on the plurality of gifts of the Holy Spirit (or charisms), such as the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, prophecy, discerning of spirits and the gift of healings. There are also regional, linguistic and liturgical diversities. The variety of gifts is “given to men by measure and their harmony makes one body... There are various gifts of the faithful, distributed to them as to members, according to the measure proper to each” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 14, 10). The plurality of the gifts does not break the unity of the Church, because all these different gifts are distributed by one and the same Spirit.

Through this plurality Christians are united by one Spirit in one body, whose head is Christ (Cipriani “Molti” 139). Congar affirms that the Second Vatican Council rediscovered this charismatic dimension of the Church. The Church is not built as a uniform institution, but as unity in diversity of charisms or gifts of the Holy Spirit. On the basis of these charisms the Church is no longer considered as a pyramidal or clerical hierarchy, but as a communion, as the people of God. Referring to the liturgical post-conciliar renewal of the Eucharistic *epiclesis*, Congar speaks of the epiclectic structure of the Church. The Church does not possess the Holy Spirit, but invokes the Holy Spirit above her life, her members, her works and sacraments (Congar “Je crois” 857-866). The Second Vatican Council brought a new departure, returning to the original meaning of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church as Augustine often expressed: “The Holy Spirit works in the Church the same way as the soul in the body; the soul plays the same role for the body as the Holy Spirit for the Body of Christ, the Church” (*s.*, 267, 4).¹ Therefore, spiritual ecumenism is a matter of community spirituality, a spirituality of the Church as *koinonia*, of the Church as the people of God, the body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit.

¹ See *Lumen Gentium* 7.

The Spirit as Agent of Unity and Reconciliation

One of the central benefits of the Holy Spirit is the unifying activity of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit represents not only the unity of the Father and the Son (*Io. ev. tr.*, 6, 10), but the Holy Spirit wants us to join with the Father and the Son through his love as well.

The Holy Spirit has been given to the apostles, to the first community in Jerusalem, to the Church. After the Holy Spirit was received, they were brought into one group by the very love and fervour of the Spirit, and began in the very unity of fellowship to sell all that they had that it might be distributed to each one as needed. They had one soul and one heart (Acts 4, 32). Through love many souls are one soul, and many hearts are one heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. Love comes to us from the Holy Spirit (*Io. ev. tr.*, 39, 5). The Holy Spirit wants to bond people with each other. He wants to found a community of love among men. In and through the Holy Spirit God is close to humankind in his love. The Holy Spirit is *communio*. The Holy Spirit calls us to imitate God's communion and unity. To be a Christian is to become *communio*.

The Spirit is the Gift who enables communion with God and with each other. The variety of tongues given by the Spirit refers to the unity of the Church. Augustine describes the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of love within the Trinity, as agent of unity and reconciliation in the communion of the Church. The Holy Spirit is "a force for unity within each individual and within a divided community" (Dreyer 52). For Augustine, the Holy Spirit is the divine source of ardor in the Church and among Christians. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit is parted in different tongues, which represent the nations to which the disciples were sent. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is united in the dove. The dove is not only the symbol of the Holy Spirit but also of the unity of the Church: "In the dove is unity; in the tongues of the nations is community" (*Io. ev. tr.*, 6, 10). Fire is the transforming energy of the actions of the Holy Spirit. The dove is moaning in love. The moaning of the Spirit embraces all prayers, sufferings and praises.

The Holy Spirit is the soul and the life of the Church. Augustine touches the charismatic dimension of the Church, referring to the plurality of gifts. In the line of Augustine, the Second Vatican Council brought a rediscovery of the charisms. The Council emphasized that the Church has not only an institutional but also a charismatic dimension (*Lumen Gentium* 4; 7; 12; 49). It can be said that the ecumenical movement is a charismatic event and an “undertaking of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the motor of ecumenism. Where ecumenical consensus has been possible, it has always been experienced as a spiritual gift. The Holy Spirit is an agent of unity and reconciliation. The impressive meeting of Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople in 1964 in Jerusalem was a significant step towards restoring communion between Rome and Constantinople. The mutual excommunications of 1054 were formally abolished one year later.

With the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII expressed the hope of a new Pentecost. Ecumenism is a vigil of Pentecost, the beginning of the transformation of a broken Christianity in a truly united Christianity according to the unity that Christ desires—nothing but that unity. Therefore Christian spirituality is a spirituality of the Church as communion. The Church does not possess the Spirit, but the Spirit sustains and animates the Church (Quicke “Come” 97).

As a pastor and teacher, Augustine developed a spirituality in which the Spirit was the principle of life and harmony. The Holy Spirit leads to the renewal of the Church. Because the Spirit is the bond of love that unites the Father and the Son for all eternity, He also unites the faithful in communion with each other. The love of the Holy Spirit enlivens the body of Christ. Through his love the Holy Spirit unifies the Church.

The Pilgrim-Church

Augustine developed a theology of pilgrimage, not only regarding his own life, but also regarding the Church, the body of Christ and the life of a Christian. The communion of the Church is the people of God in pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem.

A Spirituality of the “Whole Christ”

The Church is primarily community, in a living, interpersonal relationship with Jesus Christ. In the thought of Augustine there is a very strong unity between Christ and the Church, between Christ and the faithful, between the Head and the members of the body which constitute the Church. The profound unity between Christ and the Church is expressed in the well-known doctrine of *Totus Christus* (the “whole Christ”) (Carrabeta 244-253; 328-339; Cerioti 56-88). In the same way as the different parts of a human body are one person, so the historical Jesus is one with all who believe in him—the whole Christ. The unity between the head and the body, between Christ and the Church, is so close and intimate that they form together one only organism: “The Head and the body is the one Christ” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 108, 5).

The union between Christ and the members is “a matter of unity through identification, (not identity), freely chosen out of love” (van Bavel 171). Augustine usually refers to two texts from the New Testament. The first is the verse of Matthew: “...when you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me...” (25, 31-46). The other text deals with words of the Risen Lord to Saul: “Saul, Saul; why do you persecute Me?” (Acts, 9,4). Christ still suffers in his members (Berrouard “Le Christ” 756-757; *Io. ev. tr.*, 21, 7). Therefore, “Christ is already in heaven, and he is struggling here as long as the Church is struggling here. Christ is hungry here, thirsty here, he is naked, he is migrant, he is sick, he is in prison” (s., 137, 2).

Christ, the Head, identifies himself with the members through love. The Church is active in Christ and Christ in the Church, the body in the Head and the Head in the body (*Io. ev. tr.*, 21, 7). When we speak, Christ continues to speak in this world. Christ speaks to us, from us and through us, because we also speak in him. Thus, we pray in Christ and He prays in us. He is in us and we are in him. Augustine invites the faithful to rejoice and to give thanks not only because they have been made Christians, but also since they have been made Christ.

The Church as Communion in Pilgrimage

Augustine developed a dynamic view on the Church as sacramental, spiritual and eschatological communion. The idea of the Church as communion, as “people of God”, proposed and supported by the Second Vatican Council, has roots in the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, especially Saint Augustine (Quicke “Come” 45-60).

Sacramental Communion

Christ cannot be separated from the Church and the sacraments, because both the Church and the sacraments come from Christ. The Church is a visible communion, recognizable by the communion of sacraments, a sacramental communion (Cipriani “Molti” 123). The soldier pierced with his spear the side of Christ, throwing open the door of life from which the sacraments of the Church flow. The wounded Christ has become the source of new life and salvation (*Io. ev. tr.*, 120, 2).

According to the Donatists, the validity of the sacraments depends on the ecclesial holiness of the minister. In his answer, Augustine said that the validity of baptism does not depend on the holiness of the minister, but on Christ. The purity of the minister is irrelevant because it is the purity and power of Christ that makes baptism effective. Augustine wants to emphasize the unique position of Christ in baptism (Congar “Introduction” 86-87). Baptism is the gift of Christ. Therefore baptism always remains his baptism. In this context, Augustine expresses one of his unforgettable formulas: “Christ it is who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Let Peter baptize; He it is who baptizes. Let Paul baptize; He it is who baptizes” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 6, 7). Augustine held that every baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is a valid baptism. Everyone who has been baptized is baptized into the Church because it is the baptism of Christ and of the Church (Cutrone 743). Augustine repeatedly highlights that those who received baptism even outside the Church were not to be rebaptized, referring to baptism as a spiritual birth (*Io. ev. tr.*, 12, 2).

Commenting on John 6, 51 (“the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world”), Augustine pronounces one of the most famous syntheses of the Eucharist: “O sacrament of devotion! O sign of unity! O bond of charity” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 26, 13).² Augustine describes the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity, the bread of concord, as the very society of the saints, where there will be peace and unity, full and perfect. Augustine presents the unity of the body and blood of Christ as a unity which is formed by many grains together, or effected by the clustering together of many grapes. The unity of the Church takes the form of social harmony and spiritual concord, expressed in everyday life in the communion of goods. Ecclesial unity includes the sacraments and visible charity, constituting a visible sign of reciprocal love between brothers and sisters in the faith. In the Eucharist the Holy Spirit transforms and assimilates more intimately to Christ those who are already united with him. He nourishes the members of Christ, he integrates them more profoundly to his body and he brings them closer to one another in a living solidarity through the unifying strength of love. The love of God, which has been poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, makes many souls one soul and many hearts one heart (*Io. ev. tr.*, 39, 5; 18, 4). Therefore Augustine defines the Eucharist as the bond of charity.

Augustine recognizes the validity of baptism administered outside the ecclesial community. This is a basic idea for the ecumenical movement today. For us today, common baptism is the common ground for all Christians, by which we are already through the one Spirit members of the one body of Christ and live in a profound spiritual communion as unity in faith. Augustine states that the Eucharist is the sacrament of unity, the bread of concord, and the bond of love. These words are repeated in the texts of the Second Vatican Council (*De Sacra Liturgia* 47; *Lumen Gentium* 3; *Unitatis Redintegratio* 47). Today we speak about the Eucharistic ecclesiology of communion. Baptism is oriented towards Eucharistic sharing. In the one Eucharistic bread we become one ecclesial body. It is a painful reality that all who are engaged in the ecumenical movement cannot yet share at the Lord’s table. Even though we cannot yet celebrate together the Eucharist, there is much that can already

² *O sacramentum pietatis, o signum unitatis, o vinculum caritatis* (NBA XXIV/1, 610).

be done together. Important steps can be taken to make full use of ecumenical forms of the liturgy of the Word: vespers, prayers for peace, memorial services inspired by Taizé, services which recall the worshippers' Baptism and ecumenical pilgrimages (Kasper" Handbook" 53-55).

Spiritual Communion

Augustine describes the Church also as a spiritual communion, referring to the unifying activity of the Holy Spirit, who keeps the Church together (Congar "Je crois" 118-119; 255-256). Augustine's dynamic view of the Church deals with the concepts of unity and diversity of the Church. The unifying love which is the Holy Spirit assembles all the members of the body and unites them with the Head—Christ. We are all one in Christ, head and members are one Christ. We all live by the same life and we are unified by the same Holy Spirit.

Augustine developed a community spirituality as a spirituality of unity within diversity, a unity in concordance with the model of the Trinity (one God in three persons), existing in an intimate exchange of love. The Second Vatican Council took up this thought further and described the concept of *communio* as the most profound mystery of the Church, which is modelled as an icon of the Trinity (Lumen Gentium 4; Unitatis Redintegratio 2). The unity given by the Spirit is not a uniform monotony but rather a unity of great diversity. Augustine emphasized strongly the unity and universality of the Church against the separatist movements of the Donatists. Augustine extended the notion of the Church by referring to the righteous of the Old Testament who are made righteous by the Spirit who poured forth love in their hearts—the "Church from Abel" (van Bavel 169-176).

Augustine Pentecost was not the absolute beginning of the activity of the Spirit, nor of the Word of God. The Spirit as the Word of God transcends the temporal limits of the history of Christianity. Christ communicated himself as divine word and wisdom, even before he came into the world. Even before Jesus' birth there existed a people of God: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the other patriarchs

as well as the other prophets foretold the coming of Christ. The prophets did not foretell future events without the Holy Spirit. There is thus already a Church from the beginning of humanity (van Bavel 170).

Eschatological Communion

According to Augustine, the Church is an eschatological communion. The Church is on the way (*ad interim*) between the Easter of the Lord and our Easter. The Church is on pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem (Häring 540-547; van Bavel 169). Augustine insists on the distinction between the Church in this time (*qualis nunc est*) and the Church at the end (*qualis tunc erit*), between the terrestrial with good and bad and the heavenly and pure Church at the end of her pilgrimage (Lamirande 15-19).

***Peregrinamur (Io. ev. tr., 120, 2)*³**

Augustine uses the words *peregrinus* (“pilgrim”), *peregrinatio* (“pilgrimage”) and *peregrinar* (“to make a pilgrimage”) in order to make clear that our life in this world is a journey of exile towards God. We are sojourners, foreigners, we are taking a trip in a wasteland towards the inner of our heart. The true pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of the heart.

Augustine, who was bishop of Hippo, knew very well the dangers of the sea, of waves and surf, both from his own experience and from contact with the seafaring people that he met in the port city. Therefore the theme of the sea is very popular in the writings of Augustine. The image of the disciples who cross the lake of Capernaum in the darkness and the storm is the symbol of the terrestrial pilgrimage of the Church through all the difficulties of a world in time and space (Neusch 129-130). Augustine emphasizes how, despite those winds, storms and waves, a ship might overcome such troubles and proceed. When the storm is raging, Augustine invites the faithful to remain in the boat and to remember Christ: “Don’t let the waves overwhelm when your heart is upset by a temptation...

³ “We are Pilgrims” (NBA XXIV/1, 122).

don't let us despair. Let us wake up Christ, and so sail on in a calm sea, and reach our home country" (s. 63, 3).

"Run With Me" (Io. ev. tr., 35, 9)⁴

Augustine's thought on pilgrimage can be a source of encouragement on the way towards Christian unity. Augustine invites us to walk together, to run by believing, by hoping, by desiring. When Augustine invites Christians to undertake a pilgrimage he does not speak in the first place about bodily footsteps, but about the footsteps of the heart, the pilgrimage of the heart, the pilgrimage of inner harmony. Augustine invites us to develop a spirituality of togetherness. During our pilgrimage something happens inside. We undertake an inner journey towards the heart of our Churches and our communities—Christ. We are all members of his body. He and we, the Head and the body, the *Totus Christus*, animated by his Spirit. Day by day we realize that we are on the way, that we have to walk together with Christ. Step by step we realize: the journey itself makes us pilgrims for unity. We all undertake our pilgrimage. We cannot do this by ourselves. We are all vulnerable and we have all the same Teacher, who leads the way.

Augustine encourages us to develop together a "heart travelling", a "heart journey." Walking and running means to make progress, to move on, to make progress in seeking the good, in good conduct. We must walk, we must make progress, we must grow, so that our hearts may be able to hold those things which we cannot now hold (Ferlisi 310-311; *Io. ev. tr.*, 35, 9). Walking entails living in the presence of the Lord; while walking, we thirst together for justice and peace (*Io. ev. tr.*, 28, 9).

"Let Us Cleanse our Hearts" (Io. ev. tr., 53, 12)⁵

Saint Augustine developed a realistic and humble view of the Church as *corpus permixtum*, a mixed body, a body of saints and sinners (van Bavel 171). The presence of good and evil in the Church is a reality, for the Church is composed of human beings. The mixture of good

⁴ *Currere credendo mecum* ("Run with me by believing") (NBA XXIV/1, 740).

⁵ *Mundemus corda per fidem* (NBA XXIV/2, 1054).

and evil is a characteristic of the Church in her earthly phase. The Church is under construction. She is in the process of becoming the perfect body of Christ (*Io. ev. tr.*, 6, 2; Berrouard "l'Église" 876).

In this time of the terrestrial Church on pilgrimage to the eschatological heavenly Church, Augustine invited the faithful to travel as pilgrims on the road to the heavenly Jerusalem, bearing each other's burdens and pain through a process of reconciliation and healing of wounds, growing in faith, hope and love, in order to walk away from the false life, to cleanse the heart by faith and to seek being prepared by a holy way of life (*Io. ev. tr.*, 22, 3).

Lumen Gentium evokes Augustine's thoughts on the Church, which embraces in its bosom sinners and saints, needs to be purified and is called to follow the way of penance and renewal (*Lumen Gentium* 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4; *Ut Unum Sint* 15-17). There is no ecumenism possible without a change of heart and sanctification of personal life. Without conversion, penance and renewal, there can be no dialogue and ecumenism. Only through a real pilgrimage which includes conversion can the goal of unity be achieved. The Church is an *ecclesia semper purificanda*, which must constantly take the way of conversion. Conversion begins with ourselves; it is an examination of conscience and self-criticism. The Church is always in need of continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 6). At the same time the Church is "ever growing in Christ during its pilgrimage on earth, and is guided by God's gentle wisdom" (3).

"The Singers of The New Song" (Io. ev. tr., 65, 1)⁶

In his comment on the new commandment of the Lord, Augustine develops the theme of "the singers of the new song" (*Io. ev. tr.*, 65, 1). Augustine connects the new song with the new commandment of Jesus, that we should love one another, as He also has loved us.

Brother Roger of Taizé considered singing as "an incomparable support for community prayer" (Brother Aloïs 18). Singing together songs of longing strengthens the prayerful heart. Augustine

⁶ *Cantatores cantici novi* (NBA XXIV/2, 1140).

invites Christians to walk in Christ, to chant the song of a longing heart: “For he who truly longs, thus sings within his soul, though his tongue be silent: he who does not, however he may resound in human ears, is voiceless to God” (*en. Ps.*, 86, 1). Augustine invites his audience to sing as pilgrims, longing for heavenly happiness.

Augustine puts the emphasis on the harmony between singing and love, between singing and righteous life; he expresses the importance of singing not just with the mouth, but also with the heart and deeds: “When you sing ‘Alleluia’, you also hand out bread to the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger.” Singing also creates a togetherness, a “concordia”, a harmony. A chorus has to sing in concord: “The whole world is now the choir of Christ, and as the choir of Christ it sings harmoniously from east to east (*en. Ps.*, 149, 7).

Ecumenism can be inspired by Augustine’s spirituality of the communion of the Church in pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. The idea of the Church as communion, as people of God, proposed and supported by the Second Vatican Council, has roots in the teaching of Saint Augustine. The Church as communion participates in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Augustine’s point of view of the Church deals with the concept of the unity in diversity, diversity in universality; the Church as sacramental and spiritual communion; the terrestrial and the celestial Church, the pilgrim-Church and the Church in its eschatological fulfilment (Neusch 83-84).

Charity

Augustine was aware that he never could speak enough of love: “What is dearer than charity?” (*Io. ev. tr.*, 9, 8). Love is the heart of Christian life. Love is the bond which keeps the Church united. Charity unites the members to the Church, the body of Christ (Cipriani “Molti” 211-215).

Trinitarian Love

For Augustine, the unity of the Church is grounded in the Trinitarian love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican

Council also affirms that the Church is like an icon of the Trinity (Lumen Gentium 4; Unitatis Redintegratio 3). Ecclesial communion is a participation in the Trinitarian communion between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Church “is a mystery that finds its highest exemplar and source in the unity of the Persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, one God” (Lumen Gentium 1; Unitatis Redintegratio 2). The unity of Christ with the Father is “the wellspring of the Church’s unity” (John Paul II “Novo”, 48). Augustine promoted a Trinitarian understanding of communion as a participation in the divine life of the Trinity. God gives himself and communicates himself as Father and Son and of both in the Holy Spirit (Kasper “That” 56). The Trinitarian origin of ecclesial communion reminds us that Christian unity is a gift from the high, from God.

“Love With Me” (Io. ev. tr., 35, 9)⁷

Regularly using the expression “love with me, run with me by believing”, Augustine invited the faithful to love God and their neighbour on their pilgrimage to the heavenly Homeland. In our pilgrimage we are not alone, because Christ is with us, our way and our light. Therefore our pilgrimage of love is a way in joy and light because we are sure that we are on the road with him and that we receive his mercy, which is our joy (Io. ev. tr., 36, 8; 83,1). If we love God we cannot despise his command to love our neighbour (65, 2). Augustine emphasizes the unity and the harmony of love for God and neighbour. The basis of the inseparability of the two commandments is the idea of the *Totus Christus*, in which Christ identifies himself with the members of his body (Berrouard “L’unique” 430-432; Canning 251). Augustine emphasized that to love Christ entails extending our charity throughout the world, for the members of Christ are spread the world over (*ep. Io.*, 10, 8). Evoking the universal dimension of the *Totus Christus*, Augustine developed a spirituality of togetherness through ecclesial charity: “We may enter together upon the path of charity”⁸ (*tr.*, 1, 3, 5).

⁷ *Amate mecum* (NBA XXIV/1, 740). See *Io. ev. tr.*, 40, 10.

⁸ *Ita ingrediamur simul caritatis viam.*

The call “love with me” is linked with titles Augustine gives to those who come to listen to him (‘brothers, my brethren, dearly beloved’), in order to express his affection, his attachment and his loyalty (*Io. ev. tr.*, 1, 16). Especially in the time of the controversies with the Donatists, he calls the faithful “beloved”, for the purpose of explain to them that they belong to the Church spread throughout the world and that the Church is the place of unity, peace and charity.⁹ Many times he addresses even the Donatists with a fraternal and fatherly greeting. Saint Augustine tries to involve all Christians in the unity with Christ.

Ecclesial Charity For the Poor

For Augustine, the poor are the most precious group in the Church, because they represent the weak and needy Christ. The poor are constantly present in his sermons and his pastoral activity (Manca 37-38). As a real ambassador of the poor, Augustine expressed his desire to become one with them, “making myself a beggar with the beggars” (s., 66,5). In his sermons Augustine often described his pastoral commitment to the poor:

To rebuke those who stir up strife, to comfort those of little courage, to take part of the weak, to refute opponents, to be on guard against traps, to teach the ignorant... to help the poor to liberate the oppressed, to encourage the good, to suffer the evil, and to love all. (340, 1)

Augustine considered the care of the poor more important than liturgical ornaments. He was convinced of the need to practise an ecclesial charity for the poor and not to ignore their empty stomach (36,9). When a rich ship owner wanted to give his ships to Augustine, he answered: “It is not the task of a bishop to save up gold and to push away the hand of the beggar” (355, 4, 5). Through a concrete application of his thought on the *Totus Christus*, Augustine emphasized that Christ is still needy, suffering and poor. We are touching Christ when we help the poor. In the face of the

⁹ Berrouard remarks that Augustine uses 44 times *caritas vestra* in *Io. ev. tr.*, 1, 16; in 32,3, a variant, *dilectio vestra*, appears.

poor we recognize the face of the Lord (206, 2). Augustine devoted himself constantly to an ecclesial charity for Christ who is still lying on the street, Christ who still hungers and thirsts, Christ who is still a stranger (25, 8).

Augustine entreats the faithful to offer bread to the hungry, to give shelter to the needy, to clothe the naked, to love their neighbour (*Io. ev. tr.*, 17, 18; 51, 12). The Church has to develop a special care for the poor and the oppressed (Manca 37-38). Augustine's spirituality of a tangible ecclesial charity is a call to the different Churches and ecclesial communities to develop a spirituality of togetherness by taking care of the poor for the "needy Christ."

Balm of Divine Mercy for the Wounded Heart

Augustine repeatedly comments on the parable of the merciful Samaritan to put in evidence the mercy of Christ. He develops a Christian interpretation of this parable. The merciful Samaritan is Christ himself, the divine Physician. He lifted us up and carried us to the inn to heal our wounds. *Samaritan* means "guard" and refers to the Lord himself. The Samaritan poured the oil of consolation and hope, the wine of exhortation; he healed the wounds of the traveller and brought him to the inn. The inn is the Church, where the travellers can enjoy hospitality, take some rest and where the wounds are healed. The two coins are the two precepts on which the whole law and the prophets are based; the innkeeper is the apostle.

The Church must be a place, "wherein the wounded are healed just like the Travellers' Inn in the Samaritan parable" (*Io. ev. tr.*, 41, 13). Augustine's spirituality of togetherness is expressed in the fact that "hospitality becomes community", that it creates a harmony based on the shared confession of our basic brokenness and on a shared hope. Healing belongs to the heart of the Church. The true shepherds of the Church are driven by a merciful love, which touches the wounds with tenderness and heals the vulnerable heart. The Church is called to be a healing community, to share the wounds of its members and to be united with the vulnerable. Healing is the beginning of a new life in Christ, the restoration of the brokenness

of life. Healing is building relationship and community. Through hospitality a Christian community is a healing community, where the guests feel at home. Hospitality is a way in which the wounds become a source of healing (Nouwen 82-83).

Conclusion

Through a dialogical preaching style, which had the tone of a family conversation, Augustine developed a spirituality of prayer as a “togetherness in silence with God.” The Church father addressed the faithful directly, inviting them to listen together to the Word of God, since we are fellow students in the same school of Christ—the inner Master. Augustine never separated the Church from Christ. Christ is central in the preaching of Saint Augustine and his spirituality is a Christ-centred spirituality. The unity in Christ, our Redeemer and Mediator, is the basis for unity among men. Through his self-emptying love, Christ, the divine Physician, healed the wounds of humanity with the salve of his humility. The Holy Spirit, who is the bond of love within the Trinity, is agent of unity and reconciliation in the communion of the Church. Ecumenism can be inspired by Augustine’s spirituality of the communion of the Church in pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. Augustine developed a dynamic view on the Church as sacramental, spiritual and eschatological communion. The Pilgrim Church as people of God is on the move, undertaking a pilgrimage of the heart. For Augustine, the unity of the Church is grounded in the Trinitarian love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians are called to practise an ecclesial charity for the poor and the vulnerable. Augustine’s spirituality of togetherness and humility offers us an inspiration for our pilgrimage towards Christian unity.



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