

The Spirituality of the Ordained Priesthood According to Augustine

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## Historical Background and the Life of Augustine

One of the great masters of the Christian spiritual tradition is Saint Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis, better known as Saint Augustine of Hippo. It is clear from his writings that he possessed a colossal intellect and enjoyed a deep spiritual life. However, as a spiritual father, he has the advantage that he also experienced all that the world of his day had to offer and understood many of the challenges that faced the priest. In this discussion, I will examine Augustine's life and historical context, his writings on the priesthood and the necessary spirituality to live a priestly life, and how those lessons can be applied in my own life.

Augustine was born in 354, into a world in which Christianity was now legal and commonly practiced, in Thagaste to a poor and uneducated father and a mother who would become a significant figure in his life and a major catalyst in his eventual conversion to the Christian faith. Augustine was well educated, and he eventually settled into a long-term sexual liaison with an older woman and fathered a son. When he was 19 years old, he underwent his first conversion through the reading of Cicero. This brought him the first step from rhetoric to seeking actual truth. Cicero put him on that path, but he did not give him a form that search for truth would take. Initially, Augustine, like the Greeks in Paul's letter, found the idea of a Crucified God to be a stumbling block. Furthermore, Augustine observed the Latin translations of scripture to be of such poor quality that he, as a master of the Latin language and rhetorical style, found that they were unconvincing and unimpressive. He found

what he was looking for in the Manichaeans, a dualist heresy that resolved his challenges with the Christian Church of his day.

Perhaps providentially, as Augustine learned more of the Manicheans, he found neither a search for truth nor wisdom; they lacked the answers he sought. After he became disillusioned with his first attempt, he moved to Milan to pursue life as a philosopher. In Milan, Augustine encountered the skeptics. He was finally exposed to the deeper riches of Christianity when, at the persistent urging of a friend, he heard Saint Ambrose speak at the Cathedral. This finally offered the answers that Augustine sought. Augustine was then introduced to Neoplatonism, and he converted, to the delight of his mother who had been praying faithfully for him, to Christianity. Augustine returned to Hippo in North Africa. He was ordained a priest in 391 and named the Bishop of Hippo in 395, after four years as a priest. In addition to his *Confessions*, Augustine's most well known work, in which he recounted his life and conversion, Augustine wrote many theological and philosophical texts. Augustine's theology of the priesthood is found dispersed throughout his writings and sermons.

## **Augustine on the Life and Spirituality of the Ordained Priesthood**

John Chrysostom in the east saw the great responsibility of the priest as an epic battle between God and Satan, a battle into which the priest must enter and stand in the middle. Augustine, from a different perspective, saw the same battle in the life of the priest. He felt that the life of the priest must be fully at the service of the mission of the Church. Augustine's struggle differed from that of Chrysostom in

that, rather than a profound understanding of the scope and gravity of the role of a priest (which Augustine no-doubt understood), he saw a death to self that the priest must welcome. In Augustine's personal life, this was the abandonment of his desire to be a philosopher. The mission of the Church must come first, and the concurrent attempt to live his own desires for fame and success as a philosopher would distract him from that primary task. Ultimately, Augustine saw selfishness as the underlying cause for his desire, and he had to abandon it in favor of the Church. This, he felt, would move him into the ability to give himself to the Church and her mission in a way that could save souls, a task for which God used him, and still uses him, for centuries to come.

Augustine speaks of the necessity that a priest first be a disciple. Just as Augustine had to first turn and follow Christ and His Church before he could lead others to salvation, the priest must do the same. If a priest focuses only on the salvation of the people and feeds himself rather than taking care of the sheep, he is condemned as a bad shepherd, a condemnation which Augustine feared and sought to avoid in his own life and that of the priests for whom he was spiritual father. At the same time, if a priest ignores his own spiritual life, he will be equally incapable of leading the people since he will have no foundation on which to stand as he draws people to Christ. This same distinction could also be seen as the need to always be a disciple to be a shepherd who draws rather than a lord who drives.

A similar observation is found in Augustine's frequent observation two ways of seeing the ordained priesthood: *prodesse* and *praedesse*. *Prodesse* refers to a priest seeing himself as a servant for the Church and the people of God. Conversely,

*praedesse* is the notion of priesthood that focuses only on presiding and charge over the people of God. Augustine rejects the notion of *praedesse* and promotes *prodesse* as a correct understanding of the ordained priesthood. This advice, I think, if not properly nuanced and clarified can bring disaster to the life of a priest and to the people he serves. Many priests, in a misguided effort to avoid any appearance of their own understanding of Augustine's rejected notion of priesthood, completely abdicate the priestly munus of king. At the same time, there are undoubtedly those priests both today and at the time of Augustine, who see their office primarily as one of authority, and they lord that authority over the people entrusted to them. Pope John Paul II once observed either when a priest says that he is in charge or when he says that he is only here to serve, something is missing in the exercise of his priesthood. Rather, a priest must serve by ruling and rule by serving. To build on the image of a good and bad shepherd from Scripture, a shepherd is no better if he loses his sheep through harsh treatment and they run away than if he were to lose them through ignoring them. Rather, the role of a priest must always be to selflessly serve the people entrusted to them; this includes pastoral care, preaching the Gospel to them in sincerity, and admonishing them if they should seek to go astray. In a practical sense, there are also times when a priest cannot exercise his authority in an entirely committee driven manner; there are some times that a priest must make the decision for the good of his parish, both the people and the temporal goods entrusted to him.

The priest is also the minister of the Mystery of Faith, of which, to Augustine, there is only one. The redemption Christ offers encompasses every moment of his

life and activity on Earth, from the Incarnation to the Ascension to the sending of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church through the ages until his return. The priest serves this ministry through his role as shepherd, but he also serves this role through administration of the Sacraments in union with the Church. For Augustine, the principle act of the Christian faith, of true religion, is the participation in the sacrifice of Christ. Again, he points out that this participation is not a selfish act, but must be a full self-gift of the priest. Through the ministry of the priest, Christ offers himself daily to his people in his saving and sanctifying act. In order for this to be offered in a valid and fruitful way, the priest must exercise these roles in union with the Church and in a way approved and endorsed by the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, and entrusted with the temporal actions that bring about supernatural and everlasting good. At the same time, if a priest imposes a style of worship that fits into the patrimony of the Church, but is so divorced from the spiritual state and life of his people, he does not draw them into the mysteries of faith, but increases the great chasm between the people and God. If, in an attempt to be popular among his people, a priest performs rather than prays or allows those entrusted to him to do whatever they please, even to their own detriment, he will fall short of Augustine's admonishment to be a good shepherd to the people.

Augustine also speaks of the priest as the Minister of the word of God. Here Augustine makes a distinction between two movements in this ministry: internal and external. First, the priest, himself, must hear and be formed by the word of God. It is only then that he can propose to proclaim the word to the people. It is important to recall that, in the time of Augustine, high illiteracy and the

astronomical expense of books made private reading of Scripture frequently impossible. The only way that the people in Augustine's world heard the word was through the preaching of the priest. If the priest is to successfully undertake this project, he must first be engaged in serious prayer and study of Scripture. He must see to it that he can present Scripture to the people entrusted to him faithfully and intelligibly. Once the external hearing is complete, the people should be drawn to an internal hearing of the word of God. A priest must always remember that his role is to proclaim and expound on the word of God so that his people can have a personal encounter with the Word. To that end, he must be inviting and appropriate to his audience while always remaining faithful to divine revelation. In the life of a modern priest, the life to which I aspire, this means that the priest must be faithful to prayer and study to understand the word in its literal and spiritual meanings. He must also know his children, the people entrusted to his care. When the priest preaches, he must know whether he is speaking to the Blackfriars or to coal miners or to prostitutes; At the same time, he must not sacrifice the call of the Christian to make it comfortable and temporally rewarding in a way that was never promised by Christ.

## **Personal Reflection and Conclusion**

In this section, I will take Augustine's reflections under four categories: the social role of preaching, asceticism in consecrated service to the Church, prayer and study, and God's fidelity. In each of these categories, I will offer some reflection on how his counsel can affect my formation and eventual, God-willing, priesthood.

Augustine points out that priestly service is, first and foremost, a social role; it carries an obligation to function, not for my own benefit, even though I must still continue to “work out [my] salvation with fear and trembling” (Ph 2:12), but rather for that of the people of God in His name. In our class, we discussed that the initial draw of the priesthood was not necessarily as selfless as what God would want; in my case, this was no different although it took a unique form in my life as it does, I suspect, in the lives of most men preparing for priestly service. Even at this stage in my formation, those selfish motives are present at times, and, I suspect they will never fully subside. I still look to the privilege of serving at the altar with great excitement; frequently, I cannot be sure that my excitement is all together selfless. I think that the promise of obedience made by a priest, and, to some extent, lived by the seminarian in expectation of priestly obedience has prepared me for this over my years in formation. I will have to constantly keep in mind and check my motivations frequently in my life as a priest so that I can make sure that I am not serving for selfish motivations, but rather for the good of the people entrusted to me and as a faithful extension of the ministry of my bishop in the name of Jesus Christ.

The next aspect of priestly life and spirituality is asceticism and developing the virtues for consecrated service. This one serves as more of a challenge to me in many ways. First of all, I lived good portion of my adult life with plenty of money and all of the comforts that I wanted. I must find a way to find my enjoyment in life in service to other people to bring them to Christ. For years prior to my seminary career this was already a source of joy, but it was intermixed with a lively social life, and all the toys I wanted. In priestly life, it must remain my first and primary joy.



Augustine's next category is prayer and study. In this area, I am already gifted and experienced, and in seminary, my prayer life has deepened considerably. At the same time, it is important that I continue to focus on my prayer life and deepening my intimacy with Sacred Scripture and the spiritual writers in the Church's tradition. Only with consistent and ongoing vigilance will I be able to hope for the consistent internal life of the Gospel that will allow me to share it with the people entrusted to me in a way that will invite them into participation in the inner life of the Trinity. I recognize in myself, and it has been highlighted in seminary on several occasions, a tendency to allow the busyness of every day responsibilities to take attention away from my prayer life and the ever-deeper study and meditation on the word of God in Scripture. This will need to be a constant object of vigilance in my priestly life, and I will need to avoid the excuse that would come so easily that personal prayer or study is a selfish endeavor that can take a back seat to my ministerial tasks.

Finally, I want to take a moment to address Augustine's assurance of God's fidelity despite the flawed vessels that are his priests. In my own case, I have a tendency to waver between the extremes of lax practices and near scrupulosity in which I think that my own efforts are never right or good enough. While the efforts of a priest can never be sufficient unto themselves, I must consistently remind myself of God's fidelity even when I, as a priest, fall short. However, this trust in God's fidelity also must never be a source for laxity in my own efforts. God's fidelity serves to assure the efficacy of the sacraments; my own holiness, visible to the

people of God, will serve as an example to draw my future parishioners into a holiness of life to which they are called.