

The Spiritual Exercises in Augustine's Confessions

Andrés G. Nino.

A Common Task



The Spiritual Exercises with Augustine

Is a project built from a personal reflection through the years, like a spiritual pilgrimage in progress, guided by the Confessions¹. Along the way, we have invited others to join and to participate in it. The purpose has been to recreate the brilliant vision of Augustine that writes for “many readers of all times” encouraging them “to approach, to see and to understand this way” that is Christ². The participation, with neither haste nor rest, has created a common task, initially, for a small group of Augustinians in Spain. And the personal and group experiences that have followed have discovered for others, a methodical resource and a perennial inspiration in the lessons of Augustine, spiritual Master.

At the same time, there has been a re-evaluation of initiatives and directions that have emerged in the area of Augustinian spirituality in the last few years. Among them, we have reflected attentively upon one offered by John Paul II addressing the General Chapter of the Order of St. Augustine in 2001. It pointed out, with a deep sense of history and the value of traditions that have maintained the mission of the Church for centuries, to a fundamental task that ought to be carried on by all his members. I summarize here its central message that gives timely relevance to the project of Augustine's spiritual exercises.

A task and a commitment

John Paul II exhorts us all saying: “God has come in aid of the radical weakness of man who sees in himself, perhaps unconsciously, an inner restlessness towards the transcendent. Augustine arrives indeed at the encounter with God through this feeling of existential restlessness, keeping as companions along the way, the study of the word of God and prayer.

The experience of Augustine is similar to that of many of our contemporary men and women and that is the reason why you, Augustinians, can help them to discover a sense of transcendence in life utilizing modern forms of pastoral service. You must be for them companions and supporters towards a more personal faith and, at the same time, a more

communal faith, because it is the Church that maintains alive the memory of Jesus Christ ... You must draw from the inexhaustible treasure of your great teacher Augustine, suggestions and proposals for a renewed apostolic action ... you must safeguard, unaltered and alive, the legacy of the doctrinal and practical message of St. Augustine, in which there is a point of encounter for the humanity of all times, hungry of truth, happiness and love.

You, Augustinians, must be *pedagogues of interiority* at the service of the humanity in search of Jesus Christ in the third millennium. We do not arrive at Him through an external road, but through the route of interiority ... that is the point of departure and arrival, as Augustine said in the Confessions (I, 1.1). That requires a work of immersion in oneself and liberation from the distractions of the world, to acquire an attentive and humble listening to the voice of conscience. A vast pastoral scope is opened here that absolutely responds to your charisma”²

A task concisely enunciated for collective reflection and engagement. In the first publication of the Spiritual Exercises in 2006, we raised a question about the impact that Augustine’s Confessions and its spiritual journey has in the religious beliefs and the spirituality of the general public³. And now we ask again: Does his message reach our contemporaries? What didactic resources and contexts can be effective to achieve that? Will those that have meditated in the work of Augustine be ready to assume the task of *pedagogues of interiority* for people who want to follow the way of Jesus Christ?

As an answer to those questions, a group of Augustinians made the first experience of the ‘*Spiritual Exercises with Augustine*’ in Guadarrama, Madrid, in 2007. Later, other groups have followed in several places, including Tanzania. Recently, in 2008, a large group of Augustinian nuns had the experience in the Santa Monica Retreat Center. At present there are plans to reach out groups of lay people.

Future directions.

Augustine’s spiritual journey encourages us to reflect upon a perspective and commitment for the future. And in that respect, we have gathered some proposals put forward in several meetings that have taken place around this project.

* To establish a didactic and accessible return to the Confessions as the essential text of Augustinian formation for religious communities and formative spirituality for others.

* To cultivate the experience of the Exercises with Augustine, in order to deepen our spiritual life, extending our personal and communal reflection with Biblical, pastoral and liturgical resources. In addition, facilitating such experience through a “day of Exercises” that educational centers and parishes, among others, can integrate in their programs of evangelization.

* To create situations and encounters that nourish the spiritual concerns of people who want to make progress in their journey. Let us remember the principle that one’s conviction in a life style generates in others a desire of imitation, which leads towards adherence, according to Augustine’s experience⁴. In this manner whoever has been exercised with him is able not only to explain its message but *to transmit the motivation* necessary to others who may respond to

the Teacher who calls in their hearts. They will also say with Augustine “I can”⁴ in their pilgrimage towards God.

* To contribute to the interdisciplinary common task that interprets the message of Augustine for our time. As an example, *Revista Agustiniana* published a special issue (2008) dedicated to the “Spiritual Exercises Augustine’s Confessions” with commentaries by a group of Augustinians experts.

* To gather a group of *pedagoques of interiority* that will be able to plan a workshop or training seminar for those interested on giving retreats based on the Spiritual exercises with Augustine.

These initiatives will be integrated and disseminated through a Web page. It will facilitate the communication of ideas that will enrich to all those that participate in it. The webmaster will extend links with pages of academic character and others that will be effective in presenting Augustine’s spirituality to a larger audience.

¹ *Revista Agustiniana*, (2006) vol. XLVII, n. 142: 81-117; ² Conf. X, 4,6; VII, 21, 27; ³ *Acta Ordinis*, Publicazioni Agostiniane: Roma (2001), n.10, pp.34-38 (my translation); ⁴ Conf. X, 3,3-4.
Andrés G. Niño, osa is affiliated to the community at Austin Hall (Prov. Villanova).
Correspondence: St Mary’s Rectory /134 Norfolk Street /Cambridge, MA 02139. USA.
<andresnino@comcast.net>