

Prayer Resource

From our Chaplain Fr Paul Maloney OSA



Dear Friends

Recently while visiting a Year 4 Religion class I found myself presented with a question about what it meant to be humble. I immediately began to imagine all the characters in novels and plays who gave that virtue a very bad name. The landlord and his wife in *Le Miserable*, or Charles Dickens depiction of Uriah Heap who was 'ever so humble' until his true colours were revealed. And coming from a young child I wondered if they thought that to be humble meant that you have to think of yourself as somehow or other unworthy in comparison to others.

I think I may have lost them but my fall-back position in answering this question was of course St. Augustine who pondered on this dilemma and grappled with it in his own soul throughout his life. The constant theme of how pride and humility jostle with each other can be found in the pages of the Rule he handed on to us, and in his spiritual autobiography *The Confessions*. Augustine often reflected on how his moments of greatest pain and sorrow were when he relied on himself, and his moments of greatest comfort and joy were when he submitted to God's subtle grace in his life.

Augustine understands that if we make ourselves the centre of our own identities, the result is a weakened view of self that makes us appear pretentious and reckless. As a consequence, we do more harm than good. We need to return to the humble recognition that it is the love and providence of God for us that places us in the right relationship with objective reality, so that we find our natural place, neither too high or too low, within the chain of created existence

"Humility must accompany all our actions, must be with us everywhere; for as soon as we glory in our good works they are of no further value to our advancement in virtue".

Augustine appreciated that human beings are limited by our creaturely nature, but even so we can progress spiritually. The heart can transform itself through love, and the mind can open to the workings of the grace of God. Augustine tells us that as he struggled with and against belief on the road to becoming a Christian "his heart went into labour and gave birth to humility".

This is typically strong imagery from Augustine. Pride gets in the way of love, and only to the extent that pride diminishes is there any possibility of love emerging. In a letter to one of his students he insists on this point

"I would wish that you place yourself with all your love under Christ, and that you pave no other way in order to reach and to attain the truth that has already been paved by him who, as God, knows the weakness of our steps. This is in the first place, humility; in the second place, humility; in the third place, humility ...As often as you ask me about the Christian religion's norms of conduct, I choose to give no other answer than: humility." (Letter 118)

Prayer Resource cont.

Clearly for Augustine humility is one of the key fundamentals of being able to live in community with other human beings. The clue as to why humility is so important comes up constantly in his Rule. While other vices evidently produce 'evil deeds', pride (the opposite of humility) doesn't simply produce evil deeds but can set a trap for us even as we carry out good deeds:

“For pride lurks also in our good works, seeking to destroy even them. What good does it do to distribute one’s possessions to the poor and to become poor oneself, if giving up riches makes a person prouder than he was when he had a fortune?” (The Rule: 1, vs 7)

Augustine’s view of the ‘ideal life’ changed drastically after turning to Christ. Before his conversion, he believed that the ideal life was marked by power, success, knowledge, control, leisure, and external morality. After his conversion, he believed that the ideal life was marked by humility. All of the ways he tried to attain his ideal life before his conversion were marked by pride—he wanted to be self-sufficient, independent, and perfect—and this pride kept him from surrendering. It was only when he relinquished his desire for that version of ideal life that he discovered the real ideal of life, achieved in Christ, the one Person who fully humbled himself by laying down his life for us on the cross.

At the very start of the Rule Augustine sees love as the foundation and goal of community living. *“You are to live together, therefore, one in mind and heart, and honour God in one another, because each of you has become his temple”*. [1:8]. However, the fertile soil of love is humility. In Augustine’s mind Love always includes one’s ability to transcend egotism and go out to others with a generosity of spirit. In his great thesis on The Trinity, he states: *“To the extent that we are freed from the malignant swelling, which is called pride, we are filled with love.”*

As the season of Advent approaches later this month may your hearts be open to receive the gifts God wants to give you without placing any barriers of pride or self-importance in the way. And if anyone asks you, what does it mean to be humble? you can tell them it is to be filled

with much love,

Paul

The Purpose of the Prayer Resource Guide

Each of us is on a journey to God like our patron Augustine.

The Friends prayer resource is offered to you as a support in your day to day prayer.

It is centred on the Gospel readings and quotes from Augustine. Formation material is offered from different sources including a prayer orientated letter from our Chaplain.

