

# Feast of St. Augustine

## Introduction

I am delighted to offer Holy Mass to begin the new academic year here at St. Mary's. It is good for us to be here, good for us to make a new beginning, and to do so on the feast of a saint who is all about new beginnings, viz., St. Augustine of Hippo.

Even if you are a new seminarian, you've no doubt already heard that priestly formation consists of four pillars, or four essential components: human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral. And I hope you will agree, that St. Augustine has something to say to each of these four pillars of formation. Allow me to explain, beginning with human formation.

## Human Formation

We know something about St. Augustine's family. He was born in 354 at Tagaste, on the frontier of present day Algeria & Tunisia, a town which was a cultural center in Northern Africa. His father converted to Christianity only at the end of his life while his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian who prayed for her family's conversion, especially that her son Augustine would return to the faith of his childhood.

St. Augustine did not live an entirely angelic life prior to his conversion to Christianity. Without getting too deep into the weeds, let's just say that he got around. Hearing this, you may want to adopt him as a model of human formation, but let me suggest we take a deeper look! It's true St. Augustine took some pretty serious detours in his life and probably struggled with his humanity throughout his life. Whatever its flaws, his humanity was great and expansive. He was intellectually gifted, he was curious and open to new ideas; and most of all, he allowed his human spirit to be restless, not content with the defective philosophies and decadent lifestyles all around him. His lack of contentment gave the love of God its opening!

St. John Paul II once said that a priest's personality should be a bridge to Christ. This means that priestly formation involves struggling with one's humanity, engaging in human formation, honestly addressing our issues, moving from our comfort zone, being open to insights about ourselves. It involves nurturing a restless spirit that seeks God's love, revealed by Christ... the love shining forth through the

humanity of Christ who fully reveals us to ourselves.

### **Intellectual Formation**

No one doubts that St. Augustine took his intellectual formation seriously. In spite of his family's modest means, Augustine managed to engage in higher studies and he made quite an intellectual journey. A towering intellect, he was won over by Manichaeism, a dualistic philosophy which, in practice, denies responsibility for the evil one does on the grounds that the body is dominated by Satan, the evil principle of the cosmos. This philosophy contributed to a way of life Augustine found unsatisfying. His search led him to other philosophies, especially Neo-Platonism, a philosophy more compatible with religious faith which influenced his thought, expression, and prayer even after his conversion.

It was while in Milan that he encountered the great Ambrose. Augustine was touched by Ambrose' intimate knowledge of the Word of God, by his culture, his gentleness, and indeed his outstanding humanity. If anything, the Word of God expanded Augustine's intellectual horizons and he became, as we all know, one of the great minds not only in the history of the Church but also in the history of thought & culture. He staked out positions on difficult issues which claim our attention to this very day, such as his teaching on original sin and the just war theory.

St. Augustine's restlessness of spirit prompted him to quest for truth, to read, to study, to open his mind and heart to new ideas. Few have been as equipped as he was to engage faith and culture, even as the established order was collapsing about him. So too, we must see it as our responsibility to prepare ourselves to share the living Word of God in such a way that it engages people's lives, their minds and their hearts, which never exist in a vacuum but always in an ambient culture with its opportunities and challenges. St. Augustine helps us discover and re-discover both the beauty of God's glory and the power of human reason.

### **Spiritual Formation**

St. Augustine's most famous work, his *Confessions*, is like a window on his spiritual formation. Here he recounts both his restlessness and the persistence of God's love revealed in Christ, a love which spoke to him again and again the words of spirit and

life, a love which ultimately broke through and “shattered his deafness”. Pope Benedict may have had Augustine’s spiritual journey in mind when he wrote: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

How necessary for each of us truly to encounter Christ, truly to welcome him into our hearts, and to occupy center place. How crucial that this encounter be not a passing glance but a penetrating gaze, not a casual conversation but an even in which his heart speaks to our hearts. And how critical that this event be not momentary, but life-long! St. Augustine’s conversion was not a eureka moment out of the blue. Much led up to it and much followed. In 387, at the beginning of Lent, while in a garden, he heard a child’s voice repeat, “*tolle ... lege ...*” – an event which led him to become a catechumen. Throughout the rest of his life, he would continue to take and read God’s Word and meditate on his Word and with all his heart seek and keep that Word.

### **Pastoral Formation**

Finally, Augustine was, a monk, a priest, and in 396 the Bishop of Hippo. He fashioned and established a monastic form of life but as bishop devoted himself actively to pastoral activities while living like a monk. His lively engagement with his people comes across in his sermons, some 350 of them, in which he speaks directly to his people about their lives in Christ. His joy in the liturgy was palpable, his desire to help his people on their spiritual journey endless, as was his readiness to defend his people against errors that would harm their faith. St. Augustine even addresses administrative matters, on occasion, including an apology after someone had embezzled church funds.

First and foremost, though, Augustine was an evangelizer, preacher, and teacher, who participated deeply in the teaching office of the One Teacher, Jesus Christ. If anything, St. Augustine helps us see, in the midst of our pastoral formation, that our role as teachers of the faith has pride of place. For when, in God’s grace, we evangelize and teach effectively people come together to worship and take part in the Church’s witness of charity.

### **Conclusion**

So as this new year of formation dawns upon us, let us turn to St. Augustine, not only for his example, but also for his prayers, that we might engage in the work of priestly formation with a robust and restless spirit. May God bless you and this seminary community in the year that lies ahead!