

HOMILY OF THOMAS CARDINAL COLLINS DURING THE CELEBRATION OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S SEMINARY CENTENARY MASS

St Augustine's Seminary, September 5, 2013

A heart on Fire; a heart at rest in God

On this joyful anniversary, we can learn from our great patron saint about the vision that directs this seminary which for so many years has played a central role in the life of the Catholic Church in much of Canada.

Saint Augustine, to whom this seminary was dedicated 100 years ago, was no plaster saint. There is depth and complexity to him that we can discover in his Confessions, and in his letters and other writings, that is immensely attractive. He certainly was not boring. His wild, passionate life is a testimony to that, from his riotous youth, to his tumultuous ministry as a bishop in the dying years of the Roman Empire, to his death in his besieged city of Hippo, surrounded by marauding Vandal armies. He did not have a quiet life, or an easy one. We can learn from him.

Augustine teaches us what it is to be human, and what it is to be touched by divine grace. Like Thomas More, Augustine was born for friendship, and lived in a human and humane network of generous love, as is seen in his letters, and the accounts of those who lived with him. He was no dry intellectual, and yet he was a brilliant man, a profound thinker and great writer, whose natural gifts were developed through years of reading and writing. He worked hard.

He had a deep personal experience of sin and conversion, and perhaps from his own stormy life story derived a searching insight into the most devious pathways of the human heart. He loved fiercely and tenderly, and the effect of his life is felt by us today, 1,600 years after his death, as it was by his contemporaries. He was an exemplary priest and bishop, preaching the word of God to his people, and caring as a spiritual shepherd for the flock entrusted to him.

Augustine is a fitting patron saint for our seminary, for a seminary is intended primarily to prepare candidates for the priesthood, and Augustine was a model pastor. Though none of us can match the natural talents with which God so generously endowed him, we are called to imitate his passionate life of service of God and neighbour. This is certainly true of the seminarians who are in formation for the priesthood here, but it is really true of all of us, whatever our vocation may be. In more recent decades, St Augustine's seminary has extended its mission to prepare candidates for the office of deacon, and to prepare lay people, especially for service in Catholic education. We all can look to Augustine for inspiration and for clear guidance in our life of Christian discipleship, and in our life of apostolic service.

Augustine focused on Christ; in him he found the purpose of his life. In the famous conversion incident in the garden in Milan, Augustine heard a child's voice sing out "Take and read; take and read". He picked up a copy of the New Testament, and opened it at the words of St Paul in the letter to the Romans: "the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its desires." (Romans 13: 12-14) Augustine had tried for years the path of dishonour, and was skilled in the works of darkness, all the more so because he had many natural gifts to corrupt. But, as with St Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus, from that moment on Augustine was utterly committed to his mission in the service of Christ, and turned away from the lesser gods that had controlled him, though they always beckoned him back. But he made his own another insight of St Paul: to live is Christ.

Such must be the commitment of each Christian, and surely of one who aspires to the priesthood: in the words of a World Youth Day hymn: "Jesus Christ, you are my life, Alleluia, alleluia." A seminary prepares seminarians to discern if God is calling them to give their whole life with wild abandon to the priestly service of God and his people, and then, as a "seed bed", a seminary is meant to help them to grow in the commitment to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, like Saint Augustine, and to become on fire with love for God and for the people to whom they are sent. This is what the people of the Church need and deserve in their priests: spiritual shepherds who are, as the prayer at the ordination Mass says,

“ardent yet gentle heralds of (the) Gospel.” Augustine could be gentle, and he certainly was always ardent.

He was a servant of the suffering servant described in today’s first reading, in which Isaiah foreshadows the coming of Christ, who shares in the sufferings of his people. Augustine’s ardour came from his deep identification with Christ, the Lord and the Suffering Servant, and with the people for whom he offered his life as a pastor, and in whom he saw Christ. In that he is the model for all pastors, who must base their busy priestly ministry upon a deep union with the Lord who sends them, a union symbolized at ordination by the prostration of the candidate on the floor in utter surrender to the Lord, surrounded by the prayers of the people. And they must also live their priestly ministry in the imitation of Christ, the suffering servant, who did not stay aloof, but entered fully into the joys and sorrows of those whom he served. That is the mission of a priest: to know Christ intimately, and to know his people.

Augustine is the saint of the heart on fire; that is his symbol in our artistic tradition. There is nothing tepid, or grudging, or listless, in the priestly ministry of Augustine, and in this he is a model for all who are formed for the priesthood, and for other missions of service, at his seminary. We need pastors like Augustine, ardent yet gentle heralds of the Gospel, giving themselves generously, with boldness and joy, to God and to those entrusted to their pastoral care, spiritual shepherds with hearts on fire with love. As the motto of this seminary states, in a quotation from Augustine: As the sun reigns in the heavens, so may charity reign in our hearts.

In our days, as in Augustine’s, the fire of true love can be extinguished by the ever shifting winds of popular culture, and by the dwindling over time of the inner resources of faith. Momentary ardor in itself is not enough, nor is a faith based upon religious emotion. To use three images which communicate different aspects of the same idea: the fire must burn bright, the foundation must be deep, and the seed must grow in good soil. The fire must burn brightly through a lifetime of priestly service, and through a life of discipleship, in often difficult conditions. That will only happen if each of us has found a deep inner peace, a still point in this spinning world, a place to experience reality in a world of illusion. He of the heart on fire with love was familiar with illusion, and wrote in his Confessions:

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” There must be a contemplative base, and an inner peace even at a human level, in those who are formed here, in the vocations that are grown in this seed bed of the priesthood dedicated to the great Saint Augustine.

As with all seminaries, St Augustine’s is built upon the four pillars of formation – human formation, pastoral formation, intellectual formation, and spiritual formation – which are offered in Pope John Paul’s letter on priestly formation, “Pastores Dabo Vobis”, a title taken from the promise of God in Jeremiah 3:15: “I will give you shepherds according to my own heart”.

Seminarians receive human formation, for grace builds on nature, and the human personality of the priest greatly affects his ability to be a good pastor. Our humanity must be a bridge to others, not a wall. St Augustine was a man who used creatively the human talents he had received, and lived in warm human relationships with many friends, as his letters attest; he was a mature person, humbly aware of his faults, who cared for others. He loved and was lovable, as are we all. He was far from perfect, and that is a consolation for us all, but he courageously faced the issues in his life, and lived with integrity.

A seminary trains candidates through pastoral formation, and this seminary is meant to form pastors to be spiritual shepherds of God’s people in the parishes of the Church. As Pope Francis says, the pastor must share the smell of the sheep. He cannot be withdrawn, aloof, but must live among his people, as did St Augustine, who daily was absorbed in the most practical issues facing the Christians of his community, helping them to resolve them in the light of the Gospel. He lived and he died in the midst of his people, sharing in all of their joys and sorrows. He was truly a servant of Christ the suffering servant. It is most appropriate that this seminary was built in 1913 to face in the direction of the cathedral, the spiritual center of this local community of Christians.

A seminary is, obviously, an academic institution, offering an intellectual formation that must be exceptional. The people deserve pastors who know what they are talking about, who are learned in the profound Christian intellectual tradition that is the foundation of western culture, and of our modern universities, which arose out of the heart of the Church. Augustine was a profound thinker,

whose writings are fundamental in the intellectual life of the world. Faith is not a sentimental experience, but along with reason is one of the wings that allows us to fly to the discovery of truth. We all need to take inspiration from the wondrous questing mind of Augustine, who searched relentlessly for the truth. And he worked hard at that, in the midst of his intensely busy life as a bishop. In such circumstances, it is astonishing how he was able to produce his vast output of writings of such high intellectual quality. Our Seminary, in itself, and as a participant in the Toronto School of Theology, and in collaboration with the University of Toronto, takes its inspiration from this great student, teacher, professor, and master philosopher and theologian. In intellectual formation it must learn from Augustine, who never floated off into sterile abstraction; his intellectual work was fruitful because it was grounded in his daily experience of pastoral life.

Our hearts are restless until they rest in God, and so spiritual formation is at the heart of any seminary, as this chapel is at the heart of St Augustine's. Those who are sent out on apostolic mission must know personally the one who sends them. Jesus called his disciples to come and see, to live with him, before he sent them out to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. In prayer we dwell with Christ and he with us, and we bring the cares and joys of our daily life to him. Augustine's life was marked by the fruitful rhythm of private and communal prayer which is the foundation for the life of discipleship and mission within the community of the Church. His priestly life was centered on the preaching of the word of God in his cathedral, in the midst of his people, and his celebration of the Eucharist in the midst of his people. Augustine shows us the way of Christian prayer.

The Gospel today reminds us of the Eucharistic center of the priestly life, and of the Christian life. "This is my body" "This is my blood" – we encounter Christ in word and sacrament, and it is fitting that a key moment of our commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of this seed bed of the priesthood is today's celebration of the Eucharist. During our earthly journey, again and again, until we see the Lord face to face, all of us are sent out from the Eucharist to bring Christ into our daily lives, and we return to the Eucharist for new life. Spiritual formation is fundamental for all of us, and certainly for this seminary.

The spiritual formation of Augustine took a special form, in that too he instructs us. In connection with his ordination as a priest, and before he entered into the busyness of the pastoral life, Augustine asked his bishop Valerius for permission to spend a significant period of time in prayer and meditation on the scriptures, so that he might know more deeply the one he was called to preach – for a priest, like every Christian, is called to proclaim not just the message of Christianity (which can be learned in a classroom by anyone), but above all the person of Christ. Bishop Valerius wisely granted Augustine’s request.

Augustine was not alone in seeing the need to seek an extended period of time to deepen his intimacy with the Lord who called him and sent him. Ignatius of Loyola did not begin his active pastoral mission until after he had retreated to Manresa to deepen the foundations of his relationship with Jesus, and to come to know himself more truly in the silence of extended prayer. After his conversion experience, St Paul not only got straight his understanding of the content of the gospel message by consulting the apostles, but he went off to Arabia for several years before launching into his mission. Jesus himself spent forty days in the desert, not in study but in prayer.

In the spiritual year recently introduced at this seminary, before the seminarians enter fully into the necessary academic work that is one part of their formation, they are offered what Augustine and other great saints sought: an extended time, freed as much as possible from the distractions that will surely await them but can be put aside for a while, so that they may be immersed in the prayerful meditation upon the whole of the bible, and challenged by a prayerful encounter with Christ under the guidance of the spiritual masters of the Christian tradition. It is a time of quiet prayer, restless hearts resting in God; a time of service of the most needy, encountering Christ there as well; a time of communal sharing of faith; and a time of intense Eucharistic experience. There will be time enough later for the essential academic dimension, with exams and essays and other such purgatorial experiences, but the spiritual year is fundamentally meant to be what Augustine and the great saints sought: a time to deepen the foundational experience of Christ, the “putting on of the Lord Jesus Christ”, an experience that places everything else in perspective, and allows the candidate for ordination to be firmly grounded for a lifetime of committed priestly ministry, ready for the

increasing challenges that such a consecrated life faces, and more ready to share the person of Christ as well as the message of Christ with those to whom he is sent.

Saint Augustine is our patron, and on this anniversary day we celebrate him, and learn from him, and ask his intercession. May the laity, the deacons, and the priests who are formed here be passionate disciples and apostles, who like Augustine have put on the Lord Jesus Christ, with a heart on fire with love, and with a restless heart at peace in God. That is the mission of this seminary, and has been for a hundred years, and will be for centuries yet to come.

Here are the famous words of Augustine that express his sorrow for his sins, and his search for the Lord who all along was searching for him, and who set his heart on fire:

“Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!

Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you,

And upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong, I, misshapen.

You were with me, but I was not with you.

They held me back from you, these things which would have no being were they not in you.

You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;

You flared, blazed, banished my blindness;

You lavished your fragrance, I gasped and now I pant for you;

I tasted you and I hunger and thirst;

You touched me, and I burned for your peace.”

(Confessions 10, 27. Trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B.)

Saint Augustine, pray for us.