

## **SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS**

An experiential project

**Andrés G. Niño, Ph.D., OSA.**

*The Confessions*, Augustine's masterpiece, has influenced Christian spirituality for 1600 years. He wrote it to give testimony of his intimate pilgrimage in search of God. The narrative describes a progressive ascent; "an exercise" maintained by the inner restlessness that human beings experience in their search for truth and happiness. The times in which we live, marked by a massive servitude of cultural idols, a divisive and violent clash of ideologies, the burden of insatiable ambitions have submerged our human experience in a dense fog of inner restlessness and dispersion. More than ever there is an imperative to recover a coherent and transcendent vision of life, beginning with our own personal predicament.

On such critical matter **Augustine** emerges as **spiritual master** with a voice that resonates convincingly in our own time. His clear, direct language and his deep knowledge of the human condition establish a strong empathic link with the readers that facilitate the assimilation of his spiritual teachings. The classic *Confessions*, with its capacity to reflect the truth and transform human experience, is a point of encounter for all of us where we can learn something about ourselves and about God as we respond to the call of his 'hidden providence'. The spiritual exercises embedded in the work optimally focus our attention and give us an opportunity for personal and communal transformation.

**This project** of *Spiritual Exercises with Augustine's Confessions* draws from observations made by a number of

scholars. Here we present our work in a didactic and succinct format that allows Augustine's text to serve as the main guide for an **experiential engagement with Augustine's spiritual pilgrimage**. The purpose has been to renew his invitation to the readers of all times "to approach, to see and to understand this way" that is Christ<sup>1</sup>. The powerful image of a community around his text becomes a recurrent event and experience.

**We have reflected** on John Paul II's address to the General Chapter of the Order of St. Augustine in 2001 that conveys a discerning sense of history and the value of traditions that have maintained the mission of the Church for centuries. He said on that occasion:

*"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”<sup>2</sup>*

John Paul II's message gives timely relevance to this project.

**In the first publication** of this project we raised some questions about the impact that Augustine's Confessions and its spiritual journey has made in the religious beliefs and the spirituality of the general public: Does his message reach our contemporaries? What didactic resources and contexts can be most effective to achieve that? Will those who have meditated in the work of Augustine assume the task of being *pedagogues of interiority* for people who want to explore and follow the way of Christ?

As an answer to those questions, a group of 50 Augustinians from the four Provinces in Spain made the first experience of the *'Spiritual Exercises with Augustine's Confessions* in Guadarrama, Madrid, in 2007. Later, other groups that included Augustinians and Recollects, have followed in different countries, including Tanzania, Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica. In USA, lay people associated with Augustinian parishes and students at MIT and Amherst College, have been introduced to these Spiritual Exercises as well. The evaluations and commentaries, gathered after these experiences, have confirmed the fact that Augustine continues to be an inspiring spiritual master in modern times.

**Augustine's spiritual journey** encourages readers not only to a personal transformation but to reach out and motivate other pilgrims to share with them the struggle of the search for God and the joy of finding him.

From that perspective, we have drawn a few important proposals from meetings that have taken place about this project. Among them:

\* **To establish the reading of the Confessions** as a fundamental exercise of Augustinian formation and a way of Christian life. The Spiritual Exercises is offered as a didactic instrument viable and effective for that purpose<sup>3</sup>.

\* **To cultivate the experience of the Exercises with Augustine** by deepening into their biblical, theological, and humanistic aspects. Those who have been exercised in this manner will be able *to transmit the motivation* necessary for others to respond to the call of the interior Teacher in their pilgrimage towards God.

\* **To create situations and encounters** that will bring the wealth of Augustine's spiritual wisdom down to the path of the many that are searching. Particularly, in educational centers and parishes where it may be integrated in their programs of faith renewal, formation and service to different groups.

\* **To contribute, in a practical manner, to the interdisciplinary work** that interprets the message of Augustine for our time. As an example, *Revista Agustiniana* published a special issue (2008) dedicated to the "Spiritual Exercises in Augustine's Confessions" with commentaries by a group of Augustinian scholars. Others have contributed with an extensive select bibliography, analysis of the experience of the Exercises based on end-of-retreat questionnaires and adaptations to various groups of lay people. The objective is to continue to explore the depths of Augustine's experience while remaining attentive to the spiritual needs of our contemporaries.

\* **To gather a group of 'pedagogues of interiority'** that will be able to offer retreats based on the spiritual exercises with Augustine's Confessions. There are already a number of individuals who are already working along this line

adding perspectives and resources from their own experience and educational expertise. They represent a practical willingness to be engaged in "a common task" with the objective of demonstrating in practice the relevance in Augustinian spirituality. These initiatives are integrated in a Web page <augustiniana.com> with links to other resources of Augustinian spirituality.

---

1. Conf. VII, 21, 27.

2 *Acta Ordinis*, Publicazioni Agostiniane: Roma (2001), n.10, pp.34-38.

3 NIÑO, A G. (2008) "Spiritual Exercises in Augustine's Confessions". *Journal of Religion and Health. Psychology, Spirituality, Medicine* 47: 88-102. (OnlineFirst, 2007). A second part, "Formative Practices in Augustine's Confessions", *Studies in Spirituality*, (October 2011). The Spanish versions appeared in *Revista Agustiniana*, (2006) vol. XLVII, n. 142: 81-117; *Revista Agustiniana*, (2008) Monográfico, vol. XLIX, n. 149, 375-435.