

THE EVANGELICAL INSPIRATION OF THE RULE OF ST AUGUSTINE

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IN this study we wish to limit ourselves to a description of the theological content of the Rule of Augustine. We take the word 'theological' here in its widest sense, that is, as interpretation of the Gospel. It will be clear that one cannot possibly think of the Rule of Augustine — nor indeed of any other rule — apart from such an interpretation.

Characteristics of the Rule

The Rule of Augustine aims at giving verbal expression to the reality of being a Christian. This is evident at first glance from the great number of biblical references in the rather short text: not less than thirty-one, of which twenty-seven are from the New Testament. The text of the Rule is an excellent example of the biblical style of Augustine. Even the most simple sentences are interwoven with those biblical ideas that provide their basic inspiration. In these references also, Augustine's own theology comes to light, since the biblical ideas which he emphasizes are at the same time those ideas which have become dear to him, and have therefore assumed a special place in his life. From certain biblical data, Augustine, as it were, builds his own synthesis, accentuating it after his own fashion; by means of this we can work back to a living Christian situation.

It is precisely this evangelical foundation which forms the constant frame-work of the Rule, and which continuously preserves its value throughout the changing ages. Augustine, too, saw himself faced with the necessity of applying his theological vision within the limits of the culture of his time. Thus, of course, we find a number of points in the Rule that are purely relative to the time when it was written, and it would be foolish to want to retain them. One example would be the regulations regarding fasting; here one must take into account that, at that time, the main meal was at the end of the day, and that, for the poor, it was often the only meal. One thinks also of the great barriers of class distinction; the free man and the slave were socially very far apart. But, since discrimination is a problem of all times, it is not at all difficult to re-interpret these passages in a modern light. It goes without saying also that the man-woman relationship

is to a great extent dependent on the culture of that time, e.g. with regard to letters. One ought not to forget that, in antiquity, a letter was of its very nature something public; where secrecy was involved in an exchange of letters it was always a matter of love letters. The following customs and regulations can also be considered as products of their time: those concerning clothes (which were not so particular nor so hygienic as in our time!), the keeping of books (which, as handwritten documents, were much rarer and more costly than in our days), and the public baths (the place of recreation for the rich and rather less prudish than what we are accustomed to). And that is about the sum of all the time-bound elements of the Rule.

Of primary importance, however, are the basic evangelical thought-patterns that underlie all this. These have to be brought once again to the fore and then applied to our own time. They must become again lived realities. From the biblical citations themselves we can see what Augustine was getting at. The most common citation is that taken from the Acts of the Apostles, where the community ideal of the first Christian church at Jerusalem is described. Thus, love and community come to have an absolutely central place. Community life and love are really only different words for indicating the same reality. Consequently, social love becomes the ultimate criterion for personal progress, as is evident from I Cor. 13, 5 and 12, 31, Gal. 5, 13 and I Thess. 5, 14. The harsh text, I John 3, 15, 'anyone who hates his brother is a murderer', belongs to this same context of love. What is remarkable is that not very much is said about the love of God. But this is completely in agreement with Augustine's vision. Human love is the particular field in which we can give form to our love for God and realize it. On this point Augustine is by no means a 'verticalist', and he will never lay one-sided emphasis on an immediate contact with God. Quite the contrary. The following assertion is clear on the issue:

Since perfect love depends only on two commandments, namely, those of love of God and of love of one's fellow-man, how is it that Paul, both in his letter to the Galatians and in that to the Romans, speaks only of the love of one's fellow man? The reason for this is that people can easily fool themselves concerning love of God, since this love is but seldom tested. But a man can without difficulty be convinced that he does not love his fellow man if he behaves unjustly towards him. . . . Since the two commandments are fixed in such a way that one cannot be followed without the other, it is enough to name one to name them both . . . and by preference, the commandment to love one's fellow man . . . about which one can easily judge in daily life and in concrete behaviour.¹

¹ *Epistulae ad Galatas expositio* 45. PL. 35, 2137-8. In *epistulam Johannis* 8, 4. PL. 35, 2037.

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The reference to Romans 6, 14-22, shows us another characteristic of the Rule: freedom under grace. The whole Rule really witnesses to this freedom, since one notices straightaway how few concrete prescriptions and laws about details are given. There is no 'order of the day' to be found nor a rigidly-structured organization. Augustine was never a man for prescriptions and laws; his concern was to be continually seeking what is essential, the core of things, the heart. Even before he himself went to live in Thagaste with others of like mind, Augustine had been struck by the freedom of the religious life. In three characteristics he sums up the monastic life he had come to know in Rome: 'There one lives together in Christian love, holiness, and freedom'.² Here we meet the 'spiritualizing' tendency that the Rule has in common with all of Augustine's other works. We could even speak of 'interiorization', or of a movement towards inwardness. Seven times we come across the transition from *exterior* to *interior*: from material prayer to the true prayer of the heart; from material hunger to hunger for the Word of God (Amos 8, 11); from external clothing to the personal way of life; from looking at a woman to desiring her (Matt. 5, 28); from a physical wound to the wound of the heart; from exterior avoidance to the interior attitude and character; from externally asking forgiveness to the true forgiving of guilt from the heart (Matt. 18, 35).

As a last characteristic we ought to point out the absence of asceticism, or rather of its exercise for its own sake. The only purely ascetical element in the Rule is the mention of fasting. But then again it appears that even there Augustine was not concerned with *ascesis* as an end in itself. He immediately relativizes *ascesis* by making it dependent on the person (health is always more important), and by putting it at the service of the community life (no one may make it easier for himself at the cost of others). This is indeed confirmed by Possidius who, in his *Vita Augustini*,³ mentions that there was always wine on the table; since Possidius goes on to give a lengthy justification of this, it must certainly not have been the custom in monastic circles. Moreover, Augustine used silver spoons deliberately (*proposito voluntatis*), while keeping the rest of the cutlery and crockery very sober. The motivation for *ascesis* also deserves attention: 'To want for a little is better than to have too much'. This is an anthropological motivation, i.e. *ascesis* serves the development of the human personality. There is no trace here of

² *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* I, 33, 70. PL. 32, 1340.

³ Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 22. PL. 32, 51-52.

a dualistic or Manichaean vision of life, in which the human or worldly would be undervalued or thought of as in radical opposition to the divine.

The Ideal of the Jerusalem Community as a Basic Programme

The first chapter of the Rule offers us a basic programme that is very concisely explicitated by means of three fundamental principles: living together in love, the indispensable conditions of which are the community of goods and humility (i.e. considering oneself the same as others). The first and last sentences of this chapter run perfectly parallel:

Before all else you must live together harmoniously, one in heart and one in soul, on the way to God;

Let all of you live together in unity of mind and heart, and honour God in one another.

Unity, then, appears as the necessary requisite for our being on the way towards God with one another. Consequently, God appears in our love for one another; by way of man we go to God. For true living together presupposes love, and love is ultimately God.⁴ But authentic living together is not so quickly reached. Many forms of living together never go beyond the material level: eating at the same table or living in the same building. Augustine is very well aware that true living together only comes about when people find one another as persons and share in one another's deepest life. Community, therefore, will only be built up if it touches the heart. When the oneness of heart is lacking there can be no question of living together: 'You live together only if you are of one heart'.⁵ But then the perspective of becoming one reaches still further. Mutual love opens out upon the absolute One, the perfect Peace, the all-comprehending Love.

We are on the way towards becoming one in God, one out of multiplicity.

Love, then, must join us together so that we may follow the One in unity of heart, and not fall back into multiplicity and be divided among many things.⁶

'Unus in uno ad unum: one together, in the one Christ, on the way to the one Father.'⁷ This last is surely the most forceful description Augustine ever gave of his ideal of unity. And since unity and love coincide he can also conclude: 'In discord God is no longer present'.⁸

⁴ *Sermo* 265, 9, 9. PL. 38, 1223: 'The love with which we love our fellow-man is the very same as that love with which we love God'. In *Johannis evangelium* 17, 8. PL. 35, 1531-2. Cf. In *epistolam Johannis* 10, 3; 8, 14; 7, 6; 9, 2. PL., 35, 2055-6. 2044. 2031-2. 2045.

⁵ *Enarratio in psalmum* 100, 11. PL. 37, 1291.

⁶ *Sermo* 284, 4. PL. 38, 1290.

⁷ *Enarratio in psalmum* 147, 28. PL. 37, 1937.

⁸ *Enarratio in psalmum* 132, 13. PL. 37, 1736.

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Without any doubt, therefore, the point of departure for Augustine's Rule is the building up of an authentic community of life. Indeed, any being-together without that would become quite meaningless. From the very first sentence of the Rule the reason for coming to live together is given as concord. In chapter 6, the same thought is expressed in a negative way: whoever does not wish to live in harmony has 'no reason' for being in the monastery, that is to say, his being there is meaningless. The ideal that the monk Augustine has here before his eyes is the first Christian community of Jerusalem (Acts 4, 32-35). The Rule repeatedly refers to it. And even Augustine's biographer, Possidius, assures us that Augustine wanted to form a community 'in the manner of the apostolic model'.⁹ Moreover, Augustine himself declares in a sermon: 'To let you hear a description of the way of life which we wish to follow, the appropriate passage of the Acts of the Apostles will be read out to you'.¹⁰ Augustine quotes the text from Acts no less than twelve times in connexion with his monastic ideal. In the whole of his work, this passage from Acts is cited almost fifty times.

Yet it should not be thought that this passage is open to only one interpretation. It can appeal to different people in different ways. Thus, the Egyptian monk, Antony, interprets this text differently from Augustine. Antony interprets this passage from the Acts as a personal keeping one's distance from worldly goods, supported by the hope of eternal life. The communitarian aspect is lacking in Antony's view. That was also the case with Augustine in the beginning. In his oldest texts he reads the passage from Acts likewise in the light of a personal inner unity with God or with Christ. He is concerned with the liberation of one's own personhood. But, about the year 400, a fundamental change takes place.¹¹ Then he comes to see the community of goods completely at the service of inter-personal love. Poverty is orientated towards building up the *anima una*. Love is therefore primary; the theme of personal detachment becomes secondary. Thus, one is poor in order to be better and able to give oneself more freely to others. In this way poverty becomes a 'sign' of love.

In Christian antiquity most monastic communities based themselves on this motif from Acts. There is, today, as far as I know, not a single monastic community that expressly appeals to Acts, apart from the Taizé community. And still there is a notable difference: Taizé sees 'putting the parable of Acts before the eyes of our

⁹ Possidius, *op. cit.*, 5. PL. 32, 37.

¹⁰ *Sermo* 356, PL. 39, 1574.

¹¹ D. Sanchis, 'Pauvreté monastique et charité fraternelle chez saint Augustin', in *Studia Monastica* 4 (1962), pp. 7-33.

world' as the living out of an ecumenical striving for the achievement of unity among all Christians.¹² This interpretation is found in Augustine only on the occasion of the division between Catholics and Donatists.

Just as the Christians in Acts (but then in a more radical way), Augustine sees in the community of goods the immediate embodiment and expression of community-life-in-love: 'Let there be no talk among you about personal property. On the contrary, see that you hold everything in common.' This community of goods, however, is not a blind co-ordination of individuals: 'Each person should be given what he personally needs.' By blind co-ordination one never achieves a community of persons, but, at the most, an unconnected being-next-to-each-other of people. Therefore, love is required if one is to be able to serve each person just as he or she is; for love alone knows the person with his gifts and needs.

Further, Augustine lays great emphasis on humility: pride is as much a threat for the rich as for the poor. For him, in opposition to classical moral teaching, humility is really a basic virtue of the Christian life. Love needs humility as a foundation in order to be able to exist at all. Without humility, growing together in unity is unthinkable. No matter how different the people in a monastery may be, what is important is that they become brothers and sisters. Only then do they become God's new temple, the place of his presence, since God abides only in love. Or, to say it with Augustine: 'The house of God: that is, in the first place, ourselves'.¹³ Only then are those devoted to God *ad usus Dei*,¹⁴ available for God, people through whom God influences the world.

Thus, we can summarize the fundamental principles of the Rule as follows:

- unity of heart and spirit;
- community life as an expression of love, the first commandment of Christ;
- absolute respect for the person of the other, which follows from a consistent love for one another;
- humility as the indispensable condition for loving another, since only humility can make a person open to others and prevent him from turning back upon himself;
- community of goods as the realization of this openness to others, as the elimination of the continuous menace of going off to live egoistically for oneself.

¹² *La Règle de Taizé* (Taizé, 1962), p. 107 in the chapter 'Rechercher l'unité chrétienne. Un seul coeur et une seule âme'.

¹³ *Sermo* 336, 1, 1. PL. 38, 1471.

¹⁴ *Sermo* 148, 2, 2. PL. 38, 799-800.

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The rest of the Rule comprises nothing more than concise, concrete applications of this monastic social vision, of this community of love. The structure of the rest of the Rule can then easily be reduced to a few points:¹⁵

- (1) Common prayer (chapter 2);
- (2) The common meal, in connexion with which the attitude to be taken towards weak and sick confrères is exposed (chapter 3);
- (3) With regard to going out he speaks of preserving inner purity, and also of the moral responsibility of all the members of the community, one for the other, which is actualized in fraternal admonition (chapter 4);
- (4) Being of service to one another with regard to clothing, sickness and lending books (chapter 5);
- (5) The preservation of mutual concord by avoiding everything that could be hurtful to another person (chapter 6);
- (6) Love in relationships involving authority (chapter 7);
- (7) Concluding words of incentive (chapter 8).

¹⁵ For this new division — as indeed for my insight into the Rule as a whole — I owe a great deal to my confrère, L. Verheijen. His authoritative study in two volumes, *La Règle de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1967), is without doubt the most critical and trustworthy guide imaginable. The following commentaries should also be mentioned: A. Zumkeller, *Das Mönchtum des heiligen Augustinus*. (Würzburg, 1968). The second edition corrects and expands the first edition in many respects. A. Manrique, *La vida monástica en San Agustín. Enchiridion histórico-doctrinal y Regla*. (El Escorial, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo — Salamanca, Convento de San Agustín, 1959), and by the same author: *Teología agustiniana de la vida religiosa*. (Madrid, Real Monasterio de El Escorial, 1964). A. Sage, *La Règle de saint Augustin commentée par ses écrits*. (Paris, 1961).

R. Lorenz, 'Die Anfänge des abendländischen Mönchtums im 4. Jahrhundert', in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 77 (1966), pp. 1-61, is of the opinion that the Rule of Augustine shows a lack of unity and that it is badly composed. This is a negative fact for him in the question of the authenticity of the Rule. I do not wish to deal with the problem of the style of the Rule here, although association of ideas, digressions and interruptions in the train of thought are characteristic of Augustine's style. But I wish to object strongly against Lorenz's point that the Rule lacks unity of content. That the treatment of those who were formerly rich and of the sick are brought into relation, follows logically from the principle 'that not everyone should want to have what he sees another receiving'. The main idea here is that community does not imply blind uniformity. Lorenz also finds the sentence, 'let no one seek his own advantage in his work', out of place. That is, however, incorrect, because the passage in question concerns the material goods of the community. Nor does the mention of making gifts available for the community break the sequence in this context; it is, in fact, a conclusion from what had gone before. Lorenz finds the section on fraternal correction especially confused. But the order of events is not so haphazard as he thinks. First, there is a personal conversation with one who has acted badly; if he is unwilling to listen, then a personal meeting with the superior must be arranged; if this does nothing to help, then other people must be informed of the situation; finally it is the community itself that has to deal with the affair publicly. The basic schema followed here is that of Matt. 18, 15-17. The fact that the superior enters the picture only in the second stage is probably to be explained by Augustine's wishing to respect Matthew's schema. To sum up: the incoherent points that Lorenz sees, disappear if one reads the relevant passages in the light of the unifying idea of the Rule, namely, love for the community.

Thus, we come to the conclusion that what is of prime importance for Augustine is community life in love; this is true to such an extent that he gave his followers no other external mission. For Augustine the work one does outside is secondary. The only thing that he ever said about it is that one should become involved where the need of the Church demands it, without, however, giving up community life.¹⁶ For him, the community of love is meaningful in itself, such that it has no need of any subsidiary goal to prop up its meaning and value.

Yet, one will immediately object: yes, but community and love are everywhere found to be of prime importance! That goes without saying. Spirituality is but the nuancing of a larger whole. And, in our case, is not a certain nuancing already given in the exceptional emphasis placed on the one point: the community life as such? Nothing else is added, and I believe that this already betrays a special point of view. Other communities are always going to expand, specify and tie this point down, some of them interiorly, others exteriorly.

But there is still more. For there are communities and communities. On the level of community life notable differences exist and a whole range of gradations. Thus, there are communities in which there is very little communication on the level of day-to-day life. Also one can imagine a community of life that is intended as mainly functional, established on the basis of a particular work, a sort of work-community. Again, another form of community life will be orientated more towards the interior. And within a community life that seeks its sense and meaning in itself, one can still come across all possible shades. The Bible makes the distinction between love of one's neighbour (which is directed to everybody without distinction) and brotherliness (which is directed particularly to one's companions in faith). So within love itself distinction can be made: comradeship, friendship, married love, family relationship, etc.

Community Life and Friendship

Thus we have to ask the question whether we can more closely determine what community life was in Augustine's eyes. On reading together all the relevant texts from his works, it will be ascertained that community life in his monasteries has a very personal tone, and it can be safely said that community life for him bears the stamp of friendship.

¹⁶ See A. Wücherer-Huldenfeld, 'Mönchtum und kirchlicher Dienst bei Augustinus nach dem Bild des Neubekehrten und des Bischofs', in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 82 (1960), pp. 182-211.

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Already in Augustine's youth friendship received a place of honour. At that time, however, friendship was not striven after for its own sake, as would indeed be the case later on.

Only wisdom do I love in itself. All else, life, rest and friends, I desire to possess or fear to lose because of wisdom. What boundaries can my love for wisdom have? Not only am I not at all jealous that others possess her too, but I even try to encourage people to seek her, to desire her, to possess and enjoy her, together with me. And they will become more and more my friends the more intimately we share the object of our love.¹⁷

Later, however, Augustine will hold that friendship is sought for itself, and this is connected with a certain evolution in his vision of human love.¹⁸ Therefore, he reckons friendship among the necessities of life:

Two things are necessary in this world: life and friendship. To these we must attach great importance and we ought never to undervalue them. Life and friendship are goods given us by nature. God created man that he should be and live: that is life. But, in order that man should not be alone, friendship is also required for life.¹⁹

In *De Diversis Quaestionibus* 83, one question is entirely dedicated to friendship. This work has its origin at the beginning of Augustine's monastic life, and was prompted by questions that his young confrères put to him. In connexion with the Pauline text, 'we ought to bear one another's burdens' (Gal. 6, 2), Augustine explains how one should try to come gradually to friendship with everybody. He declares that 'no person can be known except through friendship'. To the question, 'when can it be said that someone has been taken into our friendship?', he replies: 'when a person dare entrust someone with all his ideas'.²⁰

Speaking about his monastic experience Augustine expressly asserts:

I confess it, I give myself easily to the love of friends, and I rest in it without cares, especially when I am tired of the vexations of this world. For I feel that God is there, and in safety I give myself up to him and safely I rest. In this security of love I no longer fear the insecurity of tomorrow, the insecurity of human frailty about which I complained earlier. . . . The ideas and thoughts that I entrust to a faithful friend who is filled with Christian *caritas*, I entrust no longer to a man but to God, because the man remains in God and is faithful through him.²¹

¹⁷ *Soliloquia* I, 13, 22. PL. 32, 881. See also the chapter 'Gemeenschap en vriendschap', in T. Van Bavel, *Augustinus* (Baarn, Wereldvenster, 1970), p. 23-26 (to be published in German translation in the Summer of 1974).

¹⁸ *Epistula* 130, 6, 13. PL. 33, 499.

¹⁹ *Sermo Denis* 16, 1. G. Morin, *Miscellanea Agostiniana*. Vol. I (Roma, 1930), p. 75.

²⁰ *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, q. 71, 5-6. PL. 40, 82-83.

²¹ *Epistula* 73, 3, 10. PL. 33, 249-50.

THE DOWNSIDE REVIEW

Perhaps the most profound words Augustine wrote about friendship are the following:

When we are oppressed by poverty, when mourning makes us sad or bodily pain makes us restless, when exile dejects us or any evil whatever afflicts us, then there are good people who not only understand the art of rejoicing with those who rejoice, but also of weeping with those who weep; people who know how to speak a cheerful word and how to hold a conversation that does us good. In this way much that is bitter is softened, much that weighs us down is lightened, so many failures are overcome. But it is really God who does this, through and in people. On the other hand, when we are swimming in riches, when we are free of sadness and enjoy good bodily health, while living in a free country, but having to live together with people among whom there is not even one in whom we can place trust, not even one from whom we need not be in dread and fear of guile, deceit, hate, discord or falsity, then do not all the other things of life become hard and bitter, and lose all their joy and colour? Whenever a man is without a friend, not a single thing in the world appears friendly to him. (*In quibuslibet rebus humanis, nihil est homini amicum sine homine amico*).²²

At one time, the remark used to be made against this conception of friendship that a monastery is not at all a human circle of friends, but a society based on supernatural love. Today this separation between nature and supernature seems to be totally out-dated. And rightly so: it is nonsense to speak of Christian friendship if we do not become friends in the simple reality of everyday, as is said by René Voillaume.

Community and Poverty

Now that we have more closely determined Augustine's community ideal as friendship, we must let it be seen how this ideal penetrates much further into daily life than one would think at first sight. Even the so-called evangelical counsels receive their proper complexion through this community ideal.

This is immediately evident with regard to the community of goods or poverty. To put one's own possessions at the disposition of the community is, for Augustine, an absolute condition of community life; it is, however, not its core. Poverty is thought of only as being at the service of the community. To have his own possessions makes a person concentrate on himself. It is, thus, a source of division, since material things are necessarily limited and

²² *Epistula* 130, 2, 4. PL. 33. 495.

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often cannot be used by a number of people at the same time. When there is strict insistence on individual possessions, a community very easily falls apart.

Why is it so difficult for brothers to be of one heart? Because they struggle with one another for earthly things. . . . Brothers who wish to live in unity of heart should not give themselves over to love for earthly things. . . . They should strive after that possession which cannot be divided. Then they will always be of one heart. For what is the reason for discord among brothers? What disturbs love? Why is it that, although all come forth from the one womb, they are not one in spirit? Only because their spirit remains turned in on itself and everyone attends only to his own share!²³

Community of goods and mutual love imply each other. To call one the condition of the other would be to express their relation too weakly. In fact, they are related much more closely than that. Not only does Augustine see the community of goods as implying love, but also he will see love as implying the community of goods.

If you love you are never entirely without possessions. For, when you love unity, then everyone who possesses anything has something for you. Take jealousy away, and what I possess is yours. Take jealousy away, and what you possess is mine. . . . Possess love and you will possess everything.²⁴

The concern of love is that what each one has separately becomes a possession of all. That is the strange power of love: when there really is mutual love, then I possess in another what I do not have in myself.²⁵

Giving out of love never means a loss. Here, giving means a gain. . . . Love grows the more it gives, and one becomes more loving to the extent that one loves people more. . . . Such is love: she alone understands the secret of making others richer and thereby becoming richer oneself.²⁶

Augustine's view of poverty as community of goods does not in any way arise from a hostile attitude towards earthly values. He even strongly relativizes poverty, understood as a material lack. To material misery in itself he attaches no value. Very often in his works we find the assertion: 'What sense has it, not to possess something and yet to be torn apart by desire for it?'.²⁷ Thus, here

²³ *Sermo* 359, 1-2. PL. 39, 1590-1.

²⁴ *In Johannis evangelium* 32, 8. PL. 35, 1646.

²⁵ Cf. *In Johannis evangelium* 67, 2. PL. 35, 1812.

²⁶ *Epistula* 192, 1-2. PL. 33, 868-9.

²⁷ *Enarratio in psalmum* 51, 14. PL. 36, 609-10.

again we come across the familiar interiorization process that assumes such a large place in Augustine's spirituality. Therefore, poverty for him consists not only in giving up material possessions, but also in giving up desires: 'To abandon the whole world, that is, to give up what one has and to give up what one wishes to have'.²⁸ In this way, poverty receives an unexpected psychological dimension, which goes far beyond a purely material concept. This shift to the psychological plane can be seen too in the fact that Augustine so often brings poverty and humility together. Real poverty of heart consists in humility. 'Poor' and 'humble' thus become two words which mean the very same.²⁹

Thus, Augustine's conception of poverty is seen in terms of love, or, to put it in another way, along the lines of the modern 'fraternal sharing' (i.e. the direction that the Church's practice regarding fasting is taking). The monasticism of Augustine is directed more towards the cultivation of the spirit than towards the mortification of the flesh.³⁰ Even though Augustine in his time certainly knew forms of unbridled strict asceticism, yet he never opted for them; for him relations between people are much more central. To show the proper character of this conception to its full advantage it is useful to indicate the value of other conceptions of poverty. Thus, there is nothing against considering voluntary poverty as an ascetic liberation of one's own personhood. Here poverty has at the same time the sense of 'witness': the voluntarily poor person witnesses, in fact, that riches are not essential for a Christian. Thus he emphasizes, in a tangible way, the relativity of the person and his world, in order to direct attention to him who transcends everything and everybody. One can also live a life of Christian poverty as 'solidarity with others'. This happens when one consciously wants to live on the level of the poorest of people. One could speak here of 'a poverty of apostolate'. The aim of such a way of life is a living proclamation of solidarity which is yet again a form of love. Finally, one can also see poverty as an approach to the other in friendship and comradeship, without directly linking with it any apostolic intention.

Such conceptions should be judged positively, for in all these cases earthly values are put at the service of people. And the individual plane at this point intersects with the social plane, since the voluntary poverty of the individual person must finally come to benefit mankind as such.

²⁸ *Epistula 157*, 4, 39. PL. 33, 692.

²⁹ *Sermo 14*, 2, 2-6, 9. PL. 38, 112-15.

³⁰ A. Mandouze, *Saint Augustin. L'aventure de la raison et de la grâce* (Paris, 1968), p. 199. The whole chapter on the monasticism of Augustine, pp. 166-242, is excellent.

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Community and Virginité

What was true for poverty also goes for virginity, albeit in a lesser measure: for Augustine, virginity is also characterized by the communitarian aspect. Augustine always considers personal virginity as a partial realization of the virginity of the Church. The Church as a whole is described as 'virgin' in her relation to Christ. One immediately notices here a strong spiritualizing of virginity. For Augustine, virginity is much more than bodily integrity. In fact, virginity in the purely physical sense has no religious value for him. Bodily virginity only comes to have meaning when it proves itself by the surrender of the heart. Body and heart belong together, and in the long run it is the heart that turns the scale. Thus we have the often recurring contrast — that we also meet in the Rule in another form — between the virginity of the flesh and that of the heart. 'We do not speak of virgins with praise because of the fact of their virginity itself, but because by their virginity they give themselves to God.'³¹ Finally, Augustine is always concerned with the heart of the person and its inner freedom. Bodily virginity offers a possibility to create freedom. Yet, according to Augustine, one ought never to consider personal virginity apart from the Church as community. Personal virginity is a sharing in the virginity of the Church, that is, 'in her loyal faith, her unshakable hope, and her sincere love',³² and it is at the same time a partial realization of it.

This picture of the Church is really too idealistic. And Augustine knows that. Why then does he retain this formulation? A probable explanation is that in his idea of the 'virgin' Church there is a presentiment of expectation and hope for the future; the Church must one day become like this. Religious virginity is thus understood by Augustine as contributing to the building up of the Church; and this is seen in an eschatological perspective. Virginity must become fruitful in faith, hope and love, even though we know all too well that in believing, hoping and loving we necessarily fall short. Therefore, religious virginity in Augustine's view is more an ideal that is inexhaustible than a situation we have already reached. What is noteworthy is that Augustine links virginity with humility (as he had previously done with poverty). Why is this? The reason is that he sees the religious meaning of virginity as ultimately dependent on love. Love is the very essence of the Christian life. In the Christian scale of values, love and humility (which belong

³¹ *De sancta virginitate* 11, 11. PL. 40, 401.

³² Cf. *De bono viduitatis* 10, 13. PL. 40, 438. See also M. Agterberg, *Ecclesia-Virgo. Étude sur la virginité de l'Eglise et des fidèles chez saint Augustin* (Heverlee, Augustijns Historisch Instituut, 1960).

inseparably together) have a higher place than virginity. What is most important about the person of Jesus is always his *humilitas*. Hence the maxim: 'A married person who is humble is better than a proud virgin', and 'Love is the preservation of virginity. This preserving love, however, is found in humility.'³³

The Rule brings to the fore yet another communitarian aspect of virginity in the sentence: 'From within you, the God who lives in you will also be watchful over you' (*Deus enim qui habitat in vobis, etiam isto modo custodiet vos ex vobis*). One is spontaneously inclined to give these words an individualistic interpretation: God lives in the heart of each person, and from there watches over each person. But such is not the meaning of this text. 'From within you' is not in the singular, but in the plural. The emphasis, then, must again be laid on the community. The community bears the responsibility for the good (faith, love, trust, etc.) in each of its members. Thus, the meaning is rather this: God watches over us from within the community, through the people around us. A better translation would perhaps be: 'Then, the God who lives in you will watch over you, through your responsibility for one another'. And so the monastic community as community of faith is emphasized. It is a fact that many religious societies get too much immersed in the material side of things. Materially speaking, there is a sharing of life with one another, but too often this living together is less a matter of the heart, and still less a matter of faith.

We find proof for the correctness of this interpretation in canon 31 of the Council of Hippo from the year 393, and in canon 33 of the third Council of Carthage from the year 397. These canons are concerned with those who have taken a vow of virginity but who continue to live in their family houses. The canons represent a reaction against this practice, probably because it was feared that the loneliness of these people would sooner or later put them in the danger of straying from their God-ordained way of life. When they are no longer living in the care of their parents, they are asked 'to go to live together and to care for one another'. Community life is here experienced as guaranteeing the personal commitment of faith. Even in the realm of faith one cannot ignore the social nature of man. For our time too this seems to be a truth of very considerable value. The text of the Rule thus finds a clear parallel in the assertions of these Councils. It is possible that Augustine had some indirect

³³ *De sancta virginitate* 51, 52. PL. 40, 426. The last part of this work deals with humility. In fact, there comes a time when Augustine wonders whether he is writing about virginity or humility (*Ibid.*, 31, 31-53. 54. PL. 40, 412-27).

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influence on these conciliar definitions³⁴ — indirect, because in 393, Augustine was not yet a bishop. But, leaving aside this question of Augustine's influence, there is no possible doubt regarding the social interpretation of our text of the Rule.

Community and Obedience

The community with its love is of special significance in the matter of authority and obedience, of the relationship between those in a position of responsibility and the other brothers or sisters. If one reads the text of the Rule attentively and sets it against the social situation of that time, one will be surprised by the revolutionary language of Augustine. The word 'revolutionary' is here no exaggeration. We must put ourselves back into the atmosphere of the Roman Empire, with its strong juridical tendency, its power-consciousness, its innumerable slaves. Augustine breaks through the social framework of his time in such a radical way that, even in our own day, we can still learn something from him. The relevance of his thinking on this point is not yet exhausted. Augustine's ideal of religious community, as it were, opened a new era for human relationships. The Rule offers a new foundation for democratization and collegiality within the religious community. Apart from all else, this flows logically from the fact that the ideal of mutual relations is seen in friendship.

Nowhere in the Rule does office appear as an honour; it is always seen as responsibility and service. Consequently, office is mostly described as a burden (*sarcina* i.e. the baggage that a soldier has to drag along with him). The person having responsibility stands not at the top of the religious community but at its basis. He must be most at the service of others, and that implies that he must wish to be the least of all. For unless he is so willing, he cannot serve. Thus, office is seen completely in the light of love. In this way the office-bearer earns the 'compassion' of others (also an expression of love). This undoubtedly provides a perspective for our own times. It can broaden the horizons for those who have not yet understood the 'kenotic' aspect of office, and for those who reject office as something meaningless and superfluous, or as something awkward that hinders us from developing our personhood according to our own wishes.

The texts of the Rule are not to be considered as beautiful but empty words. One must let them speak themselves in all their harshness.

³⁴ G. Folliet, 'Aux origines de l'ascétisme et du cénobitisme africain', in *Saint Martin et son temps* (Rome, 1961), pp. 32-33, perhaps undervalues too much Augustine's influence at that moment. O. Perler gives a more prudent judgement in his masterly work *Les voyages de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1969), pp. 156-8.

Because of his responsibility to God the superior will know how to be least of all. (Literally: he will lie at each one's feet).

Of each one he must render an account.

The higher the position a person has, the more dangerous it is for him. Whoever holds a position of authority should not seek his happiness in the power by which he can dominate, but in the love by which he can serve.

These texts (together with similar assertions found in the Rule but not mentioned here) require no commentary. It can, though, be useful to indicate some parallels to these texts from the Rule. For the ideas in the Rule are the same as those Augustine expresses when he speaks about office in general. Describing his own episcopal office Augustine uses the same words:

Even though we as bishop appear to speak to you from a higher place, yet we lie full of fear at your feet, since we are all too well aware of the great and hazardous responsibility of the office that we have to bear.³⁵

We speak to you from this place that is said to be higher, but the Lord knows how fearfully we lie under your feet.³⁶

I beseech you, beloved brothers and sisters, have compassion on me, even though you have forgotten your responsibility towards yourselves.³⁷

Obedience on the part of the community members lies exactly in the same line. For Augustine, being obedient is primarily an act of love for another. In the Rule obedience is presented as an act of 'merciful love' (literally, 'compassion' — *misereri*: 'By better obeying you give proof not only of having compassion on yourself, but also on your superior'). Obeying thus becomes a shared bearing of the burden and care of the whole community, and this burden and care is, as it were, entrusted to one person in the name of all the others. Here we have a very clear expression of how a particular interpretation of the Gospel can give a particular shape to concrete relationships (for the whole of the background here see Luke 22, 25-26; Mark 10, 42-45; Matt. 20, 25-28). In a certain sense it is both surprising and enriching that obedience should be removed from the context of faith, in which it was for many centuries enclosed, and placed also in the context of love. Perhaps our time too really needs something like that.

Thus I hope to have shown the basic inspiration of the Rule sufficiently clearly. The basic inspiration is none other than an almost exclusive emphasis on community life, authentic living with one

³⁵ *Sermo 146*, 1, 1. PL. 38, 796.

³⁶ *Enarratio in psalmum 66*, 10. PL. 36, 812.

³⁷ *Sermo 232*, 8, 8. PL. 38, 1112.

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another in love, and, more in particular, a living-out of real friendship. And this is all ultimately based on the Gospel itself. It cannot be separated from Jesus Christ and his message.

Of course, there are still a number of practical conclusions to be drawn. I will mention only a few points:

- silence (*silentium*) in this perspective is intended not only as a means to personal recollection, but also as respect for the person of the other. In Augustine's view, silence may never be upheld to the disadvantage of communication. True communication with one another is the goal of all such measures.
- community recreation is of great importance, once again in function of dialogue with one another.
- the *clausura* should guarantee a minimum of privacy, but on the other hand it ought not to be the cause of the community closing in on itself. The religious community must always remain orientated towards the larger community in which it is situated.
- there should be but few rules and laws, and these should be so adaptable as to give the freedom of the spirit a chance and to leave open the possibility for commitment and initiative.
- appointments to positions in the community should not be dictated from above, but should come about within the sphere of personal relations. The same goes for other decisions. These are a matter for the whole community, and thus should never be taken as the expression of the power of one person. Here the principle of 'compassion' comes into operation.
- each task ought to be seen in the light of service.
- all class distinction within the community is to be absolutely rejected.

Thus, a religious community can become in an eminent sense a form of 'social life' (*vita socialis*), as Augustine, not without pride, called his community in Hippo. He did not, however, neglect to adjoin a warning against hypocrisy, because to build up an authentic community is perhaps the most difficult task of man.³⁸

³⁸ *Sermo* 356, 14. PL. 39, 1580.