

THE AUGUSTINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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The topic I have been asked to address is “The Augustinian Perspective on Human Rights”. Since one of the key words in that title, namely ‘Augustinian’, is open to several possible meanings, I need to begin by explaining precisely what I intend to cover under this topic.

My presentation will be divided into three segments. In the first, I would like to say something about ‘Saint Augustine and Human Rights’; in the second, ‘the Augustinian Order’s Teaching and Praxis Regarding Human Rights,’ and in the third, ‘Individual Augustinians and Human Rights.’ Any of these three subtitles alone could be the topic for a lengthy presentation, but the limitation of time as well as the limitations on my research will necessarily require me to offer only some general observations and indications on each one.

I. SAINT AUGUSTINE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Because Saint Augustine, to the best of my knowledge, never used the term ‘human rights’, we might most profitably put the question we want to ask this way, “What can we learn from Augustine about human rights?”

And the simple answer is, ‘a great deal’.

A]. THE RULE

One of the sources that is most helpful in this area, and yet perhaps somewhat surprising at first glance, is the one with which all of us are also probably most familiar, namely the Rule of Saint Augustine. Some years ago Fr. Luc Verheijen, whose name is well known to you all as the great scholar who through his life’s research revealed so much to us about the Rule, gave an interview in which he shared his personal conviction, after many years of scholarship, that everything that Augustine ever wrote can be properly understood only through the prism of the Rule. The Spanish Augustinian, Pio de Luis Vicaino, takes up this premise and notes that “*the Augustinian Rule is not in any way a closed or exclusive ‘monastic’ document, but a compendium of Augustinian theology and spirituality, written in a concrete situation yet containing the same fundamental structure of anthropology and theology which is present in all Augustinian thought*” (Globalization and Justice: An Augustinian Perspective, *Community and Social Justice*, Rome 2004, p. 18).

In the Rule we find Augustine’s vision of a communion of persons which is based upon the principal of love that binds the members together in freedom. This love is only possible because of the fundamental equality in dignity of every human person who participates in this communion [11], and, as Pope John Paul II reminds us it is from the “inherent dignity and worth of the human person” that human rights flow [29]. This communion brings together in a single embrace friendship, interiority, respect, equality in dignity, and reciprocity, all of which are modeled on the Triune God [Homily of the Prior General at the Intermediate General Chapter of 1998].

Fr. Tars van Bavel has written in this regard,

“The monastery is a new form of human community in which the boundaries which exist between those who come from a condition of slavery and those who are powerful land holders are destroyed. In the monastery each one discovers the possibility of living with others on the basis of equality, brotherhood and, insofar as possible, friendship” [as quoted in the homily of MA Orcasitas, Congress on Justice and Peace, 2001].

The Order’s **Plan of Augustinian Formation** or **Ratio Institutionis** draws important implications for human rights deriving from the Rule especially with regard to the sharing of goods and interiority,

“The sharing of material goods...is not meant to remain limited to the building up of community among ourselves alone. It should be extended to the realization of a better and more just society in the world... As Augustine says, ‘Be particularly mindful of the poor...Let the needy Christ receive that of which the fasting Christian deprives himself...Let the voluntary neediness of the one possessing an abundance become the necessary abundance of the one in need’ (Serm. 210,10,12) [Ratio Institutionis n. 36].

“According to Augustine, interiority opens us to the basic principles of morality, to the unmasking of deceptive solutions, to an honest understanding of our ignorance at the threshold of the unknowable... The aim of interiority is not only to achieve the discovery of my true self and my own limitations, but also the discovery of the Other, namely God, and in Him all the others... Being turned towards God never means being turned away from human beings or from the world’s problems” [n. 53].

“Religious life, through its particular charisms, tries to proclaim in its way what other forms of the Christian life proclaim in another way, namely that human life, in all its dimensions, is fundamentally bound up with God’s plan; we are co-creators in bringing about the Reign of justice, love and peace which Jesus inaugurated, and it is in the furthering of this project in ourselves and in our world that we find the deepest affirmation of our worth and dignity” [n. 70].

The implications for us who look to Augustine’s Rule as the foundational document for our lives together, are made explicit in the words of our former Prior General, Fr. Orcasitas, in his address to the Intermediate General Chapter of 1998,

“The practical witness given by the sharing of possessions, both material and spiritual, in the community and by an active commitment to the promotion of solidarity needs to take a variety of forms: responsible work and simplicity of life, a committed defense of human rights, the creation of an office to promote Justice and Peace – (where one does not exist) – the recognition and promotion – on an international and circumscriptional level – of an Office of Justice and Peace, an evangelizing presence among the needy, a common management of economic resources within each province and the creation of a fund in each region that is destined for the advancement of the most disadvantaged”.

Further along, he goes on to say,

“...The Augustinian ideal of community – incarnated in a group of religious or lay persons – can be a useful sign in this time of searching. We must proclaim attitudes and encourage proposals that open up new paths for the future: the sharing of goods, equality among all, the full participation of women in both society and the Church, the inclusion of the marginalized and ethnic minorities, interests in common tasks, the exercise of authority as service, special attention to the weakest and the poor, freely without any interest in recompense and so on”.

In summary, it can be said that the very foundation of Augustinian life in community, as conceived in the Rule, is predicated on the human dignity and equality of all persons regardless of prior state or condition of life, and which gives rise to respect for individual differences and needs, and maintains reverence for the rights and responsibilities of each one.

Fr. Tars Van Bavel writes in the introduction to his Commentary on the Rule, *“We could characterize the Rule of Augustine as a call to the evangelical equality of all people. It voices the Christian demand to bring all men and women into full community. At the same time it sounds an implicit protest against inequality in a society which is so clearly marked by possessiveness, pride and power. According to Augustine, therefore, a monastic community should offer an alternative by striving to build up a community that is not motivated by possessiveness, pride and power, but by love for one another”* [The Rule of Saint Augustine, Tarcisius Van Bavel, Intro. P. 8].

Later, in the text itself, he continues,

“The social problem caused by the immense gulf between the many poor and the few rich is one of the most prevalent themes in Augustine’s sermons. This affluence of the few was the cancer of the society of his time. To it he opposes his religious community as an alternative form of living together. In such a community, it should be possible for rich and poor, the lowly and the mighty, to relate to each other as equals and brothers” [Ibid. p. 54].

Another commentator on the Rule, this one from Latin America, **Fr. Clodovis Boff**, from one of the many congregations with an Augustinian inspiration writes,

“Today, everything considered, we are conscious that the proposal of the Acts of the Apostles, taken up by the Rule, is valid not only for the Church, but for all of society as well. In this view, the religious community ceases to be an enclave within a world that is lost and becomes the seed of a new society, the breaking forth of the future, the germ of a new world, which sprouts from the womb of the old. Religious life cannot be a parenthesis within the old history, but rather the beginning of a phase which is moving toward maturity.” [El Camino de la comunión de bienes, Fr. Clodovis Boff]

B]. OTHER WRITINGS

THE CITY OF GOD

But the Rule is not the only source for us in seeking insights into Augustine’s understanding of values we would categorize today under the rubric of human rights. Augustine treats the themes of Justice and Peace especially in the work of his later years, The City of God where

he offers the classic definition of justice: the virtue which gives to each one what is due to him, a definition which, John Szura reminds us, is profoundly tied to the theme of respect for human rights and Christian charity, as Augustine himself will emphasize and explain frequently in the course of his preaching [33].

Augustine writes in The City of God, “*God did not want rational beings, made in his own image, to dominate any being except the irrational. He did not want a human to dominate another human; humans were meant to dominate only beasts*” (19.15)... Father Donald Burt comments saying “[Augustine] is speaking specifically about a dominion that comes from war where the losers are sometimes made, not citizens, but slaves of the conqueror. It is obvious that this situation comes about only because of sin. Without sin there would be no war and no conqueror. Without sin there would be no condition whereby a human treats another human as a lower order of being” [Friendship and Society, Donald Burt OSA, p. 141].

The familiar thesis of The City of God is summarized in the words, ‘*Two loves have given rise to two cities: love of oneself leading to contempt of God, the earthly one, and the love of God leading to contempt of self, the heavenly city...The former is dominated by the ambition of power in its princes or in the nations it conquers; while in the latter the princes and the subjects serve one another in love...*’ (civ. Dei XIV, 28) Already on the basis of this postulation, it appears clear that at the origin of the city we find man’s social nature, or in other words, the corporate solidarity of mankind. In fact, in Augustinian thought, social love is what builds the city of God, as we can see in his Commentary on Genesis: ‘*there are two loves, one holy, the other impure, one social, the other private, one which looks to the common benefit for the kingdom of heaven, the other which profits from the common good, for its own advantage and arrogant domination.*’ (Gn. Litt. 11, 15) It seems clear that man’s social nature provides the foundation not only of community life, but of any type of political society. And since love itself is social, as a natural requirement of love itself, to this is added concern for the common good. Indeed Saint Augustine states that the life of an honest and upright citizen, that is to say of a wise man, is a political and sociable life.

... For Augustine, individualism necessarily causes division and partisanship, since at its base, lies self interest and not the common interest [A Presence For The World, in Christian Presence in the World, Mario Mendoza, Our Journey Back to God, Rome, 2006] [16].

CONFESSIONS

The very first page of Augustine’s best-known work, his Confessions, expresses his deepest conviction concerning the reason for his own and all of humanity’s restless spirit, “*You have made us for yourself, O Lord...*” At the same time in this statement is rooted the source of Christian belief about the inherent dignity of each and every person. The common experience of hunger for meaning, purpose, happiness which we all share, is the best evidence of our common rootedness in the One who alone can satisfy, because He alone is the source of our being and of our basic and inalienable human dignity. As Augustine will say in another place, “*In view of the encompassing network of the universe and the whole creation... a network that is perfectly ordered in time and place, where not even one leaf of a tree is superfluous... it is not possible to create a superfluous human being*” (Augustine on Free Choice, 3.23) [Ibid p. 165]. As Fr. Trape has written, “*The central point of Augustine’s anthropology is that man is the image of God, of the triune God*” [Searching for God, 1981].

C]. AUGUSTINE THE PASTOR

It is not only in the writings of Saint Augustine, however, that we learn his commitment to belief in the importance of human dignity, equality and the rights that flow therefrom. We do so also in his own example as a Christian and a pastor to his people, wherein his dedication to the needs of his flock become an essential point of reference for us.

Fr. Orcasitas wrote in his letter to the Order on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the UN's declaration of Human Rights,

"...it would be anachronistic to pretend to find in Saint Augustine a declaration of human rights in modern day terminology....But we find in him a shepherd with great sensitivity for the human realities of his flock, a lover of peace, a defender of justice, attentive to the cry of the poor. Augustine understood the equality of all human beings as elemental to God's plan...(and) offers us in our days a clear direction for assuming postures in the face of international or national legislation that do not recognize in each human being the full dignity that derives from our condition of being created in God's image

...This constant preoccupation of Augustine for the weakest, together with his desire to overcome the social consequences brought about by this situation, stem from the same source as the inalienable rights of each person. Augustine recognizes and asserts the identity of each person, as child of God, created in God's image"

[On the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN, Letter of the Prior General, M.A. Orcasitas, in Living in Freedom Under Grace, Vol. III, p. 176, AGC Rome, 2001].

Fr. Van Bavel offers us further insight in these words,

"Th(e) identifying of Christ in the poor, the oppressed, the outcast and the persecuted means for Augustine the recognition of their human dignity. Augustine here takes his inspiration chiefly from two texts: 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...' (Mt. 25, 37) and 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (Acts 9, 4).

"Some of his letters that have been recently discovered give us a clearer idea of his 'social commitment.' Augustine asks the Emperor to issue an edict against slave dealers. He is mightily concerned over the trafficking of children, wondering what will become of them. Christian emperors had authorized the sale of infants in the hope of preventing infanticide, where the parents were unable to provide for their offspring (to be freed, however, after 25 years)... As bishop, Augustine also had care for orphans. He took steps to see that these were not kidnapped by strangers; and he provided shelter for foundlings. The practice of the Church of Hippo was to help the poor, whoever they might be – non-Christians, prostitutes, gladiators. ... 'And so let us not welcome sinners because they are sinners but because they are men; let us deal with them bearing in mind their human nature. Take action against the personal iniquity in them, and have pity on their condition, which they have in common with us.' (Serm. On Almsgiving)" (The Spiritual Legacy of Saint Augustine, T. Van Bavel, in Our Journey Back To God, Rome 2006].

Perhaps this section can best be summarized using the words of the same Fr. van Bavel when he spoke of Augustine, A Liberation Theologian, in 1985:

"Augustine's apostolate was focused on the liberation of men and women. His inspiration was the Gospel and the Gospel is nothing other than a message of redemption and liberation." (T.

Van Bavel osa, 'San Agustin, Un Teologo de la Liberacion' en San Agustin Y La Liberacion, Reflexiones desde Latinoamerica, OALA 1985.)

II. THE AUGUSTINIAN ORDER'S TEACHING AND PRAXIS REGARDING HUMAN RIGHTS – An Examination of Conscience

A. GENERAL CHAPTERS

In modern times, the point of departure for the Order's position regarding human rights and social concerns in general, is found in the document of the **Intermediate General Chapter of 1974**, commonly known as the Dublin Document.

In assessing the situation of the contemporary world at the time, the Chapter members listed four urgent 'signs of the times' that demand a response from the Church and consequently of the Order. Each of these four in one way or another, in my reading, touches on the theme of human rights, but one of them, designated by the term 'personalization', seems to do so most directly when it says: *"the promotion of human values is sought; radical criticism and a ruthless sincerity appear, along with the affirmation of democratic values, which includes not only political organization, but also equality of rights for races and cultures."* Further on, in speaking of the Church's relationship to the world, the Chapter affirms a Church that *"is aware of her mission for total liberation, for the integration of values, for establishing peace, for hope"*.

Three years later, the **Ordinary General Chapter of 1977** decreed that a Secretariat for Justice and Peace be established in Rome to assist the central government of the Order. Its purpose was to create awareness and conscientization among the friars and to highlight specific problems that needed attention.

Interestingly, Fr. Van Bavel preached the homily during that Chapter on the Feast of Saint Augustine using Mt. 25, 31-46, a passage that Augustine discussed at least 125 times.

"Augustine gives a universal interpretation to Mt. 25. 'The least of my brothers' are all those who are suffering want without exception, whatever their color or convictions might be. In this way alone are we able to do anything for God, as, the broader context of our passage makes clear. God does not need us; but men do need us, and in them God gives us the opportunity to do something for Him."

The Intermediate General Chapter of 1980, held in Mexico, spoke to the issue of Human Rights in three specific areas:

A] It confirmed the establishment of the Justice & Peace Secretariate of the Order and called for the appointment of a permanent director who was to form part of the General Curia and a group of advisors or consultors.

B] Secondly, the Chapter expressed in its concluding summary document an exhortation that the Order be particularly attentive in its pastoral mission to minorities of every category – from the economically deprived to minorities of culture, race, nationality, refugees, the unemployed, those without rights as well as civil and religious outcasts and the unborn.

C] Thirdly, the Chapter members declared themselves "firmly in favor of what the III Latin-American Episcopal Conference calls: 'The preferential option for the poor.'" In seven

paragraphs they describe what this preferential option is and how it might be lived. Among the other points made in the seven articles there is a direct reference to the large question of human rights: *“At the moment, among the least free people, there are those who cannot lead a life worthy of human beings, because of unfair mechanisms of oppression, exploitation, violence and discrimination, which prevents them from escaping from a state of poverty and even misery. Our preferential work of evangelization must, therefore, be directed towards the liberation of these people and the changing of the social structures generating this state of affairs”*.

At the **Ordinary General Chapter of 1983** the report of the Director of the Order’s Secretariat for Justice and Peace gave a report was not very positive in its evaluation of the Order’s response to initiatives taken by General Chapters up to then related to J & P. Recommendations were made to reform the Secretariat and to implement spirituality courses, formation courses as well as a study program to inform and sensitize the Order’s membership more.

Reflections of the 1986 Intermediate General Chapter

“..Those who are victims of depersonalizing systems, of unjust structures and social oppression have a special need for the proclamation of the risen Christ who combats every form of exploitation and manipulation. Evangelized by the Lord in the Spirit, we are sent to bring this Good News to all our brothers and sisters, especially to the poor and the forgotten. The proclamation of the Good News must be translated into a prophetic cry against injustice and into an effective program of human betterment. The preferential option for the poor must not remain on the margins or periphery, but at the center; not simply on a social level but also on an ecclesial and Augustinian level.

The poor are at the center of the Gospel. They must also be at the center of our religious life. In order to be prophets of hope, a hope founded on the Lord’s presence in the midst of his people, and prophets of liberation from every form of misery, we must make a decisive choice to live with the poor and for the poor”.

“The Christ ‘becoming flesh’ in the concrete situation of today summons us. ...He came to liberate us from everything which diminishes us, and to denounce everything which oppresses us, enslaves us or limits our possibilities or our liberty. It is our task, with the help of the Spirit, to make Him come alive and grow in the heart and in the life of men and women until all reach full maturity in the same Christ”.

The Ordinary General Chapter of 1989

The report of the President of J & P made the following summary conclusion,

“We believe that the theme of J & P is becoming an ordinary theme of reflection for the Order, with both lights and shadows, though we are still at the beginning. In a part of the Order the preferential option for the poor is occurring only by way of assistance. This work at the service of charity is good, but it fails to give way to an option for the poor which is the fruit of Justice, which is where the prophetic activity of the Church is moving. There are also regions of the Order where the option for the poor is incorporated into the ongoing reflection and activity of the community.”

Together with the above, several suggestions were made by the Secretariat:

1. Continue the Secretariat according to the lines of the G.C. of 1983, with the Director of OSAInt as a permanent member.
2. Each province and region have its own Secretariat for J & P

3. Incorporate the social doctrine of the Church in programs of formation
4. Incorporate a specific section on J & P into the Ratio Studiorum (underway)

The above were approved as part of the Program of the Chapter, numbers 12, 13, 14. Additionally, number 11 stated, "The G. C. should encourage major superiors to implement the proposal of the Chapter of 1986, n. 18 (Option for the Poor) as well as to support new pastoral initiatives that arise in this field, even at the cost of other apostolic works. Such initiatives should not be restricted by our inherited traditional apostolates."

The Intermediate General Chapter of 1992, Sao Paulo, Brazil

The report of the Chapter to the Order spoke of the great interest engendered around the subject of Justice and Peace and the Option for the Poor, reaffirming the sections of the program of 1989 Ordinary General Chapter dealing with peace and justice, but recognizing that there does not seem to be a spontaneous attention within the Order to the situation of the poor, no real institutional commitment. There is further, a lack of a true Augustinian spirituality underpinning the topic. The Chapter noted that 'the poor' are not only those people who lack economic means. They are also men and women whose lives are deprived of culture and justice, persons who lack poverty of spirit, as well as migrants, immigrants, etc. The Chapter suggested that every jurisdiction create a solidarity fund for projects with the poor. The work of the Secretariate for Justice and Peace was commended and that it embrace defense of the family and the right to education and offer guidelines on military service and conscientious objection. It requested that the Order publish statements on important international issues internally and outside the Order. [l. 3.]

Ordinary General Chapter 1995, Rome

Program Document: Renewed Augustinians for the Third Millennium

"A great encouragement to our missionary spirit could come from a better promotion of the Secretariat for Justice and Peace at the international and local level. Every community should feel itself involved with the marginalized in its own area and review its apostolate so as to verify its evangelical effectiveness. Every Augustinian education program should emphasize the preferential option for the poor. It should ensure that there are programs for conscientization and for sharing in solidarity in the lot of the poorest, as well as teaching the social doctrine of the Church. Superiors are invited to verify that these programs are in place at all levels. At the center of the Order there should be a Co-ordinating Secretary so as to promote the programs and maintain communication on the regional and international level."

Ordinary General Chapter of 1995 – set in motion the process for Augustinian NGO association with the UN DPI – approved by the UN on April 1, 1997.

Intermediate General Chapter of 1998

"AUGUSTINIANS IN THE CHURCH FOR THE WORLD OF TODAY"

"It is not enough that injustice and poverty be recurring subjects of reflection at our meetings. We can lose ourselves in a thicket of speeches and continue on with closed ears at the time when we should be contributing by our actions to the cause, which is both divine and human, of freedom and fraternity. If it is necessary, as Puebla reminds us, 'for the Church to be the

school that educates human beings who will be capable of shaping history' (n.274), to what history are we Augustinians committed?"

"The practical witness given by the sharing of possessions, both material and spiritual, in the community and by an active commitment to the promotion of solidarity needs to take a variety of forms: responsible work and simplicity of life, a committed defense of human rights, the creation of an office to promote Justice and Peace – where one does not exist – the recognition and promotion – on an international and circumscriptional level – of an Office of Justice and Peace, an evangelizing presence among the needy, a common management of economic resources within each province and the creation of a fund in each region that is destined for the advancement of the most disadvantaged."

"The mystery of the Incarnation entails a solidarity with human beings in their weakness. Therefore, we Augustinians are responsible for proclaiming the rights of the weak and of expressing solidarity with those unable to speak for themselves. Christ 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men' (Phil 2:6-8). An incarnate Church is therefore an 'expert in humanity' (Paul VI)... To know the complexity of the human heart, to proclaim the rights of the weak and involve ourselves to take the part of the defenseless is the responsibility which the Church has in history."

Number 20 of the Chapter Document, in speaking of the Order's commitment to studies, says with regard to the field of cultural and faith dialogue as well as scientific investigation:

"...it is our primary obligation to study the thought of Saint Augustine, which brings with it elements of judgement in fostering the dignity of the human person and of society..."

"...The Augustinian ideal of community – incarnated in a group of religious or lay persons – can be a useful sign in this time of searching. We must proclaim attitudes and encourage proposals that open up new paths for the future: the sharing of goods, equality among all, the full participation of women in both society and the Church, the inclusion of the marginalized and ethnic minorities, interests in common tasks, the exercise of authority as service, special attention to the weakest and the poor, freely without any interest in recompense and so on."

"The anthropocentric vision of Saint Augustine and the central place given to love in his anthropology...(are reminders that) Everything must be subordinated to love. 'Knowledge, too, is in the service of charity; then it is useful, but without charity it becomes inflated' (Ep 167,11). 'Knowledge is valuable when charity informs it' (De civ. Dei 9, 20) ...The common good, mutual respect, human rights, and integral human development point to a new civilization that is built on other bases and other presuppositions. In the refinement of love there must be room for knowledge, technology, and religious experience, which according to Saint Augustine, has its deepest root in the very heart of the human being. The world vision of the Christian faith can contribute in a convincing manner to the establishment of a global ethic that allows men and women, without exception, to enjoy equal rights and a new world order."

"Augustinian community brings together in a single embrace friendship, interiority, respect, equality in dignity, and reciprocity. All these are modeled on the Triune God. Augustinian community also promotes critical thought as a way that leads to truth. It is disposed to solidarity and promotes and defends everything that is human."

The Ordinary General Chapter of 2001

“The General Chapter reaffirms the obligation assumed by previous General Chapters to commit ourselves more decisively to the promotion of Justice and Peace according to the social doctrine of the Church. This is required of us by the Gospel as well as in response to the signs of our times. Consequently, we give the following directives: In and through our current apostolates we will strive to seek out and influence the opinion of those with whom we work, particularly the youth and those involved in the educational apostolate. In particular, Augustinians involved in the educational apostolate should pay special attention to the Augustinian contribution toward topics of social concern, and seriously consider promoting the Culture of Peace Program sponsored by UNESCO through the Order’s representatives in all of our institutions of learning.” [Determination B-16]

The Intermediate General Chapter of 2004

The report of the General Council on the Program of the General Chapter of 2001 included a section on the Social Apostolate of the Order of Saint Augustine today, Section B, numbers B-16 thru B-21, reporting on what had been done over the first three year period of the General Council’s mandate. No new initiatives seem to have been proposed by the Chapter in this area.

The Ordinary General Chapter of 2007

The Document of the Chapter, Section 1.3 lists a number of challenging characteristics of our time:

Globalization – *“with both its positive and negative dimensions. “The result is a society without solidarity, with more and more exclusions, something which signifies that the ‘Millennium Goals of Human Development’, which our Order has committed itself to promote, will end up being unachievable.” [1.3.1]*

Secularization – *“has positive aspects – such as the recognition of the legitimate authority of temporal realities, the value of the individual and his fundamental rights, the right of political autonomy. But when it unites with relativistic agnosticism and consumerism, it becomes secularism. This causes a dehumanizing and negative impact...” [1.3.2]*

Injustice and the scandal of social inequalities

Ecology – *“The relationship with nature in Saint Augustine acquires an ethical value ...to act against nature is to break the unity. We have to look at nature as a gift from God ... This Christian and profoundly Augustinian vision of nature, is more threatened today than ever and requires bold responses.” [1.3.4]*

New technologies

Fragmentation and religious and cultural conflicts

Immigration-emigration – *“With (the) new encounter of diverse cultures in a single country, there is an awakening of fears towards the ‘other’, with attitudes of intolerance...Behind these phenomena, and others, there is a single thread present in all: the crisis caused by the search for an ethic that responds to the new challenges. Interdependence in the world necessitates new ethical parameters that orient the living together of humanity, founding it on peace, justice and the protection of all creation.” [1.3.7]*

“The negative effects of these phenomena cannot be confronted simply by preaching, but rather by giving witness to authentic love and commitment to justice, to the fundamental rights of each person and of their dignity, to dialogue and welcome, and to a style of life based on fundamental values of our Augustinian spirituality (unitas, veritas, caritas).”

Under the rubric *Guidelines for Renewal*, 3.4 Mission, the same Document points out what we Augustinians must be about in meeting these and other challenges. *“This urges us ... to take a clear and coherent option for the poor and youth; promote justice and human rights.”*

Among the determinations (decisions) of the Chapter is # P-31:

“The Prior General and his Council will foster the coordination of the Augustinian NGOs in order to plan, organize and develop common projects of international cooperation for the promotion of development, education for peace and the protection of human rights.”

P-5 also calls for the Justice and Peace Secretariat to develop a document to be presented for confirmation to the next IGC including the various elements (of J & P) present today in the Order.

B. PRIORS GENERAL

It is important to note, in addition to the statements and programs adopted or endorsed by the various General Chapters of the Order other statements and documents which speak directly to the topic of human rights and issues of Justice and Peace.

Renewal and Service: A Letter to all the brothers of the Order, Cebu, February 1996.

In this letter the Prior General spoke to the communion of goods in our religious life as oriented towards the poor, and cited the specific international initiative to eradicate poverty in the world. *“Concerned with the human reality and conscious of the gravity of this problem, we should make ourselves an echo of this international call. The response could be made concrete, following the suggestions of the General Chapter, by strengthening the programs of the Secretariate of Justice and Peace in all our circumscriptions. Likewise, by fomenting initiatives which affirm in an explicit manner the profound links that exist between evangelization and human promotion. Concrete acts are necessary... Justice and solidarity, the nucleus of the Gospel and of Augustinian spirituality, should occupy a central place in our personal convictions and our actions...”* [d]

On the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN, Letter of the Prior General, M.A. Orcasitas, in “Living in Freedom Under Grace,” Vol. III, p. 176

“The promotion of human rights is not only an obligation derived from our human, Christian and religious commitment. It is also because we are disciples of Augustine that we should show a particular concern for humanity. Augustine’s preaching, as well as his pastoral ministry, so often dedicated to attend the small needs of his flock, are an essential point of reference for us. [179]

...it would be anachronistic to pretend to find in Saint Augustine a declaration of human rights in modern day terminology....But we find in him a shepherd with great sensitivity for the human realities of his flock, a lover of peace, a defender of justice, attentive to the cry of the poor. Augustine understood the equality of all human beings as elemental to God’s plan...offers us in our days a clear direction for assuming postures in the face of international or national legislation that do not recognize in each human being the full dignity that derives from our condition of being created in God’s image. [180].

...This constant preoccupation of Augustine for the weakest, together with his desire to overcome the social consequences brought about by this situation, stem from the same source as the inalienable rights of each person. Augustine recognizes and asserts the identity of each person, as child of God, created in God’s image; [180-181]

... As religious we should dedicate ourselves to promoting peace and justice. Human rights are the basis of human existence and coexistence, and therefore have so much civic and ethical significance. Their defense constitutes a very concrete commitment that must be assumed by all humanity. [183]

... We need to speak out on human rights from our Christian and Augustinian view of life. We should add our voice to that of those who seek the broadening of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include economic rights and to the consideration of the rights of other collective subjects, such as the family, minorities, peoples and nations. This will be an important contribution to the evangelization to which we have been called, because it will promote the dignity of each human person. [184]

...I conclude inviting all of our communities ... to take concrete initiatives in commemoration of this anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to promote respect for these rights and to contribute to the discovery of their true anthropologic root...I also invite you to consider making Declarations on the local or provincial level on topics related to the dignity of the human person...[184]

Celebrating Together the Incarnation of Jesus Christ – Letter to all the Brothers of the Order and to all the Contemplative Sisters, M.A. Orcasitas, 2000.

The Prior General proposed three dates during the Jubilee Year 2000 to celebrate certain values. Among these he proposed the Feast of Saint Augustine as a Day of Praise and Solidarity for all the gifts given to the Order.

“The recognition of graces received should be translated into gestures of fraternity and solidarity. The whole world feels the need to proclaim in the new millennium the responsibility of promoting a culture of life based on justice and peace. This commitment in the first place ought to be undertaken by Christians, because we recognize in Jesus Christ the foundation of human dignity, the fount of human rights and a new order of peace and solidarity... We are asked for concrete gestures, to be a voice for those without a voice, so they can enjoy the most basic of rights, beginning with the right of life itself, or to be in solidarity with those who strive for a more just world... our witness ought to be concrete, direct, incarnate. Once again we are invited to practice justice, to love tenderly and to walk humbly in the presence of the Lord.” [2]

C. OTHER DOCUMENTS

The Constitutions of the Order, 2008

Chapter IV, number 73, speaks explicitly of our Preferential Option for the Poor.

“...after the example of Saint Augustine, we are obliged to give a coherent and prophetic witness to the preferential option for the poor, and make a serious effort to imitate Christ, showing that we are in solidarity with those who are materially poor and who must live on the margins of society. This prophetic option requires that we examine our way of life and make practical decisions regarding the use of our material goods, in order to manifest our concrete solidarity with the victims of that injustice that arises from the social structures of sin. This preferential option for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. We cannot ignore the

existence of these realities; to do so would mean that we become like the rich man who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying every day at his gate.”

Chapter V, number 93, in addressing the Mystery of the Eucharist, reminds us of the essential correlation between our life with God and our life with others.

“...Since Eucharistic communion abundantly satisfies the desires of fraternal charity, we also must satisfy the hunger of the human family, especially of those who hunger for peace, justice, solidarity, and the defense of human rights, and in particular, the right to life.”

Chapter VIII contains a section on The Social Apostolate, numbers 182-185.

“182. All apostolic activity demands social commitment, whose reason for being stems from theological virtues: faith leads to fidelity, charity leads naturally to solidarity, hope demands a commitment made visible through witness. For this reason apostolic activity leads us to discover the need for change, or for a transformation of social structures. Our Holy Father Augustine committed himself to the human person, not only for the sake of solidarity and asceticism, but for the sake of justice, whose promotion and dissemination will become the mature fruit of our Augustinian fraternity.”

The following number of this section makes explicit mention again to the Order's preferential option for the poor, joining it to the elements of witness and solidarity:

“183. Our Order should witness to solidarity in circles in which we find ourselves. For this reason the Order commits itself in a permanent and concrete way to the poor and disadvantaged. Therefore the Order has assumed a preferential option for the poor.”

Paragraph number 184 enumerates five ways in which our social apostolate is to be exercised including the education and preparation of our students in formation; in the various curricula of our educational institutions; in our pastoral activity; in the formation of groups of laity as agents of social commitment and in the establishment of a solidarity fund in every circumscription.

Finally, paragraph 185 lists some of the specific areas that we are to address, namely: the defense of life, human rights, the situation of migrants, the dignity of women, the protection of youth, justice and peace, a more balanced economic order, and the conservation of nature, to name a few. The section ends with an exhortation to superiors, on every level, to foster the participation of communities and friars in initiatives of the Church and society that advance these concerns, mentioning explicitly the Order's NGO at the UN.

In the same Chapter VIII, under the heading *Ecumenism, Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue*, we read the following:

“180. The ‘dialogue of life’ with other cultures, traditions and ideologies cannot be something foreign to us, for ‘with the incarnation, the Son of God has united himself with every human being in a certain way,’ and is present in the serious poverty of our times, in the common concern for human life, in the struggle for justice, and in the safeguarding of creation. We are conscious that ‘the Christian message does not exempt men and women from building up the world, nor lead them to be unconcerned about the well-being of another, but on the contrary, they are more stringently obligated to these very things.’”

THE PLAN OF AUGUSTINIAN FORMATION

“The intention behind sharing material goods is, first, to create new relationships of equality and unity among those living in the monastery. The distance between rich and poor, between powerful and powerless, must be abolished, for material goods are by their nature sources of division: ‘this is mine and that is yours’. In these material goods lies the source of individualism, egoism, jealousy, competition, covetousness, conflict and struggle (En. In Ps. 131, 5: PL 37, 1718). [Ratio Institutionis, 35]

“The sharing of material goods...is not meant to remain limited to the building up of community among ourselves alone. It should be extended to the realization of a better and more just society in the world... As Augustine says, ‘Be particularly mindful of the poor...Let the needy Christ receive that of which the fasting Christian deprives himself...Let the voluntary neediness of the one possessing an abundance become the necessary abundance of the one in need’ (Serm. 210, 10, 12). [Ibid. n. 36]

“According to Augustine, interiority opens us to the basic principles of morality, to the unmasking of deceptive solutions, to an honest understanding of our ignorance at the threshold of the unknowable... The aim of interiority is not only to achieve the discovery of my true self and my own limitations, but also the discovery of the Other, namely God, and in Him all the others... Being turned towards God never means being turned away from human beings or from the world’s problems.” [Ibid. n. 53]

“Religious life, through its particular charisms, tries to proclaim in its way what other forms of the Christian life proclaim in another way, namely that human life, in all its dimensions, is fundamentally bound up with God’s plan; we are co-creators in bringing about the Reign of justice, love and peace which Jesus inaugurated, and it is in the furthering of this project in ourselves and in our world that we find the deepest affirmation of our worth and dignity.” [Ibid. n. 70]

Augustinian Promotion of Justice and Peace – Booklet #5 Curia Agostiniana, Secretariato di Giustizia e Pace, 1999. [seeks to offer concrete suggestions on how to be better promoters of justice and peace for a world which needs witnesses.]

From John Szura:

The Order identified as its UN NGO priorities three UN priorities:

- 1) literacy/education
- 2) economic/social development
- 3) human/civil rights

Literacy and education are preconditions for human development. They, together with development, are also human rights. Upon these three peace stands firm.

In Augustine’s, *The Trinity*, recent scholarship sees the trinity as a model of the just human person.

Since 1992 the Order’s Secretariat for Justice and Peace has published a series of documents, comprising the following topics:

Augustine’s Option for the Poor – Preaching and Praxix (1992, 2004)

The International Debt (1993, 2004)

Justice in Evangelization and Formation – An Augustinian Reflection (1994)
Divine Love and Human Solidarity – (1998, 2004)
The Augustinian Promotion of Justice and Peace – (1999, 2004)
Augustine as “Father of Christian Political Activism” (2000, 2004)
The Culture of Peace and the Social Doctrine of the Church – (2004)
Globalization and Justice: An Augustinian Perspective – (2004)

III. INDIVIDUAL AUGUSTINIANS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In this last section I would like to briefly name a few of the great figures of our Order’s history who are significant examples of Augustinian defenders and promoters of human rights.

Nicholas of Tolentino

The apostolic activity of Saint Nicholas, the first canonized member of our Order, is characterized by his great attention to the poor and the infirm. While he himself was one of the friars who would go from door to door begging alms for the support of his community, he also stood out as one who was particularly conscientious about sharing alms with the poor who approached the door of the friary. And not content with distributing crusts of bread or pieces of fruit, he formed a network of lay collaborators to give assistance to the needy. In this way some 100 people became the immediate beneficiaries of Nicholas’ generosity. Fr. Prevost said on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of his death, “Of course, despite his charity, zeal and offerings, Nicholas was not able to eradicate poverty nor solve the problem of hunger, not even among the inhabitants of the small town of Tolentino... But his dedication to the sick and the needy, his resolute commitment to help the poor and organize within the possibilities of his day, systems of solidarity and his conviction that this was a demand of the Gospel and part of his mission as a religious, are values which continue forming part of the most authentic Christian and religious spirituality.” (Saludo al Congeso sobre san Nicolàs, Madrid, octubre 2005)

Thomas of Villanova

Thomas, of course, is well known among Augustinians as Father of the Poor, for his great attentiveness to the needy and his personal engagement with them especially in his years as bishop of Valencia. He gave generously to the poor, helped young girls find employment so that they would not fall into dissolute living and saved many orphans from poverty. In effect the poor were the focus of his greatest efforts. One biographer has written that, “hundreds of needy persons came to his door, the proprietors – he would say – of the holdings of the archbishop’s palace, of which he himself was only the treasurer.” He personally attended the crowds of poor people who were the dinner guests of his home each day. “He added a corps of physicians and surgeons who would tend to the most infirm among them” (Tellechea Idigoras). On his death bed – which he had already promised to someone in need – his principal preoccupation was how to get rid of the 5,000 pesos which remained in his coffers: “hurry so that not a cent remains, so that there is no money in this house.”

Perhaps less widely known is the charity of **John of Sahagun** who was zealous in condemning injustice and the abuses of the nobles of his day against the rights of the

common people, as well as bold in his sermons against violence and his initiatives at peacemaking.

Among the many Augustinian missionaries who are remembered as great defenders of human rights are

Alonso de la Veracruz - certainly the most important in the history of our Order. In *De dominio infidelium et justo bello* (1554) he published his university lessons on the human rights of the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

Augustine de la Coruna and **Luis Lopez de Solis** (Lima) were bishops of South America who distinguished themselves not only in the defense of their flocks, but also by their respect for indigenous peoples, recognizing and defending their human and Christian dignity.

Closer to our own times was **Stephen Bellesini**, who in the face of great opposition and in difficult times for the Church, opened a school in his brother's home to educate all social classes, but especially the poor, who until then were deprived of educational opportunities. When his efforts were finally recognized and he was given charge of all the schools in the district of Trent, he fought for the rights of his teachers to be properly compensated. Later as pastor at Genazzano he performed his ministry amidst material and moral misery, social disorder, sickness and even the plague, which he himself contracted. ...The testimonies gathered in the process of beatification speak of his exceptional dedication to the service of his people, excelling above all in his love and attention toward the poor.

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