



Augustine on the Pastoral Ministry

Prayer Before Studying Theology: (For the Church and Those to Be Ordained to Its Ministry)

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, Who hast purchased to Thyself an Universal Church by the precious Blood of Thy dear Son, Mercifully look upon the same, and at this time so guide and govern the minds of Thy servants, the Overseers and Pastors of Thy flock, that they may lay hands suddenly on no man, but faithfully and wisely make the choice of fit persons to serve in the sacred Ministry of Thy Church. And to those which shall be ordained to any holy function give Thy grace and Heavenly benediction; that both by their life and doctrine they may set forth Thy glory and set forward the salvation of all men; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, first Ember Collect, attributed to John Cosin

The Social Context within Which Augustine's Emphasis upon Humility in Ministry Arose: The Clerical Privileges of Clergy in the Post-Constantinian Period

- The affluence (wealth, land, power) accumulated by many bishops, leading people to see church leadership as a means to personal gain
 - On the property seizures and brutality of Antoninus of Fussala, see “Antoninus of Fussala” in Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, 47 and handout of *Ep. 209* (ET Cunningham, *Letters of Saint Augustine*, pp. 384-390)
 - On the real estate dealings (and embezzlement of church funds and tax evasion) of Paul of Cataquas, see *Ep. 85* and *96* (in Cunningham, v.1)
- Immunity from certain kinds of legal claims and certain taxes.
- Increasingly turned to for civic leadership and given a position of worldly honor (*defensor civitatis* [defender of the city], rendering judgments on certain civil matters, providing for care of impoverished, etc.)

The Dangers of Ministry

To be given a role of public teaching and private pastoral care involves a very significant shift in power.

- One can want a position of power for a variety of reasons, some of which are self-destructive or can destroy others.
- Power given for one purpose can easily be used for another purpose that is self-serving and harmful to others.
- Power can also be used to evade accountability for one's actions.

- Power is particularly dangerous when one begins to see the power in question as something that is inherent in oneself and belongs to oneself.
 - When one begins to think this, one's power becomes simply a means to attain one's own personal objectives. Power is then no longer seen as subject to the constraint of any broader obligations.

Warnings sign about dangerously wrong views of power are when the person claiming the power

- is concerned to have a spotless public image;
- dislikes, avoids or shuts down questions about (or constructive criticisms of) their commitments and plans;
- may at times nominally affirm the value of repentance or reconciliation, but
 - does not seem them as an urgent and pressing issue in his/her personal life or
 - is uncomfortable with the personalization of these issues and/or the emotional engagement associated with such personalization.

Ministry Characterized by the Humility Which Christ, as Our Great High Priest, Showed by His Incarnation and Subjection to Weakness and Suffering

- **In place of the clerical sanctity (proven, uncompromising personal holiness) required and emphasized by Tertullian, the Montanists and the Donatists as an ecclesiological criterion (so the priest could reconcile others through church discipline/absolution), Augustine uses a Christological criterion for ministry—humility**
 - Christ's power expressed through humility, rather than the minister's ritual purity, is what matters.
 - As such, the pastor is nothing more than a servant, a representative of Christ who (in spite of his imperfections) is to minister Christ's word to Christ's people. The pastor is, however, also at the same time a hearer of the Word of God and subject to the Word of God, alongside his people.
 - ♣ In order the bishop is set apart, but in nature and need he is the same as any other.
 - Cf. the image of the preacher as a waiter who serves others (and in turn is fed from the same table), but is not the host/head of the household who provides the feast.
 - This emphasis on humility also has in part to do with Augustine's linking of pastoral functions with a monastic lifestyle.
 - ♣ For example, at least nine local bishops were former members of Augustine's monastery (setting aside Antoninus of Fussala and Paul of Cataquas, who disgraced themselves, we must include at least Alypius of Thagaste, Evodius of Uzala, Severus of Mileu, Urbanus of Sicca, Profuturus of Cirta, Privatus and Servilius).
 - ♣ At the same time, as Demacopoulos (*Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church*, 87-88) notes, Augustine recognized that monks who were persons of prayer and aspired to holiness were not automatically qualified for pastoral leadership or clerical

office; other essential criteria were necessary and should be discerned by a person who knew the candidate (and the candidate's background and character) well.

- Humility a value supremely demonstrated by Christ in the **Incarnation** (see e.g., Phil. 2:5-8), in which Christ as physician applies the medicine of humility to souls sick with pride (=self-will aiming at self-exaltation), which is the chief sin and the cause of humanity's fall from grace (unwillingness to show humility by acknowledging subjection to God).
 - Mt. 11:29: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (*De civitate dei* IV.16)
 - We must share in Christ's *dying* if we are to share in his risen life and glory and this dying involves a dying to pride and self-will
 - ♣ In pride "the soul prefers to imitate God rather than to serve God" (*De musica* VI.xiii.40)
 - ♣ To heal this disordered love, "the Wisdom of God, setting out to cure men, applied himself (as a bandage) to cure them, being at once the physician and the medicine. Because man fell through pride, he applied humility as a cure" (*De doctrina christiana* I.xii.13; 15)
 - ♣ "Because pride had wounded us, humility makes us whole. God came humbly, that from such a great wound of pride he might heal man" (*En. in Ps.* 35.17; I 418-419)
 - ♣ On Christ as the physician who administers the medicine of humility, see R. Arbesmann, "Christ the *Medicus humilis* in St. Augustine" in *Augustinus magister*, Communications I (Paris, 1954), pp. 623f.
 - For the healing metaphors, as applied to pride/humility and coldheartedness/love, see e.g., *serm.* 137,1, cited in Tack, p. 112: "The very health of this body [the Church] exists in the unity of the members and in their bond of love. If anyone's love should grow cold, that person is sick in the body of Christ. But the one who raised up Jesus our Head is able to heal our sick members, provided, that is, that they have not cut themselves off from the body, but cling to it until they are healed."
- Christ's humility in the Incarnation
 - Christmas sermon: "He so loved us that for our sakes he, through whom time was made, was made in time; and he, older by eternity than the world itself, was younger in age than many of his servants in the world; he, who made man, was made man; he was given existence by a mother whom he brought into existence; he was carried in hands which he formed; he nursed at breasts which he filled; he cried like a babe in the manger in speechless infancy--this Word without which human eloquence is speechless!" (*Serm.* 188.2; ACW XV 93; compare *Serm.* 184.1; ACW XV 71)

- Christ's **washing of his follower's feet** was a visible sign of the need to set aside one's honor so as to seek the Father's glory in serving one another.
- Christ's **self-offering on the Cross** (which we commemorate in the Lord's Supper) is also a tangible sign of his humility in offering himself for the benefit of others, without considering his own interests as preeminent.
 - "On account of this great sin of pride, God came in humility. This might disease of souls, brought down the Almighty physician from heaven, he humbled him even to the form of a servant, exposed him to spiteful treatment, hung him on the tree; that by the saving strength of so great a medicine this swelling might be cured" (*En. in Ps.* 18 ii 15; I 139).
 - Such humility exposes one's pride, leading one to turn to Christ as the physician for healing: "You shall heal me! I call upon you being sick; I own you to be the physician" (*En in Ps.* 42.7; II 207).
 - This change is not a simple reformation that comes about by the effort of self-will (else humility would be an achievement of the self apart from God). Instead Christ the physician offers himself to heal the sick, prideful soul to bring it to humility: "He who comes to me is made one body with me; he who comes to me becomes humble; he who adheres to me will be humble" (*Tr. in Jo. Ev.* XXV 16; I 362).
- **Christ's ministry relativizes all claims to human leadership**, placing the minister and the people on the same level as sinners saved by grace under Christ as the head of the Church. (By this means, Augustine relativizes the *ordo ecclesiasticus* [church order] which had separated the laity from those set in place as clergy.)
 - The church is not *my* church and the people in it are not *my* people but Christ's people, of whom we have merely been appointed stewards for a short time.
- Even the bishop is also a learner (*discipulus*) and must be teachable.
 - The bishop therefore cannot exercise his function of leading unless he has taken his place alongside the people to sit with them at Christ's feet and, with them, learn from Christ.
 - ♣ "It follows that your duty is to act, ours to make you more attentive; for you are the hearers of the Word and we are its preachers. But within, where no one can see, we are all hearers...I speak from outside, he rouses you from within. All of us, then, inwardly are listeners; but outwardly, all of us in the sight of God must be doers" (*serm.* 179,7, cited in Tack, p. 92)
 - "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian" (*s.* 340.1)
 - ♣ "I watch over because of the office entrusted to me, but I also want to be watched over with you. I am a pastor for you, but a sheep with you under the care of the true Shepherd. From this position I am as it were a teacher for you, but I am also your fellow disciple in this school, under that one true Teacher" (*On Ps.* 126,3)
 - ♣ "You indeed belong to one household now; all of us who are stewards belong to the same household, and we all belong to one Lord. What I give you is not a gift of my own; it is from him from

whom I too receive what I need...For how many in this congregation are destined to be stewards? We too once stood where you are standing; we too, who are now seen distributing food to our fellow servants from a position above them, were a few years ago receiving food with our fellow-servants down where you are. I speak as a bishop to laity, but how do I know how many future bishops I am speaking to?" (*serm.* 101,4)

- The preacher not the head of the household (=Christ), but the servant/waiter who eats the same food as the guests and is fed from the same table (260D2; 296.5, 13)
- **The ministry derives its power and efficacy** not from natural ability, native talent or personal exertion but **from the call and the working of supernatural grace that come from Christ to His Church.**
 - In this the minister may be Christ's instrument but the minister himself can never be the source of these things. All the power and efficacy in one's ministry are from God and it is God alone who deserves the honor; the minister is so called because he *ministers* things which are not his but rather belong to another.
 - The minister presents not his own word, but rather the Word of God, so that preaching is to be Christ's speaking through a man, rather than a man speaking from himself or out of his own resources.
 - ♣ "We are ministers of the Word, not ours, but God's, certainly, and our Lord's" (*s.* 114.1)
 - ♣ Note that this possibly parallels Augustine's account of the *sacramenta*, i.e. there is a thing perceived by the senses (word or minister) which signifies and identical with some unperceived reality (Christ's word or Christ as the true minister), which makes it what it is.
 - As such the minister is not to lay claim to what is Christ's, taking it for his own and receiving honor for it; instead, the minister is to confess that it is Christ's and Christ is to receive the honor for it.
 - ♣ Consequently, one who brings the word of Christ must point people away from himself to Christ.
 - "It is our Chief Shepherd himself who has warned us...to refrain from putting our trust even in [good shepherds], to refrain from setting our hopes on them because of their good works; rather, he tells us, we ought to give glory to him who has made them this way, to the Father who is in heaven" (*ep.* 208,4 cited in Tack, *As One Struggling Christian to Another*, p. 86)
 - "Whatever we are, let not your trust be in us...If I find people putting their trust in me, I do not congratulate them. They are to be corrected, not encouraged; changed, not affirmed...Do not let your hopes rest on us, do not let your hopes rest on men...Insofar as we are good, we will be

faithful ministers, truly ministers” (*serm.* 340A, 9, cited in Tack, p. 87)

- Cf. Tack’s commentary (p. 87): “There are perhaps several reasons why Augustine warned his people not to put their trust in him but in God, the author of all good things, reasons which are still valid for our times. First, any real honor and praise rightly belong only to God, as is clear from the gospel message of Jesus. Second, even good ministers must share with other, not what is their own, but what they have received. Therefore, when they preach and teach they are doing nothing exceptional; it is their sacred duty, which they dare not neglect, even though it means speaking up about unpleasant topics, like sin, the cross, injustice in the marketplace, things that would go against the grain. It is a strange kind of pastor that would fear to speak out about unpleasant things and only want to speak to his people about the joy of being friends with God or about earthly happiness [see *serm.* 46].”
- Note also that because the minister is simply a representative who conveys Christ’s word to his people, even unworthy, self-interested ministers cannot thwart God’s work of salvation, which he brings about through his Word, unhindered by the unworthiness and faithlessness of the minister.
 - “There are people in the Church...who preach the gospel with the desire to receive a reward of whatever sort, seeking not so much the salvation of those to whom they preach as their own advantage. But those who hear salvation from the lips of one who is himself without salvation must believe in the One about who he is preaching, without placing their hope in that person through whom salvation is being preached to them” (*serm.* 137,5, cited in Tack, p. 88)
 - It is the Word of God that matters and is decisive, not the character of the messenger: “Pay attention to what we minister...What should not concern you is the kind of dish in which the food you are eager to eat is offered to you...The dish may be silver, gold, or clay, but what you must be concerned with is whether it contains bread, whose bread it is, and whose gift it is that is being served to you” (*serm.* 340A,9, cited in Tack, p. 88)
 - When attention is directed away from God to the minister of the Word, the minister himself can suffer spiritual harm: [Sometimes] a person is praised for some gift received from you, Lord. If this person takes more pleasure in the praise than in the possession of the gift for which praise is being offered, then acceptance of that praise detracts from you. In this case the person offering the praise is better off than the one receiving it. Because while that person has delighted in God’s gift in another,

the person who is praised has taken more delight in the gift of praise, given by a human, than in the gift itself, received from God" (*Conf.* 10,36, cited in Tack, p. 92)

- **Augustine on the burden** (*sarcina*=a heavy pack a Roman soldier had to carry on his back) of episcopal **ministry** in *ep.* 134.1.
 - Cf. Gal. 6:2 on the need to bear one another's burdens and in this way fulfill the law of Christ, which is the law of love.
 - Cf. *On the Customs of the Catholic Church* I,32,69 (cited in Tack, p. 100), where he notes that the clergy have "a way of life that is anything but peaceful. Indeed, the people entrusted to them are not sound and healthy, but such as need constant care and attention. They must have patience with the moral frailty of the people in order to heal them, and before they can calm the tempest, they must bear its brunt. In such circumstances it is very difficult to maintain an exemplary conduct and keep one's spirit perfectly calm."
 - On the need to correct and rebuke people and its unpleasantness, "Who would not run away from such labor?" (*serm.* 339,4, cited in Tack, p. 101). "But the fact remains that we have been saddled with a burden that we cannot and must not shake off our shoulders" (*serm.* 82,15, cited in Tack, p. 101).
 - ♣ On the difficulty of knowing how to administer correction in a constructive way: "How much can a person stand? Are there not punishments a person will balk at, such that not only will he derive no advantage from them, but he will also collapse under their severity? What deep, dark questions!...I do not know either how many people have become better because of punishment or how many have turned out worse on its account. And what is one to do in the case that frequently presents itself: If you punish a certain person, he is lost; if you allow his wrongdoing to go unchecked, another person is corrupted by it?" (*ep.* 95,3, cited in Tack, p. 102)

The Forms in Which Humility Is Expressed in Ministry

The importance of intensive biblical study (at least six months) prior to taking up a ministry of teaching and caring for the church. (cf. "the remedies which the Scriptures contain for such a case as mine" in Augustine's letter to Valerius), so as to be able to bring wisdom to others.

- Cf. the qualification for a minister of the Word in *Conf.* 10.26.37: "Your best servant is he who looks not so much to hear from you what he wants to hear, but rather to want what he hears from you."
- On the effort to be expended by the minister of the Word in studying the Scriptures: "There may be—indeed there certainly are—written in the holy books, counsels that the man of God must know thoroughly...But how can he get to

know these counsels, except as the Lord has told us: by asking, seeing, knocking, that is by prayer, by study, by tearful supplication?" (*ep.* 21,4, cited in Tack, p. 103)

Prayer and confession of sins = dependence upon God in the needs which confronted him as a pastor (cf. in his letter to Aurelius of Carthage [392]: God being "present as your help in all time of need, showing in His dealings with His church, through your discharge of priestly functions" showing "such mercy as spiritual men with tears and groanings implore him to manifest."

Role of spiritual friendship (i.e friendship rooted in the common love of God, who share this goal with the same passion, pray for each other and are at roughly equal stages of advance) within the Christian life and the willingness to engage with others, be receptive to being taught and challenged by others (i.e fraternal correction and forgiveness), and be accountable to others.

Living for the sake of the Church (to whose service he was called)

- *prodesse* (being of service to others) must come before *praeesse* (being in a position of authority).
- The challenge of not having enough time for oneself: "If I were to give you an account of how the hours of my days and nights are spend, and let you see how many of them I have to spend over unnecessary things, it would make you quite sad; you would also be astonished at the number of things which I cannot put off and which pluck me by the sleeve and prevent me from doing what you are questioning and begging me about—the things which I would so gladly do myself, but which, to my unspeakable regret, I am not in a position to do" (*ep.* 139,3, cited in Tack, p. 105)

Caution in handling money and public conduct--the land swindles, condoning of slavery and immorality of other North African bishops, clergy and monks

- "So when the laity who want to lead good lives pay attention to a bad priest, what do they say to themselves?... 'We must hear from him the words that are not his own, but God's. We must follow God. Let this man follow his own desires.'... But as for the laity who are bad and unfaithful... what do they say to themselves when God's word censures them? 'Go away: why speak to us? If not even bishops and priests do what you tell them to do, then why are you compelling us to do so?' They are not seeking an advocate for themselves in a bad cause, but a companion in punishment..." (*serm.* 137,7, cited in Tack, pp. 87-88)

The Selection, Teaching/Training and Mentoring/Supervision of Clergy as necessary for the unity and health of the Church

- See Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders*, B&H Academic, 2009 for Augustine's vision of this.