



## BECOMING ONE ALL TOGETHER ACCORDING TO THE RULE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

Nello Cipriani, osa<sup>1</sup>

“The main purpose for your having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God, with one heart and one soul” (*Rule of St. Augustine*, Chapter 1, n. 3). With these words, placed at the beginning of his *Rule*, St. Augustine points to unity of mind and heart—that is, communion—as the principal objective of his religious community. Together with this goal, he also offers as a model in this regard the first Christian community of Jerusalem, described in the Acts of the Apostles: “The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32). In other writings of his, the Bishop of Hippo broadens even more the horizon of his view of the monastic life, placing it in the framework of the eternal plan of God to bring together all humanity in Christ because “God highly prizes unity in a multitude” (*City of God*, Book 12, Chapter 22). He also points to the Holy Trinity itself as the divine model of supreme communion, which we are called to imitate (*On the Trinity*, Book 6, Chapters 5, 7).

**First Part.** But how can such a sublime goal be reached? For St. Augustine, it is first of all necessary to recognize that a unity of many souls and hearts is possible only on the condition that God himself is the unifying center toward which all converge. In his *Rule*, this idea is expressed with the addition of the words *in God* to the statement in the Acts of the Apostles: *one heart and one soul*. It is an original addition—one that cannot be found in any Scripture codex nor in the writings of any of the other Fathers of the Church. Augustine uses the term not just once but more than thirty times in his writings. An explanation for this can be found in his commentary on the Gospel of John, where, speaking about the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, their preaching and the conversion of thousands of people, St. Augustine observes that, as the number of believers increased, “a considerable community was created in which all, receiving the Holy Spirit, by whom spiritual love was kindled, were by their very love and fervor of spirit welded into one.... There were so many thousands, and one soul. But where? In God.” And he concludes: “If many souls are united to God through love, then they become one soul, and many hearts, one heart (*Tractate on the Gospel of St. John*, n. 39, 5).

The Bishop of Hippo had no problem recognizing that the human heart harbors a selfish love that seeks its own interests and is not inclined to seek the good of others. This kind of self-love necessarily breeds divisions and conflict. But he also recognizes that human beings have a natural and licit love—one that unites the members of the same family and friends who have the same interests, tastes and pastimes. He even acknowledges a kind of love that binds citizens of the same

---

<sup>1</sup> **Nello Cipriani**, agostiniano, è docente presso l’Istituto Patristico Augustinianum di Roma, dove si è laureato in Teologia e Scienze patristiche, dopo aver conseguito la laurea in Lettere antiche e filosofia nell’Università degli Studi di Perugia. È membro della AIEP (Association Internationale d’Études Patristiques). È stato consultore della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede e si è specializzato nelle fonti classiche e cristiane del pensiero di sant’Agostino. È autore di vari articoli e libri sulla spiritualità di sant’Agostino, sulla sua filosofia e teologia.

town to one another. This love he calls human love because it is born spontaneously in the human heart.

But he also says that this and other similar natural bonds are not enough to create true communion among people—a communion that will ensure stable harmony and true friendship, open to everyone. In other words, in order to form a truly united community, it is not enough to work together, live together under the same roof and have many things in common. So as to “preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), as the Apostle Paul says, it is necessary that the Holy Spirit pour the love of God into the hearts of believers (Rm. 5:5). And so, Augustine concludes, “those who love one another and who love the God who dwells in them, constitute the city of God” (*Exposition on Psalm 99*, n. 4).

In short, by adding *in God* to the statement in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Augustine wanted to say that so as to live truly united to one another, it is necessary that religious live in the presence of God, converse with him, contemplate his goodness, get to know his will and ask for his grace, because fraternal communion is his gift. This is why without an intense interior life lived in communion with God, genuine communion cannot be created among individuals.

**Second Part.** Nevertheless, it is not enough to know that unity of hearts is the primary goal of a religious community and that this unity is first of all a gift that we must ask of God in faith. The *Rule of St. Augustine* offers us a practical guide—I would say it is almost an instruction manual—on how to attain this unity. In effect, all the norms that we find in the *Rule* aim, on the one hand, to eliminate the causes of division and, on the other, to suggest how to grow in love, which is the bond of unity. Thus, immediately after having pointed out the general purpose for which religious live together, Augustine reminds us of two indispensable conditions for attaining this goal, namely: a sharing of material goods and humility. A sharing of goods, inseparably joined to attention to the needs of persons, was already practiced in the community described in the Acts of the Apostles: “No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...and [these goods] were distributed to each according to need” (4:32, 35).

St. Augustine followed this practice to the letter. He wanted the members of his religious community to put everything truly in common: not only their worldly possessions, the fruit of their work and the gifts they received from family and friends; he also wanted their meals, clothing and library to be in common. Augustine was convinced that the private possession of material goods did not foster unity of hearts in any way. In one discourse, he said that even children of the same mother would often wind up quarrelling and hating one another when it came to the division of property (s. 359, 2.4). Moreover, it is precisely through the possession of material goods that people try to garner attention and increase their power, so as to assert themselves over others and dominate them (cf. *City of God*, Book 19, Chapter 14).

For St. Augustine, pride—that is to say, the desire to be or to appear to be superior to others—is the greatest obstacle to fraternal communion and it is the worst of the vices because, he declares, “every other kind of sin has to do with the commission of evil deeds, whereas pride lurks even in good works in order to destroy them” (*Rule*, Chapter 1, n. 8). In late antiquity, the unity of the religious community was put to a hard test by the great social differences of its members. It is for this reason that Augustine’s *Rule* says that those entering the monastery from rich families or those bringing to the monastery more material goods than the others must not show off or look down on their companions. However, those who enter the monastery in a state of poverty are also reminded to not be proud and arrogant simply because they can now fraternize on an equal basis with those who in the world they would not even have dared to approach (*ivi.*).

At any rate, it is not enough to just remove the obstacles to unity. The *Rule* requires the members of the community to be very attentive to the needs of the others: “Let each one receive according to his need.” Recently one of Augustine’s critics took issue with the saint, saying that he encouraged the maintenance of social differences in the monastery because in the distribution of food and clothing he (Augustine) urged the community to be understanding toward the habits and

past lifestyle of those who had been affluent in the world. In reality, the *Rule* explicitly excludes every type of privilege, saying that the community must be equally attentive to the well-being of everyone, rich and poor, sick and convalescent, in matters of food, dress, and everything else. The supreme value is not absolute equality among religious but rather love, which recognizes and respects the weakness of a brother/sister and trusts his/her commitment. In short, charity must reign above and beyond every prescription of the *Rule*. And since love for one's brother/sister springs from esteem for that person, St. Augustine concludes his first prescriptions with the command: "Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honoring in yourselves the God whose temples you have become" (*Rule*, Chapter 1, n. 9). The dignity of human beings is not linked to the nobility of their origins, nor to their level of education, nor to the role they carry out in the community, but to the fact—accessible only through faith—that God dwells in each person as in his temple.

The *Rule* does not lack the call to common prayer as an important moment of religious aggregation, but the insistence falls on interiority: "Don't pray with your lips alone but also with your heart" (*Rule*, Chapter 2, n. 12), because it is union with God, not the act performed in common, that unites hearts.

The central part of Augustine's *Rule* concerns the guarding of chastity. It reminds everyone about their mutual responsibility in this regard and also with regard to fraternal correction: "Each one should protect the modesty of the other." In our society, privacy is considered to be almost the supreme law. However, indifference cannot be justified in the name of privacy. No one in a religious community should say: "Another person's behavior does not concern me"; "It's not up to me to remind someone of their duty." Genuine love cannot be indifferent to the true good of one's neighbor because, as St. Augustine says, "By mutual vigilance over one another will God, who dwells in you, grant you his protection" (*Rule*, Chapter 4, n. 24). Vigilance and mutual correction are also works of mercy.

Chapter 5 has been called "the most monastic of the entire text, in the technical sense of the word," by Luc Vereijen, the foremost expert in the study of St. Augustine's *Rule*. In effect, the chapter concerns the organization of the monastery's life and the distribution of duties: one person is placed in charge of the common wardrobe; another, of the library; a third, of the pantry, while a fourth is assigned to care of the sick. Each of these individuals is urged to perform his/her service attentively and lovingly. But to these obvious dispositions, St. Augustine adds a paragraph that expresses better than any other the spirit that should inspire the activities of all religious: "None shall perform any task for their own benefit but all your work shall be done for the community with greater zeal and more dispatch than if each one of you were to work for yourself alone. For love, as it is written, 'is not self-seeking' (1 Co. 13:5), meaning that it places the common good before its own, not its own before the common good." At this point, Augustine suggests the criterion to be followed in evaluating one's spiritual progress: "Know, then, that the more you devote yourselves to the community rather than to your private interests, the more you have advanced. Thus, let love, which remains forever, prevail in all things that minister to the fleeting necessities of life" (*Rule*, Chapter 5, n. 31).

The perfection of a religious is not measured by the work that person does but by his/her love for the common good, which inspires the work. In human society, not all roles are equal. In religious communities too, there are different roles and duties, assigned according to the needs of the common life and the abilities of individuals. These different roles and functions might give rise to feelings of jealousy and envy. St. Augustine is very familiar with the words of St. Paul concerning the various charisms in the Church. In his *Rule*, he limits himself to urging everyone to rejoice in the charisms of the others because, he says, "In the unity of the same body, I can do what my brother/sister does because I am not separate from him/her. If I have less power, he/she shares my poverty, while I rejoice with that person for the things he/she has that are greater than mine" (*En. Ps.*, 130, 6).

In spite of his lofty concept of religious communion, St. Augustine is not an idealist, that is to say, he does not lack a sense of reality. He is well aware that a religious community is always made up of sinners and that perfect peace will never be achieved in this world. Only in heaven will we experience a perfectly ordered and harmonious society in which each person enjoys the things of God and one another in God (cf. *City of God*, Book 19, n. 17). On earth, there will always be disagreements, misunderstandings, and even opposition and battles. Therefore he urges: “You should avoid quarrels altogether or else put an end to them as quickly as possible; otherwise, anger may grow into hatred.... Any who have injured others by open insult, or by abusive or even incriminating language, must be mindful to repair the injury as quickly as possible” (*Rule*, Book 6, nn. 41-42).

To ask for forgiveness and repay one’s debts is part of the ordinary life of every community that takes the Gospel as its inspiration. What is absolutely to be avoided is to allow anger to be transformed into hate, not only because, as Scripture says, ‘Everyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer’ (1 Jn. 3:15), but also because hate is contrary to love and unity. Therefore he does not hesitate to severely condemn “those who are never willing to ask pardon or do not do so from the heart.” These, he says, “have no reason to be in the monastery, even if they are not expelled” (*Rule*, Chapter 6, n. 42).

***In conclusion***, Augustine says that it is once again love that must govern relationships between those in authority and those called to obey. Here the wisdom of the author of the *Rule* reaches its highest point. He does not speak about superiors and subjects. Instead, he alternates his reminders between those called to obey and those called to preside over the others. To the first, he simply says: “you should obey superiors as fathers or mothers with the respect due them so as not to offend God in their persons” (*Rule*, Chapter 7, n. 44). Then he addresses those in authority, reminding them that their duty is to ensure that the *Rule* is observed. He invites them to not neglect anything and to be ready to correct others and recall them to their duty. But he doesn’t stop there. He is well aware that the exercise of authority is extremely important for the growth of communion in a religious community, but that it is exposed to a big temptation—that of transforming a service into an assertion of power. Therefore, he warns persons in authority: “Superiors must think themselves fortunate not because they rule by virtue of their office, but because they serve in love” (*Rule*, Chapter 7, n.46). “A superior should hold first place in the community by dignity of his/her office but in God’s sight he/she should lie beneath the feet of the others in fear. They [the superiors] must be a model of good works for all. Let them admonish the unruly, cheer the faint-hearted, support the weak and be patient toward all. Let them love discipline and instill respect for it. And though both are necessary, they should strive to be loved by [the members] rather than feared, ever mindful that they must give an account of them to God” (*ivi.*).

To a concept of authority so profoundly inspired by humility and fraternal love should correspond an obedience inspired by the same spirit: “Therefore,” Augustine concludes, “it is by willing obedience that you [subjects] show mercy not only toward yourselves, but also toward superiors, whose higher rank among you exposes them all the more to greater peril” (*Rule*, Chapter 7, n. 47). As can be seen, obedience too must be transformed into a work of mercy.

The last paragraph sketches out the spirit that animates the *Rule*: “The Lord grant that you may observe all these precepts in a spirit of charity, as lovers of spiritual beauty...not as slaves living under the law but as men and women living in freedom under grace” (Chapter 8, n. 48). Religious observance must not be lived as an externally-imposed burden. It must be an expression of interior freedom, which the servants of God undoubtedly enjoy, if they are animated by sincere love of the ideal of communion that they have embraced. This love, in its turn, is on the one hand a gift for which one must ask, and, on the other, the fruit of contemplation of the love of God, revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ.