

**COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF ST. AUGUSTINE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Community life or communion of life is essential to most religious institutes. For the Augustinians, community life is understood as the axis around which their life revolves. Therefore, this essay explores St. Augustine of Hippo's perspective on and understanding of community life. The major focus of the essay is St. Augustine's special preference of communion of life and sharing of things in common as the best way to seek God and to seek and arrive at knowledge and truth. The essay concentrates therefore, on the phenomena and events that influenced Augustine's understanding and approach to community life, his concrete experience of community life and his theological, sociological and evangelical teaching on community life. The essay concludes with the assertion that Augustine's perspective on community life is as relevant today as it was in his days.*

**INTRODUCTION**

One thing Saint Augustine of Hippo is known for is his versatility in intellectual and spiritual enquiries. His writings and teachings touch several aspects of philosophy, theology and spirituality. Augustine was not only a theorist, in the sense that he bases his writings on speculative and theoretical matters only. Rather, he was also pragmatic and realistic. His pragmatic approach to issues and intellectual questions are usually fuelled by his personal life experiences. This is especially the case in his teachings on spirituality and faith in general.

One of such practical experiences that influenced Augustine's teaching and approach is community life or life of communion. The theme of community life is present in numerous works of Augustine and he lays down very clearly, both traditional and innovative teachings on the topic. For Augustine, Community life is pivotal to human search for knowledge and for God. Secular wisdom, intellectual knowledge and spiritual growth all progress better when sought within a community, in a life of communion. For Augustine, there is a strong tie between sharing and learning: the more we share, the more we learn; the more we learn, the more we are required to share.

In this article, we wish to explore Community Life in the perspective of Saint Augustine of Hippo. The emphasis therefore, is on Augustine's own understanding, teaching and practice of community life. I will begin the inquest by calling attention to the centrality of community life in Augustinian spirituality. The article goes on to consider Augustine's preference for community life, the influences of community life on Augustine and his understanding of community life. The scope of this article is limited, majorly, to Augustine's teachings on community life. Nonetheless, a little

attention is given to community life as a pivotal point in the spirituality of the Order of St. Augustine.

## THE CENTRALITY OF COMMUNITY LIFE IN AUGUSTINIAN SPIRITUALITY

Community life or communion of life is a very central theme in Augustinian Spirituality. Augustinian Spirituality is derived from the spirituality of St. Augustine of Hippo and from the history and tradition of the Order of St. Augustine. Two basic documents that guide the life of the Augustinians, namely, the Rule of St. Augustine and the constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine, lay emphasis on community life as their pivotal point.

A critical analysis of the Rule of St. Augustine reveals that all the regulations of the life of the Friars are centred on communion, sharing, and common concern for the wellbeing of others and the search for God in common. Right from the very start of the Rule, Augustine states that “The main purpose for you having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart”<sup>1</sup>. Coming together to live harmoniously in the same house and to seek God in oneness of mind and heart immediately strikes the note of communion of life and sets the pace and foundation for all that is to follow in the rule. The sharing of material things in common, fraternal correction, prayer in common, care of community goods and care of one another, obedience to the superior, etc, are meant to foster this living together harmoniously.

The constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine clearly place community life at the centre of Augustinian life and spirituality: “Community life is the axis around which Augustinian Religious life turns: a community of brothers who live harmoniously in their house, united by a single soul and a single heart, seeking God together and open to the service of the Church”<sup>2</sup>. This same point on the centrality of community life is echoed earlier in the same constitutions where community life is described as the “foundation” of Augustinian life<sup>3</sup>.

The Church has in different times reminded the Augustinian Order of this central point of her spirituality. For instance, when Pope Paul VI was addressing the members of the General Chapter of 1971, he emphasized that for Augustinians, “the common life is not just one of the many helps they have for conventual life, but rather the goal towards which they strive every day”<sup>4</sup>. As an ideal, community life occupies, or rather, should occupy the mind of every Augustinian as a goal that has

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rule of St. Augustine*, I, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine*, 26; This fundamental principle of community life was already highlighted in the first constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine which was published in 1290. See Luis Marin de San Martin, OSA. *The Augustinians: Origins and Spirituality*, translated by: P. Brian Lowery, OSA. (Roma: Institutum Historicum Augustinianum, 2013), pp. 211-212.

<sup>3</sup> *The Constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Paul VI, “Discourse to the members of the General Chapter”, 20 September 1971: *Acta Ordinis Sancti Augustini 16* (1971) 91-94, as cited in: Luis Marin de San Martin, OSA. *The Augustinians: Origins and Spirituality*, p. 212; See *Living in Freedom under Grace: Augustinian Spirit and Spirituality in the Writings of the Popes and Priors General (1953-1978)*. (Roma: Curia Generalizia Agostiniana, 1979), p. 44.

to be achieved. This preoccupation is shown by constantly practising community life and placing it at the centre of all the pastoral and ethical actions of an Augustinian.

In his opening address at the Intermediate General Chapter of the Order held in Nigeria, in September 2016, the Prior General, Alejandro Moral Anton, says that communion is the nucleus and centre of Augustinian charism. According to him, communion “has been and is the great gift of the Spirit. If we neglect or even, lose this aspect of our religious identity, the existence of the Order of St. Augustine does not have meaning. Our great witness, according to our Holy Father, and upon which the Church is founded is communion”.<sup>5</sup>

Since community life occupies such an important position in the life of the Augustinians who live the life of Christ under the inspiration of St. Augustine, it is vital to seek to grasp Augustine’s understanding of Community life and how he lived it both as a lay man and as a priest and bishop.

### **AUGUSTINE ALWAYS CHERISHED COMMUNITY LIFE**

Even though Augustine ardently cherished and sought interiority and solitude, he also certainly sought to build and live a life of community.<sup>6</sup> For Augustine, contemplative and active lives have to go together.<sup>7</sup> He sought therefore, to harmonize his longing for solitude (*holy leisure*) with friendly dialogue and service to the community (*necessary activity*).<sup>8</sup> Augustine believed that both interiority/solitude and community are vital hence he sought for a way to bring *holy leisure* and *necessary activity* together. As we are about to see, Augustine always cherished community life while living and appreciating contemplative life.

It is interesting to note that Augustine did not begin to appreciate community life only after his conversion and baptism; community life has always been part of his life from his earliest days.<sup>9</sup> Even before his conversion, Augustine had come to cherish community life that he even had a dream, a vision of a well structured community life. According to him this project and vision collapsed because of the consideration of the spouses of the intending members<sup>10</sup>. Augustine lamented the collapse of this community because it would have been a wonderful “philosophical community”, a community where search for wisdom through individual reflection and common sharing would have taken place.<sup>11</sup> Even though the project was not realized, community life was already an ideal in the mind of Augustine.

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<sup>5</sup> *Intermediate General Chapter: Documents and Decisions*, (Abuja, Nigeria, 18-30 September 2016). Roma: Pubblicazioni Augustiniane, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Augustine, *Letter* 101, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Fermin Fernandez Bienzobas, OSA, “Typically Augustinian Values” in *Basic Elements of Augustinian Pedagogy*, Eusebio B. Berdon, OSA (Coordinator). (Roma: Pubblicazioni Augustiniane, 2006), pp. 85-86.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 4, 4, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 6, 14, 24. Augustine had this to say as the reason for the collapse of the plan: “Afterwards the question began to be raised whether the wives, whom some of us already had and we wished to have, would permit this. As a result, the whole project, which we had worked out so well, collapsed in our hands; it was completely broken up and thrown aside. Thereupon we returned to sighs and groans and turned our steps to following the broad and beaten ways of the world”.

<sup>11</sup> See Theodore Tack, OSA, *If Augustine Were Alive: Augustine’s Religious Ideal for Today*, (New York: Alba House, 1989), p. 3.

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As at this time, when Augustine conceived this ideal of community life, he had not known of the existence and practice of the monastic tradition in the Church. According to him, it was after the collapse of this “community project” that he and Alypius, and others with him got to learn from Ponticianus about Anthony of Egypt and the monastic tradition which already existed in the Church “unknown to them”.<sup>12</sup>

We can also point to Augustine’s Cassiciacum Community experience as a form of community life, even though it involved his family and friends.<sup>13</sup> From the description of the structure and activities that took place at Cassiciacum, it can be seen that a kind of community life was lived there. This is what made Theodore Tack to submit that the Cassiciacum community can be described as the very first “Augustinian” community.<sup>14</sup>

After the death and burial of Monica in Rome, Augustine did not continue his journey back to Africa; rather, he remained in Rome for some time. During the time he spent in Rome, he visited monasteries in and around Rome and learned about their way of life<sup>15</sup>. His experience in these monastic communities had some influence on his understanding and appreciation of community life.

Possidius, Augustine’s friend and Biographer, tells us that shortly after Augustine eventually got back to Africa, after his conversion, mother’s death and burial, he founded a community at Tagaste, his home town. This community comprised of Augustine’s fellow townsmen and friends who were alike in their desire to serve God. In this community they practiced prayers, fasting, good works and meditation on the word of God<sup>16</sup>. This community already had the structure of a religious community.

Furthermore, Augustine’s love for community propelled him to continue the practice of community life even after he was ordained a “diocesan priest”. Due to his interest in, and desire to continue the practice of community life, his bishop, Valerian, gave him a garden on which he founded his second community. This community was modelled after the early Christian community in Acts of the Apostles. Possidius recounts that:

Soon after his ordination, he founded a monastery near the church and began to live there with the servants of God, following the way of life and rule that had been established under the holy apostles. The most important provision was that no one in that community was to have any property of his own, but rather, they were to have all things in common, with each being given what

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<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 8, 6, 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine narrates the community of Cassiciacum in his *Confessions*, 9, 4-6. Those who were at Cassiciacum with Augustine were his mother, Monica, his son Adeodatus, his good friend Alypius, several other relatives, friends and students.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Tack, OSA, *If Augustine Were Alive: Augustine’s Religious Ideal for Today*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> St. Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*, I, 31-33.

<sup>16</sup> Possidius, *The Life of St. Augustine*, John E. Rotelle, OSA (Editor), (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1988), 3, 1-2.

he needed; this was the course Augustine himself had adopted when he had returned home from overseas<sup>17</sup>.

This account of Possidius on the structure, composition and nature of Augustine's community, mirrors Luke's description of the early Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles and very much what Augustine later put down in his Rule. It is a community where Augustine was to share everything in common with the other members of the community, while he still served as a priest.

Jordan of Saxony, a very notable and famous Augustinian who lived in the fourteenth century, wrote about Augustinian Life and Spirituality. In his famous work, *The Life of the Brethren*, he wrote very convincingly about Augustine's love and passion for community life. He stated that both as a priest and a bishop, Augustine wanted to live in community:

When our Blessed father Augustine was made a priest and had to attend to the care of the people, he was still unwilling to leave the company of his brothers behind and wanted to maintain the communion of the common life. When Saint Valerius learned that he was resolved not to live without his beloved brothers he gave him a garden near the city where he could build a monastery. Thus he would be able to live there with his brothers as he desired and nonetheless to look after the people. Even when he became a bishop, he made sure to have some of the brothers with him in his residence so that he would not have to live without a community of brothers<sup>18</sup>.

Jordan of Saxony was convinced that Augustine was such a community person because, in his view, Augustine was a coenobite and not an anchorite.<sup>19</sup> Life in common was an indispensable way of life for Augustine and he showed that clearly all through his life. He always believed in the life of sharing both one's life and one's personal material and spiritual possessions with others, with whom one lives in community.

## **INFLUENCES OF COMMUNITY LIFE ON AUGUSTINE**

Apart from the natural African influence on Augustine regarding his love and preference for communion of life, there are some other factors that influenced him. Right from when Augustine was growing up, he learned from the culture of mutual support, friendship and family conviviality which was part of the African way of life. Augustine enjoyed family support and warmth; he had lots of friends and could

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<sup>17</sup> Possidius, *The Life of St. Augustine*, 5, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Jordan of Saxony, *The Life of the Brethren: Liber Vitasfratrum*, John E. Rotelle, OSA, (Editor). (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1993), p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> Jordan of Saxony, *The Life of the Brethren*, p. 75. He contends that if anywhere Augustine is found to describe himself as a Hermit, then it should be as a Cenobitic Hermit, not as an Anchoritic Hermit. He buttresses his conviction by citing Augustine when he praised life of community as the life of perfect men and as an angelic life. See *ibid*, pp. 76-77. It is also interesting to note that in *Sermon 27*, Augustine ranks himself among the Cenobitic Hermits.

also relate very cordially with the wider extended family system. Our attention is not focused here on this natural influence of a community's cultural system on Augustine. Rather, we wish to consider some other factors that are different from and wider than the immediate or extended family circle. Three main influences are worth considering here: Philosophical school, Early Christian Community and Monastic Experience.

*Philosophical School:* The influences of community life on Augustine can be traced back to the time he was captivated by Cicero's Hortensius. After reading this work of Cicero, Augustine became interested in philosophical search and he put in a lot of energy into it believing that his search would be fulfilled and his doubts cleared by it. "He was fired up by wisdom" after reading the Hortensius in his nineteenth year.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Augustine states that "there can be no happy life, save in philosophy".<sup>21</sup>

From the different schools of philosophy, Augustine got the idea that wisdom cannot be attained in isolation. Carlos Moran Fernandez buttresses this point by pointing to the historical fact that "in antiquity, no philosophy and no philosopher existed outside a group or community, a 'school of philosophy', and this brought with it a certain way of life".<sup>22</sup> We cannot underestimate this influence on Augustine because in Augustine's understanding and principle of community life, not only material things are shared in common, but also intellectual and mystical ideas. In our search for God, those who live in community share with their fellow community members whatever light or spiritual experience they receive after making the interior journey to meet the interior Master. This idea has been at the centre of Augustine's preference for community life, right from the time he founded his first community at Tagaste. Augustine always sought the truth, knowledge and wisdom within an atmosphere and with the support of the community.

This point is brought out clearly in the "philosophical community of his dream" which collapsed before it took off!<sup>23</sup> He wanted a community where the members would share everything in common, including spiritual and intellectual illumination. In his Soliloquies, he states that community is meant to help and encourage those who live, seek and discover wisdom and faith together.<sup>24</sup> Other than imitating the early Christians in sharing one's material possessions, it was very important to Augustine that spiritual and intellectual wealth were also shared.

*The Early Christian Community:* The basic and foundational influence on Augustine regarding community life is the description of the way the early Christians lived their Christian lives by Luke, in *Acts of the Apostles* (4:32-37). According to this text, the believers in Christ lived in one mind and one heart; "there was no needy person

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<sup>20</sup> See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 4, 7; 6, 11, 18; 8, 7, 17. Saint Augustine, *On Holy Life*, 1, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Saint Augustine, *Against the Sceptics*, II, 2, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Carlos Moran Fernandez, "The Community in St. Augustine: Philosophical and Theological Aspects", in *Elements of an Augustinian Formation*, (Roma: Pubblicazioni Agostiniane, 2001), p. 289.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 4, 14, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies*, 1, 12, 20.

among them” because they shared what they had in common. We can say that this scriptural text triggered the conviction in Augustine that spiritual growth, wisdom and intellectual knowledge are better enhanced within a community system. Little wonder then that “one mind and one heart” became a motto for Augustine. Common sharing of goods, therefore, shaped Augustine’s understanding of religious life.

The evidence of this is very eloquence in the Rule of St. Augustine. As we noted in an earlier session, the Rule of St. Augustine is permeated by the consideration of the other members of the community and the attitude of sharing everything in common. For Augustine, the main purposes of coming to live in a community is to live in harmony in oneness of mind and heart intent upon God; and to “call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common...”<sup>25</sup> This is clearly inspired by the life of the Early Christians as presented in the *Acts of the Apostle*.

*Monastic Experience:* After the visit of Ponticianus to Augustine at the Cassiciacum, during which he told Augustine and his companions about the existence of Monasteries in the East and in the West, especially that of Ambrose, Augustine began to develop a desire to learn and know more about their way of life. The narration of Ponticianus triggered and heightened Augustine’s natural desire to live a shared, common life.

This desire was fulfilled during the space of time between the death and burial of Monica and his return to his native land. As we noted earlier, while in Rome within this period, Augustine visited some monasteries within and outside Rome. These visits offered Augustine different perspectives of community life. This experience, no doubt, helped to shape his community project when he eventually returned to Africa. The first fruit of this experience and inspiration was the community of laymen which Augustine founded shortly after he arrived at Tagaste, his home town.

### **AUGUSTINE’S UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY LIFE**

Augustine’s view and understanding of community life is very rich and enriching to Christian spirituality. Even though Augustine’s love for communion of life is inspired by a variety of factors, as we have already seen, he has a personal touch to it. This personal touch to Augustine’s community comes from his theological, philosophical and charismatic approach to life and spirituality. He speaks about community life with authority because he did not only idealize it, he actually lived it practically, before and after he became a priest and even as a bishop.

*The Community as a “Theological Place”:* In the spirituality and theology of Augustine, the community is a theological place. For him the human person is a theological place, that is, a meeting place with God. This anthropological privilege, in the thought of Augustine is as a result of God’s decision to make man an *Imago Dei* or as

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<sup>25</sup> *The Rule of St. Augustine*, I, 3-4.

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he prefers to call it, *Imago Trinitatis*. The human person has something of God (the Trinity) in him. The community is therefore, a privileged and primordial space for this meeting (between God and man) to occur"<sup>26</sup> The community which is the conglomeration of many such persons (who are places of encounter between God and man) is without doubt, a "theological place". The community is where its members meet God in each other and where those outside the community encounter God as well. St. Augustine says in his Rule: "Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honouring God in yourselves, whose temples you have become".<sup>27</sup> Each person living in an Augustinian community, according to the Rule, is a place where God dwells (temple) and each person should also recognize the God who dwells in the other persons and members of the community. God is, and should be, present and made visible in each religious community.

In another of his works St. Augustine re-presents the theme of God dwelling in us through Christ, and we dwelling in him. He writes: "We dwell in Him (Jesus Christ) when we are his members, and he dwells in us when we are his temple. Unity joins us so that we may be members, and this unity is achieved through charity. And what is the source of charity? asks the apostle. The charity of God, he says, is spread in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us".<sup>28</sup> By the grace of the Holy Spirit each of us dwells in God and God dwells in each of us. The gathering of these persons who dwell in God and God in them is the community and God obviously dwells in the community. This is why the community should be lived and experienced as a *theological place*.

*Community Life and Search for God:* Being a deeply community person, all important events in the life of Augustine are done with people around him, including the search for God. For Augustine, therefore, community life and search for God (Interiority) cannot be separated. In his journey towards conversion Augustine was surrounded by friends, so we can say that he arrived at his conversion and discovery and knowledge of God through the community. He makes this very prominent in his rule because for him the reason why brothers (or sisters) come together to form a community is to seek God together.

The search for God is done in community and interiority fosters the community. It is not only material things that are to be shared but also the spiritual illuminations and knowledge gained in the interior. When this is done, common life and interiority become mutually inclusive and mutually beneficial.

*Friendship and Community:* Friendship is at the heart of Augustine's understanding of community life. As a person, Augustine always cherished friendship and he actually had a lot of friends.<sup>29</sup> While many of his friends helped him positively, he was also

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<sup>26</sup> See the analysis of this Augustinian theme in Varied Authors, "Communion of Life" in *Our Journey Back to God: Reflections on Augustinian spirituality*, Miguel A. Keller, OSA, (Coordinator). (Roma: Pubblicazioni Agostiniane, 2006), pp. 319-325.

<sup>27</sup> *The Rule of St. Augustine*, I, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalm*, 27, 6.

<sup>29</sup> There are many instances in the life of Augustine where he showed how much he appreciated friendship. We could recall his friends with whom he disrupted classes and even stole apple! We can recall the

aware of some, who led him astray, especially before his conversion. In one of his sermons he stated categorically that good health and friendship are the two most necessary things in life: "... two are the most necessary things in this world: good health and a friend".<sup>30</sup>

Augustine's shimmering description of the characteristics and relationships that exist among friends fits perfectly into his understanding of community life. Friends share things in common, agree in many ways, laugh and be serious together, learn from each other, etc.<sup>31</sup> Augustine expects those who live in community to be true friends to each other. It is when we live as friends in the community that the difficulties and sacrifices that go with community life can be tolerated and approached with joy. True friends bear the burdens of one another, knowing that each person has his or her own weaknesses.

In Augustine's understanding, a fulfilled life is the life that is supported by others in true friendship and charity. This is why he states in his commentary on the Psalms that "We need our fellow in order to be ourselves" since "life without friends is an exile".<sup>32</sup> The basis of a community therefore, is the determination to come out of this "exile" and live with friends with whom one is happy, comfortable and willing to share one's life.

*Love at the heart of Community Life:* For Augustine, genuine community comes from genuine love which places common things before one's own. A False community results when members place their own things and interests before common ones. In his view, "a crowd", not a community, is created when selfishness and lack of mutual love bring people together.<sup>33</sup> A true community comes about when the people who make it up are willing to practice charity towards one another and to transit from the "I" to the "We".

At the centre of community, therefore, is selfless love, where one is willing to detach from the self and share in the life of others, in love. "A community is not created by virtue of clustering or subordination or hierarchy among individuals, but by the common good, which prevails over personal interests".<sup>34</sup> The appreciation of "common good" is therefore paramount in community life. Community survives only when members are ready to bear each other's burden<sup>35</sup> and are ready to take

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sorrow he felt over the death of one of his friends (cf. Confession 4, 4, 7). We can also point to his circle of friends at Cassiciacum; the friends with whom he founded his first community at Tagaste and even those friends with whom he had the idea of forming a philosophical community, and so on.

<sup>30</sup> Saint Augustine, *Sermon*, 299D, 1.

<sup>31</sup> See Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 4, 8, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalm*, 125, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 103, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Fermin Fernandez Bienzobas, OSA, "Typically Augustinian Values", in *Basic Elements of Augustinian Pedagogy*, p. 86. See Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalm*, 130, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Saint Augustine, *Divers Questions*, 71, 1. In this work Augustine gave example of how community members should bear each other's burden by pointing to how the deer swim across a river by one placing its head on the one ahead of it and same with the one bearing the weight of the one behind it. It is a graphic example of how each community member should be willing to bear the burden of others because others also, at one time or another, have to bear his burden too.

that which is common to all as paramount. Only genuine love can make this possible.

*The Trinity as the source and Model of Community Life:* When we dealt with the community as a theological place, we highlighted Augustine's teaching on *Imago Dei* as *Imago Trinitatis*. The human persons who are made in the image and likeness of God (Trinity) make up the community. It is the unity of these persons that creates community. For Augustine, the Trinity is the source, model and inspiration of a religious community. As the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons but live in perfect unity so too we should live in unity, despite our distinctiveness and differences.<sup>36</sup>

Unity is pivotal in Augustine's consideration and understanding of community life. In and through Christ, the unity of the Trinity can be achieved in human (religious) communities. This is why he says that for community to be truly possible, the many souls that make it up should become one soul: "Your soul is not yours alone; it belongs to all your brethren, just as their souls are yours. In other words, their souls and yours are not many souls but the single soul of Christ".<sup>37</sup> A true giving up of self and a convinced willingness to share one's life with others is needed for a true community life. Perfect life in common, harmony or *koinonia* (having one single soul and heart) is for Augustine the foundation and badge of religious life, the fundamental vow or "holy intent" characterising it.<sup>38</sup>

Certain persons live in the community only in the physical sense; they live under one roof but they are very far from each other. Such people need to seek the grace of God therefore, because true unity in community is made possible by the grace of God and not only by human efforts. Commenting on Psalm 132, Augustine says that the dew referred to in the psalm is the grace of God which fosters and guarantees this unity in community.<sup>39</sup> By the grace of God and the convinced determination of members, a community can succeed in true unity, after the model of the Blessed Trinity.

*Poverty is a necessary part of Community:* In the understanding and teaching of Augustine, poverty is part and parcel of community life. Coming together to form a community, especially a religious community, necessarily demands sharing of spiritual and material things in common; it also requires receiving and serving others. This principle is set down in the Rule which Augustine wrote for those who came to live together in a community: "Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common. Food and clothing shall be distributed to each of you by your superior; not equally to all, for all do not enjoy equal health, but rather according to

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<sup>36</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm*, 103, 4; Saint Augustine, *Letter*, 238, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Saint Augustine, *Letter* 243, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Continental Animation Team of the "Hippo Project" (Project for the Revitalization of the Order in Latin America), "Communion of Life" in *Our Journey back to God: Reflections on Augustinian Spirituality*, p. 322.

<sup>39</sup> See Saint Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm*, 132, 11.

each one's need".<sup>40</sup> The good and welfare of the person should be the main consideration in the distribution of things, not uniformity or equal measure.

Evangelical poverty demands submission and sharing. This means, therefore, that poverty calls for dependence and the attitude of disposing one's personal property for others. Those who live in community possess nothing personally but rather are content to have only one possession in common with others, namely, God. Augustine clearly states: "Indeed, God himself, that great and superabundant treasure, will be our common possession".<sup>41</sup> God should become the common possession of all because those who possess God possess everything. This for Augustine is the reason why community persons are people of joy and contentment.

Another important point in Augustine's teaching on the importance of poverty to community life is the positive attitude which should accompany the sharing of goods. Those who submit their properties to the community should do so cheerfully and not begrudgingly. And those who did not bring should not take advantage of the community in enriching themselves or becoming puffed up because of the privilege of enjoying what they would not have been able to enjoy outside the community.<sup>42</sup> When both the one who submits and the one who shares from what is submitted act in humility and charity,<sup>43</sup> true joy and contentment of community life is experienced.

## **PRACTICAL COMMUNITY LIVING**

Augustine speaks and teaches about community life from his practical experiences of it; he is not idealistic or theoretical about community life. The greatest part of his life was lived in community, at different stages and with different types of people. From his observations and practical personal experiences, therefore, Augustine has so much to say regarding community life.

For Augustine, an ideal community respects needs of members who are quite different from each other. Community life is not established on egalitarianism but on a successful integration of the differences of the community members. This is the first task of a religious community, namely, to transit from the "I" to the "We", and to begin to think of the common good as superior to personal interests. In the Rule, Augustine asks that each person should be given what he needs, and that those who receive gifts should dispose their gifts for common use. It is when members willingly share, that is, give and receive, that we can speak of a community.

Augustine admonishes us to seek and promote harmony and make effort to kill dissensions and anger in the community. He says that as vinegar spoils a container if it is kept in it for too long, so does anger destroy the community.<sup>44</sup> Part of the maturity that is required of the persons who live community life is the ability to control one's anger so that love and charity on which a true community is established is not jettisoned or sacrificed.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Rule of St. Augustine*, 1, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Saint Augustine, *Sermon*, 355, 1, 2.

<sup>42</sup> See *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, I, 5-8.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Saint Augustine, *Letter* 210; cf. *The Rule of St. Augustine*, I, 6.

Augustine also observes that certain persons enter the community without the willingness and determination to live the life they profess to live. He complains that some profess to be what they are not, because they do not practise charity and do not live true community life. He calls these community members “false monks”<sup>45</sup> He recognizes that there are some community members who live hypocritical lives, and for him, it is better for such people to leave the Monastery than to continue to live within it pretentiously.<sup>46</sup>

Even though Augustine laments these phenomena, he does not give up on community or on the brothers who do not live up to expectation. Rather, he admonishes those who live in communities to bear the burdens of such “falsity” and “hypocrisy” of these “false monks” because people may have also suffered the inadequacies of the good brothers before they made progress.<sup>47</sup> Those brothers who have made progress in living community life need to tolerate those who have not because we always have something in us that others may have to tolerate in us. Moreover for Augustine, “because you already have no fault in you for another to bear, you should be all the stronger to bear with the faults of others”.

In community life, therefore, peddling rumours about a brother, assassinating the character of a brother, refusing to share your life with the brothers, treating a brother with disrespect or with a prejudiced mind are against Augustine’s principles and understanding of true community life.

All the legitimate members of the community are either the burden or the glory of all. In the Church and in all the professions within the Church, there are the good and the bad; let them coexist till the end of time.<sup>48</sup> Augustine does not condone anti-community behaviours from those who live in community, rather, in his usual way, he applies moderation and objective consideration of the practical realities of community life.

We can demonstrate that Augustine does not tolerate indiscipline in the community by pointing to chapter seven of his Rule which recommends punishment for acts that undermine the rules of the community.<sup>49</sup> In the constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine, following the teachings of the rule of St. Augustine, a section is dedicated to various forms of punishment that should be meted on those who violate the life of the community.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to emphasize, as Domingo Alvarez did, that the motif for giving punishment should not be inspired by the desire to eliminate opposition: “It is not a question of eliminating opposition, because in that case there would be no interchange of ideas and the saddest thing is for an Order, Province or community to

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<sup>45</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm*, 134, 4.

<sup>46</sup> See Saint Augustine, *Sermons* 355 and 356. Augustine was vehemently against private possessions by those who share common life in the Monastery. See the analysis of Theodore E. Tack, “Augustine’s ‘Holy Commitment’ and Religious Profession” in *Elements of an Augustinian Formation*, pp.186-189.

<sup>47</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm*, 99, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm*, 99, 13.

<sup>49</sup> *The Rule of St. Augustine*, VII, 44-47.

<sup>50</sup> *Constitutions of the Order of Saint Augustine*, 513-521.

err unanimously, as this closes off the future".<sup>51</sup> The beauty and richness of the community is in the multifariousness of ideas, talents, cultures and experiences of its members. Differences in opinions and styles do not necessarily represent disobedience, opposition, division or anti-community spirit. Rather, multiplicity in unity should be viewed and understood as a beauty and strength, not a weakness or negativity.

## CONCLUSION

This article is not exhaustive on the teachings and understanding of Community life in Augustine. Nonetheless, we have endeavoured to demonstrate that Augustine was grounded in community life as a charism and spirituality. One can say that his teachings on community life are prophetic and seminal in the sense that they are as valuable and useful today as they were in his days. This is why the different religious families who use the rule, and/or follow the spirituality of St. Augustine still find him inspiring and relevant today.

Other than religious families and people who live vowed lives, the concept of community life which was taught and promoted by Augustine is very apt and relevant to modern society. In a world that is grossly divided and driven by the wind of economic and social competition, the kind of community life advocated by Augustine is a panacea. Today's world needs communion, friendship, mutual help and the spirit of sharing and solidarity. All these can be found in the kind of community life dreamt of, taught and lived by Augustine of Hippo.

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<sup>51</sup> Domingo Natal Alvarez, "The Augustinian Community in Practice" in *Elements of an Augustinian Formation*, p. 332.