

INSTITUTE OF AUGUSTINIAN SPIRITUALITY

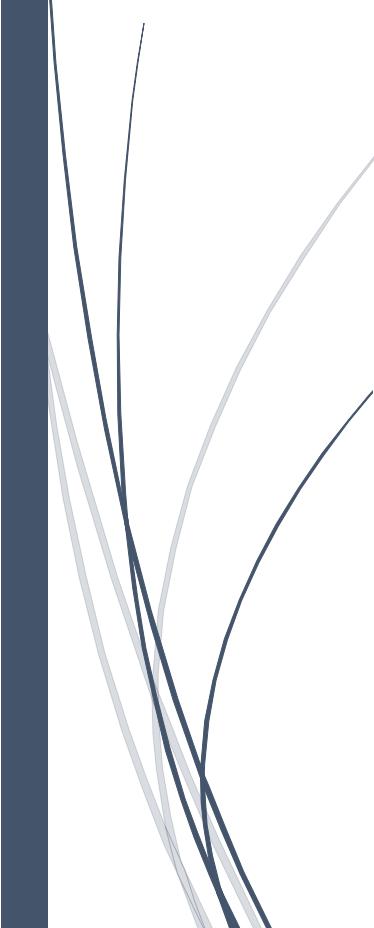


A TIME FOR HOPE

Fundamentals for a Renewal of Augustinian Religious Life
after the Coronavirus



ROME 2020





*Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
[...] For my purpose holds/ to sail beyond the sunset.
[...] We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

(A. Tennyson, Ulysses)

We are in a time of crisis, understood in the strongest sense of a *terminus* (*krisis*, a separation, a break point at which one must decide), it forces us to think and to discern. In our case it is desirable that it lead us to profound changes, to a conversion based on the Gospel itself. It is enough that some of the pillars upon which we build our small world of daily securities might collapse so that suddenly we might see ourselves confronted by the mystery of who we are.

It is somewhat paradoxical that a virus, a microscopic organism that all of sudden emerges, would so shake humanity, setting off such an unimaginable crisis. It is also very significant. The paradigm of the world we know flounders because a virus has overturned a whole way of being and doing. We thought ourselves to be invulnerable, powerful, self-sufficient; we epitomized a euphoric activism and, frequently, overbearing. Covid-19 has upset our projects and our tranquility. Has it taught us anything? Has it made us wiser? Saint Augustine said that “true wisdom is humble and true humility is wise.”¹ What has happened to us is, without doubt, a strong affirmation of the humility of our limited human condition and, hopefully, might result in a return to God, an Easter. The “*Plan to rise up again*” that Pope Francis proposes is offered in this spirit.²

Certainly, we must not deceive ourselves, but rather face the truth directly: the “post-coronavirus” period is going to be a tragic and painful time. For this reason, serenity, courage, inventiveness and creativity must prevail. The usual remedies will not work. New ways must be found in the answers to two fundamental questions. What will your service and your life as a religious be like, starting from now? What will the life of the Augustinian Order be like after the pandemic? In other words: what have we learned and what must we change, personally and communally.

Nothing can remain the same. We stand before one of those crossroads of history that demands of us a response understood as profound change. Passivity will lead us to personal dissatisfaction, an accelerated decline as an Order, and to irrelevance. On the other hand, a

¹ St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* 112,2.

² Cf. Francisco, “Un plan para resucitar”: *Vida Nueva*, 17 April 2020; Pope Francis, *Life after the pandemic*, Vatican 2020, 41-50.

deliberate response motivates us to forge paths through integrity and authenticity and to catch a glimpse of a future. One that is different, not yet defined, but without a doubt one of hope.

1. ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW WORLD

1.1. A vital renewal

We stand before the challenge of renewal: a more genuine way of being and doing, more authentic. And, therefore, much more attractive and significant by being more meaningful. Pope Francis pointed out that “the creativity of the Christian needs to show forth in opening up new horizons, opening windows, opening a transcendence toward God and toward people, and in creating new ways of being at home.”³

Tackling the problem requires overcoming inertia and an ingrained conservatism, without fear of inconvenience and difficulties which, without a doubt, encompasses any process of renewal.⁴ It is through a firm commitment to necessary renewal that we will advance towards a more consistent, more meaningful, and happier way of life.

Renewal, newness, transformation have been talked about for a while now. These concepts or other similar ones appear frequently in talks and official documents. But in reality the path forward turns out to be very difficult and, till now, the results are quite scarce. We can apply to ourselves the words of Aldo Moro: “The truth is that we speak of renewal and do not renew anything. The truth is that we deceive our very selves with being original and creative and we are not. The truth is that we think about making the situation evolve, but we are still there, with our old way of being and of doing, with the illusion that if others change, the whole lot would change. That’s fine, but it isn’t that way. For something to change, we have to change ourselves, also.”⁵

It is true that the situation originating from the Covid-19 pandemic is complex and difficult. But it is also true that the Order has known throughout its history other moments of profound crisis: in the 14th century as a result of the so-called “black death”, in the 16th century as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation, in the 19th century between the suppressions and the liberal confiscations. However, we find equally moments of profound renewal, of progress, of growth: in our origins during the 13th century and also in the times of crisis there were brothers who opened themselves to the Spirit and prevented Augustinian religious life from being covered in dust and ashes. Today we are grateful for their initiatives, the streaks of a prophetic spirit, their religious experience of a profound quality, and their choices and decisions.

³ Interview with Austen Ivereigh and published on 8 April 2020 in various media.

⁴ “Although the advisability of doing some type of restructuring or reorganization in a Congregation is spoken of in Chapters, in informal meetings or in various gatherings, when you want to tackle it seriously, it frequently happens that this topic will provoke negative reactions. There is a predisposition to think that we must accept defeat and decay. Only later, when the fruits are seen, is it considered worthwhile to make such an effort”: A. Bocos Merino, “Claves para un proceso de reorganización en los institutos religiosos” (“Keys to a process of reorganization in religious institutes”): *Vida Religiosa* 96 (2004) 386. (Translation from Spanish. TN).

⁵ A. Moro, *Lettere della prigionia*, Torino, 2009, 172.

But how do we renew ourselves? Obviously, “it is not so much about creating elaborate constructions before creating something that later will be completely different, and which is impossible to build beforehand in a laboratory. Rather, it is to live for what is essential and that can later be embodied and recreated again. In this regard, a form of simplification that highlights the truly imperishable and sustaining elements of our doctrine, of our faith is also important. That the great fundamental constants, the divine question, salvation, hope, life, the ethically sustaining reappear in their main elements and, in this way, make possible new structures.”⁶ This is, without doubt, the way to go.

1.2. A reflection on doing

1.2.1. Keys to evangelization

The Church is a society formed by the disciples of Jesus Christ, which begins in Jesus and which includes Jesus. Even more: the Church is the Body of Christ. Only in this way does it appear in its radical newness, in its originality, illuminated and sanctified by the reality of Christ in her. And from there we can understand her evangelizing mission. Our doing is a consequence of our experience of Christ and, for this reason, it is not a mere “profession” or “specialization”, but an evangelizing endeavor which bursts forth from the Risen One and prolongs his mission. Let us not forget that the promise of Christ is not simply to survive, but to resurrect.

Fr. Alejandro Moral, the Prior General, in his letter on the occasion of Easter 2020, reflected on “the importance of the time we have been given and in which we live: so full of possibilities but, at the same time, so limited, so fleeting.” Do we take advantage of it? Do we take advantage of life’s truth, so brief, so fragile? “We place our greatest hopes in our doing, and now that most activity has stopped, we can ask ourselves: does that make sense? Meaning is found in a higher reality: love. It is not a matter of activism, which is sometimes a sad reflection of our vanity and pride. Rather, it is a matter of evangelizing, of being Christ’s presence in the world, opening ourselves concretely to mercy and compassion. Above all, it is a matter of bearing witness to love of neighbor, the neighbor who challenges us, ‘because if we do not love the brother or sister whom we can see, how can we love the God we do not see?’(1 Jn 4, 20).”⁷

The reality of love is what makes sense of our doing. Were this not the case, we would run the risk of becoming a minority closed in on ourselves (*auto-referential*, to use a term of Pope Francis), that has lost the way and desperately searches for security in what is ephemeral (be that material well-being, success, power or even pleasure). We must convince ourselves that it is not just about working, but rather evangelizing; not only about educating, but about forming Christian leaders and Christian families; not only about celebrating, but about transforming. Then we will generate life in these times of death; then our days will have been worth it; then the call of God (vocation) will have found a response; then our youth will feel attracted to a project they see reflected in us and this will be, without doubt, the most fruitful vocation ministry possible because it will be credible.

1.2.2. We have known love

We don’t have to go far. During this pandemic we have heard the testimony of many people who know how to go resolutely from lament to the dynamic of service, even risking their lives.

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Dios y el mundo*, Barcelona 2005, 422. (Translation from Spanish TN)

⁷ Letter of the Prior General to all Augustinian Brothers, Sisters and Laity, Rome 9 April 2020.

News comes to us daily from all corners of the world telling us about a Church mobilized on more and more fronts. Many Catholics, many brothers (laity, priests, religious men and women), among so many others, are involved and have not hesitated to give their all and to give everything. Pope Francis speaks often about the “*saints next door*”, those who live close to us and are a reflection of the presence of God”⁸, aware that “even outside the Catholic Church and in very different contexts, the Holy Spirit raises up signs of his presence.”⁹ In their doing they witness to love and, therefore, are the presence of God.

Pain, fear, powerlessness, loneliness, dramas occasioned by the coronavirus pandemic have raised terrible questions: Where is God? What is God doing? And it seems as if it will shake our faith in a good God. His silence becomes very hard for some, as always happens when evil appears before us (*mysterium iniquitatis*). It would be a mistake to ignore these questions or try to silence them. It is necessary to reflect on them, to search for an answer in the light of Christ, looking to Christ, who died and is risen.¹⁰ As Christians, we do not place ourselves outside of faith, but rather within it. We should not look for an intellectual response, but rather an existential one. God responds to pain, suffering with it (*cum-passio*), letting himself be affected by it¹¹: it is a way of responding born of his very essence that is love (*mysterium amoris*). “The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 Jn 3,16). The suffering caused by Covid-19 can shake our religious experience and purify it, but it should not separate us from God, but rather the contrary. The God revealed in Jesus Christ suffers in the one who suffers, the sick, the elderly, the one alone, the disabled, the anguished. The God revealed in Christ is in the doctors, in the nurses, in the religious, in the priests, in the professionals, in all the people, blessed may they be, who try to alleviate suffering. He is there, as well, in those, believers or not, who give and give themselves generously in love. Am I, also, God’s answer? What have I done to relieve suffering during the pandemic? “Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth” (1 Jn 3,18).

1.3. A reflection on being

1.3.1. When security disappears

A reflection on doing leads us to an underlying priority: a consideration of being, the truth of who we are once the masks have dropped, the deceptions and falsehoods with which, on occasion, we clothe our existence. The riveting image of Pope Francis under the rain in a deserted St. Peter’s square on March 27, 2020 remains fixed in our memories. His words resound in our ears: “The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and the forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly “save” us, but

⁸ Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudate et Exsultate*, Rome 2018, n.7.

⁹ Ibid, n. 9

¹⁰ “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross”: M. Luther, *Disputa de Heilderberg*, 1518, 20.

¹¹ Cf. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, Rome, 1994, see especially nn. 16-18.

instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity. In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.”¹²

1.3.2. *Metanoia*

Change is imposed on us. But the change of which we speak is not a peripheral transformation, but it is rather quite deep. It is a time of returning to God, a moment of reorienting our lives. In this respect, the reflections of Cardinal Michael Czerny are very interesting: “Under these exceptional conditions, in this ‘suspended’ time like slow motion that is imposed on us all, we are being forced to slacken our frenetic rhythms, to change our habits, to invent new perspectives, criteria and responses. Quarantine has torn asunder each person’s usual web of relationships. Solitude can be an uncomfortable surprise. The mounting death toll is deeply upsetting for those who have never really faced the mystery of their own death. In coming to terms with themselves and their inner life, or seeking comfort and reassurance, or rediscovering the traditions in which they were raised, many have felt the need to seek God. This is a novel turn in an age when techno-scientific progress can take people away from religion. An important step in seeking God is to embark on a serious review of one’s life. The certainties on which we have built our existence now seem shaky, and this allows questions of meaning to emerge: what did I live for? What will I live for? Am I capable of going beyond myself?”¹³

There will not be renewal without *metanoia*; there will not be a future without interior transformation, without a profound conversion that allows us to radically live our vocation, the charism kindled by the Spirit for the good of the Church. “Those who believe differently, and hope differently, and love differently, must also live differently.”¹⁴ This is a time of risky choices because we are risking our future. There are three main temptations we must fight against: the temptation to close our eyes and not want to look; the temptation to try to return to our past way of life, as if nothing had happened; the temptation to just let ourselves be carried away by our daily problems. Perhaps it would help us to have recognized our own fragility, the fleeting nature of our existence and the reality of death, which could come upon us in any moment putting an end to so much falsehood upon which we constructed our lives. We are truly risking much.

The dilemma has been put before us already by St. Augustine in *The City of God*. The desire for happiness implies a choice and we do that in our daily decisions with which we orient our lives. Love is longing and desire, a desire that yearns, an affection based on a choice (*dilectio*). Love of transitory things (*cupiditas*) configures the earthly city; love of the eternal (*caritas*) configures the celestial city. It is not that the transitory should not be loved, but loving it as an end in itself is wrong and frustrates the insurmountable desire for happiness (*beatitudo*). So the

¹² Extraordinary moment of prayer in the time of pandemic presided over by the Pope in front of St. Peter Basilica, Friday, 27 March 2020.

¹³ M. Czerny, “La Iglesia frente a la emergencia del Covid-19” (“The Church facing the Co-vid 19 Emergency”). This is an English translation of an article commissioned and published on 22 April 2020 by *Religión Digital*.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, 20,23.

earthly city, in which is already shown (*spes*) the celestial city is lived in transit (*peregrinatio*) towards its goal (*patria*).

True love always seeks eternity.¹⁵ It is a time for decision, for a change: “All the while, as I talked to myself like this and the wind blew now from this quarter, now from that, hurling my heart hither and thither, time was slipping by. I put off being *converted by the Lord* and from day to day pushed away from me the day when I would live in you, though I could not postpone a daily dying in myself. Though I was so enamored of a happy life I feared to find it in its true home, and fled from it even as I sought it.”¹⁶

1.3.3. Returning to the first love

The Second Vatican Council already highlights the “radical” character of consecrated life, insisting on *total* dedication to the service of God and the need to love him *above all*.¹⁷ It is a response to the call to holiness, proper to all Christians, understood as the fullness of Christian life in perfect charity. The *Constitutions* of the Order remind us that we have been called to follow Christ more closely and to show more fully our baptismal consecration.¹⁸

Nevertheless, for a long time now the Order has insisted upon a need for restructuring, renewal, and change. All one needs to do is read the acts of the most recent General Chapters and the Chapters of our circumscriptions. Pope Francis has been very clear and has referred to some areas of weakness in consecrated life today: “for example, certain sectors’ resistance to change, a weaker force of attraction, the not-insignificant number of [those leaving] … the weakness of certain formative paths, the desire for institutional and ministerial duties at the expense of spiritual life, the difficult integration of cultural and generational diversity, maintaining a balance when exercising authority and in the use of goods.”¹⁹ We can add some others: the so-called “liquid thinking”, weak leadership, worldliness, materialism, a preferential seeking of comfort, satisfaction with the minimum, the loss of a sense of service, professionalization, the rise of individualism, provincialism, nationalism, a weakness in the meaning of the wider Order, an inadequate presence in cultural fora. Pope Francis encouraged us to think about those weaknesses, to be attentive to the signs of the Spirit, which opens up new horizons and moves us to follow new paths, and to work with generosity and boldness.

It would be misleading to presume that a recipe book of means and remedies would be able to cure our ills all at once. There are no shortcuts, there is no magic. The way forward is arduous, difficult, and probably slow. At the same time, without doubt, renewal is possible; there is hope. But we have to work at it.

A Christian response excludes attitudes which are not compatible with faith in Christ nor with the goodness of God. We should avoid negative feelings, such as fear, nostalgia, “giving up”,

¹⁵ Cf. J.D. Jiménez, “Opus imperfectum. Pensamiento agustiniano y mundo actual”: *San Agustín, un hombre para hoy. Congreso Agustiniano de Teología, Buenos Aires 26-28 de agosto de 2004, II*, Buenos Aires 2006, 27.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 6,11,20.

¹⁷ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 44.

¹⁸ *OSA Constitutions* 1.

¹⁹ *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the participants in the plenary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, Rome 27 November 2014.

submission, and animosity. These attitudes are not compatible with a posture of faith and fidelity. We should assume our responsibilities and the demands of our Augustinian charism with two basic requirements: fidelity and evangelization.

There is no need to pretend there will be immediate changes or miraculous, rewarding, or sudden newness. Nor is it worthwhile to overstep the responsibilities of others. If so, one by one we would elude our own responsibility without changing anything. We need to assume our own responsibility: personal, communitarian, institutional.

We have a great spiritual legacy. Without calling attention to themselves, many in our Order love the Lord, and are quite willing to work hard. We can count on a great history and present reality that we do not always value. Above all, we can and should count on the help of the Lord, with the strength of the Spirit and the goodness of people. The first thing this asks of us is to count on what we have, mobilize who we are, become more aware, reassure ourselves, live with greater integrity and set an example of fidelity, peace of mind and productivity. Live with joy and holiness so that it might be said of us: “Look at how they live; we want to live like them and walk with them.”

1.4. Your sons and daughters will prophesy

1.4.1. To generate hope in a broken world

All of this leads us to reflect briefly on an important demand placed upon us. “As prophets have always emerged in times of crisis to announce the will of God to the people of Israel, in the same way religious orders have always had a prophetic vocation in the history of the Church. They have offered a response in the Church and in society to the longings of the people.”²⁰ Indeed, the mendicant movement knew how to read the signs of the times in a particular historical moment and to understand that the moment to liberate oneself from social and economic ties had arrived, to value the universality and the poverty of the Gospel and to incarnate the “apostolic life”. In this way they would be able to show the true face of the Church animated by the Holy Spirit and guided by Christ.²¹ They thus became a full-spirited force for renewal and reform. We can ask ourselves in this historical moment: What does the Lord ask of our Order, and of each one of us? Towards what end is the Spirit moving us?

The Constitutions tell us clearly that “When we faithfully correspond to our profession, we appear as a prophetic sign to the entire people of God.”²² The tone that characterizes consecrated life is prophecy and a religious should never abandon it.²³ It has been said that we are living in an era without prophets and this coincides with the crisis of religious life. Because of this, the

²⁰ A. Rauti, “Prefazione”: *Vita Consacrata: Mistica e Profezia. Bollettino UISG* 141 (2009) 2. (Translated from the Spanish, TN).

²¹ Cf. *Interview of Niels Christian Hvidt with Joseph Ratzinger*: Web page of the Congregation for Clergy, 29 September 2017 (Translated from the Spanish, TN).

²² OSA *Constitutions*, 55. Cf. also 33.69.73.

²³ Cf. A. Spadaro, “¡Despierten al mundo! Diálogo del Papa Francisco sobre la vida religiosa”: *La Civiltà Cattolica* (2014-I) 3-17. (Translated from the Spanish, TN).

Pope insists that we need prophets, that is, “men and women of hope”, always “forthright” and never “weak”.²⁴ In these times, this becomes an urgent call.

What is a prophet? What are his/her characteristics?²⁵ We can summarize them as three: a passion for the truth, intimate union with God, a willingness to give one’s own life.²⁶ The prophet speaks the truth because he is in contact with God. Because of this he is able to make visible divine truth in this historical moment, cast light on the future and point out the way to follow. This experiential knowledge of God, speaking face to face, as one speaks to a friend (cf. Ex 33,11) is indispensable. From here, he can announce and denounce. But he does not do this “from above”, but rather “from within”, we can say that he is “with others and for others”. Nor is he a “prophet of doom”, in the celebrated expression of St. John XXIII, but rather a promoter of hope. He is not lukewarm nor ambiguous. He is always direct, but also accompanies his brothers and sisters, crying with them and for them and helping them to heal. He allows himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, announces hope and salvation to the poor and marginalized and dedicates himself to all without privilege or exclusion. The prophet, most definitely, welcomes in himself the will of the Father and undertakes to witness to it faithfully before others.²⁷

The true prophet, if he does his task well, puts his life on the line and does not have an easy life. He is rejected because his words question the calm of the *status quo*, immobility, routine, worldliness, vanity and arrogance. Prophets are persecuted and they are silenced because they bother others. A willingness to give of one’s life, to share the cross of Christ, requires much love: “there is no one greater love than to give one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15.13). Therefore, union with the Lord, an experiential knowledge of Christ and love incarnate are indispensable. We can then understand the resounding words of St. Augustine: “Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: Love, and do what you will: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.”²⁸ Love is, then, assurance and strength.

1.4.2. Pathways for youth

In his message to all young Augustinians²⁹, the Prior General, Fr. Alejandro Moral, expressed his conviction that “If our elders dare to dream and our young people to prophesy (Joel 3,1), we will be cultivating a seed of hope that will undoubtedly flourish and bear fruit. In a world in which the face of God seems to have been lost, an audacious prophetic witness is urgent on the part of consecrated persons.” This letter, perhaps one of the documents with the greatest motivation for renewal in the Order in recent years, confirms the need to “prepare the Order of

²⁴ Francis, *Mass at the Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 17 April 2018. (Translated from the Spanish, TN).

²⁵ Cf. The preface written by Joseph Ratzinger for the book by Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy. The Post-Biblical Tradition*, Oxford 1998. Also *Interview of Niels Christian Hvidt with Joseph Ratzinger*: Webpage of the Congregation for the Clergy, 29 September 2017. (Translated from the Spanish, TN)

²⁶ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, Rome 1996, 84-85.

²⁷ Francis, *Mass at the Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 17 April 2018; Angelus, 3 February 2019.

²⁸ St. Augustine, *Homilies on the First Letter of John* 7, 8.

²⁹ *Message of the Prior General to All Young Augustinians*, Rome, 24 April 2018.

St. Augustine for a new time, rediscovering the essential beauty and joy of being Augustinians.” He continues: “we need a profound renewal to live radically the charism inspired by the Spirit. We must shake off routine and resignation, be creative, get involved, take risks. Moving forward always from truth, which is reached by conversion of the heart.” He also asked of young people: “be protagonists of this essential renewal process. The Order needs you. Renewal will only be possible from personal choices and the vitality of small groups. Hopefully in Chapters, in encounters, in meetings, the voice of young people will burst forth like a torrent of life and newness. I hope your testimony will shake us and provoke us, as you truly live as communicators of enthusiasm.”

Paraphrasing Pope Francis, we cannot just say that our youth are the future of our Order. They are the present, they are enrichening it by doing their part.³⁰ In this moment of our history, in this world tormented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, at these crossroads, the Order more than ever needs the prophetic voice of our young people.

2. CHALLENGES IN DIFFICULT TIMES

We now present some topics for further discernment. These thoughts spring from the above considerations and from careful reflection on the present moment. The goal is to help us situate ourselves, as Augustinians, in a world that has changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and in which we are presented with several very specific and practical emergencies. Therefore, they demand clear and courageous decisions from us.

2.1. Renewing Spiritual Life

2.1.1. There is only one center of our life and it is Christ

It is important to keep in mind that all external renewal comes from interior conversion and not the other way around. All change in structure is in vain if it is not accompanied by interior renewal. In fact, it would be impossible. Therefore, we face an apparent problem that arises frequently in many conversations and is used as an argument quite resistant to change, that it serves no purpose to initiate new paths if we ourselves do not change. So, let us await the conversion of all of us if we want to open ourselves to something new. The outcome of applying this type of thinking is nothing other than stagnation. Time passes, and reforms, if they happen, can do so at such an insufficient pace that they not only fail to revitalize our religious life, but can barely put a stop to its decline.

“*We have come to believe in God's love*: in these words, the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”³¹ The renewal of religious life presupposes a basic attitude: the keen awareness of being religious, of being consecrated. Because, what basically defines us is a relationship with Christ and a personal encounter with him, which calls us to follow him through a certain charism (Augustinian in this case). How can we speak of renewal if, on occasion, it seems that the religious dimension of our life has been obscured? St. Augustine, following St. Paul (Gal.

³⁰ Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Loreto 2019, 64.

³¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Rome 2005, 1.

2:20) recalls that the Christian is Christ and therefore should follow his own path and live worthy of the baptism he has received. All the more, the religious ought be what St. John Paul II refers to as “living as Christ”³², since the foundation of the consecrated life is in special relationship with Christ and some of his disciples whom he invites not only to embrace the Reign of God, but to put one’s very existence at the service of this cause, leaving everything behind and imitating closely the life of Christ.

When this does not happen, when we lose the Christocentric dimension of our consecration, when this language becomes foreign to us, when salt loses its flavor and light no longer shines, we feel lost, not knowing what to do or what decisions to make. So, set in our ways, we run the risk of living the lie of those who have allowed themselves to be seduced by the worldly values, and therefore swallowed by death. Christ alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14,5). Obviously, it is clear to us that Christ is the center of our life: we believe it, we say it, and we teach it. But do we live it in our daily lives? The words of Saint Augustine are tremendously clear in this respect: “If we discover that even Scriptures tell us to deny this not only with our tongue, but also with our deeds, we will undoubtedly find many antichrists that profess Christ with their mouths but deny him with their deeds [...], a tree is known by its fruits. The most deceitful antichrist is the one that proclaims Christ with his mouth and denies him with his deeds. This is deceitful because he says one thing and does another.”³³

2.1.2. Interiority and Truth: merely concepts?

Therefore, it is of primary importance to bring back a cultivation of the interior life and sound spiritual experience. “Conversion presupposes that God once again be placed first. Then everything will change. Let them ponder God’s words as truths that will enlighten them in their own interior life. We must, once more take the risk so to speak, of experiencing God for the sake of allowing him to act in our society.”³⁴ For some time now, we have seen persistent emphasis upon this theme in the documents of the Order, since “interiority “is the center of life, the fruitful core of the human being where the mystery dwells. To live outside is to live in exile and in emptiness.”³⁵ It is a call to never allow ourselves to become wrapped up in secularism and secularity that grow and affects us directly; a call to revive the Christian meaning of life, to be mindful with regard to times and forms of prayer, to flee from routine and formalism to prioritize silence. Neither common life nor the apostolate are possible if they do not originate in the encounter with Christ. On the contrary, they result in egoism, in activism or in sociologies.³⁶ The fact of the matter is that “the purpose of a total return of the heart is precisely to be able to go beyond ourselves, to transcend our very selves, to abandon the “I” in order to open ourselves up to God and to the people that surround us.”³⁷

³² St. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Rome 1996, 14.

³³ St. Augustine, *Homilies on the First Letter of John* 3, 8.

³⁴ Benedicto XVI, *Luz en el mundo*, Barcelona 2010, 76.

³⁵ “Augustinians in the Church for the World of Today. Document from the Intermediate General Chapter 1998, Villanova, PA”: *Living in Freedom Under Grace III*, Roma 2001, 76.

³⁶ Cf. M. Nolan, “The Cry of the Heart. Letter of the Prior General on the occasion of the closing of the XVI centenary of the conversion of St. Augustine, Rome 13 November 1987”: *Living in Freedom Under Grace II*, Rome 1999, 249-250.

³⁷ T. van Bavel, *Cuando tu corazón ora...*, México 2001, 56.

The response to this calling should be given on an individual level, with a firm decision of the person to a priority of caring for the interior life, as well as on a communal level, not only in our planning, but above all in the options we choose, in the code of values that we establish in order to guide us in our decision making. Pope St. John Paul II made a direct appeal to the Augustinians: “Be teachers of *interiority* as a service to people of the third millennium in their search of Christ”³⁸ Hence, the special attention with which this aspect in its formative stage should be cared for, its important presence in different groups and fraternities and the growing awareness in religious men and women involved in the active apostolate. Regarding this issue, we must recognize the spiritual breath that the contemplative nuns are for the Augustinian family. We must continue to advance in the path we have undertaken with renewed vigor, growing energy and joyful creativity.

2.1.3. In this time of empty churches.

The Eucharist, sacrament of love, sign of our unity and bond of our charity³⁹ is the source and summit of all Christian life.⁴⁰ It holds a central place in the life of the Church⁴¹ and therefore in our communities, and in the very reality of our lives as Christians and consecrated religious. Due to the confinement as a precaution against the pandemic, in many places during this prolonged period, the faithful (and religious women to a great extent) have not been able to receive the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Nor have they been able to participate in church gatherings, with the community which is an essential element of faith and Christian celebration. However, in religious communities of men, even with current preventative measures, it has been possible to continue celebrating the Eucharist. This should cause us to reflect. Are we conscious of the great gift that this is? How have we lived out this great gift? We are not dealing with a spiritual luxury, but rather with the source of grace on which the Church lives and that unites us to Christ (that transforms us into him, St. Augustine would say⁴²). How have we established solidarity and a spiritual closeness to those faithful who have not been able to receive the Eucharist during this period? Pope Francis himself invited priests to be close to the faithful, to bring the Word of God and the Eucharist to the sick and to accompany the health care workers and volunteers. We are prevailed upon to engage in deep and serene reflection.

This time of confinement and lived difficulties have produced an obvious inclination toward prayer. When security begins to stagger, questions about meaning emerge. Frailty leads us to a search for confidence and a return of the heart to God. “The one who has hope, prays, which is known to be needed. And the one who prays, has hope. Prayer is the interpreter of hope.”⁴³ It is indeed necessary to purify the desire for prayer and strengthen the weakening flame. This is both an excellent possibility and a challenge: namely, to facilitate prayer and accompany those

³⁸ Saint John Paul II, *Message to the Participants of the Ordinary General Chapter*, Castelgandolfo 7 September 2001: *Ordinary General Chapter: Documents and Decisions*, Rome 2001, 36.

³⁹ Cf. St. Augustine, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* 26,13.

⁴⁰ *Lumen Gentium* 11.

⁴¹ Cf. St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Rome 2003; Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Rome 2007.

⁴² Cf. St. Augustine, *Sermon* 227,1.

⁴³ Cf. Uruguay Episcopal Conference, *Caridad y oración frente a la pandemia*, Montevideo 18 March 2020. (Translation from the Spanish TN)

searching for it and being an instrument for an encounter with Christ. But no one gives what they do not have. This leads us to ask ourselves about our personal and communal prayer: the quality, the times, the styles. How do we cultivate our vital relationship with Christ? The *OSA Constitutions* dedicate 8 articles when speaking about the topic of prayer.⁴⁴ Only in prayer can we discern and see and be able to find the necessary strength to travel the path that the Lord is asking us to tread.

But, what is prayer? St. Augustine responds to this question by saying that it is a conversation with God, a dialogue.⁴⁵ A dialogue of love that flows from the heart, from the very depths of our being: “As it is typical of hypocrites to make themselves seen in prayer, but bear no other fruit other than the approval of men, it is also typical of the pagans, that is, the gentiles, to imagine that through mere words they will be heard. We should not address God with words, but rather with the sentiments of our souls and our thoughts, together with pure and simple affection”⁴⁶ This is the prayer that Augustine defines as the “clamor of the heart”⁴⁷ and it constitutes an essential element for our life and mission. If religious communities, our communities, are to be present in the church and be perceived as prayerful communities⁴⁸, prayer cannot occupy a marginal place; it cannot not be perceived as being caught up in carelessness or routine; nor be confused with devotion or with activism; nor can it be strictly according to the individual. We have here, ample space for reflection and we also find here one of the keys to our future. The consecrated religious who lives in “post-corona virus” times must be a witness to what is essential and true.

2.2. Reviving Community Life

2.2.1. Places of Encounter

The Maltese bishop, Mario Grech, pro-secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, a man very close to the Augustinians, said recently that “one positive aspect of the current obligatory social distancing is that we are gradually coming to appreciate more the “culture of encounter”. Encounter promotes dialogue, builds bridges, solidarity, fraternity, charity and mercy. “Jesus is an inspiring figure and leader of all these things!”⁴⁹ We may have rediscovered the beauty of being together, the need we have of each other, the value of taking refuge in a group when crisis comes, when the winds of desolation and death stir up. The Church (community) is always a witness to and the presence of love and life. In this time of pandemic Covid-19 our common life has probably been strengthened, even though it has been imposed on us not to go out. We ought to reflect upon this. Is it a mirage, an illusion? Do the roots of individualism in us still live on? Have we discovered what Augustinian community life truly means? Where should we go from here?

Perhaps we should reflect once more upon what it means to be Augustinian. We admire St. Augustine; we may even love him. But we must also identify ourselves with his spiritual

⁴⁴ Cf. *OSA Constitutions* 84-91.

⁴⁵ Cf. St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* 85,1.7.

⁴⁶ St. Augustine, *On the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount* 2,3,12-13.

⁴⁷ Cf. St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* 118,29,1.

⁴⁸ Cf. *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*. SCRIS, Vatican, March 1980.

⁴⁹ Thoughts written in his Facebook account, 20 March 2020.

proposal. We run the risk of limiting ourselves to making him a source of quotes or a name constantly repeated, but with no real authentic influence in our decisions and choices. Or, we might even comfortably resign ourselves to making Augustine a private resource of a few energetic and worthy experts, without realizing that the example and teaching of the Bishop of Hippo should saturate what we are and what we do, not only on a theoretical level, but rather on an eminently existential and vital level. Another danger, however, is focusing exclusively on St. Augustine while forgetting the tradition of the Order, its history, and its spiritual figures. Regarding our particular interests here, namely, reflecting upon Augustinian community, involves a much wider scope than merely a useful reference to a series of quotes of St. Augustine. Much more is needed: consideration of this theme under the overall arch of the tradition of the Order, the necessary understanding of the reality of today's world, becoming enriched with the nuances coming from cultural realities, along with the unifying strength in which differences find meaning. To understand what is truly essential and what is incidental. All of this is done, not to dilute but to strengthen, to live the charism, which identifies us as Augustinians. It is an essential task.

2.2.2. A strong concept

Communal life is the sign of Augustinian identity. The reason for being in community is none other than to search for, find and possess God. Therefore, let us not forget this involves a very sound understanding of community: "*anima una et cor unum in Deum*"⁵⁰ a practice fulfilled in the precept of love. "What does love seek other than to adhere one's own self to the one it loves and if possible to become one with that person?"⁵¹ Actually, "communion as a value and community as a structure constitute together our ideal of life and the starting point for our mission within the Church and in the world. For us Augustinians, they are indispensable, solid points of reference that throw light on our present vision and the future path of the Order. The Church is a communion in Christ. The Order is a communion of brothers in one heart and one mind on the way to God. Society yearns for the solidarity of human communion. From the progress the Order has made in the last twenty years and from all the documents it has produced, it is clear that communion and community constitute the path which the Order has specified for itself."⁵²

Therefore, during this time in which we find so much pain caused by the coronavirus, in this moment of deep transformation as well, from which emerges a different world, we reclaim the prophetic dimension of the Augustinian community: "There is the role of the prophet within the community, to keep alive fidelity and conversion, and the role of the prophet outside, which means really believing in the symbolic character of our life."⁵³ It is not a minimal wager we make but rather the maximum bet; it is not limited to maintaining and occasionally recovering a few external signs, whatever they might be, which in the case of consecrated religious is living in the same house, praying together, sharing goods perhaps, at times working together on

⁵⁰ St. Augustine, *Rule*. 1, 3.

⁵¹ St. Augustine, *On Order*. 2, 18, 48.

⁵² M.A. Orcasitas, "The Augustinian Community: Between the Ideal and the Real, Letter to the Order in preparation of the Intermediate General Chapter 1992, Rome, 28 August 1991": *Living in Freedom Under Grace III*, Rome 2001, 27.

⁵³ "Augustinians in the Church for the World of Today, Document from the Intermediate General Chapter 1998, Villanova, PA": *Living in Freedom Under Grace III*, Rome 2001, 81.

common projects. Nor is it limited to the possibility of participation and democratic criteria in governmental structure. Augustinian fraternal life goes far beyond that: it is not merely coexistence, but communion; it is an undertaking so that the minds and hearts of those who live together become one through charity and are centered upon God.⁵⁴ Everything else will serve as a means of reaching this goal or the consequences of its achievement.

Let us take care of the structural aspects, such as the adequate number of members in our communities (the proliferation of excessively small communities is a mistake and a great deal of discussion about this topic took place during the General Chapter of 2019); It is evident that we must make courageous decisions with regard to this topic. Let us concern ourselves as well with ways to foster dialogue, human and spiritual communication, but let us above all and before all else, direct our attention to personal and communal decisions with a mindset amenable to constant revision and updating. Likewise, we need to develop much more a sense of the Order: a great family, in unity from plurality. We have placed emphasis upon the differences (cultural, national...). Undeniably, this time linked to the pandemic Covid-19 demands that we place emphasis upon unity, the only way in which differences will motivate enrichment, in as much as it is shared and participated in, and not from impoverishment, separation or confrontation. An Order must be a family, not a multiplicity of “small orders”, small unsustainable “kingdoms” that derive from localism and individualism, thus negating the essence of the Augustinian charism.

Augustinian community is not egotistical nor self-absorbed, it does not isolate itself nor entrench itself, but rather opens itself up to the world, it “is” in the world. In this regard we recall the instruction of Pope Francis, who invites us to allow ourselves to be guided by “the breath of the Spirit that opens horizons, awakens creativity and renews us in fraternity to say I am *present* (or *here I am*) before the enormous and imperative task that awaits us. It is a matter of urgency to discern and find the pulse of the Spirit to give impetus, together with others, to dynamics that can witness and channel the new life that the Lord wants to generate at this concrete moment in history. [...] This is the right time to find the courage for a new imagination of the possible, with the realism that only the Gospel can offer us. The Spirit, who does not allow himself to be locked up or manipulated by fleeting or fixed schemes, modalities and structures, invites us to unite to his movement, which can ‘make all things new’ (Ap. 21, 5)”⁵⁵.

2.3. Rethinking solidarity

2.3.1. Option for the poor

If for St. Augustine the ideal of religious life is the “*cor unum et anima una in Deum*”, we can understand that poverty is for him a logical consequence of the “profession of holiness” of those who, through self-emptying and out of spiritual poverty reflected in humility, have in God their

⁵⁴ Cf. T. Tack, “The Augustinian Community and the Apostolate, Message of the Prior General to the Order, 26 November 1974”: *Living in Freedom Under Grace I*, Rome 1979, 148; cf. “Dublin Document: Document from the Intermediate General Chapter 1974, Dublin, Ireland”: *Living in Freedom Under Grace II*, Rome 1999, 79, 85-86.

⁵⁵ Francisco, “Un plan para resucitar”: *Vida Nueva*, 17 de abril de 2020; Pope Francis, *Life after the pandemic*, Vatican 2020, 46-47.

one true treasure⁵⁶. From this option, the mendicant movement to which our Order belongs from its origins, sought to return to evangelical radicality by imitating the poor Christ, that is, to the *Ecclesiae primitivae forma*, not only on the personal level, but also as a community. In this context, the option for the poor is the face of love: open eyes and active hands, ferment in society and kernel of an alternative civilization: the civilization of love.⁵⁷ We are at the service of the human person, of their dignity.

The struggle against material poverty involves the building up of a better and fairer society. The example of St. Augustine is enlightening. “It is not proper for a bishop,” he says, “to possess gold and to repudiate the beggar's hand.”⁵⁸ Thus, poverty in Augustinian thought is also a reaching out in love to those in need, especially the poorest, exercising solidarity with them, sharing their pain, because “Christ is in need when a poor person is.”⁵⁹ The Order of St. Augustine has tried to be unwavering in living this option for those most in need. The shining examples of St. Nicholas of Tolentine, Saint Clare of Montefalco, Saint Rita of Cascia, Saint Thomas of Villanova and Saint Alonso of Orozco are constant reminders, which continues to challenge us currently and of which our Order was reminded by the Second Vatican Council. In the *Dublin Document*, the fruit of the Intermediate General Chapter of 1974, we called ourselves to go beyond the mere formal vow of poverty in order to assume the cause of the needy, defending their social rights and sharing with the poor.⁶⁰ A few years later, in 1980, during another Intermediate General Chapter, in this opportunity gathered in Mexico, it was determined that the evangelizing task of the Augustinians “departs and develops from the perspective of the poor.” The document continues: “It is only in this way that life and the Order's Apostolate can represent a sign and an authentic witness of solidarity with the poor, and contribute for the construction of a more righteous, shared and fraternal world.”⁶¹ Today, in the crisis we are experiencing, we need to make much more progress, not only in the essential mission of awareness-raising, but also in the difficult duty on the part of all to take action. The existing world situation resulting from the pandemic requires concrete responses from us that must not be delayed, let alone diluted in an ethereal spiritualism or in melancholic demagoguery.

2.3.2. When the economic engine and commercial activity are stopped

It is certain that the Covid-19 pandemic will have a devastating effect on the global economy and could also lead to a social crisis. In the face of these forecasts, the Church has prepared herself in concrete and effective ways. On March 20th the Holy See has created, within the

⁵⁶ Augustinian thought on poverty can be summed up as follows: "To have nothing on this earth in which to put our hope, to live from our own labor, to be content with little, to be joyful with having God as our one true treasure and total dependence on God through the Church": A. Trapé, *La Regla de San Agustín*, Madrid 1978, 190.

⁵⁷ Cf. St. Paul VI, *Christmas homily*, 25 December 1975; *General Audience*, 31 December 1975; *General Audience*, 25 February 1976.

⁵⁸ St. Augustine, *Sermon 355*. For St. Augustine, possessing what is superfluous is a way of stealing. Cf. *Commentary on the Psalms*. 147, 12; *Sermon 206*, 2.

⁵⁹ St. Augustine, *Sermon 38*, 8; cf. B. Kloppenburg, “*Opción preferencial por los pobres*”: *Medellín 5* (1979) 323-356.

⁶⁰ Cf. “*Dublin Document*: Document from the Intermediate General Chapter 1974, Dublin, Ireland”: *Living in Freedom Under Grace II*, Roma 1999, 89.

⁶¹ “*Intermediate General Chapter 1980, Mexico*”: *Living in Freedom Under Grace II*, Rome 1999, 107-108.

Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, a taskforce for the analysis and reflection on the socio-economic and cultural challenges the future holds, along with the proposal of guidelines to address these challenges.⁶² The Pope has increased aid and donations of health equipment; many dioceses and Episcopal Conferences have created solidarity funds; the pastoral work of Caritas and other Church institutions is mobilized and growing very significantly; priests and bishops donate monthly in currency and in goods; properties and buildings are offered for social purposes; the coordination of initiatives is being promoted.

There is poverty, but sometimes we don't see it or we don't want to see it. Or, better, we don't want to be challenged by it. The Pope has been very clear: "To see the poor person means to restore their humanity. They're not objects, they're not rubbish, they are people. We cannot provide the same type of assistance as we do with abandoned animals. I dare to offer you some advice. It is time to descend to ground level and move from a hyper virtualized society, without flesh, to the suffering flesh of the poor. It's a conversion we have to make. And if we don't start there, the conversion isn't going to work."⁶³

What is or what will be our response to the crisis? It is not just a question of "staying afloat", trying to survive with minimum damage, or "adapting" to the current or upcoming complications, without questioning anything, without changing anything, living the same way as always, as if nothing had happened and it were possible to return to the previous "normal". We certainly cannot allow ourselves to stand with our backs to the suffering of so many people. It would be not only a scandal, but also a sin. "There are people so foolish that they flee from mercy as from a vice, because they say that if the soul is not affected by the miseries of others, then duty alone cannot move them to provide aid; we must tell them that rather than remaining serene with the serenity of reason, they are frozen with the cold of their inhumanity."⁶⁴

The first thing is to make, with humility, a serious examination of conscience, both personal and institutional. It can be painful, but it's necessary. The Pope's words still ring in our ears: "We, we have advanced quickly, feeling strong and capable of everything. Greedy for profits, we've let ourselves be absorbed by material goods and distressed by haste. We have not been attentive to your cries, we have not been woken up by wars and injustices in the world, we have not heard the cry of the poor and of our seriously ill planet. We have continued to be unperturbed, thinking of always staying healthy in a sick world. You ask us to take this trial as a moment to choose. It is not the time of your judgment, but of our judgment: the time to choose between what truly counts and what is passing, to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is the time to restore the course of life toward you, Lord, and toward others."⁶⁵

⁶² It is structured into five working groups: 1. To listen to and support the local Churches and to collaborate with charitable initiatives promoted by other structures of the Holy See; 2. To reflect on society and the post-Covid-19 world, particularly in the environmental, economic, labor, health, policy, communication and security sectors; 3. To report on the work carried out by groups and to promote communication with local Churches; 4. To support the Holy See in its activities and relations with countries and international agencies; 5. Responsible for funding support for the assistance of the Covid-19 Commission provides to local Churches and Catholic organizations.

⁶³ Interview conducted by Austen Ivereigh and published on April 8 in various media.

⁶⁴ St. Augustine, *The Customs of the Catholic Church* 1,27,54.

⁶⁵ *Extraordinary moment of prayer in times of pandemic presided over by the Holy Father Francis, Atrium of the Basilica of St. Peter*, Friday, March 27, 2020.

Then we can advance in several directions. Taking concrete measures and offering social assistance and economic actions to the disadvantaged and those hit hard by the crisis (in our schools, parishes, shrines, centers, etc.). We cannot forget the celebrated phrase of St. Augustine: “There are two ways of offending one's neighbors: one is by causing them harm and the other by denying our aid when it can be offered.”⁶⁶ Also working for justice, which implies the active defense of the rights of the poor and a tangible commitment to overcome unjust poverty: “When we try to dominate those who are by nature our equal, that is, all people, this constitutes an absolutely intolerable arrogance.”⁶⁷ And, no less important, examining our lifestyle and making decisions accordingly, regarding the use of resources, projects and investments, economic centralization (shared economy), instruments of participation and verification, care of creation, simplicity of life (lifestyle, pace of consumption), economic structure, etc. “We have many superfluous things if they are unnecessary, because if we look for frivolous things, nothing will be enough for us. Sisters and brothers, endeavor to have just enough for the work of God, not what fulfills your greed. Your greed is not God's work. Ask for what is enough, and you will see how little that is. The superfluous things of the rich are the necessities of the poor. Other people's resources are consumed when you own superfluous goods.”⁶⁸ This judgement needs to be made at all levels. It is not simple, but it is essential if we want to be comprehensible and therefore credible.

Bishop Mario Grech has made this abundantly clear and forceful: “I felt the need to share this reflection with you since, due to this present pandemic, we are sure to be facing an economic crisis and, most probably, there will be many more people facing financial poverty. I appeal to the People of God to ‘share bread’ with the financially poor. I appeal in a special way to those who enjoy some level of financial security. May I suggest that for the moment we do not come up with any new initiatives to decorate our churches and to be frugal in our festive celebrations so that, instead, we could financially support those in need. For us who celebrate the Eucharist, to share our wealth with those in need, does not only have a social justice aspect, but also a Christological, and therefore sacramental, aspect. Many have protested that we are not allowed to celebrate Masses in our churches; I pray the Holy Spirit to enlighten us so that this eagerness to participate in the celebration of the Mass may drive us to make our Eucharistic celebrations a prophetic action that moves others not to “humiliate those who have nothing” (1Co 11:22).”⁶⁹

2.3.3. Integral ecology

Another extremely important facet that questions us is that which concerns the care of Creation. The Covid-19 pandemic urges us to reflect on those elements, including remote causes, that have made it possible for this virus to spread and do damage in such a devastating way. Is it, in a way, nature's manner of retaliating? The Pope answered this question clearly: “Partial catastrophes were dismissed. Today, who's talking about the fires in Australia? Or that a year

⁶⁶ St Augustine, *The Customs of the Catholic Church* 1,26,50.

⁶⁷ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1,23,23.

⁶⁸ St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* 147,12.

⁶⁹ M. Grech, *Let us not humiliate those who have nothing, Homily during the Mass 'In Coena Domini'*, Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary, Victoria, Malta. 9 April 2020.

and a half ago a ship crossed the North Pole because the glaciers had melted? Who's talking about flooding? I don't know if it's revenge, but it's nature's response.”⁷⁰

Interest and concern for ecological issues have always been present in Christian reflection, but today they are indispensable. One of the “signs of the times” that St. Pope John XXIII invited us to interpret is undoubtedly the relationship of human beings and the environment, while the Second Vatican Council referred to the question about the place and function of human beings in the universe.⁷¹ It is not a fashionable distraction but of the utmost necessity, an urgency that we are gradually realizing its significance and role within our Christian faith. It is not just about climate change, the ozone layer, the protection of natural spaces or the use of resources. St Pope Paul VI warned that, the human person, “due to an inconsiderate exploitation of nature, risks destroying it and being in turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the physical environment in permanent threat: pollution and waste, new diseases, the ultimate destructive power; it is the human conglomerate itself that we no longer dominate, thus opening space for an environment that could be intolerable tomorrow.”⁷² Precisely the place of the human being in creation and our relationship with it, is a subject that must also be considered from a soteriological and eschatological perspective.⁷³

Nature is an integral part of the project of love and truth; “Reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself.”⁷⁴ And this is what, unfortunately, has been happening and what we need to react to. Pope Francis has made this topic one of the prominent points of his Pontificate, to which he has dedicated an encyclical⁷⁵ and to which he refers often. One of the fundamental characteristics is the invitation to incorporate and read the concept of “integral ecology” within the broader “social magisterium” of the Church. Indeed, the times in which we live are presented to us as an opportunity to address social and environmental issues in an integral fashion. The current crisis is not merely a health crisis, but also an economic, ecological, security (food, cybersecurity) crisis, social and political. Solutions are not simple. That is why the only way to address this crisis is to recognize its complexity and to try to do so in a comprehensive way.⁷⁶ In other words, to open ourselves to an integral and complete ecology in which the good of all human beings is the most important objective.

The crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic calls out for a genuine reflection beyond the merely intellectual dimension, which takes into account also the moral component. This involves our attitude toward life (God, self, human beings, the world). Only by combining scientific development with the moral dimension will we be capable of “promoting the

⁷⁰ Interview conducted by Austen Ivereigh and published on April 8 in various media.

⁷¹ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 3.

⁷² St. Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, Rome 1971.

⁷³ Cf. A. J. Kelly, *Integral Ecology and the Fullness of Life: Theological and Philosophical Perspectives*. Mahwah 2018.

⁷⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* 48, Rome 2009.

⁷⁵ Cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, Rome 2015. It should be completely reread.

⁷⁶ Cf. A. Zampini, deputy secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, an interview published in *Digital Religion* 4 May 2020.

environment as a home and as a resource, for the whole person and for all people.”⁷⁷ That is why the Pope refers to the care of Creation as a shared gift and not as a private possession. And he warns that the ecological crisis is ultimately rooted in the human heart, in selfish greed and irresponsible comfort, which move us to control and exploit the limited resources of our planet, ignoring the most vulnerable, fostering poverty and underdevelopment and reaffirming the globalization of injustice. Violence in the human heart, wounded by sin, also manifests itself in the symptoms of sickness that we notice in the soil, in the water, in the air and in the living beings.⁷⁸ We must keep this in mind when reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic.

All of this brings us to the need for change and conversion. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, a person very involved in ecological issues, said that, having lived this tremendous experience, the time for words is over and for works to begin. And he calls all people to “embrace the cry of pain that arises from wounded nature, from this common home of ours, within which we have become tyrants and not good stewards.”⁷⁹ To do this, we cannot simply examine how to resolve technical issues or promote only some limited political, legal or social decisions. “There will be no healthy and sustainable ecology, capable of transforming something, if people do not change, if we are not encouraged to opt for a different lifestyle, less voracious, more serene, more respectful, less anxious, more fraternal.”⁸⁰

For this reason, we can only resolutely promote the path identified in the 2019 General Chapter which, in its determination 31, commits us to promote education, reflection and action to care for our common home. But good intentions are not enough. We need concrete actions that come from an authentic change of mentality and lifestyle.

2.4. Two prominent points

2.4.1. Usefulness of social networks and new technologies in our apostolate

Pope Francis has insisted on the need for creativity (“may the Lord give us all the grace of creativity at this time”⁸¹), in which the Church, at a time of crisis, demonstrates that it lives in the freedom of the Spirit and not confined in institutions. “We have to face the lockdown with all our creativity. Either we get depressed, or we alienate ourselves, or we create.” And he advised of the need for apostolic creativity, “creativity purified of so many useless things, but longing to express faith in community and as God's People.”⁸² The pandemic has provoked new paths in pastoral care and also new attitudes, reflected in the courage to question, to break molds, to not settle for routine maintenance (“it has always been done like this”). In order to

⁷⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican 2004, 465.

⁷⁸ Cf. *Message of the Holy Father Francis to His Holiness Bartholomew I on the occasion of the international symposium "Toward a Greener Attica: Preserving the Planet and Protecting its People"*, Rome, 7 June 2018; cf. also St. John Paul II, *Message for World Day of Peace* 1990, 15.

⁷⁹ *Message from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, on the occasion of the International Mother Earth Day*, 22 April 2020.

⁸⁰ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, Rome, 2020, 58.

⁸¹ Francis, Mass at the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 27 April 2020.

⁸² Interview conducted by Austen Ivereigh and published on 8 April 2020 in various media.

follow the Lord's invitation, we must engage with all our being and run the risk of facing unknown challenges.⁸³

Pastoral need has led us to rediscover social media; broadcasts on YouTube and streaming have multiplied. We have appreciated, in a broad fashion, the opportunities that new technologies provide not only for communication but, above all, for evangelization and pastoral care. The challenge is to transmit the Gospel and our Augustinian spirituality using the language and tools of the new culture of communication.

Often the motivation for accessing social media is interrelationship in general, without a specific purpose. We have a dual purpose: the experience of the Christian vocation and evangelization. That is why a reflection on the topic is necessary, avoiding improvisation and letting ourselves be carried away by current fashion, promoting personalities and putting ourselves ahead of the message. The center is Christ, whom we follow in Augustine's footsteps. And the goal is for his gospel to be better known and lived. And for that we use the appropriate means in this day and age. Undoubtedly "new technologies" are one of the signs of the times that must be read and interpreted.

What is transmitted, primarily, are the Eucharist, prayers, (mainly morning and evening prayer or the holy rosary), *lectio divina* and commentary on Sacred Scripture, Eucharistic exposition. Elements of formation have also been offered (theological, biblical, Augustinian...); space for dialogue has been created, presenting specific topics and answering enquiries and questions. The possibilities are enormous. Suddenly the usefulness of new technologies and social networks, which have come to stay, has been discovered. From the so-called "digital generation" we move on to the age of integration for all. From being an instrument used by a few, to widespread use. Obviously, we need to learn. In the same way that we learned how to use the internet, now it is necessary to take it a step further. This is a challenge for the immediate future. Failure to address the use of new technologies will mean being "disconnected", losing apostolic effectiveness.

There are obvious risks involved. The Pope pointed out some: the forming of groups around interests or topics providing weak links; exclusivism, rejection towards those who are not part of the group; exclusion of diversity; rampant individualism; promotion of narcissism. Becoming "social hermits", with the consequent risk of complete alienation from society. "The image of the body with its variety of members reminds us that the use of social networks is complementary to in-person encounters."⁸⁴ We have the opportunity and need to promote positive uses. The topic can be deepened and developed around the responses to a triple question: what, for what and how. In this way we will be able to make greater progress toward coordination, greater interaction, better quality and greater effectiveness.⁸⁵

New technologies can also open paths for dialogue between cultures and religions and offer the opportunity to gather and share in a digital space (cyberspace). It is a sign of the times that we must now know how to read and use. Given the rich variety of projects in place to present the

⁸³ Cf. *Message of the Holy Father for the LVI World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, 9 March 2019.

⁸⁴ Francis, *Social Media and the Internet, Message for World Social Communications Day*, 24 January 2019.

⁸⁵ "Christ's proclamation in the world of new technologies requires an in-depth understanding of them to be used properly later": Benedict XVI, "New technologies, new relationships. Promoting a culture of respect, dialogue, friendship," *Message for XLIII World Social Communications Day*, 24 May 2009).

Christian experience in the digital world with quality and professionalism, it is equally necessary to initiate and enhance collaboration not only among the members and circumscriptions of the Order, but also with Church structures: “It is appropriate to establish channels of collaboration that allow us to work effectively in this context to make the presence of Christ and the Gospel more attractive on social networks and to take advantage of each other's achievements with a sense of communion.”⁸⁶

2.4.2. Towards a less clericalized Church

The confinement time due to the Covid-19 pandemic has fostered a deepening in the life of the Church. It has been clearly noted, in practice, what was already known theoretically: we are all the Church, not just bishops, religious and priests. Although there are different vocations, we are all equal in dignity and we are all called to collaborate in evangelization so that the Good News reaches all corners, not just geographically speaking.⁸⁷ This crisis has revealed, through its immense and generous action in a few dramatic moments, that Church is Caritas, Church are the priests and chaplains of hospitals, health professionals, Church are the suffering and those who pray, the consecrated and consecrated who help, Church are families. Never as now has the dream of the Second Vatican Council of a domestic Church been realized.

Among the lessons we can gain from what we have experienced during the pandemic is the need to advance in the process toward a reduced clericalization, which Pope Francis has often referred to as one of the most necessary tasks. And he goes on to say: “One of the consequences of poor formation that worries me most is clericalism. There is no doubt that it is one of the most serious perversions of consecrated life.”⁸⁸ We still need to change the mindset more and we are facing a great opportunity for this: just as we cannot reduce the Church to only clerics and religious, neither is the Order of St. Augustine reduced only to friars. We call to mind what the Constitutions say when they clearly point out that the Order of St. Augustine is made up of friars, Augustinian nuns of the contemplative life, and lay faithful attached to Augustinian secular fraternities, legitimately erected.⁸⁹ The journey forward involves, principally, formation, participation and the apostolate. And, definitively, to deepen the sense of Order also in this regard. A journey that began years ago needs greater momentum, more courage and greater conviction.

Robert Prevost rightly pointed out: “Our love for God and among us, our desire to enter into dialogue with one another and with the laity, and our work for justice alongside the marginalized, the excluded, the poor of our times – these are the elements that will open our minds to what the Spirit is telling us. With reverence for our Augustinian heritage and our commitment to renew ourselves as we prepare for the future, our lives and our communities will be transformed, as if we once again hear those words: *Come and follow me.*”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Conclusions of the Iberian Meeting 2013 of the Social Media Commissions of the Episcopal Conferences of Spain and Portugal, *La Seu D'Urgell* 3-5 June 2013.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 32.

⁸⁸ Pope Francis, *The strength of vocation. Consecrated life today*. An interview with Fernando Prado, Madrid 2018.

⁸⁹ Cf. *OSA Constitutions* 40.

⁹⁰ R. Prevost, *Homily during the closing Mass of the Ordinary General Chapter*, Rome 21 September 2007: OSA Act 59 (2007) 114.

Any response to the trials and challenges resulting from the pandemic must undoubtedly be community-based. Whether we look within the Order (greater integration between friars, nuns and lay people), or outwards (collaboration with other structures of consecrated, ecclesial, interreligious life; collaboration with civil society and governments). If we know and feel like members of a large family, then terms such as solidarity, aid, involvement, sacrifice, participation, etc. gain significance. Just so, united to Christ, charity makes sense.

3. A HOPEFUL VIEW

An archbishop and theologian wrote a text that retains a surprising relevance: “We must learn to consider the difficulties of these moments as an opportunity for purification, of spiritual and apostolic strengthening of our Church, as a call from God to personal conversion, a strong invitation to return to the roots of our faith and our lives, to live with greater detachment and with a greater appreciation of our faith and of the gifts of God that we have to live and which we must also offer to others, coming out of our comfort, our apathy and our fears and insecurities. [...] We live times of trial, let us make them, with God's help, become times of renewal, times of evangelization, times of moral regeneration for society, times of coexistence of peace and prosperity. Let us be a ferment of peace and trust. In the name and with the help of the Lord.”⁹¹

Augustinian, Christocentric and ecclesiological spirituality communicates hope and enthusiasm for the future. Realism leads us to note the difficulties and shadows of our time, but, while we are involved in the search for solutions, we initiate a dynamic of renewal that begins with our own conversion: “You are accustomed to saying: times are difficult, times are hard, times abound in miseries. Live well and you will change the times with your good life; you will change the times and you will have nothing to murmur about.”⁹²

The future of the Order of St. Augustine will contain contours very different from those we know today. But this is not cause for fear or discouragement; quite the opposite. This can be an incentive to regain the authenticity of our Augustinian charism. From a simpler, more genuine life, filled with hope, we can offer a clear and enormously attractive response to the frightful loneliness of people and the terrible emptiness of principles in a society traumatized by pain, fear and death. The Covid-19 pandemic cries out for a courageous and creative response.

We conclude these reflections with the beautiful text of the *Soliloquies* as we pray with St. Augustine: “You I invoke, O God, the Truth, in whom and from whom and through whom all things are true which anywhere are true. God, the Wisdom, in whom and from whom and through whom all things are wise which anywhere are wise. God, the true and crowning Life, in whom and from whom and through whom all things live, which truly and supremely live. God, the Blessedness, in whom and from whom and through whom all things are blessed, which anywhere are blessed. God, the Good and Fair, in whom and from whom and through whom all things are good and fair, which anywhere are good and fair [...] God, from whom to be turned away, is to fall: to whom to be turned back, is to rise again: in whom to abide, is to

⁹¹ F. Sebastian, *Current situation of the Church. Some practical guidance*. Letter from the Archbishop of Pamplona and Bishop of Tudela, 17 March 2007.

⁹² St. Augustine, *Sermon 311,8*.

stand firm. God, from whom to go forth, is to die: to whom to return, is to revive: in whom to have our dwelling, is to live. God, whom no one loses, unless deceived: whom no one seeks, unless stirred up: whom no one finds, unless made pure. God, whom to forsake, is one thing with perishing; towards whom to tend, is one thing with living: whom to see is one thing with having. God, towards whom faith rouses us, hope lifts us up, with whom love joins us. God, through whom we overcome the enemy, You I entreat.”⁹³

⁹³ St. Augustine, *Soliloquies* 1,1,3.