

a good one, too, of course. You don't like a bad pair of boots, why put up with a bad life? As though a bad pair of boots hurt more than a bad life. When your boots pinch, you sit down and take them off, and throw them away, or mend them or exchange them, so as not ruin your toe. But a bad life ruins your soul. Ah, but I see where you get taken in. A boot with a nail in it is nasty, but a life of vice is nice. Yes, but what is nice at the time, is all the nastier afterwards, and what is nasty, but good for you, at the time, makes you happy afterwards for ever with endless pleasure and joy unending; as it is written, "Who sows in tears shall reap in joy", and "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted".

ST AUGUSTINE AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

ALOYSIUS SMITH, C.R.L.

ABOUT two years before his actual conversion St Augustine evinced the first signs of the kind of life he would embrace. He had reached the stage when it was no longer a matter of being sure of God but of 'how to become more steadfast in God.'¹

He hoped to be directed by Simplicianus as to which should be the best course for one in his case to walk in the way of God. He witnessed the church full of faithful and one went this way and one went that, and he felt unhappy that although he had renounced all desire of honour and gain because of the attraction he felt for the 'sweetness of God and the beauty of his house which he loved', there yet remained entanglements which he found it hard to sever.

Augustine was aided in the last stages towards his conversion by the striking accounts he heard of the numbers of those who devoted themselves to the monastic life. Pontitianus, his fellow countryman, a high official of the Milanese court, related to him the history of the Egyptian monk, St Antony, who on reading in St Matthew (19, 21): 'Go, sell what thou hast and give to the

¹ *Confess.*, viii, 1.

poor and come follow me', entered upon the religious life. He discovered that at that very time there was flourishing just outside Milan a monastery 'full of good brethren' under obedience to St Ambrose and this interested Augustine intensely. 'Hitherto', he says, 'we knew nothing of it.' Pontitianus, continuing to comment on the life led in the monasteries, related the striking instances of two of his own companions of the court of Trèves suddenly embracing the life of some servants of God, 'poor in spirit, of whom is the kingdom of God'. Pontitianus, being at walk with three of his court companions, noticed that two of them entered the small dwelling of those servants of God. When he returned with his one friend he was amazed to find that they had decided to renounce their position, their minds being made up to serve God only 'from that house and in that place'. St Augustine comments: 'So both of them, now become thy servants, reared up a spiritual tower at the only price that is adequate to do it, namely leaving all things and following Thee.' He says that the very admiration he felt for these men finally made clear to him the way he must follow. 'These men', he says, 'have received the wings to free their shoulders from the weight of vanities that oppressed them.' Thus it is that Augustine describes the part that religious life had played as the prelude to the pathetic crisis in the garden and to the baptism conferred by St Ambrose upon him, Alypius and Adeotatus, when 'all solicitude of his past was lifted'.

He experienced great joy now in listening to the brethren of the Church singing together with heart and voice so that he wept with consolation to hear their hymns and canticles; 'as the voices flowed into my ears', he says, 'and thy truth distilled into my heart . . . happy did I find myself therein.'

Augustine seems to express thus his anxious longing to embrace the life of complete renunciation, which he had planned for himself and his friends and of which he had had a foretaste at Cassiciacum in preparation for his baptism. When the future bishop of Uzala joined the company, Augustine says, as of his vocation: 'Thou, Lord, who makest men of one mind to dwell together in the same house, didst add Evodius to our number . . . and we kept together, intending to continue in our holy purpose.'

Augustine's opportunity to realize that holy purpose presented itself on his return to Tagaste with his friends in 388. He forthwith

sold all his goods and gave the proceeds to the poor. The pattern of their lives was now simply but very strictly that outlined in the Acts of the Apostles: 'one heart and one soul in God, none of them called any of his possessions his own, everything was shared in common'. (Acts. 4, 32.)

At the same time, over and above the surrender of their goods, with his wonted emphasis on charity, Augustine and his friends dwelt *unanimis in domo*, in community, their ardent exemplar guiding them in their study of sacred letters and in the quest for the Divine Beauty, ever ancient, ever new.

During his final months in Rome after his baptism, Augustine says: 'I came to know several monasteries'. He records his admiration of the ideal of their life. 'Who can help reverencing and praising those who, discarding the pleasures of the world, live together in chaste and holy fellowship? They spend their time in prayer, sacred reading and conversation. Amongst them there is no pride nor self-will nor envy, but humbly, modestly, peacefully they offer their life of perfect harmony among themselves and entire devotion to God, a sacrifice most acceptable to Him Whose gift it is that they are able to do such things.'²

After his priestly ordination some three years later, Augustine was more attached than ever to the regular common life, and, when consecrated co-adjutor to the Bishop of Hippo, he made the episcopal residence a monastery of regular clergy, bound by the obligations of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

St Augustine, the religious, had not thought of discriminating between monks or regular clergy. His example availed for both, his teaching carried weight with both and his first groups became the sources whence bishops, clerics and monks spread throughout North Africa and beyond, as Possidius relates. Not strictly a founder or legislator or even organizer of any new mode of life, St Augustine stands out rather as the spiritual teacher, interpreter and example of the principles which inform the life of the evangelical counsels. He has been well called the Patriarch of Monks and Religious. At the request of Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage, Augustine wrote *De Opere Monachorum*, mainly to describe the practical labour, sanctified by prayer, which should be performed in the monasteries. The doctrine was accepted by St Benedict and continued as the recognized teaching for all orders.

² *De moribus ecclesiae*, xxxi.

Two of Augustine's sermons (355 and 356) consist of an exposition of the life of the clergy living with him at Hippo, and were preached at a time when he was called upon to rebut some charges against the community.

'This is how we live: no one in our society may retain anything of his own. If any one does possess, the rule still is that it is not permitted. If any still possess they are doing what is not permitted. But I have a good opinion of my brethren, and thinking well of them I have always refrained from any enquiry; for to make enquiries would seem to judge less well of them. I have known all along and am persuaded that all who are living with me know the plan and order of our life.'

And again: 'I gathered my brethren about me as my equals, all imitating me that as I sold my small property and gave to the poor, so they should do the same, that we might live "in common", and our common reward, great and *uberrimum*, should be God himself.'

The Rule of St Augustine is contained in his letter 211, addressed to the convent of nuns at Hippo, of which the saint's sister had been superior and of which his cousin and niece were members of the community. Troubles having arisen on the death of his sister, Augustine intervened to restore harmony, and took the opportunity to inculcate the essential practices that common life demands, and the spirit in which they should be carried out. Insistence therefore is laid on possessions being held in common, on chastity, obedience, on self-denial, on prayer in common and in private, on the mutual relations between superiors and subjects, on fraternal charity and so forth.

The brief axiomatic sayings with which St Augustine intersperses his exhortations, often recalling texts of Holy Writ, are calculated to catch the attention and remain fixed on the mind. The peculiar character of the doctrine contained in the Rule is, with the charity which pervades the whole, discretion, moderation, sympathy and a fellow-feeling with all.

If the instruction to the nuns was not at once taken as the directive of communities of men, it was soon adapted to apply to them; early documents show that it was used as a manual of edification and as such found a place in collections of writings of the Fathers. Letter 211 was read and re-read by St Benedict, who borrowed several important texts from it for insertion in his own rule.

Many other of the saint's writings meanwhile never ceased to nourish the religious piety of the monasteries. Of St Augustine's treatise *On Christian Doctrine* Christopher Dawson says: 'it became the programme (of studies) of the monastic schools and bore fruit in men like Bede and Alcuin'.³

When, at the time of the great reform movement in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Rule began to win its widespread favour, it could only have been because the simple lines of the document recalled the characteristics of St Augustine, the fervent religious. Not indeed that he displays there the genius, the depth or the vast knowledge of his greater works, the study of which was being maintained at the same period, but the warm humanity and genial sympathy of the spiritual guide of souls. He addresses himself to those who, through the Gospel Counsels, would tend to become, as he was, 'lovers of spiritual beauty'.

Under the Popes from St Leo IX to St Gregory VII an ever-increasing number of Chapters of Regular Canons became 'Augustinian' by adoption of the Rule.

St Norbert chose it for his Order of Premonstré. St Dominic and his first group of Friars Preachers in 1216 decided unanimously that the 'Rule of St Augustine, a mighty preacher, be chosen for these Preachers to be'. There followed the Order of the Hermits of St Augustine, the Trinitarians, Mercedarians, the Hospitallers of St John of God with some of the military orders. To these must be added the numerous later institutions both of men and women right down to modern times.

The observance of St Augustine's Rule has given rise to a number of commentaries on the text, constituting for the most part instructions on the spirit and example of the great legislator. Well known is that attributed to Hugh of St Victor (†1142). Also of the twelfth century is a discourse on the text written by a canon regular of Bridlington Priory and now in preparation for publication. Of the following centuries are the commentaries of the Premonstratensian, Adam the Scot, and that of Bl Humbert of Romans, the fifth Master General of the Dominicans. Yet another is that of Richardson, a sixteenth-century canon regular of Cambuskeneth.

All these, while extolling the Rule itself, set forth the eminent sanctity of the author, and must have led many to the appreciation

3 *A Monument to St Augustine*, p. 3.

of his other works, especially the 'Confessions'.

The Book of *The Observances of Barnwell*, which deserves to be ranked with the commentaries, concludes with these words: 'Did not the Blessed Augustine set forth your Rule? Who was more holy than Blessed Augustine, who more profound in thought, more eloquent or more wise? Who with marvellous sweetness thought out more clearly the height of the divine plan for the salvation of the human race? Who has ascended higher to the throne of glory and thought out more completely the indications of the Holy Trinity? Who in the Church of God has been more courageous in routing the depravities of heretics? His abundant works serve in the universal Church for a light and a lamp.

'Love therefore passionately the Rule which that holy man set forth and walk in accordance with it. Turn not aside to right or left. For his rule is simple and easy so that unlearned men and little children can walk in it without stumbling. On the other hand it is deep and lofty, so that the wise and the strong can find in it matter for abundant and perfect contemplation. An elephant can swim in it, and a lamb can walk in safety. Even as a lofty tower surrounded on all sides by walls makes the soldiers who garrison it safe, fearless and impregnable, so the Rule of Bl Augustine . . . makes its soldiers . . . undismayed at the attacks of the devil, safe and invincible.'⁴

A recent student of the Rule and its history gives it as his final judgment that 'there remains no doubt that the Rule has been proved by the experience of thousands of widely different generations and vocations to be one of the supreme documents of the religious life'.⁵

St Augustine stands out as an example and teacher of the perfect religious, united with God in contemplation, with his neighbour in zealous charity.

⁴ *The Observances of Barnwell Priory*, ed. J. W. Clark, Cambridge, 1897, pp. 230-3.
⁵ J. C. Dickinson, *Origins of the Austin Canons*, p. 70.