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TO THE VERY ROOTS OF OUR CHARISM

2

St. Augustine's Rule

by Regnum Mariae

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GENERAL OUTLINE

1. *The “Legend of the Origin”*

1. God’s Primacy
2. Obedience in Faith
3. Into the world, but without belonging to the world
4. Echoing Christ
5. The new city
6. Communion and sharing
7. Poverty
8. Friendship

2. *St Augustine’s Rule*

1. The Temple of God
2. The poor’s community
3. Prayer
4. Listening
5. Fraternal Correction
6. Work
7. Forgiveness
8. Freedom

3. *The Mother of Jesus*

1. Walking towards Christ
2. Blessings of Faith
3. At the service of the world
4. Near the cross
5. Hope of Unity
6. Sign of unity
7. The woman robed with the sun
8. Voice giving praise to God

4. *Secular Dimension*

1. «Everything has been made for a purpose» (Si 39:21)
2. In the image and likeness of God
3. Teach us to count up the days that are ours
4. Loyalty to the world
5. Loyal to Christ and his mission
6. Witnesses of hope and charity
7. Made free to love
8. «Look, I am making the whole of creation new» (Rv 21:5a)
A community gathered in faith and in love

1. THE TEMPLE OF GOD

Lectio Divina: «Do you not realise that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God? You are not your own property then...» (1 Co 6:19-20)

St Augustine's Rule, I, 8: «“Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honouring God in yourselves, whose temples you have become.»

Rule of Life RM, 3: «...may we live as one in mutual love.»

This year's biblical-theological essay will deal with the Rule Saint Augustine wrote for his monks at Hippo. The primitive group of the Seven Holy Founders received it from Ardingo, Bishop of Florence (d. 1247), who thus established the new community. There can be no doubt that, from that moment onwards, St Augustine's Rule greatly influenced the Servants of Mary's spirituality as well as their life-style, the latter being based both on fraternal life and poverty. In this essay we will deal with the many points where RM's Rule of Life and the Augustinian Rule agree, as we believe that the 'ideal new man' outlined by the Augustinian text may shed light on our secular vocation too: like the yeast mixed in with flour, we should try to help each and every man to get rid of selfishness and grow in mutual love.

This first unit will briefly introduce Saint Augustine's monastic ideals; then it will focus on the structure of his Rule.

Augustinian Monasticism and the Rule

The Rule is very concise, a kind of memorandum the bishop entrusted to his monks: in it, he mentioned the themes he was concerned with, and which he had dealt at large with in his many books. In order to fully understand the message of his Rule it is therefore necessary to take into consideration the whole of his work. In fact, he did not regard the Rule as an independent text, given that it is not included in the list of books he inserted in the *Retractations*, a book Augustine wrote at the end of his life to correct and clarify some of his previous statements. There is no trace of the Rule either in the index of Hippo's library that Possidius, one of his disciples, wrote soon after the death of his master. (430)

Saint Augustine was born at Tagaste in 354 and died at Hippo in 430. He spent most of his life in Roman North Africa, and his last thirty-four years of his life as bishop of Hippo, which today is called Annaba, in Algeria. At the time North African Christianity, whose champions had been Tertullian and bishop Cyprian, was characterized by a radical ethos; pride of place was given to asceticism and heroism, as evidenced by the *Passiones Martyrum* and also by a monastic tradition prospering well before Augustine's times (eg. Adrumetus' community, some communities of virgins, hermits and so on). Augustine is not the founder of African monasticism, even though his personality as well as his vision of religious life left a permanent mark on it.

The itinerary towards conversion

When he was 19 and studying in Carthage, the reading of Cicero's Hortensius (a book now lost), in which the great Latin orator eloquently praises a love of wisdom that is necessary to those wishing to take part in public life and / or politics, prompted him to radically search for truth. The event is thus recounted in his Confessions:

“Following the usual course of study, I came across a book by Cicero, whose eloquence is universally admired, though not universally loved. Its title was ‘Hortensius’ and contained a commendation of philosophy. That book really changed my feelings; it changed my way of giving praise to You, Lord; it modified my intentions and desires. All of a sudden, human hopes seemed to me contemptible, and I started longing for wisdom’s immortality. I was just starting to raise my head again and turn towards You.” (3, 4.7)

In the year 384 Augustine departed for Milan and there he obtained a professorship in rhetoric. He also met Bishop Ambrose, and found in him the guide who would lead him to the discovery of wisdom in the Christian religion. He had previously been a member of the sect of the Manichaeans, who professed dualism (according to which, reality would be divided into two equivalent principles, good and evil); and before becoming a Christian he would also adhere to neo-Platonic philosophy, which laid stress on the world of ideas, the material world being its imperfect copy. All these experiences strongly influenced Augustine’s spirituality; their mark can be seen in his tendency to prefer radical choices: all or nothing.

Augustine’s quest for God through all these philosophical experiences was always coupled with friendship: he always carried out his studies together with the friends he was living with. In his Confessions he recalled that community of friends thus:

“And many of us friends, consulting on and abhorring the turbulent vexations of human life, had considered and now almost determined upon living at ease and separate from the turmoil of men. And this was to be obtained in this way; we were to bring whatever we could severally procure, and make a common household, so that, through the sincerity of our friendship, nothing should belong more to one than the other; but the whole, being derived from all, should as a whole belong to each, and the whole unto all. It seemed to us that this society might consist of ten persons, some of whom were very rich, especially Romanianus, our townsman, an intimate friend of mine from his childhood, whom grave business matters had then brought up to Court; who was the most earnest of us all for this project, and whose voice was of great weight in commending it, because his estate was far more ample than that of the rest. We had arranged too that two officers should be chosen yearly, for the providing of all necessary things, whilst the rest were left undisturbed.” (VI, 24)

In fact, when they discussed whether this community could be compatible with the wives some of them already had, or with those others intended to have, they concluded that the plan could not be carried out. It must be highlighted that, as far as the

young Augustine was concerned, Christian life and fraternal life were one and the same thing; the quest for truth needed communion.

Subsequently, Augustine read St Anthony's Life, by St Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. The original text was in Greek, but Latin translations were at the time widespread in the Christian West. It was through that book that Augustine became familiar with the monastic ideal, and learning about Anthony – the founder of hermitical Monasticism in the East – helped his conversion to the Christian faith as well. The episode is recounted in Book 8 of his Confessions. Previously he had devoted himself to reading St Paul's epistles and had paid visits to bishop Ambrose.

After his conversion (please read Confessions VIII, 12), Augustine went to Cassisiacum, a country estate near Milan, in order to prepare himself for baptism. He stayed there from September 386 to early March 387. He also devoted himself to the pursuit of true philosophy and wrote his first philosophical works (*De Vita Beata*, *Contra Academicos*, *De Ordine*, *Soliloquia*).

Cassisiacum was not a monastery, just a community of people interested in philosophy, devoting their time alternately to study and manual work.

At the beginning of March 387, Augustine went back to Milan, where he was baptised on Easter Day. Then, in autumn, he left for Africa, but had to stop in Rome because of his mother Monica's death. In Rome he came to know Roman monasticism and wrote *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* (*On the Customs of the Catholic Church*), in which he described the various vocations and respective lifestyles that could be found in the Church. Among them, monasticism and perfect celibacy.

Once back in Africa, he withdrew to Tagaste, his birthplace, where he owned a house with a garden. That will become his first monastery. In spring 391 he went to Hippo in order to found a second monastery, but there his life would take a sudden turn: during a liturgy, Valerius, the local bishop enfeebled by old age, argued that he needed a coadjutor to help him with the ministry of preaching; and the congregation begged him to raise Augustine to the priesthood. Augustine was obliged to yield to their entreaties, but after ordination he asked the bishop, through a letter,¹ whether he could resume his Scriptural studies, spending some time to prepare himself for the new ministry. At the time priests had to be well conversant with Scriptures, or they would risk being transformed into public officials (clericalism). Augustine was convinced that that would take him far from God and prevent him from engaging in good works for the benefit of his people; in a way, from passing on the Lord's truth by his words and deeds.

Valerius' reply was very generous: he knew that Augustine wished he could live in a community, so he put some Church's property (a piece of ground used for growing vegetables) at Augustine's disposal, thus enabling him to found a monastery: the 'monastery of the vegetable garden'. There the priest Augustine lived with a community of lay people. Subsequently, after being consecrated bishop (396), he realised that it would have been unfair to ask a community of lay people to adapt themselves to the lifestyle his new episcopal ministry required. He wished his bishop's house could be open to everybody. So he left the community of lay people, but in his new place he founded a monastery too: a monastery for priests, where they could live in community together with their bishop. Its supreme rule was to be Acts 4:32-35, as Augustine explains in two of his Discourses, 355 and 356, which he made in Hippo in the years

¹ Letter 21, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXI, Città Nuova, Rome 1969, p. 100-105.

425 and 426. We will go through them when we deal with the ideal of communion and poverty.

Authenticity, date and structure of the Rule

As Saint Augustine exercised a great influence on Western monasticism, in the course of centuries many rules were attributed to him. The critical Latin edition of his Rule was established by an Augustinian scholar, L. Verheijen. The oldest manuscript it can be found in, comes from the scriptorium of the Benedictine Abbey of Corbie (7th – 8th c.), now at Paris National Library. That version of the Rule is preceded by an *Ordo Monasterii*, a text defining in details how the monks should behave in everyday life. Of course the *Ordo* cannot be by Augustine. Subsequent versions of the Rule transcribe only its very beginning: “Before all else, dear brothers, love God and then your neighbour, because these are the chief commandments given to us.”

When was the Rule written? According to Verheijen, a clue is provided by the quote from Acts it begins with. In fact, Augustine’s understanding of Chapter 4 of Acts gradually developed, as time went by. At first, he gave a spiritual interpretation of it: the communion described in Acts 4 is the inner unity of the believer who gets rid of worldly riches in order to love God with his / her whole self. Subsequently (around the year 400) this interpretation, limited to the individual level, was replaced by an ecclesial one, definitely more in line with the biblical text. This change was brought about by meetings with different people, everyday life events, as well as the realisation that, without a real stripping of the individual self, true unity cannot be attained. In a way, the concept of ‘poverty-deprivation’ becomes ‘poverty-unity’. Works written between 399 and 401 testify to this new ecclesial awareness (eg. cf *De Virginate* 45, 46; *De Opere Monachorum* 2, 25; *De Catechizandis Rudibus* 23, 42).

The structure of the Rule includes:

- a. a preface (“The following are the precepts we order you living in the monastery to observe.”);
- b. the precepts (concerning: unity, prayer, meals, going out of the monastery, community services, asking pardon and forgiving offences, governance and obedience);
- c. a prayer (about love of spiritual Beauty, which is the very soul of observance);
- d. conclusions (how often one should read the Rule and how it should be put into practice).

The monk’s path outlined by the Rule is clearly focussed on observance of the precepts. Precepts are conducive to beauty, which is equal to being in harmony with one’s own self, with God and with others. It must be pointed out that these ideas can be found also in Augustine’s early works, especially in *De Ordine*, a philosophical dialogue in which he argued in favour of the existence of a personal providence within the order of the universe and the relation of cause and effect. In 8:25-19:51 he outlined a path that starts with the study of ‘liberal arts’ (pride of place is given to geometry and music). The young – as well as those introduced to this path at a later stage of their life – must commit themselves not only to study and education, but also to inner discipline, abstaining from lust, the allurements of greed and gluttony, excessive care of one’s body, beauty and dress, frivolous games, sluggishness, laziness and sloth, competition,

slander, envy, the struggle for power, fame and honours. They should also be detached from money, behave neither like cowards nor heroes, be able to overcome or control anger, as any other temptation or vice. When they have to resort to applying a sanction, they should avoid any excesses. Forgiveness should be given unreservedly. They should never punish anyone unless it is beneficial; in the same way, they should never be indulgent towards anyone if that may spoil him / her. They should treat their subordinates as if they were their own relatives; they should believe they are their servants, not their superiors; and they should enjoy serving them. When an outsider wrongs them, they should never vex whoever does not recognise that they have been wronged. They should carefully avoid hate; they should put up with other people's hate. They should try to settle disputes. The supreme precept should be to treat others as one would like them to treat him / her.

In his *De Ordine*, Augustine suggested that one should not become a State official unless he has received a proper moral formation. One should also try to have friends from all walks of life. One should meditate upon, search for and praise God, and base one's efforts on faith, hope and charity. Once somebody has attained to inner unity, order and harmony, he / she will look at this world's reality in a different way, and beauty will shed its light on it. This formative path, which includes cultural training as well as moral education, ends in beauty's contemplation. "Beauty can be seen only by those who live and pray well, and properly devote themselves to philosophy."

De Ordine perfectly anticipates what will be Augustine's Rule's ethos. In the Rule he does not mention liberal arts, of course, but the path is the same: from a moral life to the contemplation of Beauty.

One soul and one heart in front of God

"The main purpose for you having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart. Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common. Food and clothing shall be distributed to each of you by your superior, not equally to all, for all do not enjoy equal health, but rather according to each one's need. For so you read in the Acts of the Apostles that they had all things in common and distribution was made to each one according to each one's need (4:32,35)."

The quote from Acts 4:32,35 at the very beginning is a real novelty of Augustine's Rule, if it is compared with earlier rules. It is also a very interesting example of how Augustine treated Scripture: he modified the Scriptural text and made additions to it, so that it could better express its meaning. We have previously mentioned that the first time Augustine's attention was attracted by this passage of Acts, which was due to his interest in philosophy: the passage well expresses the attempt to attain to man's inner unity as well as truth by stripping the individual self. Subsequently his interest matured through everyday life's events and the discovery of the value of friendship which, according to Augustine, is the very source of life in common (cf the story of our Seven Holy Founders). This implies that a community is the place where it is possible to talk, exchange ideas, freely argue, in a hearty and familiar atmosphere. It is significant that the Rule does not mention "heart and soul" as it is the case of Acts (there the stress is laid on the "soul"), but it inverts the order and says, "mind and

heart”, thus highlighting the “heart”. Here the ‘heart’ is seen as the whole of the human being and includes reason as well as feelings. In fact, a Scriptural passage that deeply affected Saint Augustine is:

“My child, pay attention to me.” (Pr 23:26) [In Latin as well as Italian, “My child, please give me your heart.”] Saint Augustine often commented on it. “Know yourself if you want to be charitable. Maybe you do not give yourself away for fear you might consume all your energies... Anyway, if you do not give yourself away you will be lost. Wisdom is speaking on behalf of Charity herself. (...) Listen to what Wisdom is saying: ‘My child, please give me your heart.’ She says, ‘Give me.’ What? ‘Your heart, my child. It should not be exclusively yours. (...) Let it belong to me or else it will perish.’ ”²

The heart, highlighted at the very beginning of the Rule, is urging man to deepen his relationship with God and neighbour: the whole of his being must be given away.

“...intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart.” ‘Upon God’ is an interesting addition to the quote from Acts 4:32. St Augustine believed that not always ‘life in common’ implies ‘unity’. Everybody must strive to build unity day by day, amidst trials and difficulties, and never give up hope.

The conclusions of Chapter 1 expand on what has been stated at the very beginning of the Rule: “Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honouring God in yourselves, whose temples you have become.” [In fact, both the Latin and Italian versions read, ‘unanimously and in harmony’.] The term ‘house’ has become ‘temple’, a term dear to St Paul (cf 1 Co 3:16; 2 Co 6:16), that Augustine especially applied to those who hold everything they own in common. Now, let us quote his commentary to Psalm 131 (132):5, in which David swears to the Lord that he will not allow himself to sleep unless he has found a dwelling for the Lord:

“My brothers, thousands of people believed and, after selling their land or houses, brought the money to present it to the Apostles! What does Scripture say about them? They had definitely become God’s temple, not only just as individuals but also as a community. In other words, they had become a place consecrated to the Lord, one place for the Lord. As Scripture says, ‘They were intent upon God in oneness of heart and soul.’ Those who, on the contrary, refuse to become a place consecrated to the Lord, greedily look for riches and are attached to their personal goods. They are happy to hold sway over other people and to look after their own interests.

But whoever wishes to prepare a dwelling for the Lord, should place his trust not in private ownership but in common property. This is exactly what those chaps did: they shared their own goods. And by sharing what was their own, did they lose anything? Had they not shared their goods, each of them would have owned his personal goods only; in fact, by sharing what was their private property, they gained everybody else’s. (...) Private property causes quarrels, hatred, scandals, sins, wickedness, homicides. Nobody would quarrel about common property. (...) Blessed are those who prepare a dwelling for the Lord by sharing their personal property. (...) ‘I will not enter tent or house,’ he says, ‘till I have found

² Discourse 34, 7, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXIX, Città Nuova, Rome 1979, p. 629.

a place for the Lord.' Will the place you have found for the Lord be yours? Yes, because you will be the Lord's dwelling yourself, made one with anybody else who has become a dwelling for the Lord."³

We can become a dwelling (temple) for the Lord by living in unity. God lives where love is. This unity does not eliminate personal differences, but is founded on the acknowledgement of and respect for the distinctive features of each and every person that God loves. St Augustine's Rule's ethos recommends a radical sharing of everything one owns, as well as love for the whole of the human person.

Nobody lives for himself/herself

The image of the temple is not the only hint to St Paul's letters in the Rule: others passages are quoted too, namely 1 Co 3:16-17; 6:16-19; 2 Co 6:16b; Ep 2:21.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is addressing himself to the solution of the problems of the Christian community of Corinth, which he had established in 50-52 AD. He wrote the letter possibly near Easter, 57. Five years after its foundation, the community was now divided into four parties, respectively "belonging to Paul, Apollos, Cephas and Christ" (1:10-13; 11:18). It also had been troubled by a series of scandals, casting a shadow on its morality and weakening its testimony (5:1; 6:1).

In the first part of his letter (1:10-4:21), the apostle dealt with the divisions of the community, arguing that the crucified Christ should set them a good example. He asked them: "Was it Paul that was crucified for you, or was it in Paul's name that you were baptised?" (1:13) He was thankful he did not baptise any of them, in fact, not very many, just a few; no one could therefore say that he / she was baptised in Paul's name. The community was not baptised in his name, but in the crucified Christ's, as the apostle explicitly wrote in his letter to the Romans, just a few months later: "You cannot have forgotten that all of us, when we were baptised into Christ Jesus, were baptised into His death. So by our baptism into His death we were buried with Him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life." (Rm 6:3-4) Unity could be regained if the community became aware that it was baptised in the crucified Christ, the One who reconciled everything by making peace through His death.

Paul did not baptise anybody: "Christ did not send him to baptise, but to preach the gospel; and not by means of wisdom of language, wise words which would make the cross of Christ pointless." (1 Co 1:17) The 'psychic' man, who can rely on his own powers and nothing else, cannot understand Christ's Cross: it is foolishness to him. Paul's preaching of the crucified Christ can be understood only thanks to the Holy Spirit, i.e. thanks to the divine love we have been given in Christ. The divisions of Corinth's community show that its members were not 'spiritual' men and women, inhabited by love, but rather 'carnal' people, blinded by selfishness.

Paul's task was to make the community aware that they belonged to God, and God only: "You are God's farm, God's building." (1 Co 3:9) And again, "Do you not realise that you are a temple of God with the Spirit of God living in you? If anybody should destroy the temple of God, God will destroy that person, because God's temple

³ *Works of St. Augustine*, IV, Città Nuova, Rome 1977, p. 277.

is holy; and you are that temple.” (1 Co 3:16-17) As an authentic minister, he would help the community grow in the love of Christ.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 highlights that the community must be holy; each of its members must commit themselves to holiness. Paul was dealing with the scandals he had been informed of (5:1-6, 20). Leaving on one side his harsh words (cf 5:2-5; 6:9-10), we should try to get that his main concern here is to build a fraternity capable of establishing genuine relations, by recognising each person’s value. “For me everything is permissible,” the Corinthians said, perhaps repeating one of Paul’s statements, who wanted to highlight the liberty we have received from Christ (cf Ga 5:1). “Maybe, but not everything does good,” (1 Co 6:12) retorted Paul. What did he mean? Not everything is useful to build up the community. Liberty has been given to us so that we can be servants to one another in love (cf Ga 5:13)

Another statement can be referred to the community: “The body is not for sexual immorality; it is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.” (1 Co 6:13-14) When using the term ‘body’, Paul was not referring to a single person, rather to someone as part of a network including one’s neighbour, the world and God. The Lord did not take flesh for our ‘inner man’. He took flesh for real people, made of flesh and blood, living in this world. Sexual immorality reveals a selfish attitude towards life in general. In fact, we cannot live isolated any longer, as we are members of one body, the Body of Christ. Paul concluded: “Do you not realise that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God? You are not your own property, then; you have been bought at a price. So use your body for the glory of God.” (1 Co 6:19-20) The price we have been bought at is Christ Himself. Likewise, every member of the community must be aware that he / she is not his / her own property, but the property of Christ, who did not indulge His own feelings (cf Rm 15:3) “For none of us lives for himself and none of us dies for himself; while we are alive, we are living for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord.” (Rm 14:7-8)

The mystery of the Church

Even though it does not explicitly mention the temple, our Rule of Life makes use of the related concept of community sanctified by its members’ love. In fact, Regnum Mariae is “a Family gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus” (art. 1), where all “live as one in mutual love” (art. 3).

Art. 3 also states that the relation between members should be “genuine and sincere”. [In Italian, “caratterizzato da semplicità e profondità” i.e. “characterised by simplicity and depth”.] In order to be genuine, we must have “a clear eye” (cf Mt 6:22-23): our power of seeing should be similar to God’s own vision, a kind of vision that can grasp the truth lying in the depths of man’s heart. In order to be sincere, we must suit the action to the word, and commit our whole self to helping others.

Art. 36 states: “Let us nourish a strong love for the Family, keeping ourselves always open and loyal.” In order to be loyal, we should be transparent, as well as ready to share everything. In order to be open, we should strive to put off our own self, and believe that by so doing we can grow in evangelical freedom (cf art. 58). Art. 52 adds that to be open (as well as simple) is the indispensable condition for living in this world and welcoming others.

RM's community is an "ecclesial place" (art. 42), as it is governed by the law of communion which is the main feature of Christ's Church, and also because it "lives lovingly the mystery of the Church and strives to be an expression and persuasive manifestation of her ever new relationship with the world." (art. 5) Our secular vocation in the world urges us to re-discover the true and deep identity of the Church, which is service to the world.

RM's own participation to the life of the Church draws its inspiration from Our Lady's fraternal lifestyle, "who from the Upper Room supported in faith the first ecclesial community" (art. 45). It also has a special regard for those who have been called to exercise the ministerial priesthood in the Church, cooperating in their mission (cf art. 5, 6, 45).

2. THE POOR'S COMMUNITY

Lectio Divina: «God chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong.» (1 Co 1:27)

St Augustine's Rule I, 5: "... they are to be given all that their health requires..."

Rule of Life RM, 16: "Acknowledge and accept your shortcomings and, trusting in the power of the Lord who does wonderful things in those who are humble, praise Him at all times."

In the first unit we have dealt with the principle on which the whole Rule is based: the law of communion and unity. This was solemnly stated by quoting Acts 4:32,35, and by dealing with the changes St Augustine made to the quote (inversion of the two terms 'heart' and 'soul', as well as the addition of '... upon God'), so that it could better express its meaning. The community is formed by people who radically strip their own individual self and share all their material goods. Communion of goods is the visible sacrament of their hearts' unity. If communion of goods were lacking, unity would be a fake: "Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common," or – to quote the Acts of the Apostles – "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common." (Ac 4:32b)

Where humility is, there love dwells

This radical unity has to make allowances for real people's situations as well as shortcomings. The Rule accordingly orders: "Food and clothing shall be distributed to each of you by your superior, not equally to all, for all do not enjoy equal health, but rather according to each one's need. For so you read in the Acts of the Apostles that they had all things in common and distribution was made to each one according to each one's need (4:32, 35)."

Once the principle has been stated, exceptions can be made to the general norm: St Augustine is aware that the community he is addressing his Rule to is not perfect. Allowances must be made for its members' shortcomings. The first problem the Rule faces is that the community's membership is made up of both the poor and the rich. "Those who owned something in the world should be careful in wanting to share it in common once they have entered the monastery." (I, 4) It may be difficult for the rich to become poor, by sharing their own property with all the other members of the community. They have to change the very idea of property; everything they own is not their own private property any longer. The poor cannot elude conversion either; in fact, "they who owned nothing should not look for those things in the monastery that they were unable to have in the world." (I, 5)

Both the rich and the poor must walk on the same path to conversion, the path to humility. In fact, by living with people who are well above their status, the poor may become proud. The rich, or those "who seemed important in the world", (I, 7) may despise, in their turn, the brothers who used to be poor. The poor are invited "to lift up their hearts" (I, 6). The phrase "Sursum cor" or "Sursum corda" is one of Augustine's

favourites. He used to say it in order to encourage his congregation to lift up their hearts as well as minds to God and to live in communion with Him, so that they should not become attached to transient things and put their trust only in the grace of God. “When we hear the exhortation, ‘Lift up your hearts’, we respond, ‘We lift them up to the Lord’: that should never be a lie...”⁴

The rich should take pride in being the poor’s companions, without boasting about the riches they have given as a gift to the community. The Rule states: “And what good is it to scatter one’s wealth abroad by giving to the poor, even to become poor oneself, when the unhappy soul is thereby more given to pride in despising riches that it had been in possessing them?” (I, 7) Here the echo of 1 Corinthians 13:3 can be heard: “Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess (...) – if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever.” (1 Co 13:3)

Both the rich and the poor join the community in order to learn how to be humble, and become fully aware of their own shortcomings. Only thus a real fraternity – where people help and understand one another – can be built. According to Augustine, if humility were lacking, love would be lacking either. Only if someone becomes poor, that is humble, he will be able to meet the other members of the community who are, in their turn, poor. In the prologue of St John’s Epistles Commentary, Augustine writes: “Where humility is, there love dwells.”

Of course, being fussy is not allowed in a community. Nevertheless, St Augustine’s Rule includes the following prescription in its first chapter: “They are to be given all that their health requires even if, during their time in the world, poverty made it impossible for them to find the very necessities of life.” (I, 5) The term ‘infirmitas’ (‘infirmity’) occurs here for the first time; it will recur many other times in the Rule. The community is not made up of perfect people but of poor people: they do not expect to be judged, rather, to be helped to rid themselves of their own shortcomings (*in the Italian text, “poverty”: poverty may also mean ‘shortcomings’, transl.*).

How to become poor

Even if it is not explicitly quoted, it is very likely that St Augustine, when dealing with the community’s poverty, had in mind 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. In the first unit of this essay, we have already dealt with the Epistle’s date and with St Paul’s reasons for writing it. He is trying to explain to the community, afflicted by divisions, that only “the message of the cross” (1 Co 1:18) can be the source of unity. It is a message of salvation that cannot be enhanced by philosophical speculation and tricks of rhetoric, (cf line 17, “human wisdom”, “wise words”) as the cross goes against all the expectations of the human mind. Indeed, human wisdom would make the message of the cross pointless.

In 1 Co 2:1-5 Paul tells us of his experience: he is an apostle and a proclaimer, who went to Corinth “in weakness, in fear and great trembling”. (1 Co 2:3) What he spoke

⁴ Letters 189, 7, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXIII, Città Nuova, Rome 1974, p. 201. To the words of the priest, people answer: «We lift the heart to the Lord». Cf. Also *Discourse* 56, 16; 177, 9; *Comment on the Psalms*, 53, 11. Another passage where the *sursum cor* it’s in relation with the humble confidence on the Lord: «It’s good to have a raised heart; not towards one self, which is superb, but towards the Lord, which is obbedience; and this cannot be but of humble ones. Therefore there is a way of looking down that in a marvellous way lifts the heart, and there is a way that lowers it down» (*The city of God*, 14, 13, 31).

and proclaimed was not meant to convince by “philosophical argument”, (1 Co 2:4) by “brilliance of oratory or wise argument”. (1 Co 2:1) Human wisdom, however great it may be, is incapable of understanding the mystery of God, which is revealed solely by “the convincing power of the Spirit”. (1 Co 2:4)

From the human point of view, the message of the cross is but a “folly”. But to those who believe, “those who are on the road to salvation”, it is “the power of God”: it proclaims both the crucified Christ and the divine power which raised Him from the dead, and which will raise us together with Him too. Thus the cross – as opposed to what human wisdom states – becomes our source of life.

By quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah, Paul suggests that the paradoxical message of the cross fulfils the old economy of salvation, as revealed in the Old Testament. The first quotation is from Isaiah: “The wisdom of the wise men is doomed, the understanding of any who understand will vanish.” (Is 29:14) It must be pointed out that Is 29:1-14 foretells the siege and fall of Jerusalem, and how the Lord will suddenly intervene in it. His intervention surpasses every human expectation. From death to life: God’s work is “mysterious”, His deeds “extraordinary”, (cf Is 28:21) a “sealed book” (Is 29:11) that the unbeliever can look at but never perceive, listen to but never understand. (cf Is 6:10)

“Where are the philosophers? Where are the experts?” (1 Co 1:20) These questions are quotations from the Old Testament too. They join Is 19:12, where the term “sage” is to be found, with Is 33:18, where the term “learned man”, or literally “the man who did the counting”, is to be found. Paul condemns both Greek pagan philosophy and Jewish rabbis’ wisdom, which in many cases are just “a philosophy of this age or of the rulers of this age”, (1 Co 2:6) the fruit of human efforts according to the flesh, a refusal to convert oneself. The Pharisees in particular often made use of this kind of human philosophy when arguing with Jesus (cf Mk 8:11; 12:28) or with Stephen (cf Ac 6:9) or with Paul himself (cf Ac 9:29).

Of course, nowhere in this passage does Paul condemn genuine human wisdom, a means to knowledge of God. What he condemns is an arrogant wisdom which fails to its object, when it is convinced it can “build the world” by itself. He condemns man who deludes himself into believing that he can find happiness in making a name for himself, rather than in giving away his own life as Jesus did on the cross.

Jeremiah 9:22-23 is the second quotation Paul makes use of in order to conclude his argument, as well as to point out that the Old Testament prophetically foretells the power of the cross. “If anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord.” (1 Co 1:31) This passage from Jeremiah will be quoted twice again in the New Testament: (cf 2 Co 10:17; Jm 1:9) it clarifies prophecy’s attitude towards wisdom. A logical argument resting on philosophical axioms is not in itself reprehensible, but it is unacceptable if it becomes a condition without which the mind refuses to believe. The Scripture, as it is the case in Chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis, put us on our guard against a kind of knowledge that relies too much on reason and that excludes faith. True understanding and knowledge of the Lord – Jeremiah tells us – must be put into practice by acting with mercy, justice and uprightness on earth. (9:23) In this respect, faith is the highest kind of intelligence. [See also Is 5:19-24; 30:1-5; 31:1-3; Jr 8:8-9]

Man is unable to know God, unless God Himself intervenes by His grace. “Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognise God through wisdom, it was God’s own pleasure to save believers through the folly of the gospel.” (1 Co 1:21) This passage can have many other interpretations: the world, *in spite of being surrounded by*

God's wisdom, was unable to recognise God. (See also The Jerusalem Bible.) God created man and gave him the faculty of knowing Him and trusting in Him. Unfortunately, man wanted to have his way. Rm 1:18-32 expands on this concept of the original sin of humanity. Anyway, however line 21 may be interpreted, there is one basic truth: everything is God's gift. A clear example of this is Corinth's community: "Consider, brothers, how you were called; not many of you are wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families. No, God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; He chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who by human standards are common and contemptible – indeed those who count for nothing – to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human being might feel boastful before God." (1 Co 1:26-29) Corinth's community is made up of ordinary people. God overturns man's social standards. Now status, education and prestige are worthless. They cannot be regarded any longer as the meaning of life. Still, they can deceive man into believing he is important. In fact – Paul writes – "You exist in Christ Jesus." (1 Co 1:30) Jesus Christ is man's only value. So, if anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord, that is, find the meaning of his life in Him. This does not mean that man's life is worthless, rather that it is only in Him that it can be fulfilled and find its deepest meaning. The community's poverty is meant to reveal God's giving Himself to man as a pure gift, of which the crucified Christ is the climax.

The community's poverty is the source of fraternity. Only the poor can meet one another and support one another in love. This is also the true identity of the Church; in this respect, she can subscribe to St Paul's words: "As for me, it is out of the question that I should boast at all, except of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Ga 6:14) The 'world' refers to man's self-sufficiency in front of God and neighbour.

The Church is centred upon Christ's cross: she is self-less and at everybody's service. It is thanks to 1 Co 1:26-31 and what it says about Christ's Church, that we can understand why St Augustine specified, at the very beginning of his Rule, that his community is walking on the path to an ever increasing poverty. Both the rich and the poor, when they join the community, must become poor. This is the only way love can be put into practice within the community, the only way 'infirmity' can be given all that it requires. This idea of a community made up of 'infirm' people, where people help one another to be restored to health in Jesus' love, is fascinating and true to life.

The Lord's power

Art. 16 of our Rule of Life highlights the true identity of the community as a communion of poor people. If we are poor, we can be deeply grateful for the gifts we have received from God and from our brothers and sisters. God's gifts are: in the first place, God Himself; then, faith in Him, knowledge of His Word, the certainty that He is constantly close to us in each and every of life's events. Our brothers and sisters' gifts are: their presence, whatever they may offer us, their support, their respect, their forgiveness.

Poverty means also to be happy about the gifts others have received. There should be no room for envy or jealousy, given that God's gifts do not belong to the

individual, they are rather a common property. Art. 37 states: “Acknowledge in each other a gift from God. We shall help one another to discover and develop the charisms each of us has received from the Lord. “ (art. 37)

It is thanks to poverty that we can recognize and accept our own shortcomings; and also – as we trust “in the power of the Lord who does wonderful things in those who are humble” – that we may give praise to Him. Here Our Lady’s Canticle resounds: she is for us an example of how we should be aware that we are poor in front of God, as well as an example of trust in the Lord (art. 7). Here the “Lord’s power” is the same power 1 Corinthians tells us of, that is, the message of the cross implying not only death but also the living power of God. It is the power by which Jesus was raised from the dead (cf Rm 1:4), the healing power issuing from Jesus when the sick touched Him (cf Lk 5:17; 6:19; 8:46).

Art. 16 refers only to our own personal shortcomings. It is true, though, that other people’s shortcomings can be a burden too. Art. 2 states that the community is to be loved faithfully, both “in the good and in the bad times”. “The bad times” may refer to the times when we discover that both other people and we are weak, full of shortcomings, in a word, sinners. Still, the Family we have been called to live in – so art. 42 reminds us – is “the ecclesial place where compassion, as an essential dimension of our life in common, is exercised”. At this stage, the meaning of ‘ecclesial place’ should be clear: it is a community of poor who accept and help one another, trusting in the power of God; it is not a community made up of perfect people. The community’s perfection comes from mercy (in a Biblical sense), i.e. from God’s free love: it has been showered upon us in spite of our unworthiness. Articles 52 and 60 (the last paragraph) deal with this theme too.

3. PRAYER

Lectio Divina: «I urge you, then, brothers (...) to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you...» (Rm 12:1-2)

St Augustine's Rule, II, 3: «When you pray to God (...), think over in your hearts the words that come from your lips.»

Rule of Life RM, 61: «You shall strive to be constantly nourished by faith: both your prayer and action will thus become a sign of your communion with Christ who, working in you, is leading you to the Father as well as to your brothers and sisters.»

In this unit we shall try to discover whether St Augustine's Rule – apart from being the source of Servite spirituality – may be a source of inspiration for our consecrated life in the world too. This is not something arbitrary, given that every Christian experience, even if it is deeply involved in this world's affairs, cannot do without the 'monastic' dimension, that is, without a genuine search for God, search that provides each and every activity with its true meaning.

Prayer of the heart

The chapter on prayer of St Augustine's Rule opens with the following invitation: "Be persevering in your prayers." This is a quote from Colossians 4:2: "Be persevering *in prayer*." Augustine turns the singular into a plural, [*not really: in fact The New Jerusalem Bible has the plural, 'Be persevering in your prayers', exactly as St Augustine puts it! Translator*] as he is referring first of all to the common prayers of the monks, setting the pace for them during the day. This second chapter of St Augustine's Rule, exactly as the first, refers to the fundamental rule of common life: sharing of material goods, as well as sharing of prayer.

Praying at fixed times is a monastic rule that may be beneficial to life in the world as well. To reserve some fixed times to prayer within our daily schedule – as RM's Rule of Life binds us to do – may be a great help if we want to progress on our spiritual path.

Augustine then mentions the Oratory ('*oratorium*'), the place where each of the monks may pray during his free time, even outside the hours appointed. According to the Rule, in this place no one should do anything other than that for which it was intended and from which it also takes its name. It is first of all a place for prayer, where everybody is free to go and pray at ease, even though it might be used temporarily for other kinds of activities. In the monastery, apart from the big church where both the monks and the faithful used to pray, there was also a small chapel for monks only,

especially for their personal prayer. When somebody could be found praying in it, the oratory could not be used for any other purposes – like cleaning, or singing rehearsals etc. The idea behind all this is evident: personal prayer is very important, it must be respected and should never be hindered. As Augustine states in his letter to Proba,⁵ personal prayer must be done in one's own spare time, "free from other good and necessary tasks". Of course, the Rule does not mean that if one does not have spare time he or she is exempt from prayer; it does mean that only those who kindle in their hearts the desire to pray constantly, will be able to find some spare time and pray.

For this very reason, the Rule adds: "When you pray to God in psalms and hymns, think over in your hearts the words that come from your lips." This is a reference to Ephesians 5:19 ("Sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs among yourselves, singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts.") and also to Colossians 3:16 ("Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God.") According to the Bible, the heart is the very core of the human person; indeed, it is the human person with its feelings, its will, its reason and desires.

It is interesting to note that in the Rule the communitarian and the personal dimensions are closely interwoven one with the other. The community prays with psalms and hymns at fixed times during the day, and the individual makes this prayer alive by wholeheartedly taking part in it. The community comes first, but people must contribute to it by their own personal gifts, faith and beliefs, in order for it to be genuine.

Augustine often speaks of the 'heart' where truth dwells. Two similar passages follow, in which 'prayer' is defined as 'one of the heart's desires'. The first one is from the Letter 130 to Proba.

"It is not one of the Lord our God's wishes that we may let Him know about our own human will, as He already knows it; He rather wishes that we may train our power of longing in prayer, so that we may become capable of receiving what He intends to give us. [...] We always pray then with a constant desire flowing from our faith, hope and charity. But at regular intervals and in particular situations we also pray God with words: they are signs by which we can stir ourselves up, realize whether this desire has increased and incite ourselves to make it grow. [...] What the Apostle says, "Pray constantly" (1 Th 5:17), means nothing but, "Tirelessly long for what He may give you: the blessed life, that is, eternal life." Of course, if we long to receive it from God our Lord, we shall never stop praying for it. [...] To pray constantly does not certainly mean to make use of many words – as some believe. In fact, an intimate, constant desire

⁵ Letter 130, 10:19, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXII, Città Nuova, Rome 1971, p. 95. This letter was written by Augustine to Proba, very important woman in that time, apparently from high Roman nobility. After the invasion of Rome by Alarico, king of the Goti in 410, she escaped, already as a widow, with the daughter and the niece to the North of Africa where she got properties. She addressed Augustine for advise and counsel for her own prayer; and the bishop sends her a long letter, a sort of treaty on prayer, that begins as follows: «I'm not able to express in words what a great joy had caused on me your request... which other so important task would you have had in your widowship than the one of fostering in prayer day and night, according to what said by the Apostle (1Tm 5:5)?... Two ideas to underline: prayer gets birth from uncertainty found in human beings, even in those who seem to be more fortunated; prayer finds its symbolism in the image of the widow, the one who doesn't have anybody, but only God. Cf. *The prayer, Epistle 130 to Proba*, introduction».

is very different from a long speech. The Lord Himself sometimes spent the whole night in prayer (cf Lk 6:12; 22:44). By doing this, He just wanted to set us an example, given that in time He is the proper intercessor, and in eternity He is – together with the Father – the One granting our wishes. [...] So, on one hand, never use in your prayer too many words; on the other hand, never cease from insistently pleading; and always pray in earnest. To make use of too many words in one's prayer would be useless; but if we pray much, our heart is constantly and devoutly knocking at the heart of the One we are turning to. Most of the time prayer consists more of groans than of words, more of tears than of formulas. Our tears stand before God, our groans are in His presence, as He created everything by His Word, and He doesn't need human words."⁶

The second passage is from a commentary on Psalm 37 (38): "Lord, all my longing is known to You." (Ps 38:9) [In Augustine's version, "...all my longing is before You".]

"Not before men, who cannot know the heart, but before You is all my longing. May your longing be before Him, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. (cf Mt 6:6) Your longing is your prayer. If you constantly long, you constantly pray as well. As the Apostle said, 'Pray constantly.' (1 Th 5:17) We would not certainly be able to constantly kneel, prostrate ourselves, or raise our hands in order to carry out the order, 'Pray constantly'. If praying consisted in those activities, we would never be able to do it constantly. In fact a different kind of prayer is possible: the inner prayer that never ends, that is, longing. Whatever you may be doing, if you constantly long [...] you will never stop praying. So, if you don't want to stop praying, never cease from longing. Your constant longing will be your never ending voice. You will be silent only if you stop loving."⁷

The heart's desire is love. Love is the secret spring prayer gushes forth from. Love makes the individual's and his brothers and sisters' voices one; love makes them united, heart and soul.

The gift of one's self

This desire, absorbing the whole person, can be found also in the passage from St Paul's Letter to the Romans we are reflecting upon. It is the beginning of St Paul's 'exhortation'. "I urge you then, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies..." (Rm 12:1-2) This exhortation to offer one's own body is the necessary solution to the difficult question Paul had previously dealt with: how come the Israelites, in spite of the fact that it was they who were adopted as children, the glory was theirs and the covenants; to them were given the Law and the worship of God and the promises; and that to them belong the Fathers, (cf Rm 9:4-5a) were unfaithful to God? Was it God who repudiated His people? What about the gentile nations that have been called to faith as well? What is the relation between them and Israel?

⁶ Letter 130, 9:18-10:20, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXII, p. 93-95.

⁷ *Works of St. Augustine*, I, Città Nuova, Roma 1967, p. 865-867.

The ‘mercies of God’ are – as we have already seen – God’s ‘womb’: this word conveys the idea of a deep feeling of love, a love which is not only a mother’s, but also a father’s, brother’s, sister’s and friend’s love, and of whichever person might help and support another in a concrete and generous way. God’s ‘merciful womb’ shows that mercy is part of God’s very mystery; that mercy is God’s very essence. The plural, ‘mercies’, highlights the fact that love is expressed through an endless series of actions and interventions.

Chapters 9-11 of the Letter to the Romans, dealing with Israel’s disobedience, end with this statement: “God has imprisoned all human beings in their own disobedience only to show mercy to them all.” (Rm 11:32) The problem of Israel’s unfaithfulness – as well as of the call of the gentile nations – is solved by their welcoming God’s mercy: it may seem paradoxical, but sin, according to the merciful God’s plan, may even be conducive to man’s salvation.

Paul’s belief comes from his personal experience. The light he received while he was travelling to Damascus (Ac 9:3; 22:6; 26:13), led him to a new awareness of the divine mercy, mercy that he already knew from his familiarity with the Old Testament (cf Dt 32:36; Hos 11:8-9; Is 54:8). As a faithful Jew, brought up according to the traditions of his ancestors, (cf Ga 1:14; Ph 3:6) he was aware that God “has mercy”, (Rm 9:16) that God is the “Father of mercies” (2 Co 1:3) and is “rich in faithful love”. (Ep 2:4) But after receiving the grace of seeing the Lord (cf 1 Co 15:8; 9:1), mercy became the one and only key for him to enter the mystery of God, to tread on His inaccessible and unfathomable ways. Previously he had always regarded the death-resurrection of Christ as a pure nonsense – and blasphemers those who believed in it – but now he was able to recognise in this very event God’s merciful love. In fact, when he describes himself as a man transformed by meeting Jesus, Paul says that he is a “person who has been granted the Lord’s mercy” (1 Co 7:25) and also that his ministry is “by God’s mercy”. (2 Co 4:1) This is his gospel, his joyful announcement: “God’s saving justice was witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, but now it has been revealed altogether apart from law: God’s saving justice given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. No distinction is made: all have sinned and lack God’s glory, and all are justified by the free gift of His grace through being set free in Christ Jesus.” (Rm 3:21-24) God’s saving justice has been revealed in Jesus, and also His faithful love embracing all men: all men sinned, and now lack God’s light and therefore they need His salvation. Only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved by God.

Paul constantly reminds his readers of his meeting with Jesus Christ, as well as of his experience of God’s mercy. For example, in Philippians 3 he thus describes the event: “Because of the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, I count everything else as loss. For Him I have accepted the loss of all other things, and look on them all as filth if only I can gain Christ and be given a place in Him, with the uprightness I have gained not from the Law, but through faith in Christ...” (Ph 3:8-14) [see also Ph 1:21; 2 Co 5:14-21; Ga 2:19b-21; 3:1; Rm 15:15-19.]

Salvation is the exclusive result of God’s mercy. Everything comes from His grace. The ‘mystery’ of Israel can be solved only by taking into account God’s mercy: within the last three verses of Rm 9-11 (11:30-32), the term ‘mercy’ occurs four times, so that there can be no doubt about final salvation: “There is no change of mind on God’s part about the gifts He has made or of His choice.” (Rm 11:29) Israel is as hard as stone; but God’s love gets the better of them. The gentile nations have been called to

faith, but they cannot boast to Israel about that, as they were not called because of their merits; in fact, their call is just to be ascribed to God's mercy.

God's mercy is boundless; it draws good from evil. And Paul cannot but sing a hymn of praise and adoration (Rm 11:33-36). He makes use of Isaiah's words (40:13), singing God's inexhaustible life-giving power, and also of two quotations from the Book of Job (41:3, 35:7), the poem where a true believer cannot find easy answers to the many questions of life, except than to adoringly surrender to the One who is unfathomable and before whom all human words are meaningless. According to Paul, even though we cannot know the mind of God, we can rest assured that He will devise any possible means to save man.

Well, how shall we then respond to God's mercy? Such a great love deserves a great gift on our part, the total gift of our whole selves: "Offer your bodies..." The term 'body', as used by Paul, refers to a very complex reality. It may be the physical presence of the person (cf 2 Co 10:10), the means by which the person is real (1 Co 15:35 ff), the means by which the self can act (2 Co 5:10), suffer (2 Co 4:10; Ga 6:17), relate to others (cf the image of the Church as the Body of Christ: 1 Co 12:27; Rm 12:5; Ep 4:12; etc.). In Paul's view, all human beings have a body: this 'body' must be seen in its fullest sense.⁸ To offer one's body means to offer one's own self (cf Rm 6:13; Ph 1:20; 1 Co 6:15, 12:27), one's own life, one's own relationships with others. In Jesus God gave us the whole of Himself; now it is our turn to give our whole person to Him.

Saint Augustine spoke of the 'heart'; Paul speaks of 'the offer of one's own body'. Both expressions refer to the person taken as a whole. Prayer implies the offer of one's whole self to God. This is a 'spiritual' cult (in Latin, 'rationabile obsequium', 'rational cult', proper of man who has the faculty of reasoning). This is the only cult that is appropriate to man's reason, following in the footsteps of Jesus who, by offering His own body to the Father once and for all, (cf Heb 10:10) inaugurated a new way.

Closely linked to this idea of prayer as offer, is the precept that we should not conform to the mentality of this world, which in fact we have been called to turn into a Christian world, in the first place by transforming our own selves. Our very life, transfigured by God's Word, will then become prayer as well as intercession for the world: a light – however dim it may be – that can help others to find the right way.

Prayer and action

As art. 61 of our Rule of Life deals with 'prayer and action', it has been chosen as the main reference for this unit. Both prayer and action have pride of place in St Augustine's spirituality. Even when he writes to a contemplative monastic community,⁹ he cannot but remind them that prayer does not release them from the obligation of concretely serving both the Church and humanity. This theme is not clearly dealt with by Augustine's Rule, even though there is a passage where he indirectly refers to it –

⁸ Paul speaks also of 'body which belonged to sin' [*in fact, the New Jerusalem Bible correctly translates: "the self which belonged to sin", translator*] (Rm 6:6), of "the habits originating in the body" (Rm 8:13; cf Rm 6:12), or of "the body of death" [*in fact, the NJB translates: "the weakness of the human nature", translator*] (Rm 8:3). In these cases the self has not been freed from the law of sin, as it does not live in Christ.

⁹ See Letter 48 to Eudossio, the abbot of Capraia Isle's monastery, in *Works of St. Augustine*, I, p. 402-407.

this passage will be dealt with in one of our essay's next units: as far as consecrated life is concerned, one's own activity can be meaningful only as a sign of charity.

Art. 61 is part of the chapter dealing with the general principles about the personal growth of RM's members: in order to concretely fulfil our vocation, we have to faithfully meet our daily engagements. Well, according to the Rule of Life, one of these engagements is exactly prayer. Prayer should be regarded as our life in the world's 'priority', an activity we should give priority to during our whole life (art. 28). Indeed, as art. 59 reminds us, it is an 'imperative': this term may seem inappropriate, given that we pray out of love, not under coercion; still, it highlights that prayer is absolutely necessary. Our 'secular' vocation rests on prayer. If prayer were lacking, our action in the world would be pointless as well as dull.

Art. 59 also highlights that prayer may be difficult at times. No doubt prayer is a 'struggle'. If we have never experienced that, we have never prayed in earnest. It is indeed a struggle especially for those who live in the world and are doing an ordinary job (cf art. 4). We are doing our job seriously, given that our secular vocation prompts us "to live all of life's situations in Christ, and to carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence." (art. 4) We are devoting much time to our job, we are studying and getting training for it. There is a risk we are doing too much: our minds and hearts are completely absorbed in all our various activities; our whole self identifies itself with them, finding in them – or, better, deceiving itself into finding – its identity, as well as the meaning of life. For this very reason it may be difficult to regularly devote time to prayer. Faithfulness becomes a real asceticism, implying detachment, renunciation, self-control. Was it by chance that St Augustine, in his Rule, placed the norms about penitential practices and fasting immediately after prayer? Faithfulness is the only way we can attain to 'genuine prayer', when words are useless as we are in front of the face of that God that we seek. (cf art. 59) Prayer is genuine when it is self-less and it may be compared to breathing, an activity we are not aware of – generally speaking – as it is completely regular. Then all our life becomes prayer (cf art. 29), and our work a liturgy (art. 48). But we must be faithful to a regular daily schedule, in which some times are set aside and dedicated exclusively to the encounter with God (art. 30).

By our prayer – our Rule of Life adds – we can co-operate in the mission of those who have been called to exercise the ministerial priesthood in the Church (art. 6: corresponding to St Augustine's 'ecclesial service'). By prayer we are part of the world, a world we pray and intercede for, as art. 33 says, quoting Colossians 4:12. This passage mentions Epaphras, one of Paul's associates, a "servant of Christ Jesus who never stops battling for you, praying that you will never lapse..." Prayer is our daily battle: by it we can share our brothers and sisters life, we can support them and work for them as Paul did, who in his Letter to the Colossians states: "...to make everyone perfect in Christ. And it is for this reason that I labour, striving with His energy which works in me mightily." (Col 1:28-29)

Our life should not be divided, but be one, harmonious. "You shall strive to be constantly nourished by faith," art. 61 urges us, as only faith can make of both our prayer and action a sign of that total love of Christ which can lead us to the Father as well as to our brothers and sisters.

4. LISTENING

Lectio Divina: «Listen, Israel (...). Let the words I enjoin on you today stay in your heart.» (Dt 6:4,6)

St Augustine's Rule III, 2: «When you come to table, listen until you leave to what is the custom to read, without disturbance or strife.»

Rule of Life RM, 32: «Following the example of the Virgin, meditation will help you see into the meaning of the Scriptures so that you may be able to discover in them God's warnings as well as His love, and not only in them but also in humankind, in events and in all creation.»

The daily reading of the Bible is mentioned only twice in St Augustine's Rule: in chapter 3, dealing with meals, and in chapter 5, where it decrees that books are to be requested at a fixed hour each day. In fact, we know that the matter was of great importance to Augustine: he believed that the reading of the Bible and its study should be practiced both by his monks and each and every Christian.

However, the two hints of the Rule provide very precious information. We will deal first with the former, which can be found in chapter 3:2.

With meekness and respect

After dealing with fasting, St Augustine deals with the proclamation of the Word of God during meals: not only one's mouth should take nourishment, but also his ears should hunger for the Word of God¹⁰. To couple fasting with the Word is one of the Bishop of Hippo's features. For instance, in the Lenten speech n° 205, he says:

“[...] may the word of God – proclaimed to you through our ministry – nourish your hearts while you keep fasting with your bodies. Thus the inner man, refreshed with his proper food, will prompt the body to mortify the flesh and will also be strengthened. In order to spend this period of time with devotion, it is right and fitting that while we approach the celebration of our crucified Lord's passion we self-impose on ourselves as a cross the mortification of our fleshly desires [...]. Any Christian should constantly hang from this kind of cross, his whole life long, as he lives in the midst of temptations. [...] Christian man or woman, may you always live like this during your earthly life; never get down this cross, unless you want to sink in the mud.”¹¹ (205:1)

The inner man that freely devotes himself to listening to the Word of God may grow through fasting.

So that it may be heard, and not only during meals, the word of God must be listened to “sine tumultu et contentionibus”, i.e. without disturbance or strife. We can

¹⁰ Reading during meals it's an eastern tradition as origin; we find this habit in Basilus, in practice no. 180 of his «brief rules».

¹¹ *Discourse* 205, 1, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXXII/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1984, p. 137-139.

understand what the Rule hints at by reading a passage of ‘On the Sermon of the Mount’, a work that Augustine wrote between 391 and 395.

In his very original exegesis, Augustine finds a link between Mt 5:3-9 and Is 11:2-3, that is between the seven beatitudes and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is not a novelty that the author of the Legend of the Origins is referring exactly to this exegesis when describing the religious experience of our Fathers on Mount Senario. Every beatitude is matched with a corresponding gift of the Spirit: meekness with ‘pietas’¹² [piety]. Taking into consideration the way this term has been used in the New Testament (Ac 3:12; 1 Tm 2:2; 3:16; 4:7.8; 6:3.5.6.11; 2 Tm 3:5; Tt 1:1; 2 P 1:3.6.7; 3:11), we understand ‘pietas’ as the lifestyle of the Christian man who, because of his faith in Jesus Christ, shares in his neighbour’s sufferings, helps his neighbour to carry his burdens, overcomes evil with good. ‘Pietas’ and meekness are the two necessary attitudes for a genuine listening of the word of God: in fact the word of God cannot be understood if it is questioned, criticized and welcomed with hostility. It can be properly understood only through faith and meekness.

In the first book of ‘On the Sermon of the Mount’ Augustine says: “Only the meek can come to true knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. It is necessary for the soul to be meek through ‘pietas’, so that it does not dare to dispute what might seem a nonsense to the untrained, thus becoming rebellious and obstinate.”¹³ He also speaks of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and, as far as ‘pietas’ is concerned, adds: “Pietas is suitable to the meek. In fact, those who seek piously, honour Holy Scripture and neither dispute what they cannot comprehend yet, nor put up a resistance. This is the very meaning of the word ‘meek’.¹⁴” Meekness and piety are – in Augustine’s view – always linked to the reading of the word of God.

In I, 4:12 he deals again with the beatitude of the meek, “who shall have the earth as inheritance”, i.e. the kingdom of Heaven, and, by making use of the idea of inheritance he defines ‘pietas’ in a new and interesting way. Whoever is able to easily realize which duties he has towards God, towards his country, towards his relatives or children, and manages to fulfil them, is a pious man. This is the reason why the earth – Augustine says – is being offered as inheritance to the meek, who as affectionate children faithfully act according to their father’s testamentary provisions. “The inheritance has been given to the meek who seek with piety, as disposed by the father’s testament.” The term ‘testamentum’ may mean either ‘last will and testament’ or ‘covenant between God and Israel’: once again Augustine links the second beatitude to a children’s reading of the word of God, which must be affectionate and obedient.

In the second book of ‘On the Sermon of the Mount’ Augustine draws a parallel between the meek’s beatitude and the invocation of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come...” In fact, ‘pietas’ has as a necessary consequence meekness, that is, our hearts’ openness to the coming of the kingdom: “If it is ‘pietas’ to make the meek blessed, as they shall have the earth as inheritance, we should ask that God may grant us both the coming of His kingdom within ourselves, given that we are becoming meek and do not oppose it, and the glorious return of the Lord from heaven to the earth.”¹⁵

¹² The Hebrew text of Is 11:2-3 lists only six gifts of the Spirit. The gift of ‘piety’ can be found in the Septuagint version of the Bible and also in the Latin one, in use in St Augustine’s times.

¹³ *De sermone Domini in monte* I, 3, 10, in *Works of St. Augustine*, X/2, Città Nuova, Rome 1997, p. 91.

¹⁴ *De sermone Domini in monte* I, 4, 11, *ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁵ *De sermone Domini in monte* II, 11, 38, *ibid.*, p. 227.

Augustine believes – but he specifies that this is just a personal interpretation – that the meek’s ‘pietas’ is explained by Mt 5:25-26: “Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. In truth I tell you, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.” The ‘opponent’ is the word of God: Holy Scripture stands in the way of those who want to live in sin. It has been given to us as our companion on our earthly journey, and therefore our life cannot be inconsistent with it. If our life is inconsistent with it, it will hand us over to the Judge (God). This is why it is very important to come to terms with it, as we do not know when our life will end. To come to terms with it is possible only if we read it and listen to it piously. “We should be aware that here the opponent is God’s commandment. In fact, for those who want to sin, what can be more opposing than God’s commandment? His law as well as Holy Scripture have been given to us so that they may be our companions on our earthly journey; we should not oppose them, if we do not want to be handed over to the judge. On the contrary, we should come to terms with them as soon as possible, given that nobody knows when he will pass away. Who can then be in agreement with Holy Scripture but he who reads it and listens to it piously, regarding it as the supreme authority? By so doing he will not hate what he is reading, given that it will not be in opposition to his sins. On the contrary, he will love greatly to be admonished, and will be happy that his illnesses are being cured until he is perfectly healed. Should the Word be obscure or absurd to him, he will not fight against it by raising objections; on the contrary, he will pray so that he may comprehend, and will remember that love and respect are due to such a great authority. This is exactly the behaviour of those who do not open their father’s testament threatening to go to law, but being meek thanks to their pietas. Blessed are the meek, then, as they shall have the earth as inheritance.”¹⁶ (II, 11:29-32)

I will quote three more passages from St Augustine’s work: the first is from ‘De Doctrina Cristiana’¹⁷ 2, 7, 9.

“First of all we should try, through fear of the Lord, to know God’s will and what He bids us look for or abhor. This fear should remind us that we are mortals, arouse the awareness of death which awaits us, and nail our flesh to the wood of the cross, together with our pride. In the second place we should become meek and respectful, and never contradict the Holy Scriptures as if we were able to know things better than they do, neither when we can understand them (as when they disapprove of our own vices) nor when we can’t understand them. We should rather believe that what we find written in them is better and truer – even though it may be obscure – than what we can judge ourselves.”¹⁸

The second passage is from the Letter n° 171 A, a fragment of a letter that was written after 414 to Massimo, a physician and a convert from Aryanism to orthodox Christianity. Here Augustine lists the various steps that are necessary to reach purity of the heart. The first one is ‘fear of God’, the second, ‘meekness / piety’:

¹⁶ *De sermone Domini in monte* I, 11, 32, *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁷ Augustine started writing this work between 395 and 398, and ended in 426. It deals with the interpretation of the Holy Scripture.

¹⁸ *Works of St. Augustine*, VIII, Città Nuova, Rome 1992, p. 69.

“Once you have become meek and patient thanks to pietas, do not stubbornly contrast what you cannot understand in the Holy Scriptures as well as what may seem strange and contradictory to the uneducated. Moreover, do not replace the genuine meaning of the holy books with your own ideas, but submit yourself to their authority, meekly waiting for the time when you will be able to understand them, rather than harshly condemn their hidden meanings. [...] Blessed are the meek, in whom a piety willing to learn resides...”¹⁹

Then in his ‘Discourse on the fear of God’, Augustine writes:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. These are the humble, that down here in the valley tremblingly offer to God their broken and mortified heart. From there they come to pietas: they do not oppose God’s will, either when it is made manifest by His words, but they cannot comprehend their meaning, or when it is made manifest by the order and governance of creation, most events of which are not in harmony with men’s individual wishes. And they say: ‘Father, let it be as You, not I, would have it.’ ” (347, 3)²⁰

In this last passage, we must highlight the quotation from Mt 26:39; ‘pietas’ is interpreted as Jesus’ very attitude in the garden of Gethsemane, when He experienced at the same time how to obey the Father’s will could be costly but also the freedom of completely entrusting Himself into His hands.

Therefore, the phrase that can be found in the Rule, “sine tumultu et contentione”, i.e. without disturbance or strife, demands that we should thoroughly respect the Word of God, without submitting it to our own wishes and interests. It urges us to keep silent, while listening to what life has to say: while striving to be humble, our life should conform more and more to God’s will.

Listen, Israel

Dt 6:4-8, together with 11:13-21 and Nb 15:37-41, is the great prayer of the Shema (‘Listen’) that each Jew has to proclaim twice during the day, in the morning and in the evening as a sign of his love for the one and only God. Dt 11:13-21 says that Israel knows God because of the ‘lessons’ (11:2) that God imparted by His direct interventions in the history of His people (the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the years spent in the desert). In Nb 15-16 the one and only God’s commandment is presented as a very strict and frightful law, destroying all those who dare to break it (see the punishment for those who break the Sabbath, Nb 15:32-36; the rebellion and punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram in chapter 16).

‘Listen’ (Dt 6:4): this is the most important word in the Bible, the key of the whole Holy Scripture. It is a basic attitude, implying that one has to wholly and thoroughly entrust himself / herself to God, that a response is required even before God might ask. When God asks Israel to listen, He already expects from them a behaviour in accordance with His will.

¹⁹ *Works of St. Augustine*, II, Città Nuova, Rome 1971, p. 813.

²⁰ *Works of St. Augustine*, VI, Città Nuova, Rome 1989, p. 117.

The Holy Scripture closely links the verb ‘to listen’ and the verb ‘to do’. Listening sometimes precedes action (cf Dt 5:27; 30:13; Jr 11:4; see also Mk 12:29-31 and parallels, where listening must be followed by action, but action is equal to love). However, there are two passages where listening comes after action, as it is a consequence of action or its very aim: the first one is Ex 24:8 – we have already considered it but it may be worth dealing with it again, as it is one of the Holy Scripture’s most important passages. After listening to the reading of the Book of the Covenant, the people state: “We shall do everything that the Lord has said; we shall obey.” The Italian Bishops’ Conference’s translation of the Bible renders it with, “we shall do it and carry it out”: the two verbs are more or less synonymous. In fact, the original texts goes: “We shall do it and listen to it.” If we changed ‘and’ with ‘so that’ – this is possible in Hebrew – the text would read, “We shall do everything that the Lord has said, so that we can listen to Him.” In fact, action makes manifest that the heart has already accepted God’s will, and can wholeheartedly listen to the Word and understand it. Without love there cannot be either listening or obedience.

The second passage is Psalm 103, which starts with the words: “Bless the Lord, my soul, / from the depths of my being, His holy name; / bless the Lord, my soul, / never forget all His acts of kindness.” God is love, and His love is from eternity and for ever. The angels’ voice joins men’s in praising the Lord: they are “mighty warriors who fulfil His commands, so that they may listen to the sound of His words.” (103:20) This Psalm confirms what I stated above: the angels fulfil the word of God, so that they may listen to it.

“The Lord our God is the one, the only Lord.” (Dt 6:4) The relation between God and man is a covenant of communion: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people.” (Lv 26:12; Ezk 36:28; 37:27) This is a mutual belonging. We are God’s precious treasure (cf Ex 19:5: God’s “personal possession²¹” among all the peoples; cf also Is 43:1-5), His own people (Dt 4:20; see also Dt 9:26,29: His “heritage”; 1 K 8:51; Is 47:6; Gn 2:17; 4:2; Mi 7:14; Ps 28:9; 78:62,71; 94:5,14; 106:5; 136:21-22). Moreover, God in His turn is our heritage and possession (cf Nb 18:20; Dt 10:9; 18:1-2; Jos 13:14; Ezk 44:28; see also Si 45:20-22). These passages refer to the Levites and the priests – who could have no claim on the land, given that their own heritage was the Lord and the Lord only – but they are relevant to us too, because we would like to choose the “better part” like Mary of Bethany did, the heritage that will never be taken from us (cf Lk 10:42). Mary is at the exclusive service of the Lord like priests are. With her, who “sat down at the Lord’s feet and listened to Him speaking”, let us rediscover our priestly dignity (Ex 19:6) in the awareness that the “better part” set aside for us is the Lord. In fact God is our “birthright” (Ps 16:5), our “portion” (Ps 73:26) “in the land of the living” (Ps 142:5). “My task, I have said, Lord, is to keep Your word.” (Ps 119:57) “The Lord is all I have,” I say to myself, “and so I shall put my hope in Him.” (Lm 3:24)

“The Lord our God is the one, the only Lord.” The terms ‘ehad (one and only) and shema’ (listen) are the practising Jews’ favourite ones, and should be any believer’s. According to the Bible, God is One not only because there is no other god, but also because He is the only One that provides men with the meaning of life. When he says that God is One, the believer confesses that it is only by doing God’s will that he can be free and perfectly fulfilled (cf Ps 73:25: “With You, I lack nothing on earth,”

²¹ In Hebrew *segullah*, indifferently in Italian translated as “property” (Ex 19:5; Mt 3: 17), “possession” (Ps 135: 4), “privileged people” (Dt 7:6; 14: 2), “particular people” (Dt 26: 18).

it is “better Your faithful love than life itself.” – Ps 63:4). This last quotation means that it is in God and His love only that life is worth living.

Israel has to witness that God is one before the whole of humanity. The Hebrew word for ‘witness’ is ‘*ed*’. ‘*Ed*, *shema*’ and ‘*ehad*’ are the three key words of the Jewish confession of faith. The rabbinical commentaries highlight the fact that ‘*ed*’ derives from the combination of the last letter of ‘*shema*’ (that is, ‘*ayn*’) and the last letter of ‘*ehad*’ (that is, ‘*daleth*’). It is for this very reason that in Hebrew bibles these two letters are always bigger in size than the rest. The ‘*Shema*’ is for each and every man, as only God can provide a meaning to life, even in tragedies²².

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.” (Dt 6:5) This is the one and only precept, even though immediately afterwards (line 6) the term ‘precept’ is used in the plural form: ‘precepts’. It is the one and only precept because it is the commandment that unifies and provides a meaning to any other, a commandment that – as Jesus taught us – implies the second commandment to love one’s neighbour (Lv 19:18; cf Mk 12:29-31; Rm 13:10).

God must be loved with all our heart, that is by consciously offering our own will to Him; with all our soul, that is with a wholehearted longing; and with all our strength, that is with all our abilities and capabilities. God “is the One you shall love above all.” (Rule of Life art. 9; cf art. 10).

“Let these precepts I enjoin on you today stay in your heart.” (Dt 6:6) This line refers to the fact that a formal observance of the law can be avoided only through love. Love makes of observance an offer, a total gift of our whole self to God.

“You shall tell them to your children, and keep on telling them, when you are sitting at home, when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are standing up.” (Dt 6:7) Love cannot be kept shut up, it needs being communicated to others. It is a declaration that one must commit himself to hand on the heritage of faith faithfully and constantly. Each of us, each community, each family, must teach faith, not from the pulpit but by our life, faithfulness and consistency.

“You must fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as a headband; you must write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Dt 6:8-9) This is the precept of the *Tefillim* and *Mezuzà*. The *Tefillim* are small leather cases that the orthodox Jews still carry on their left arm as well as on their forehead when they pray; inside them, they place a sheet of parchment paper with the four passages from the Torah that mention the *Tefillim*: Ex 13:9,13; Dt 6:8 and 11:20²³. The *Mezuzà* is a small roll of parchment paper kept in a case hanging from the right doorpost of the main door and also of the doors of the rooms.

²² We could remember martyr Rabbi Aquibà, victim of Roman prosecution in 137 a.D., as described in Talmud: «As when R. Aquibà was taken to martyrdom, the time for praying the *Shemà* arrived, and no matter how much he suffered, he accepted the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven [that means he began to pray the *Shemà*]. His disciples ask him: Your still have the courage to pray? He answered: All my life I have done so, “with all my soul” as we read in the Scripture, ... now that I have the opportunity of accomplishing this precept, why should I not do it?... (From *Treaty of Blessings [Trattato delle benedizioni]*) of Babilonian Talmud, UTET, Turin 1982, p. 415.»

²³ On both sides of the case placed on the front head, it is printed the Hebrew letter *shin*; on the belt of the case placed on the arm it is made a nod that reproduces letter *yod*; the belt that fastens the head is tied with a nod reproducing letter *daleth*. These three letters together give the name *Shaddai*, the Almighty. Getting ready for prayer, observant Jews place first the case on the arm and after on the head, meaning that action precedes meditation, in remembrance of Es 24:7: «We will accomplish and listen all what was said by God».

These precepts highlight the need to constantly deepen our knowledge of the Word of God. Holy Scripture does not provide easy answers to the problems of life. In fact, it does not give easy answers at all, while raising objections that need constant and patient efforts to be solved. The Lord gave us His Word so that our heart may be renewed by it, and can discern the signs of His presence in life's events.

Following the example of the Virgin

Simplicity, openness and love are the three attitudes one should meditate upon the Scriptures with, according to n° 32 of our Rule of Life. Apart from art. 32, the term 'simplicity' can also be found in three more articles of the Rule: in art. 3, where, together with depth, it is one of the main features of our fraternal relationships; in art. 18, where it is used in relation to our simple lifestyle according to the Gospel; and in art. 52, where, together with promptness, it qualifies our attitude towards the world, that we should welcome driven by Christ's love and free from defence mechanisms and prejudices. Simplicity implies then trust and openness, as well as a quest for the essentials, deriving from the wish to be really ourselves, completely frank and transparent.

We should also be transparent with regard to the Word of God. We should stand before the Lord who is speaking to us as we really are, allowing Him to judge us, without questioning His Word but carrying it out, with the same meekness and faith in the renewing power of God that St Augustine teaches.

We should also do our *Lectio Divina* in all simplicity, and our *Lectio Divina* should be a simple reading of the Bible, first of all because we must be aware of our own poverty before God – and thanks to poverty we can meet all those brothers and sisters who are poor like us – and in the second place because its aim is not erudition – even though it may require a regular study, depending on one's capacities – but to discover, behind the surface of the actual words, Jesus giving a new strength and a new meaning to our life.

Art. 32 urges us to be faithful to this "daily, long, personal meeting with the Lord". This should never be hasty or superficial, but be a long period of quiet meditation, kept separate from other activities. This is a demanding rule, but also a wise one, because only by being faithful to our *Lectio* day after day we may benefit from it.

We are supported in this engagement by the Holy Virgin, our teacher as far as prayer and contemplation are concerned. She teaches us how to penetrate into the meaning of the Holy Scriptures. If they are not relevant to life, they cannot be thoroughly understood. "As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Lk 2:19) In her, life and meditation are one. That is why our Rule of Life constantly urges us to follow her example: "Each of us will learn from Her "Fiat" to welcome the Word of God; from Her life with Jesus at Nazareth, each of us will learn the meaning of her involvement in society..." (art. 7). And again, art. 47 states: "You shall draw your inspiration from the service that Mary rendered and still renders to the world; you shall work in all peace, with no anxiety, which is typical of those who do confide in their own efforts."

Listening to the Word is of paramount importance to a secular vocation, which is being fulfilled in the hustle and bustle of the world. Through it, we may become able to

discover God's warnings as well as His love in humankind, in events and in all creation (cf art. 32). Faithfulness to a secular vocation needs contemplation.

5. FRATERNAL CORRECTION

Lectio Divina: «If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves...etc.» (Mt 18:15 ff)

St Augustine's Rule, IV, 6: «Thus, by mutual vigilance over one another will God, who dwells in you, grant you His protection.»

Rule of Life RM, art. 38: «...you shall be prompt to welcome, provide accommodation to and lovingly care for those Sisters who are experiencing suffering in their lives.»

Augustine speaks about fraternal correction in Chapter 4 of his Rule, while dealing with the monk's commitment to chastity. This chapter may seem difficult because of its vocabulary, which sounds harsh and in opposition to that refined sensibility Augustine displays when dealing with the person's shortcomings and frailties. The chapter opens with the warning not to seek to please by one's apparel, but by a good life; and also with the prescriptions for the monks going out of the monastery: they have to walk together, and when they reach their destination, stay together; they must not give offence to anyone who sees them: their behaviour must be consistent with their holy state of life. These warnings are but an introduction to the theme of chastity which, if we consider the space given to it, seems to be much more important than other topics; another impression may be that here Augustine mainly deals with violations of chastity. Each monk is bound to denounce his brethren's errors, even immodesty of the eye.²⁴ In IV,10 there is an impressive series of verbs – “to find them out, to ward them off, to make them known, to prove and to punish them” – which recalls more the idea of a criminal trial than of fraternal correction.

God's gaze

In fact, Augustine's attitude is different from what it may seem; it is expressed by the many biblical quotations which characterize this chapter. To be honest, there is only one explicit quotation from Proverbs 27:20: “An abomination to the Lord is he who fixes his gaze.”²⁵ Man's gaze may become obscure because of envy and especially because of the lustful desire to possess a woman. “The unchaste eye carries the message of an impure heart.” (cf Mt 5:28) To man's unchaste eye is opposed God's clear eye. According to the Rule, He “sees from on high” and “nothing is hidden from Him” (IV,5). Augustine is implicitly quoting from Proverbs 24:12, when he defines God as “the Weigher of the heart”: this term occurs very often in his works.²⁶ God sees everything, but His eye is not definitely as merciless as a detective inspector's. He looks into man's heart (‘in-spicere’) and knows everything about him, but his knowledge is

²⁴ Even though the Rule mainly deals with violations of chastity, the positive value of chastity is expressed by the biblical terms ‘sanctitas’ (‘consecration’) and ‘sanctus’ (‘consecrated person’). Sanctity is one of God's very own features, a mystery to be adored and welcomed; Israel is holy thanks to their devotion to the Lord, they have been bound to by the Covenant.

²⁵ This quotation that is not present in other works of St. Augustine (besides reminiscences of Comment to Psalm 50), and according to Greek version of the Seventy's.

²⁶ cf Discourse 50, 2, 3.

not merciless, given that it is coupled with patience. “Are we to imagine that He does not see because He sees with a patience as great as His wisdom?” (IV,5) This is a reference to Rm 9:22 and Rm 11:33,32, where God’s infinite patience reveals itself in His mercy. See also 2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord... is being patient with you, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to repentance” (cf 1 P 3:20).

It is evident that – the Rule implies – if God is patient even though He thoroughly knows man’s heart, why should we, whose knowledge is very imperfect, be merciless with sinners?

A believer does not hide from God’s judgement because he is afraid He will punish him; on the contrary, he welcomes God’s judgement with what Augustine calls ‘chaste fear’, that is “for fear that he should displease God” – the Rule says (IV,5)²⁷. According to Ben Sira, it is “the man who sins against the marriage bed who says to himself: ‘Who can see me?... The Most High will not remember my sins.’ What he fears are human eyes, he does not realise that the eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun, observing every aspect of human behaviour, seeing into the most secret corners.” (Si 23:18-19)

Not only God sees into our hearts, He also dwells within us (Rule IV,6): here the image of the temple recurs – the same which had already been used at the end of the first chapter; it refers to 1 Co 3:16 as well as 2 Co 6:16. If man is God’s dwelling, his dignity must always be acknowledged, even when he falls into error: correction should be done “out of love for man and a hatred of sin” (IV,10)²⁸.

As Psalm 121 states, God is also man’s guardian: “May He save your foot from stumbling; / may He, your guardian not fall asleep! / You see – He neither sleeps nor slumbers, / the guardian of Israel. / The Lord is your guardian... / The Lord guards you from all harm / the Lord guards your life, / the Lord guards your comings and goings, / henceforth and for ever.” (Ps 121:3-5,7-8) God does not guard us directly, but through other men and women. “Exercise a mutual care over purity of life. Thus, by mutual vigilance over one another, will God, who dwells in you, grant you His protection.” (IV,6) We must be responsible for each other. Brothers and sisters must watch over one another. We should never be the cause of one of our brothers or sisters’ downfall; it is for this reason that Christ gave His life (cf 1 Co 8:8-13).

Out of love, we should regard the brother or sister who fell into error as “a wounded man in need of treatment” (IV,8). Sin is similar to an illness, or to a wound which must be treated by the same love Jesus showed towards sinners (cf Mt 9:12: “It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick.”). “And do not charge yourselves with ill-will when you bring this offence to light. Indeed, yours is the greater blame if you allow your brothers to be lost through your silence when you are able to bring about their correction by your disclosure. If your brother, for example, were suffering a bodily wound that he wanted to hide for fear of undergoing treatment, would it not be cruel of you to remain silent and a mercy on your part to make this known? How much greater than is your obligation to make his condition known lest he continue to suffer a more deadly wound of the soul.” (IV,8)

When it is necessary to punish a sinner, the punishment must be ‘emendatorius’ (‘salutary’ – cf IV,9), that is, it must help the brother to become a better man. The term

²⁷ Cf. *Discourse* 161: 9 in *Works of St. Augustine*, VII/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1978, p. 131.

²⁸ *Letter* 153, 1:3 in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXII, Città Nuova, Rome 1971, p. 525.

‘emendatorius’ was coined by St Augustine: we can find it seven times in his works²⁹ and twice in other monastic works belonging to the Augustinian school of thought³⁰. Punishment should never overwhelm the sinner; Augustine keeps to mind Paul’s advice to Corinth’s community, regarding somebody who had fallen into error: “The punishment already imposed by the majority was quite enough for such a person; and now by contrast you should forgive and encourage him all the more, or he may be overwhelmed by the extent of his distress. That is why I urge you to give your love towards him definite expression.” (2 Co:6-8) Adam’s punishment – Augustine writes in ‘De libero arbitrio’, III, 25, 76 – was ‘emendatorius’ (‘salutary’), not ‘interfactorius’, that is, it did not kill him. Adam was expelled from the garden of Eden so that he could become a better man, not so that he could be killed. The adjective ‘emendatorius’ expresses the light of God’s mercy: God does not want the sinner to die, He wants him to live and convert himself.

If someone refuses to submit to the salutary punishment, so that he may become a better man, he shall be expelled from the brotherhood (IV,9). This is not done out of cruelty, but from a sense of compassion towards the whole community, that may be endangered, should it keep in touch with those who do not want to change (cf 1 Co 5:4-5; Dt 13:6).

Evangelical correction

The right procedure for correction can be found in the gospel (Mt 18:15-17). The Rule states: “... admonish him at once so that the beginning of evil will not grow more serious but will be promptly corrected. But if you see him doing the same thing again on some other day, even after your admonition, then whoever had occasion to discover this must report him as he would a wounded man in need of treatment. But let the offence first be pointed out to two or three so that he can be proven guilty on the testimony of these two or three... (...) But if he fails to correct the fault despite this admonition, he should first be brought to the attention of the superior before the offence is made known to others who will have to prove his guilt, in the event he denies the charge. Thus, corrected in private, his fault can perhaps be kept from the others. But should he feign ignorance, the others are to be summoned so that in the presence of all he can be proven guilty, rather than stand accused on the word of one alone.”

Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew – the Discourse on the Church – opens with a call to conversion: leaving aside any desire for greatness and success, Christ’s disciples must convert themselves and become like little children (18:3), that is, recognise before God and others that they are little. There is another way of putting it: to recognise that they are servants.³¹ Only thus it is possible to welcome little children, that is, the poor and people of no importance: “Anyone who welcomes one little child

²⁹ *De libero arbitrio*, III, 25, 76; *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*; Study of Psalm 37, 3; *Sermo Denis* 24, 4; 17° study to Psalm 118, 3; *Contra adversarium legis* II, 11, 37; *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide et spe et caritate* (Book regarding faith, hope and charity [*Manuale sulla fede, la speranza e la carità*]), 1972.

³⁰ Cf. L. VERHEIJEN, *Rule of St. Augustine. Studies and Researches*, Augustinus, Palermo 1986, p. 255 (for Italian version).

³¹ The verb ‘tapeinò’, which has been translated with ‘to make oneself little’ (Mt 18:4), means in fact ‘to humble oneself’ not according to the ascetical ideal of submission, rather in the awareness that one is called to serve. Cf also Mt 23:12; Lk 14:11; 18:14. And also Lk 1:48: “He has looked upon the humiliation of His servant.”

like this in my name welcomes me.” (18:5) ‘Children’ refers both to the members of the community (cf Mt 10:40) and to every little and poor man / woman Jesus identified Himself with (cf Mt 25:40) as they are precious to God. That is why Jesus’ warnings, against both those who lead others astray (cf Mt 18:6-9), and those who despise the dignity of little ones, dignity they do not lose even when they fall into error (cf Mt 18:10-13), are so harsh. In fact, “their angels in Heaven are continually in the presence of my Father in Heaven.” (Mt 18:10) This expression means that they are of great value and that they never lose it: in fact, when they stray, the shepherd leaves the whole flock in order to go in search of them (Mt 18:11-13), as it is never the will of the Father that one of these little ones should be lost. (Mt 18:14)

On Chapter IV of the Rule of Life we can find an analogy to these ideas: it is necessary to leave any type of external appearance and to convert oneself to the truth, through a fraternal communion life-style, with reciprocal welcoming and joint responsibility.³² Inside the community we can find people who is “hurt”, who need the oil of love and mercy to be healed. From these members, all the community should take care and look after them as the Good Shepherd does.

In the Italian Bishops’ Conference’s version of the Bible, the headline for Mt 18:15-17 is ‘Brotherly correction’. This is the first time that the term ‘brother’ occurs,³³ it refers to a member of the community who has done something wrong “to you”, as some authorities add, even though this addition is probably to be omitted: here the point is not that someone has been wronged; rather, that someone else did something wrong and, therefore, is in danger of being lost; the latter is the one we must go in search of, so that he may be corrected – as the parable of the Lost Sheep explained. Here the point is not to forgive an offence (this concept will be dealt with from line 21 onwards), rather, to correct the sinner. It is not clear who is to take initiative and correct him; supposedly, any member of the community who feels responsible for the sinner’s life.

“If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between you and him.” (Mt 18:15) This frank discussion should help the sinner to realize his error, given that understanding is the very first step towards conversion. “If he listens to you, you have won back your brother.” ‘To win somebody back’ is a kind of technical phrase, that was used in the early Christian Church to mean ‘conversion’ (cf 1 Co 9:19-22); it is interesting to point out that in Mt 25:16 the verb ‘to win’ is used with reference to one’s own talents: one must trade with them in order to ‘win’ some more. In the same way, it is only when we bother about our brothers and sisters, overcoming laziness and self-centredness, that we will be able to win them back.

If the sinner does not listen and refuses to acknowledge his guilt, one or two others should be “taken along with you”, not to bring the sinner to trial, rather to be more convincing. “If he refuses to listen to these, report him to the ekklesia” (Mt 18:17)³⁴, the community of believers that will care for him, so that he may get everybody’s support. “If he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a gentile or a tax collector.” (17b) Does this mean that we have to break off relations with him? Not really; indeed, we must make many more attempts to win him back. “...treat him like a gentile or a tax collector” is to be interpreted according to the Parable of the Lost Sheep,

³² It is important to underline the insistence of: *simul ambulate* (walk together); *simul state* (stay together) (IV, 2).

³³ cf Mt 5:22-24,47; 7:3-5; 12:46-50; 23:8; 25:40; 28:10.

³⁴ The term *ekklesia*, already used in Mt 16: 18, doesn’t appear in the other two Synoptics, not even in John. On the Greek Old Testament this term indicates the holy people of Israel, called by God.

in which the shepherd rejoices³⁵ when he finds it, and also according to Jesus' own behaviour, that of a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19). Any Christian man or woman should keep away from sin, but love the sinner: no sin – however serious – should be a barrier between us and the sinner, making us keep away from him. As we have already seen, St Augustine's Rule underlines this as well: it is right to reproach, correct and punish, but "out of love for man and a hatred of sin".

Mercifully

No article of RM's Rule of Life is wholly devoted to fraternal correction. Yet, it contains many of the elements that, according to both the gospel and St Augustine's Rule, are essential to fraternal correction and also to a common growth, that can be achieved through mutual help and a joint responsibility.

First of all comes mercy, a reflection of God's own mercy.³⁶ Were it lacking, my words could not be conducive to genuine conversion. The Family I am part of – according to art. 42 – is "the ecclesial place where compassion – a fundamental feature of our fraternal life – can be put into practice." Compassion (mercy) must be exercised as a joint responsibility: "The whole Family will support you while you tread on this path of new life" (art. 55).

Support is especially needed when sisters are experiencing suffering in their lives – as art. 38 states, with reference to Mt 25:31-46, where it is said that the kind of judgement we will get depends on our attitude towards "the least of Jesus' brothers". 'Suffering' includes all the hard times we may pass through, disregarding whether these may be imputed to either our own faults, or wrong choices, or frailties. "Thanks to fraternal communion, you will be able to accept both your own and the other Sisters' shortcomings without recriminations, and also to find that courage and those resources which are necessary to overcome unavoidable difficulties." (art. 60)

The Lord does not ask us to pass judgement on our sisters; He asks us to support our sisters by our love, helping them to be healed... If we did not help them always and as much as we can, we would break our vows binding us to the fraternity. This link lasts even when a sister, for whatever reason, chooses to leave our Family. "Should a Sister leave the Family, for our part we shall maintain fraternal relations with her." (art. 43) The Servite Friars' Constitutions add that the fraternal bond is a spiritual good, that will never be taken away from us (cf art. 22). This means that fraternal correction consists in supporting others, sharing their burdens, healing their wounds by our love.

In order to welcome others, we need that interior poverty that can enable us to understand that we are not better than others, and that everything is a gift. "By your interior poverty you will be made attentive to them, and you will also be made capable of welcoming, being open to and exchanging views with them." (art. 17) Of course leaders play a special part in fraternal correction. "Whoever has been elected to an office, should remember that during her term she has to bear witness to Christ, who came "not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28) and came also so that His own might have life to the full. She shall fulfil her duties in a spirit of love, of attentive listening to and of assistance to others." (art. 39; see also art. 66)

³⁵ Luke gives a more deep expression: «goes after the lost one, until he finds it» (15:4). God doesn't give up in his search until he finds us. He wants to find us at all expense.

³⁶ For mercy of God see Rule of Life, arts. 12; 31d; 33.

The Mother of God's compassion must be our constant inspiration: "From Her participation in the redemptive mission of Her Son, each of us will be led to understand, alleviate and make the most of human sufferings." (art. 7) Then, our compassion must embrace "all those who are in need within our environment" (art. 19) or, better, all those who are "in the laborious march towards freedom." (art. 52) We are sisters and brothers of each and every person living on earth, so let us try – by our hidden life in Christ – to help them all find the right way.

6. WORK

Lectio Divina: «Love (...) never seeks its own advantage.» (1 Co 13:4-5)

St Augustine's Rule, V, 2: «No one shall perform any task for his own benefit but all your work shall be done for the common good...»

Rule of Life RM, 18: «Earn a living by your work, even if that means labouring at hard and difficult tasks. Thus you will share humankind's common lot: fatigue and insecurity.»

It may seem weird that in this unit we should deal with both 'work' and 'love'; but to St Augustine's mind they are one and the same thing, given that work should bring about communion, which is the basic rule of Christian life.

No one shall perform any task for his own benefit

Chapter 5 of St Augustine's Rule deals with Community goods and services: the wardrobe, gifts, the laundry, bodily cleanliness, the treatment of the sick and of those in convalescence, the library... all of which are governed by the supreme law of charity, that is, trying to meet the weak's needs. Chapter 5 also contains the supreme norm to which each and every member's path to perfection should conform to:

In this way, no one shall perform any task for his own benefit but all your work shall be done for the common good, with greater zeal and more dispatch than if each one of you were to work for yourself alone. For charity, as it is written, is not self-seeking (1 Co 13:5), meaning that it places the common good before its own, not its own before the common good. So whenever you show greater concern for the common good than for your own, you may know that you are growing in charity. Thus, let the abiding virtue of charity prevail in all things that minister to the fleeting necessities of life (cf 1 Co 12:31; 13:13).

1 Co 12:31-13:13, St Paul's renowned Hymn to Love, is the source of inspiration for this article, in which God is not explicitly mentioned as the destination of our path to perfection, given that only fraternal love allows us to verify whether we are actually walking on it. Fraternal love becomes real when we show greater concern for the common good than for our own. "No one who fails to love the brother whom he can see can love God whom he has not seen." (1 Jn 4:20)

St Augustine deals at length with work in his "De Opere Monachorum"³⁷, which he wrote between 399 and 401. In it, he refuted the arguments of some monks belonging to a Carthago monastery, and their wrong explanations of 2 Th 3:10 as well as of Mt 6:26 – they rejected manual labour as not consistent with the ideal of a life entirely devoted to prayer and meditation.

They regarded St Paul's admonition, "not to let anyone eat who refused to work", (2 Th 3:10) as figurative. They pointed out that in 1 Co 3:5-10 the Apostle deals

³⁷ *De opere monachorum*, in *Works of St. Augustine*, VII/2, Città Nuova, Rome 2001, p. 522-605.

with apostolic work by making use of terms which refer to agriculture (planting, watering and so on). Consequently, the work of 2 Th 3:10 should not be intended as referring to manual labour, rather to prayer and spiritual reading.³⁸ On the contrary, Augustine rightly believed that, by his admonition, Paul meant to avoid using the rights which the gospel allowed him (that those who preach the gospel should get their living from the gospel – cf 1 Co 9:14, 18) so that he could be an example to all those who wanted this privilege without being entitled to it. In fact, Paul worked with unsparing energy in order not to be a burden to anyone, thus smoothing the way for the preaching of the Gospel. Another reason in support of manual labour can be found in Ep 4:28, “Anyone who was a thief must stop stealing; instead he should exert himself at some honest job with his own hands so that he may have something to share with those in need.”³⁹ This is in line with the earlier monastic tradition, started by St Anthony the Great who – as his ‘Life’ says – “worked with his own hands, after hearing that it is written, ‘Do not let the man eat, who is idle and lazy’.” (3, 6) St Basil the Great states that work is necessary for monks, given that it is conducive to asceticism, and it is also a means to exercise charity towards the poor (cf ‘Long Rules’, 37). St Jerome powerfully states: “I do not steal anything from anybody; I do not accept anything unless it is in return for work. In fact, remembering the Apostle’s words, ‘Not to let anyone eat who refused to work’, I earn my living by the work of my hands and the sweat of my face.” (Letters 17, 2; 130, 15)

Augustine adds one more reason to those mentioned above, the one he believes is the most important of all: work must be the expression of fraternal communion. When he joins the community, the monk does not stop working; he starts working with a different object:

“Let not the monk believe that his work is similar to what he used to do outside of the monastery. In fact, from selfish love for his private goods he has come to supernatural love for common life, and now he does not care for his private businesses any longer; rather, he does care for Jesus Christ’s, and lives in the holy family of those who are united, heart and soul, so that no one claims private ownership of any possessions as everything they own is held in common. Even some of the very important people of this Empire of ours were celebrated and praised by their panegyrists for choosing the common good of the State and of all its citizens, instead of their own interests. [...] With these models, what should be the attitude of the citizens of the eternal city, the Heavenly Jerusalem, towards this immortal ‘mother country’ of theirs, but to share with their brothers and sisters what they earn by their work and, should they lack anything, to get it from the community goods? Thus they will be able to say, together with him whose prescriptions they are following: ‘...having nothing, and yet owning everything.’ (2 Co 6:10)”⁴⁰

³⁸ «Let’s listen to the reading together with our brothers that tired come to us from the difficulties of the world to find, among us, the calm in the study of the Word of God, in prayer, in the song of psalms, hymns or spiritual chants. We speak with them, we comfort them, and foster them to good building in them, that means in their behavior, what according to us they lack, considering the state on which they are. If we don’t devote ourselves to those activities, our search of God for spiritual nourishing, that is given us by him, would be dangerous. Is to them the reference made by the Apostle when says: *Those who don’t want to work, should not even eat*» (*De opera Monachorum*, 1, 2, p. 525).

³⁹ *De Opere Monachorum*, 13, 14, p. 553.

⁴⁰ *De Opere Monachorum*, 25, 32, p. 583.

Let no one work for his own but for the common good. This is not just a monastic rule; it is also one of the basic principles of society. When commenting on our ancestors' fall [Adam and Eve's], Augustine writes: "Holy Scripture is right when it defines pride as the origin of sin: 'The starting point of each and every sin is pride.' (Si 10:15) The Apostle agrees with this text: 'The love of money is the root of all evils' (1 Tm 6:10), if by 'love of money' we mean 'lust' in general, especially the lust of those who are greedy for something which is not essential and who justify their lust by their pre-eminence or by their love for their own personal interests. Latin wisely defines this kind of love as 'privatus': this adjective is commonly used in relation to a loss rather than to a gain, given that each deprivation involves a loss."⁴¹

When Augustine uses the term 'private good' or 'private love', he intends to refer to their real value. Selfish love, love for one's own profit, is an impoverished love, a love that makes one miserable and needy. "The lust to improve one's conditions brings about poverty and necessity, given that – due to the deadly love for oneself – the pursuit of the common good turns into the pursuit of one's individual good."

St Augustine warns us that behind the 'love for money' lies 'lust': "Men are greedy for money, because they believe that to be richer means also to be better than the rest." Charity stands in the way of this love for one's own self, a love which thinks it does possess everything while in fact it does not own a thing. "Charity never seeks its own advantage, (1 Co 13:5) that is, it never takes pleasure in its own pre-eminence. Rightly, it is never boastful or conceited (1 Co 13:4). Of these two different kinds of love, one is pure, the other one impure; one communitarian, the other one private; one eager to serve the common good, looking forward to the Heavenly City, the other one ready to subordinate the common good to its own power, looking forward to an arrogant domination; one submissive to God, the other one an enemy of God's; one quiet, the other one unruly; one peaceful, the other one quarrelsome; one friendly, the other one envious; one wishing for its neighbour exactly what it wishes for itself, the other one wishing to subject its neighbour to its rule; one ruling its neighbour to the neighbour's profit, the other one to its own profit."⁴²

When the Rule states that perfection consists in placing the common good before one's own, it does not prescribe something valid for a religious community only, but the attitude that may bring about a society built upon justice and peace. Christianity, the way of love and sharing, has something to say to a divided and unjust world, where sharing the earth's goods is far from being achieved.

The way par excellence

1 Co 12:31-13:13 is part of the section devoted to the Holy Spirit's gifts. These gifts may be called in different ways: charisms, ministries, activities. The Spirit grants them to whomever He pleases: they are many and various as people are, but all are conducive to unity, given that their source is always the same Spirit (12:1-11). The

⁴¹ *Genesi alla lettera* 11, 15, 19, in *Works of St. Augustine*, IX/2, Città Nuova, Roma 1989, p. 581.

⁴² *Genesi alla lettera* 11, 15, 20, in *Works of St. Augustine*, IX/2, Città Nuova, Roma 1989, p. 581. Augustine considers this topic several times, that is the relationship between common good and private good. Cf. *Il libero arbitrio [Freedom to decide]* 3, 1, 1; *Music* 6, 16, 53; *True religion* 15, 112; *Letter* 140, 28, 68; *The Trinity* 12, 9, 14; *Confessions* 12, 25, 34.

community is similar to a body, one body consisting of many members (12:12-27). There is a hierarchy of charisms (12:28-30), but the parts which are the weakest and poorest should be surrounded with the greatest dignity. Only love makes the community one, and love is the only criterion by which all the different charisms can be judged. Love is the way par excellence, not one of the many possible ways: it is the way by which diversity can become unity (12:31).

Chapter 13 starts with a verb in the first person singular: “Though I command languages... And though I have the power of prophecy... Though I should give away to the poor...” Then, each of us is confronted with this truth: “If I am without love, I am nothing.” (1 Co 13:2) With no love, even the most important, grand or heroic actions of ours would be pointless.

It must be pointed out that here – similarly to the Rule – God is not explicitly mentioned, but of course He is implied. The progress I am making on the path to perfection can be measured by my love for others.

Love is described by St Paul by a series of verbs, seven of which are positive, eight negative (13:4-7). Now we shall deal with them one by one.

First of all, love is patient or, literally, ‘magnanimous’. God is magnanimous or, like the Hebrew Bible says, “slow to anger”⁴³ (cf Ex 34:6; Nb 14:18; Ne 9:17; Ps 7:12a; 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jl 2:13; Na 1:3) and “compassionate” (Gn 4:2; Ws 15:1; Si 2:11; 5:4). Closely linked with this quality is God’s promptness to forgive. In the parable of the ‘unforgiving debtor’ (Mt 18:23-35) the true meaning of God’s magnanimity is shown by the master’s attitude towards the servant who begged him to be patient: God is offering us true liberty, and the trust He places in us gives us the necessary strength to start walking again. We, in our turn, should “let others go and cancel their debt” (cf Mt 18:27), make room for them, let them breathe freely, so that they may feel respectable and well-loved. In fact, love is magnanimous because it does not judge the brother or sister according to what he or she is at present, rather according to what he or she will become in the future. Love is magnanimous because it always places trust in others.

Love is also kind. This kindness is closely linked with the magnanimity of Col 3:14. It is God’s own goodness, as it was revealed in Jesus Christ (cf Ep 2:7; Tt 3:4): it is meant to bring us to repentance (Rm 2:4; Ep 4:32).

Love is never jealous. Jealousy gives rise to quarrels (cf Rm 13:13; 2 Co 12:20; Jm 3:14,16) and is the feeling of those who are still living by their natural inclinations, that is, who are selfish (1 Co 3:3), who are still infants in Christ and have to be fed with milk and not solid food, that is with the crucified Christ’s oblation of love.

Love is not boastful: this verb occurs only here in the Bible. Its meaning is explained by the following verb: “love is not conceited”. The latter is typical of Paul’s (1 Co 4:6,18,19; 5:2; 8:1; Col 2:18). In 1 Co 8:1 love that builds up is opposed to knowledge that puffs up. Knowledge of Christ who sets us free is useless unless it is coupled with love, with which freedom will be used not as an opening for self-indulgence but in order to be servants to one another (cf Ga 5:13).

Love is never rude: cf Rm 1:27; Rv 16:15. Love does not make use of others as the objects of its selfishness; it rather recognizes the dignity of each and every person.

Love never seeks its own advantage. St Augustine is focussing on the quality of love, which can enable monks to genuinely share everything with their community. Love never seeks its own advantage, be it either material goods or the fulfilment of

⁴³ Greek Bible translates “slow to anger” with “magnanimous”.

one's own wishes or to make others agree with one's own views. Love is always ready to take into consideration other people's circumstances, needs and difficulties.

When St Paul deals with the matter of food sacrificed to idols, and whether it is permissible to eat it, he reminds the Corinthians that now – as far as eating regulations are concerned – they are definitely free in Christ: “Eat anything that is sold in butchers' shops; there is no need to ask questions for conscience's sake, since ‘To the Lord belong the earth and all it contains.’ (Ps 24:1) If an unbeliever invites you to a meal, go if you want to, and eat whatever is put before you; you need not ask questions of conscience first.” (1 Co 10:25-27) In fact, “for us there is only one God, the Father from whom all things come and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist.” (1 Co 8:6) Yet, this sublime knowledge, should it disregard other people's feelings, would be just an excuse for being prouder. Should it become an excuse for doing what I like, it would not really be genuine. On the contrary, it should make me ready to love my brothers with the same love Christ loved them with and died for them. (cf 1 Co 8:11) So Paul, though he was not slave to any human being, put himself in slavery to all people (1 Co 9:19) and in everything he did, he tried to accommodate everybody in everything, not looking for his own advantage, but for the advantage of everybody else, so that they might be saved. (1 Co 10:33) The supreme model is Jesus Christ, who “did not indulge His own feelings” (cf Rm 15:3); but “emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are” (Ph 2:7; see also 2:21). Augustine drew his inspiration from all these texts, even though they are not explicitly quoted in his Rule. Even though Christ's name is mentioned only once in the Rule, His poverty permeates the whole of it: in fact, we cannot share the fruits of our labour unless we get rid of our own selves and of our own private interests.

Love does not take offence. Here Paul uses a term⁴⁴ which reminds us of two events recounted in Acts. The first one is the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, which occurred when Barnabas suggested taking John Mark with them, while Paul was not in favour of taking along the man who had deserted them in Pamphylia. “There was sharp disagreement so that they parted company.” (Ac 15:39) The second one is Paul's visit to Athens, when “his whole soul was revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry” (Ac 17:16).

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas must have been fierce; perhaps somebody did take offence... However, it must have been about different theological views and missionary methods (cf Ga 2:13). In the end, they parted company so that each of them could resume his missions in all freedom. It was a time of difficulty, but communion was not broken. While sticking to his own line, Paul felt the need to be in communion with the mother-church of Jerusalem, of which Barnabas was a representative. In fact, the conclusion of the First letter to the Corinthians deals with the collection for the brothers who live in Jerusalem: a gesture which expresses the deep solidarity between all those who believe in Christ.

Love does not store up grievances or, better, does not plot evil, following the Latin translation (“non cogitat malum”) which is a quote from Zechariah 8:17: “Do not secretly plot evil against one another.”

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. The relation between injustice and truth is dealt with in Rm 1:18: “The retribution of God from

⁴⁴ Its positive meaning is ‘to stir a response’ (cf Heb 10:24): «Let's pay attention to one another for stirring us to charity and to good works».

Heaven is being revealed against the ungodliness and injustice of human beings who in their injustice hold back the truth”; as well as in Rm 2:8: “For those who out of jealousy have taken for their guide not truth but injustice, there will be the fury of retribution.” (cf also 2 Th 2:10-12) Here injustice means – as in the Old Testament – falsehood, dishonesty (cf also Jn 7:18) as they are far from God’s truth. Love cannot rejoice at wrongdoing, but wishes to go after those who lost their way and find them, like Jesus, the Good Shepherd does: He leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the desert and goes after the missing one. And when He finds it, He calls His friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me.” (cf Lk 15:6,9)

One reason for the community to rejoice together may be also the fact that one of its member is honoured, (cf 1 Co 12:26) or the common realisation that faith might involve sacrificing one’s own life (cf Ph 2:17-18).

There are four verbs in 1 Co 13:7, all of which are positive. “Love is always ready to make allowances...” The verb occurs⁴⁵ in 1 Co and also in 1 Th: “We have put up⁴⁶ with anything rather than obstruct the gospel of Christ in any way.” (1 Co 9:12) “When we could not bear it any longer... we sent our brother Timothy... to keep you firm and encourage you about your faith.” (1 Th 3:1-5) The Italian Bishops’ Conference translation goes: “Love covers everything.” Of course love does not hide truth for the sake of peace and quiet; on the contrary, it bravely upholds it. The verb can also mean ‘to forgive’ as in Ps 85:2, “You blot out all their sin,” or in Ne 3:37, “Do not pardon their wickedness, may their sin never be erased before You...”

“Love is always ready to trust...”: love has a boundless faith in the sinner, it believes that his conversion is indeed possible. Love is always ready to forgive because its faith is boundless.

“Love is always ready to hope and to endure whatever comes.” Love is always ready to hope, in the same way as God is patiently waiting for us. Holy Scripture is but the revelation of the steadfastness of His infinite Love: “The Lord is waiting to be gracious to you... to take pity on you... blessed are all who hope in Him.” (Is 30:18)

Work and communion

While reading RM’s Rule of Life, I was greatly amazed at finding out that here too – as in St Augustine’s Rule – work is always linked to communion. Love that does not seek its own advantage is the fertile soil RM gets its nourishment and its life from.

The Mother of Jesus, who “led on earth an ordinary life, full of familiar cares and chores,” (Prologue of the Rule of Life) must be for each and every sister the model of communion with the whole world, in particular with those who are experiencing the same hardships and difficulties which are man’s common lot. (cf art. 18)

For us who fulfil our secular consecration in our own environment – doing an ordinary job, as ordinary people do – work is indeed our first apostolate: it must be done in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence. (cf arts. 4, 48, 54)

⁴⁵ On the NT is only found in Sir 8:17: «Don’t get advice with the stubborn, as he would not be able to cover a word».

⁴⁶ «We all put up (support) for not being an obstacle to the Gospel of Christ» (1Co 9:12). «Not being able to resist» (1 Ts 3:1.5), Paul sends Timothy to reinforce the Thessalonians in faith.

“You shall carry out everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (art. 29) If work is carried out in the name of the Lord Jesus, it is a sharing in His priesthood, prayer and praise to the Father: it is turned into a ‘liturgy’, in the awareness that even the humblest of services has a redemptive value for our brothers and sisters. (art. 48)

Very often the places where we work are embittered by envy, jealousy, rivalries, injustices, slander. They may be made better places if our love is patient and kind, never jealous, not boastful or conceited, never rude and never seeks its own advantage. In this respect, art. 33 suggests that praying – a very beautiful, secret and simple thing to do – is one of the solutions: “You shall regard intercession as the essential expression of your communion... with all the people you are in touch with for your work.”

The fruits of our work must be placed at the Family’s service, as well as at the service of all those who are in need within our environment (cf art. 19). In addition to that, we must contribute both our love and practical help to our own family, the family we keep on living with as a sign of peace and unity (cf art. 51).

7. FORGIVENESS

Lectio Divina: «Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. (...) forgive, and you will be forgiven.» (Lk 6:36-37)

St Augustine's Rule VI, 2: «...if they have offended one another, they must forgive one another's trespasses for the sake of that prayer [the Lord's Prayer] which should be recited with greater sincerity each time you repeat it.»

Rule of Life RM 42: «Evaluate your life within the Family, as it is the ecclesial place where compassion – a fundamental feature of our fraternal life – can be put into practice.»

Chapter 6 of St Augustine's Rule deals with 'Asking Pardon and Forgiving Offences'. This is its beginning: "You should either avoid quarrels altogether or else put an end to them as quickly as possible; otherwise, anger may grow into hatred, making a plank out of a splinter, and turn the soul into a murderer. For so you read, 'Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.' (1 Jn 3:15)"

The splinter and the log (Mt 7:4)

When he makes use of the term 'lites' ('quarrels'), St Augustine is not probably referring to mild disagreements, but to clashes between strong personalities, which may be overcome by patiently exercising self-control.

Holy Scripture regards quarrels as a serious obstacle if one wishes to acquire true wisdom (cf Si 28:8-12; Pr 16:28). St James wondered where wars and battles between Christians first started; the answer lies in the desires fighting inside our own selves. (Jm 4:1) In fact, "you want something and you lack it; so you kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force." (Jm 4:2) Quarrels arise out of jealousy, when someone tries to get what he sees in others by getting rid of them: he does not physically kill them, but definitely tries – however unconsciously – to mortify others so that his own position may be appreciated by all the rest.

Paul recommended to his disciple Timothy "to avoid these foolish and undisciplined speculations, understanding that they only give rise to quarrels; and a servant of the Lord must not engage in quarrels, but must be kind to everyone, a good teacher, and patient. He must be gentle when he corrects people who oppose him, in the hope that God may give them a change of mind so that they recognise the truth and come to their senses, escaping the trap of the devil who made them his captives and subjected them to his will." (2 Tm 2:23-26)

In Chapter 3 the Rule prescribed that, during meals, one should listen to the spiritual reading "without disturbance or strife". A similar attitude, meekness, should be the basis of fraternal relations. As each of us is trying not to oppose the Word, rather, to be moulded by it, so he cannot expect to change others at will or, worse, to get rid of

them just because they are different from him. In fact, he should start to pray and change his own self first, so that diversity may not stand in the way any longer.

Quarrels, disputes and clashes should never take place: they show that the heart is not peaceful but jealous, and jealousy makes truth obscure. Realistically, as far as people who are not perfect are concerned, the Rule regards quarrels as inevitable: the term 'infirmity' (weakness) is used very often. When quarrels and clashes occur, the injury should be repaired as quickly as possible, in line with the Apostle's commandment, "Never let the sun set on your anger, or else you will give the devil a foothold." (Ep 4:26-27) It is vital that disputes may be settled as soon as possible, so that "anger does not grow into hatred, making a log out of a splinter". Anger is compared to the splinter, as it is a transient passion and, after all, not very relevant; hatred is compared to the log, as it is a passion that takes root in the heart and creates irremediable division. Augustine very often made use of this image, which can be found in Mt 7:3-4 and Lk 6:41-42. As an example, we can quote some passages from his works:⁴⁷

Anger is a splinter, hatred a log. But if you add fuel to the splinter, it may become a log. An inveterate anger may become hatred⁴⁸. In order for the splinter not to become a log, "never let the sun set on your anger."⁴⁹ (Discourse 49, 7)

We must mention also Discourse 211, as it is closely linked with the Rule. Written before 410, it is one of the 'Seven Lenten Discourses' (205-211) and dealing solely with fraternal love.

One should never give vent to complaints about his neighbour, or else he will end up in ruin. (...) To get angry is human – we wish we could not do it! But our anger, which at the very beginning is like a little splinter, should never be nourished by suspicions and turn into the log of hatred. Anger and hatred are very different. A father may be angry with his child, but he will never hate him; he gets angry in order to correct his child, out of love. That is why it was said, 'You observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the great log in your own'. You censure your brother for anger, while nursing hatred in your heart! Compared to hatred, anger is like a splinter. But if you add fuel to the splinter, it may become a log. If, on the contrary, you get rid of the splinter, it will be harmless (*nihil erit*)⁵⁰.

Hatred "turns the soul into a murderer. For so you read. 'Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer'. (1 Jn 3:15)" This is the fourth explicit biblical quotation one can find in the Rule.⁵¹ It contains an idea similar to James'. Who hates his own brother may try to get rid of him, to exclude him, to make of him a non-entity; but he is also a killer because he harbours death in his heart, as Augustine explains in Discourse 211:

⁴⁷ Cf *Discourse* 49, 7; 58, 7, 8; 82, 1,1; 211, 1; 1-2, 2; 387, 2; *Commentary to the Psalms* 54, 7; 30 (2), 2, 4; 103 (3), 19; *Letter* 38, 2; *De sermone Domini in monte*, II, 19, 63; *Explanation to the letter to the Galatians*, 56.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ciceron, *Tusculane* IV, 9, 21: *odium est ira inveterata*. This phrase goes back to Zenon of Citium.

⁴⁹ cf *Discourse* 49, 7, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXIX, Città Nuova, Rome 1979, p. 937.

⁵⁰ *Discourse* 211, 1, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXXII/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1984, p. 181.

⁵¹ Rule 1, 3 (Ac 4:32,35); 4, 5 (Pr 27:20); 5, 2 (1 Co 13:5).

Who hates his brother can walk, go out, come in, advance and so on: he is not loaded with a heavy chain, he is not locked up in jail. Nonetheless he is bound by guilt. And his jail is his heart.⁵²

The Rule goes on: “Whoever has injured another by open insult, or by abusive or even incriminating language, must remember to repair the injury as quickly as possible by an apology, and he who suffered the injury must also forgive, without further wrangling.”

The verb ‘laedere’ (to damage, offend, hit) has been rendered with ‘to injure’, given that immediately afterwards the Rule speaks of ‘curare’ (to cure, heal) and, at the end of the sentence, of ‘medicamenta’ (medicaments) and ‘vulnera’ (wounds): “You must then avoid being too harsh in your words, and should they escape your lips, let those same lips not be ashamed to heal the wounds they have caused.” It is to be highlighted that a wound may be caused also by ‘criminis obiectu’, that is, by calling attention to someone’s fault⁵³ again and again. In fact, the person is not to be judged from the mistakes he made, but must always be regarded as capable of conversion. In order to forgive, we must take into account the possibility of conversion. Even though we have been wronged, we must forgive others with no argument or recrimination.

“But if they have offended one another, they must forgive one another’s trespasses for the sake of your prayers which should be recited with greater sincerity each time you repeat them.” The reference to ‘your prayers’ is not clear; that is why the following addition can be found in some manuscripts: “Whoever does not want to forgive his brother, is prevented from benefiting from prayers...” The terms ‘trespasses’ and ‘forgive’ are clear reminiscences of the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”), that the community says many times during the day.

The reference to the Lord’s Prayer occurs many times in Discourse 211:

One is the remedy thanks to which we can live: God, our Master, taught us to say in prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...” (Mt 6:12) We entered into a contract with God, we agreed upon being forgiven our trespasses but we had to offer a guarantee. We can trustfully ask, ‘Forgive us our trespasses’, provided that we forgive too. Otherwise we would deceive ourselves. Man should try not to deceive himself; and God, on His part, never deceives anybody. (211, 1)

Try to reach an agreement with your brother. If he refuses, you have a good reason to feel sorry for him; but, as far as you are concerned, you have already paid your debt. If you would like to reach an agreement but he does not, you can confidently say, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”. (211, 2)

Let us suppose that, after offending somebody, now you would like to make peace with him and say to him; “Brother, please forgive me, I have sinned against you.” If he does not forgive you, if he does not forgive your trespass, he will have to be careful when praying. What will he do? He will say, ‘Our Father, who art in Heaven...’ Then he will add, ‘Hallowed be Thy name...’, and again, ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven...’ An he will

⁵² *Discourse 211, 2*, p. 183.

⁵³ Cf. *Contra Faustum XXII, 64*, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XIV/2, Città Nuova, Roma 2004, p. 559.

go on with: ‘Give us this day our daily bread...’ But now he will have to stop and wonder how he should go on. Should he find no fault in himself and therefore no reason to say, ‘And forgive us our trespasses...’, he would disregard what the apostle John states, “If we say, ‘We have no sin,’ we are deceiving ourselves, and truth has no place in us.” (1 Jn 1:8) If, on the contrary, he is aware of his own frailties, as well as of the fact that in this world evil abounds, he will say, ‘And forgive us our trespasses...’ But he will have to be careful about what follows. If he says, ‘As we forgive those who trespass against us...’, he will be a liar; if he does not say it, he will receive nothing. So, the best thing for him is to say the truth. But how will he be able to say the truth, if he denied forgiveness to his brother? (211, 3)⁵⁴

More often the Lord’s Prayer is said, more genuinely it should be said: it is the source of a healthy life. In fact, it is defined as a ‘remedy’ at the beginning of Discourse 211 (see above). The Lord’s Prayer is a very efficacious cure for sin. “There is a remission of sin that we receive only once in life, when we are baptised; and a remission of sins that we can receive every day, thanks to the Lord’s Prayer. That is why we say, ‘And forgive us our trespasses...’ ” (Discourse 58, 5, 6, written between 412 and 416). The Lord’s Prayer sets us free from sins, heals us and therefore gives us the strength to love and forgive in our turn.

The community is the place where the brothers mutually waive their respective ‘debts’: it is the place of forgiveness, of liberation, of newness of life.

The Rule goes on: “Although a brother is often tempted to anger, yet prompt to ask pardon from one he admits to having offended, such a one is better than another who, though less given to anger, finds it too hard to ask forgiveness. But a brother who is never willing to ask pardon, or does not do so from his heart, has no reason to be in the monastery, even if he is not expelled.”

We have already seen (cf Unit 5) how a brother who refuses to submit to “amending”⁵⁵ punishment should be expelled from the community. A brother who is never willing to ask pardon should be expelled too. It might be difficult to take this measure, given that it is not possible to read somebody else’s heart. However, even if this brother is not expelled, he stays in the monastery without a valid reason, as the main reason why one is part of the community should be love. Due to his selfish love, he is not in communion with his brothers. As he did in his Confessions, here Augustine expresses his basic idea of human existence, whose ‘burden’ is love: “My burden is my love: it will go wherever I will go.” (Confessions, 13, 9, 10) Adam was not expelled from the Garden of Eden, given that God does not expel anybody. God let Adam go where the burden of his selfish love took him.⁵⁶

We should avoid being too harsh in our words; but the good of discipline may require us to speak harshly when correcting our ‘subjects’. In this case, even though we think we have been unduly harsh in our language, we are not required to ask for

⁵⁴ Discourse 56, 9, 13: «Accept every day the words that come from the heart: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. So let us do what we repeat. We have a commitment with God, an agreement, a duty. God our Lord tells you: if you forgive, then I forgive you. If you don’t forgive, then you, not me, consider your own faults against you». Cf. Also discourses 57, 58 and 59, devoted, as Discourse 56, to the Our Father; Discussion to Psalm 103, 19 (1); Letter 189, 8.

⁵⁵ Cf. unit 5.

⁵⁶ cf *De genesi contra Manichaeos*, 2, 22. See also Discourse 285, 6.

forgiveness lest, by practising too great humility towards those who should be our subjects, the authority to rule the community is undermined. But we should still ask forgiveness from the Lord, who knows with what deep affection we love even those whom we might happen to correct with undue severity. It is difficult to establish who these ‘subjects’ might be: Augustine may be referring to the common people, the humble, those who have just started to tread the path to perfection, the youth, or those who are subject to the abbot’s jurisdiction. However, from the context we gather that Augustine is not addressing the abbot only, but all the members of the community: then the term ‘subjects’ must be interpreted as ‘the youth’, or ‘little children’ (cf Mt 11:25), people of no importance.⁵⁷ Once again Discourse 211 comes to our help:

I say this to all – men and women, young and old, laymen and the clergy – I say this to myself as well. If we sinned against our brothers, all of us should listen, all of us should be fearful (...). As long as we live, let us do the Father’s will – He will be our Judge – and let us ask for forgiveness as, by sinning against our brothers, we have injured or damaged them.

Some people are humble – ‘common’, according to the opinion the world has of them – but they become proud when someone asks them for forgiveness. Now I will make myself understood. A master who has been unjust to his servant should take into consideration that both the servant and himself are servants of Jesus Christ, given that both of them have been redeemed by His blood. Still, he should never say to his servant: “Please forgive me.” Otherwise the servant would become proud. In fact, the master should repent before God, chastise his own heart in the presence of God. Even though he cannot say to his servant, “Forgive me,” he can say kind words to him, and this will be like asking for forgiveness. (211, 4)

As at the very beginning of the Rule, here Augustine deals with the basic attitude that can build up the community: ‘humilitas’, ‘humility’ making us all part of the poor, making us all servants; without it, there cannot be genuine love, there cannot be forgiveness.

Of course, the source of this humility is Jesus Christ, even though Augustine does not mention Him explicitly. He is the “Teacher of humility”:⁵⁸ Book 10 of the Confessions ends with an invocation that expresses Augustine’s wish to study at His school:

The true Mediator, whom You revealed and sent to us men by the secret means of Your mercy, so that we could follow His example and learn humility itself, is Jesus Christ, the Mediator between God and men. (...) Good Father, You so loved us that You did not spare Your only-begotten Son, and You handed Him over to evil men for our sake. For our sake He was obedient unto death, and death on a cross. (...) Rightly I put my trust in Him, who can heal me.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ cf L. Verheijen, *St Augustine’s Rule*, Palermo 1986. We gather from Letter 209, 3 and Discourse 356, 7 that teenagers and young people used to live in Augustinian monasteries.

⁵⁸ cf *Discourse* 207, 2; and also 205, 1; 206, 1.

⁵⁹ *Confessions* X, 43, in *Works of St. Augustine*, I, Città Nuova, Rome 1965, p. 361-363.

It is easy to understand then why St Augustine ended Chapter 6 of his Rule thus: “You are to love one another with a spiritual rather than an earthly love.” The Pauline terminology refers us to 1 Co 3:1. Selfish love brings about “divisions and quarrels”; spiritual love, i.e. Christ’s oblation of love, makes the community one.

Whatever you loose on earth...

Spiritual love – Jesus Christ’s love, who gave Himself as a ransom for many – is the focus of the passage we have chosen for our Lectio (Lk 6:36-37). This kind of love marks His disciples (they even have to love their enemies); it is the believers’ distinctive ‘grace’ (‘charis’). In fact, “if you love those who love you, what ‘grace’ can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what ‘grace’ can you expect? For even sinners do that much. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to get money back, what ‘grace’ can you expect? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount.” (Lk 6:32-34) The comparison between the Christians’ and the sinners’ behaviour reveals why Christian love is basically different: it is given anyway, even though there is no return. The Italian Bishops’ Conference translation of the Bible renders ‘charis’ with ‘merit’, while the new official translation is more literal and uses the word ‘grace’. In fact, what Luke is trying to say has nothing to do with merit; rather, with imitating God’s love, a love which goes beyond merit. Therefore, here ‘charis’ means ‘gratuitous love’: “If you love those who love you, how can your love be gratuitous?” How does your love reflect God’s own love, which is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked”? (Lk 6:35)

“Love your enemies and do good to them, and lend without any hope of return.” (Lk 6:35a) The reward for this kind of love will be huge: to be a child of the Most High (cf Mt 5:45), to experience a very deep and genuine relation with Him. The reward is God Himself, the light and meaning of our life. Who loves the Father will behave like Him, who is kind to the ungrateful (the “loveless”) and the wicked, that is, to all those who do not know what love means, or are not capable of responding to love.

To be children of the Most High is not just an eschatological promise, rather a commitment that must be fulfilled in this life too. Only God is merciful,⁶⁰ we must become like Him: “Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.” (Lk 6:36) Four actions are required on this path: “Do not judge... do not condemn... forgive... give...” (Lk 6:37-38) We should never judge and condemn – we are in no way better than those we are judging, and we may be in the same difficulties and make the same mistakes. We should always try to forgive and give. The term ‘forgive’ translates the original ‘loose’: “Loose, and you will be loosened.” Forgiveness is seen as freedom, the freedom to start walking again. The evangelist uses this verb when talking about release from prison (cf Ac 4:21,23; 5:40; 16:35,36; 17:9; 26:32; 28:18; Heb 13:23), or leave-taking of people, communities or groups (Ac 13:3; 15:30,33; 19:41; 23:22; 28:25). In the gospel we must highlight the passage of the Gerasene demoniac: after healing him, Jesus ‘loosened’ the demoniac (cf Lk 8:38) who asked to be allowed to stay with Him; but that was not possible, as he had a different mission: “Go back home and report all that God has done for you.” (Lk 8:39) Being freed by Jesus, he could go back to his life and proclaim God’s love.

⁶⁰ For a definition of God as «merciful and compassionate» cf Ex 34:6; 2 Ch 30:9; Ne 9:17,31; Ps 86:15; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; Si 2:11; Jl 2:13; Gn 4:2.

While He was teaching in one of the synagogues on a Sabbath day, Jesus called a woman who for eighteen years had been possessed by a spirit that crippled her and said, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” (Lk 13:12) He laid His hands on her and the woman straightened up and glorified God. The president of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, but Jesus answered him: “Is there one of you who does not untie his ox or his donkey from the manger on the Sabbath and take it out for watering? And this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has held bound these eighteen years – was it not right to untie this bond on the Sabbath day?” (Lk 13:15-16)

Again, on a Sabbath, Jesus had gone to share a meal in the house of one of the leading Pharisees. He took a dropsical man and cured him and sent him away (cf Lk 14:4) It is on Sabbaths that Jesus loosens the bonds preventing people from moving with liberty and dignity, because the Sabbath day used to be a reminder of the Jews’ liberation from slavery in Egypt and of their entrance into the Promised Land, where everybody was free, a brother among brothers (cf Dt 5:15).

Jesus always tried to loosen the bonds that mortify the person, by His forgiveness and generosity. In fact, He said to Peter, in his capacity as the community’s representative: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven.” (Mt 18:18; 16:19) The second part of this sentence is more important than the first one. Jesus asks us to loose as many people as we can, because nobody should be left bound, but everybody should be offered the opportunity to start walking again, to feel loved and appreciated, even if one’s debt is so huge that it will never be paid. (Cf Mt 18:27 – the master “looses” the debtor, he lets him go and cancels the debt.)

The place where compassion is put into practice

RM’s Rule of Life defines God as “faithful and compassionate” (cf art. 12; Ex 34:6). Putting our trust in Him, we are “ready to exchange views with everybody in charity” (art. 12): without love, our secular consecration would be pointless.

Therefore each Sister, while she “silently announces Christ”, becomes for everybody “the haven where God never stops reconciling them to Himself” (art. 11) and the whole Family is “the ecclesial place where compassion can be put into practice.” (art. 42)

“You shall hold dearer – art. 52 recommends – all those that you can recognize as very poor, and be at their side in the laborious march towards freedom.” The poor may be either members of our Family or outside it, but in any case they want to be set free from their burdens and difficulties: they need to be forgiven and appreciated so that they can start walking again. RM is a small ‘church’, a community made up not of perfect people, but of poor people who always need to be supported and forgiven. Any church can be like the evangelical yeast within society, provided that it becomes a place of compassion and reconciliation. We should be merciful to everybody, with no prejudices and strictness. Thus we will be able to recognise God’s call for conversion in the events of our lives.

The strength to forgive “seventy-seven” times (cf Mt 18:22) derives from the awareness that we have already been forgiven by God. Our Rule of Life suggests: “In the sacrament of Reconciliation you shall take the opportunity to frequently experience God’s mercy; you shall proclaim it by celebrating with the priest the liturgy of the

Church, always reforming and renewing herself.” (art. 31d) St Augustine’s Rule reminded us that we can also get God’s forgiveness by reciting the Lord’s Prayer and committing ourselves to “forgive those who trespass against us”. It is by God’s grace that our fraternity becomes the place where we are sacramentally reborn as people set free by love.

8. FREEDOM

Lectio Divina: «...sin will no longer have any power over you – you are living not under the law, but under grace.» (Rm 6:14)

St Augustine's Rule VII, 1: «May the Lord grant you to observe all these precepts in a spirit of charity as lovers of spiritual beauty.»

Rule of Life RM 58: «Be aware that you will grow in evangelical freedom in so far as you strive to put off yourself and put on Christ.»

St Augustine's Rule ends with a prayer: "May the Lord grant you to observe all these precepts in a spirit of charity as lovers of spiritual beauty, giving forth the good odour of Christ in the holiness of your lives: not as slaves living under the law but as men living in freedom under grace."

The beginning and the end of the Rule are similar. The former states the basic law for life in common: to be intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart. The latter prescribes how that law should be observed: as lovers of spiritual beauty. By comparing the beginning and the end we realise that the beauty St Augustine is speaking of is God Himself, and also that the purpose of his whole Rule is to lead men to the contemplation of God.

Beauty

The phrase 'lovers of beauty' is a quote from Si 44:6, "Homines divites in virtute, / pulchritudinis studium habentes, / pacificantes in domibus suis", "men endowed with strength, who love beauty and bring peace to their homes." In fact, the whole chapter 44 is dear to the Servants of Mary, given that the Legend of the Origins makes use of it when it starts recounting the story of our Order's Fathers.

In the first unit of this essay we have already mentioned that the Rule – a series of moral precepts leading to the contemplation of spiritual Beauty – is closely linked with an early philosophical work by Augustine, 'De Ordine',⁶¹ dedicated to a Zenobius, whom Augustine describes as 'lover of beauty', exactly as he will do later on when speaking of his confrères ('lovers of spiritual beauty'). In this dialogue, written in December 386, Augustine debates whether it is possible to find out a rational law behind all that exists. The divine order can be found out inscribed in the wise man's mind: by studying the liberal arts (grammar, dialectics, rethoric, music, geometry, astronomy, arithmetics), understood as the ways to exercise his reason, and by following the moral precepts, the wise man can draw unity from the multifarious, and thus contemplate God. Beauty and the harmony of an orderly life will lead him to know the source of beauty itself. "If she can get the right value of ratios, the soul will be ashamed to find out that while – thanks to her knowledge – a poem is well articulated and its meaning well rendered, or the sound of the lyre is similar to human singing, she

⁶¹ Cf. L. VERHEIJEN, *St. Augustine Rule*, p. 166-173. However, it has to be taken in consideration that for Augustine is precisely this perfect spiritual communion the one that opens the soul towards the contemplation of God.

is being led astray by passions and vices, and she is not in harmony with her very self. But once she has come to unity, order, harmony and beauty within herself, then she will come to the vision of God and of the source of truth; she will come to the vision of the Maker of Truth Himself. O great God, what will those eyes be like? How healthy, how beautiful, how piercing, how deep, how peaceful, how happy! What will they be gazing at? [...] The vision of harmony, in whose light reality is beautiful, but compared to which it is hideous. Who will be able to see that harmony? The one who lives, prays, philosophises well.” (Dialogues, I, 19, 50-51)⁶²

Augustine explicitly states in ‘De Ordine’ that this lesson comes from Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher who looked at the quest for the Invisible, friendship and communion of goods⁶³ as man’s highest ideals. Only those who are free and pure can contemplate the invisible God. The path Augustine marked out in De Ordine is prescribed in the Rule as well, which aims at freeing man from self-love while making of him a true lover of divine beauty.

This connection between Augustine and Pythagoras is not an accepted truth. According to N. Cipriani, “the precepts of the Rule are not aimed at preparing man for contemplation, rather for life in common and perfect communion.”⁶⁴ In fact, Augustine believes that it is indeed perfect communion that prepares the soul for the contemplation of God. And life in common is the way to God.

Augustine’s philosophical training – according to Neo-Platonic and Pythagoric principles – did not prevent him from going deeper and deeper into the Christian faith. Rather, it was faith that let him discover that beauty which can be clearly seen only by those who have purified their souls and minds. In ‘De Vera Religione’, a work he published in 390, Augustine wrote: “If he were alive in these days and did not despise my questions, or one of his disciples had questioned him while he was still alive, Plato would have persuaded him that truth cannot be seen with bodily eyes, but with a pure mind; and also that whoever adheres to truth can find happiness and come to perfection. There is nothing that can prevent the soul from finding truth more than a life devoted to pleasure and to the false images derived from all that can be perceived with the body, which give rise to quarrels and mistakes. Therefore, the soul must be restored to health so that it can fix its gaze on the unchangeable shape of things and on beauty, unchangeable too, neither divided by space nor transformed by time, one and with every single part identical to the others: men do not believe that such a beauty exists, but it does, really, indeed.”⁶⁵

The believer can recognize the divine beauty in the harmony of Creation. “The divine wisdom reaches from one end of the world to the other. (Ws 8:1) The Artificer arranged all His works in an orderly fashion, and all are conducive to beauty. In His goodness He never denied beauty to any of His creatures, that beauty which comes from Him only.”⁶⁶

The divine beauty shines especially in the grace we have been given through Christ. He is the most handsome of all men, (cf Ps 45:3) as He is equal to the Father and

⁶² *Works of St. Augustine*, III/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1970, p. 355.

⁶³ VERHEIJEN (*op. cit.*, p. 177-189) has demonstrated the relationship between the formation programme of *De ordine* and that one of the Pythagorical sources.

⁶⁴ N. CIPRIANI, *Introduzione alla Regola [Introduction to the Rule]*, in *Works of St. Augustine*, VII/2, Città Nuova, Roma 2001, p. 14 (note n° 18).

⁶⁵ *De vera religione* 3, 3, in *Works of St. Augustine*, VI/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1995, p. 21.

⁶⁶ *De vera religione* 39, 72, *ibid.*, p. 109-111.

the Lord of Creation. Even His festering wounds are beautiful, as He died on the Cross to redeem His brothers.⁶⁷ He is handsome, because love is equal to beauty. When he has to explain 1 Jn 4:19 (“Let us love, then, because He first loved us.”) Augustine writes: “How could we love, if He had not first loved us? By love we have become friends; but He loved us when we were still His enemies, so that we could become His friends. He first loved us and made us able to love Him in our turn. At the time we did not love Him yet. By loving Him, we can become beautiful. [...] God is beauty for ever and ever; in Him there can be neither ugliness nor change. He first loved us when we were still ugly. He did not love us in order to send us back still ugly as we were, but to change us into beautiful people. How can we become beautiful? By loving Him who is handsome for ever and ever. The more love grows within our selves, the more beauty can grow too: charity (love) is in fact the soul’s beauty.”⁶⁸

The beauty of Christ is His divinity. By taking flesh, Christ assumed our own ugliness, that is, our own mortality, so that He could make us similar to Him and prompt us to love inner beauty. Even if He is the most handsome of all men, Jesus does neither have charm to attract us, nor beauty to win our hearts, as Isaiah says. (53:2) The Word has emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave. (cf Ph 2:7) “He had neither beauty nor charm, but He could give you both beauty and charm. Which beauty? Which charm? Charity’s love. You are already handsome: but you had better look at Him who made you handsome, rather than at your own self, lest you should loose what you have gained.”⁶⁹

Now we can better understand why in the Rule, after hinting at spiritual Beauty, Augustine utters Christ’s name for the first and only time: those who love God, the supreme Beauty, must give forth the good odour of Christ (cf 2 Co 2:15; 1 P 2:12; 3:16) by the holiness of their life in common (cf Jm 3:13; 1 P 3:16). Christ’s beauty and His love shine through the beauty of the community’s love. Unity is the true beauty of the Church. “ ‘If you do not know this, O loveliest of women,’ (Sg 1:8) know yourself! How will you be able to know yourself? [...] In fact, you are beautiful and one of your features should be unity, given that division is equal to ugliness, not beauty.”⁷⁰

Not slaves, but free men

The precepts of the Rule must be observed in a spirit of charity. We must be lovers of spiritual beauty, we must be brothers and sisters giving forth the good odour of Christ by their lives, brothers and sisters who are not living under the law any longer, but under grace. (Rm 6:14)

Chapter 6 of Romans is Paul’s reply to the objection stirred up by his previous statement, that is, that we are saved by pure grace. “But however much sin increased, grace was always greater; so that as sin’s reign brought death, so grace was to rule

⁶⁷ «Remember to love with all your heart the one that among the children of mankind is the most beautiful (Ps 44, 3). [...] Consider the beauty of the beloved one. Consider him the same as the Father and obedient also to the mother; lord in heaven and servant here in earth; creator of all things and created as one of them. Admire what from him other destroy. With inner eyes look at the wounds of the crucified, the scars of the risen, the blood of the dying, the price paid for the believers, the exchange made by the Saviour». (*Holy virginity*, 54, 55, in *Works of St. Augustine*, VII/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1978, p. 155-157.

⁶⁸ *Commentary to 1Jn 9,9*, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXIV/2, Città Nuova, Rome 1968, p. 1829.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Discourse 46, 37*, in *Works of St. Augustine*, XXIX, Città Nuova, Rome 1979, p. 853.

through saving justice that leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rm 5:20b-21) Should we remain in sin so that grace may be given the more fully? This objection is a pure nonsense, given that, according to Paul, Christians have died to sin. “You cannot have forgotten that all of us, when we were baptised into Christ Jesus, were baptised into His death. So by our baptism into His death we were buried with Him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glorious power, we too should begin living a new life.” (Rm 6:3-4) It is interesting to note that Paul does not say, “so that we may be raised from the dead too,” but rather, “so that we should begin living a new life,” that is, to live according to the resurrection of Christ, according to the new way of life Jesus established by His resurrection.

We should reveal these new potentialities by our lifestyle, by living in the risen Jesus Himself. “Our former self was crucified with Him, so that the self which belonged to sin should be destroyed and we should be freed from the slavery of sin. Someone who has died, of course, no longer has to answer for sin.” (Rm 6:6-7) The “self which belonged to sin” is our old creature which is a slave of sin. “You must not allow sin to reign over your mortal bodies and make you obey their desires; or give any parts of your bodies over to sin to be used as instruments of evil. Instead, give yourselves to God...” (Rm 6:13) The body is the basic element of the human person. Not only does the person have a body, it is itself a body. That is why, at the resurrection of the dead, our bodies will be resurrected: “What is sown is perishable, but what is raised is imperishable; what is sown is contemptible, but what is raised is glorious; what is sown is weak, but what is raised is powerful; what is sown is a natural body, and what is raised is a spiritual body.” (1 Co 15:42-44) The risen body is the human person in its glory, free from any kind of selfishness that would make it dead.

By baptism we have been immersed in God’s love: it is a love always fresh, renewing us; it is a faithful love. In fact, “Christ has been raised from the dead and will never die again. Death has no power over Him any more.” (Rm 6:9) Christ’s resurrection is a turning point of human history. The life the risen Christ now lives is life with God and we, too, are dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus: (cf Rm 6:11) we are neither living by our natural inclinations (cf Rm 7:5), nor in the world, (cf Col 2:20) that is, according to the principle of self-sufficiency; but in our Lord Jesus Christ we live for God only, with the freedom he have been given by God’s grace.

Sin has no power over us any longer, because we are not living under the law – understood as a series of works by which we could save ourselves while, in fact, we would be multiplying the offences – but under grace, under a love which saves us freely, and does not take into consideration our ‘performances’.

Infirmity and grace

In St Augustine’s work, the couple love-freedom appears for the first time in a book written while he was living in Rome (387-388): *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* (The customs of the Catholic Church). This is the first of Augustine’s writings against Manichaeism, the heresy he had adhered to for some time before converting to Christianity, which stated that the Old Testament God is wicked and has nothing to do with the God preached by Christ. In *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* 28, 56 Augustine deals with the ‘medicine of the soul’, that is, a medicine for all those who are treading evil’s path. Two sides must be taken into consideration: “coercion and instruction.

Coercion makes use of fear, instruction makes use of love, that love that we must bear all those we are helping by discipline. Without love there can be neither repression nor instruction. God Himself, from whose goodness and leniency derives what we are, established as a rule for discipline both coercion and love. Both of them can be found in the Old as well as in the New Testament; still, fear is prevalent in the Old Testament, while love in the New; in the former the Apostles preached slavery, in the latter, freedom.”⁷¹

Augustine then addresses the Church directly as “the most genuine mother of the Christians” and states: “Thanks to you we can understand why we sin more seriously if we are aware of the law than if we are not. ‘The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin comes from the Law,’ (1 Co 15:56) with which it can hit more severely and destroy our awareness that the precepts have been broken. Thanks to you we can understand how useless the works done out of respect for the law are, if lust ravaging the spirit is restrained by fear of punishment but not destroyed by love for virtue”.⁷²

A believer behaves well not for fear of punishment, but for the love which unites him to God. Therefore, the rule should be observed ‘cum dilectione’, with love; the observance of the rule must come from a free gift, more and more thorough.

Even though it is implied in the concept of love-freedom, the phrase ‘under grace’ cannot be found in *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*; it can be found in the first of Augustine’s writings as a priest, *De Utilitate Credendi* (391-392). The Manicheans are right when they state that all those who live under the law are slaves. However, Augustine adds, the proclamation of the law was a good thing, given that it prepared us for grace, Christ’s grace freeing us from any slavish fear and urging us to surrender ourselves to love only. This is why St Paul states that the law well accomplished the task of the pedagogue until Christ came (cf Ga 3:4). “The One who gave men a pedagogue to fear, then gave them a Master to love”.⁷³

The important work *Expositio Quarundam Propositionum ex Epistola ad Romanos* (Commentary to some proposals of the Letter of St Paul to the Romans) belongs to the same period. In chapter 35, dealing with Rm 6:14, Augustine states that, as we are still weak human beings, we are subjected to the law of sin which fascinates us; however, as we live also “under grace”, we can resist temptation by fighting against it: this struggle will end only when we die. This concept is then resumed in chapter 45, when Augustine deals with Rm 7:23-25, and also in chapter 47, dealing with Rm 8:1 (“Thus, condemnation will never come to those who are in Christ Jesus”). If we still have sensual desires, we do not deserve condemnation; but we should never satisfy them: this would show that we are still under the law and not under grace.

The same concepts and words can be found in another work written while he was a priest, the Commentary to the Letter to the Galatians, 46. The history of humanity can be divided into many different periods: the first one is the ‘ante legem’ period, the period before the law came, when man did not know the law yet. Then comes the ‘sub lege’ period, the period under the law, when man came to know the law, wished he could live without breaking it, but was very weak and was defeated by sin. Then comes the ‘sub gratia’ period, the period under grace: grace is the love that the Lord made us know; to struggle with sin is still necessary, as man has not come fully to peace yet. The ‘peace’ period is the last one: man will live in peace, in the peace of life eternal, and he

⁷¹ *Works of St. Augustine*, XIII/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1997, p. 87.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 95-97.

⁷³ *Usefulness in believing* 3, 9, in *Works of St. Augustine*, VI/1, Città Nuova, Rome 1995, p. 187.

will not be subjected to evil's lures any longer. As we are now living under grace we can, despite all the temptations and trials, stand by love for justice.⁷⁴

In his first work after he was consecrated bishop (the two books *A Simpliciano su Diverse Questioni* – 396), commenting on Rm 7:14 (“I am a creature of flesh and blood”), Augustine applies it not to Paul, who was a saint, but to the man who still lives under the yoke of the Law; God’s grace can forgive sins, though, and pour the Spirit of love into men’s hearts.

Later on, Augustine changed his exegesis of Rm 7:14. In fact, when he wrote, “I am a creature of flesh and blood... I do not act as I mean to, but I do things that I hate,” Paul could have made a reference to himself. This change occurred at the time of his controversy against the Pelagians, which started in 412 and was about the difficult relation between freedom and grace. A passage from the *Ritrattazioni* (‘Recantations’), written in 426-427 when he was 72 (he will die in 430), explains the reasons for this change of mind: “In this book [Commentary to some proposals made to the Letter of Paul to the Romans] I wrote: ‘The words: We are well aware that the Law is spiritual: but I am a creature of flesh and blood, (Rm 7:14) show that the law can be carried out only by men that the divine grace has made spiritual. Later on, though, after reading some exegetes of the divine texts I regarded as authorities, I reconsidered the matter more thoroughly and realised that these words [...] might refer to the Apostle Paul too. [...] The Apostle’s words can be better understood if we refer them to the spiritual man, living under grace. We come to this conclusion after taking into consideration the creature of flesh and blood, which is not yet spiritual but will become spiritual at the resurrection of the dead, and also after taking into consideration lust: the saints must fight against it, given that, even if they do not consent to evil, in this life they are not yet free from fleshly desires, to which they try to resist. They will be free from them in the next life, when Death is swallowed up in victory. (1 Co 15:54) By taking in consideration lust and fleshly desires – still part of his life and to which he is trying to resist – each saint already living under grace can refer to himself all those expressions that in this book I referred to the man not yet living under grace, but under the law.”⁷⁵

According to Augustine, then, when he says, “I do not act as I mean to...” Paul in fact means, “I would like to be free from all lust, but I am not able to raise myself up to this level”. In this life, even Paul was not able to attain to inner peace. This simple but very important truth is expressed by the Rule too: in it, Augustine refers to his brothers as “those in more delicate health”. Before God none of us is what he would like to be. The saints aren’t: as they thoroughly know the measureless grace of God, they can feel, like Paul, the great distance dividing them from God.

No more living under the law, but living free under grace, in our community we are all poor and weak brothers and sisters, experiencing the urges of the flesh and realising that we are full of shortcomings. But what unites us is the awareness that we have all been healed out of grace and that we want to know better and better that Beauty which can ransom us from our wretchedness.

⁷⁴ Once more the structure *ante legem, sub lege, sub gratia, in pace* that is found in two of the “3 questions”, 61, 7 and 64, 3. Cf. also question 66, on which Rm 7:5-23 is quoted another time; here the apostle evokes the experience of who is under the law, and that would be freed through grace.

⁷⁵ *Recantations*, I, 23 in *Works of St. Augustine*, II, Città Nuova, Rome 1994, p. 123-125. Cf. revision made to the commentary to the letter to the Galatians (*Recantations* 24, 2, p. 131); sixty-sixth question in *Book regarding eighty-three different questions* (*Recantations*, I, 26, 2, p. 145; *Two books to Simpliciano* (*Recantations* II, 1, 1, p.151).

The mirror of our life

Many references to freedom can be found in RM's Rule of Life. Art. 1 highlights that our commitment to live a consecrated life in the world is voluntarily undertaken in order to fulfil the commandment to love (see also art. 71).

The Evangelical Counsels are not burdens, but gifts which can strengthen our freedom. By the vow of Chastity, "voluntarily undertaken for the sake of the Kingdom" (art. 8), our whole being is being fulfilled, and we can feel at peace with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters and with all creation. (cf. art. 10) We can find the Beauty mentioned in St Augustine's Rule: the beauty of the love of Christ, freeing us and letting us be in communion with everybody.

The vow of Poverty makes us extremely detached when we use material goods, so that we can both welcome Christ in our heart and convey Him to others (cf. art 15) with no hindrances or cares.

The vow of Obedience allows us to make the will of the Father our own, so that we can fulfil our union with Him and walk towards perfect freedom (cf. art. 21).

Consecrated life, in line with the Church's tradition, is defined as "a voluntary response of love by which we commit ourselves to follow Christ in the world" (art. 55). This freedom must be exercised daily: our freedom must be free from defence mechanisms and prejudices, in order to be introduced into the infinite freedom of Christ's love (art. 52). "Be aware that you will grow in evangelical freedom in so far as you strive to put off yourself and put on Christ" (art. 58). When we are confronted with life's problems, only freedom enables us to discern and to find wise solutions.

Faithfulness to the Rule is also stressed. Thanks to it, to our pondering over the Word of God, and also to a sincere and persevering dialogue with everyone, we can get enough light to discover God's will (art. 22). The Candidate's request is assessed in accordance with her ability to live the ideals expressed by RM's Rule of Life (art. 68). With the Promise, then with yearly vows, we commit ourselves to the practical observance of the Rule (cf. arts. 73, 75, 80, 81).

The Rule of Life must be carried out with faith and love (art. 24). The fulfilment of the commitments which have been undertaken must be evaluated at regular intervals: this regular evaluation is "a time for growing in the gift of yourself to God and to others" (art. 63).

The whole Family in its entirety is jointly responsible to be faithful to the Rule, the expression of the charisma which brought the Family to life as the evangelical 'seed' or the 'yeast' hidden in the world (art. 65).

We should make our Rule of Life's spirit our own (art. 73). Observance should never be pedantic. We are not slaves of the Rule, but we must fulfil it as people made free by love, wishing to offer God every day a more and more thorough gift.

The Rule becomes then, as St Augustine wrote to his monks, a mirror in which we can see ourselves and the path we are treading. "And that you may see yourselves in this little book, as in a mirror, have it read to you once a week so as to neglect no point through forgetfulness (see also Jm 1:23-25). When you find that you are doing all that has been written, give thanks to the Lord, the Giver of every good. But when one of you finds that he has failed on any point, let him be sorry for the past, be on his guard for the future, praying that he will be forgiven his fault and not be led into temptation." The

Lord's Prayer ('Our Father') – the prayer of the Community – is the seal that Augustine sets on his Rule. May this prayer, by which we ask the Lord for forgiveness, help us too to forgive one another and to be faithful – in spite of our shortcomings – to the steep and bright ascent towards the fullness of God.

INDEX

Book 2

1. *The Temple of God*

Augustinian Monasticism and the Rule
The itinerary towards conversion
Authenticity, date and structure of the Rule
One soul and one heart in front of God
Nobody lives for himself/herself
The mystery of the Church

2. *The poor's community*

Where humility is, the love dwells
How to become poor
The Lord's power

3. *Prayer*

Prayer of the heart
The gift of one's self
Prayer and action

4. *Listening*

With meekness and respect
Listen, Israel
Following the example of the Virgin

5. *Fraternal Correction*

God's gaze
Evangelical correction
Mercifully

6. *Work*

No one shall perform any task for his own benefit
The way par excellence
Work and communion

7. *Forgiveness*

The splinter and the log (Mt 7:4)
Whatever you loose on earth ...
The place where compassion is put into practice

8. *Freedom*

Beauty

Not slaves, but free men

Infirmity and grace

The mirror of our life

“
No one shall perform any task
for his own benefit
but all your work shall be done
for the common good
with great commitment
and attention, as if it were done
for oneself. In fact, love never seeks
”
its own advantage

- from the *Rule of St. Augustine* -

Pier Giorgio M. Di Domenico was born on 2 December 1940; became part of the Order of the Servants of Mary in 1964; together with other brothers, he tried to give, since 1974, «a more open space for the contemplative characteristics» of the Order (*Cost. OSM*, 4). This research has made him live in different places in Italy: first Montefano (Macerata), then Casola di Canossa (Reggio Emilia), Ronzano (Bologna), Matera, Arco (Trento), where he lives at present. Other tasks in his life are preaching and teaching subjects like History of Christian Spirituality.