

## Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

One of the key dimensions of Saint Augustine's conversion experience was his realisation of the truth that the God whom he was seeking was not somewhere outside. God is at the heart of every creature, holding it in existence. Augustine came to see that what attracted him in the people and the things around him was God hidden in their depths but revealing himself in the beauty of what he has made. Creatures are attractive in so far as they share in the beauty of God. He realised also that the God who attracted him in others was at the centre of his own being.

This is true even when we are in mortal sin - that is to say when we have chosen by our behaviour to harden our hearts against grace and to turn our back on God. In that condition we refuse to live in communion with God, but God is still in the centre of our being holding us in existence. We are unable to receive God's love, but God is still there offering it. God does not stop loving us, and does not go away from us. If we obstinately persist in sin our souls will die, but it is important to believe that God is still with us, longing to give us the fullness of life. Saint John of the Cross reminds us that 'should this essential presence be lacking to us, we would all cease to exist' (*Spiritual Canticle*, 11.3). He also writes: 'It brings special happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a soul in mortal sin' (*Spiritual Canticle* 1,8).

This means that whenever, like the prodigal son, we realise how foolish we are to have blocked ourselves off from God's grace, we know that what we have to do is not go searching for an absent God, but go back to our own heart where we know that we will find Him. It will not be easy as we will have to burn off a lot of the rubbish that we have let accumulate in our lives, we will have to clear away a lot of the stuff that is blocking the spring, and we will have to let go a lot of attachments that have distracted us from our real longings, but we know that God will always welcome us home, and give us all the grace we need to find the peace for which we long - the peace found only in communion with him.

The presence of God to a soul in grievous sin is nothing compared to his presence to a soul who is living in grace. The difference is not with God. God is in our heart in both situations. When we are living in grace, however, we are open to God's love and we enjoy its fruits. God is within us. When we live in His grace, we open up our hearts, our feelings, our minds and our affections to allow his love to permeate our being. Again, let us listen to Saint John of the Cross: 'O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit, who long to know where your beloved is and where you may find him so as to be united with him. He dwells within you. You are yourself the tabernacle, his secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart's longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without him' (*Spiritual Canticle* 1,7).

It is our faith that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell in the soul in grace. That is to say, that the inner life of God – the love-giving that is God – is happening deep within the

soul that lives in grace, and that such a person is drawn into this divine embrace. We are a sacred place where God chooses to be and to share his life (*2Corinthians 6:16*). Do not expect to feel this presence. It is a matter of faith. John of the Cross tells us: 'However surely it may seem that you find, experience, and understand God, you must, because He is inaccessible and concealed, always regard Him as hidden. Do not be like the many foolish people who, in their lowly understanding of God, think that when they do not understand, taste, or experience Him, He is far away and utterly concealed' (*SC. 1,12*).

John of the Cross speaks of a third kind of presence of God in the soul - a special intimacy given to those who long for it (*Spiritual Canticle, 11.3*). It is especially in the communion with Jesus experienced in the Eucharist that we enjoy this intimacy. This is what we mean when we speak of eating the flesh of Christ and drinking his blood. We eat his flesh when that for which we most hunger is to be united to Jesus in the suffering which he endured as he gave his life for us in love. This is what we are asked to do for each other, especially in the intimacy of family. Just as Jesus gave his body for us, so a wife is to give her body – that is to say her whole human person for her husband and family; likewise for the husband – he is called, like Jesus to give himself, all of himself, for his wife and children.

To drink the blood of Christ is to pour out our life, as he did, for those who ask love of us. That is why Jesus asked his disciples if they were able and willing to drink the cup that he was to drink. When we approach the Eucharistic table and take his broken body in our hands, and put our lips to the cup, we are saying that we are willing to do what Jesus did. But we are also recognising that we cannot live in this way without the love and the strength which he gives us when he comes in this special way into our bodies in communion. This is the primary meaning of the Mass. The sermon may be boring, because we priests are human like everyone else. The liturgy may be repetitious and unexciting. But please do not let that distract you from the gift that is being offered here from the altar.

Jesus says to each of us: 'I am yours and for you. I am delighted to be what I am, so as to be yours and to give myself to you' (*John of the Cross, Living Flame 3,6*). And we reply: 'How gently and lovingly you stir in my breast where in secret you dwell alone; and in your sweet breathing filled with good and glory how delicately you swell my heart with love!' (*John of the Cross, Living Flame 4*).

In today's Gospel, Jesus says: 'As I draw my life from the Father, so the person who eats me will draw life from me' (*John 6:57*). Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. When we receive communion here at the Eucharist, we, the thirsty branches, draw life from the vine. We receive the love which God gives to his Son and we are drawn to share in Jesus' love which he offers to his Father. We are enfolded in the embrace of the Spirit that binds Jesus to his Father and binds the Father to him. John of the Cross writes (*Romance 4,15-17*): 'Our Bridegroom takes us tenderly in his arms and there gives us his love. And when we are thus one, He lifts us to the Father, where God's own joy is ours.'

For as the Father and the Son and the Spirit who proceeds from them live in one another, so it is with the one Jesus loves. Taken wholly into God, we live the life of God'. When we offer the Mass, we are invited by the Church to offer ourselves, so that when the bread and wine are transformed by God into the body and blood of Christ, we are transformed with them, so that our heart gradually becomes the heart of Jesus, so that our thoughts become his thoughts, our love becomes his love, our judgments become his. In this way we become more and more perfectly united to God and to all those who receive communion with us (see Vatican II SC 48). This is at the very centre of what it means to be parish.

We are invited to offer everything we do including our family and married life, our daily work and relaxation and the hardships as well. Our prayer and our hope is that all of these will be transformed, and in this way, the Vatican Council tells us, 'the laity consecrate the world itself to God'(LG 34).

In today's second reading Saint Paul reminds us that our lives are meant to redeem this poor distracted world. We will do so only by allowing our inner selves to be transformed by God who dwells within us. Nowhere does this happen more intimately than here at the Eucharist. Let us prepare today in a special way to receive him for whom our hearts long, and let us pray to be drawn into an ever deeper love of God.

At the beginning of the homily I spoke of Saint Augustine's conversion. He explains what he means by loving God: 'O God, what do I love in loving you? It is not the beauty of the bodies, nor their perishable grace, nor the radiance of the light so dear to my eyes, sweet melodies with their various sounds, sweet smells of flowers, perfumes, aromas, spices, manna, honey, nor limbs made for carnal embraces. No, this is not what I love when I love my God ... And yet there is a light, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace that I love when I love my God. It is the light, the voice, the perfume, the embrace of my deepest self, where there shines in my soul a light that is not limited by space, where melodies are heard that time does not drive away, where perfumes are wafting that are not scattered by the wind, where I taste a food that cannot be devoured no matter how hungry I am and where I experience an embrace that continues to draw me. This is what it means to love my God'[Augustine Confessions 10,6(9)].