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CURIA GENERALIZIA AGOSTINIANA
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MESSAGE OF THE PRIOR GENERAL TO ALL YOUNG AUGUSTINIANS

*" See, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"
(Is 43,19).*

Dear brothers and sisters:

At this time when the Church reflects on young people (The Synod of the Bishops, World Youth Day), I would like to address you, our brothers and sisters of the Order of St. Augustine who are in this stage of life, and who make up a significant part of the Order, and have a very important perspective and responsibility. In your hands is the future of the Order.

We are preparing the Augustinian Youth Encounter, and recently I addressed a letter to the youth who participate in our schools, parishes and other Augustinian youth groups.¹ However, I would also like to be in special contact with you, our young Augustinian brothers and sisters. I write to you from my heart with a desire to continue the dialogue already begun in various encounters and visits where I was able to meet you and come to know you better. I sincerely believe that your contribution is essential and, therefore, should not be addressed from complacent flattery, but from trust, necessity and clarity, and always in a spirit of friendship.

1. The courage to be young

Our Order, already in its origins, was an effective engine of renewal in the Church and must continue to be so. The Augustinians are in five continents developing many activities and pastoral services, attentive to the needs of the Church. We know how to integrate various cultures and sensitivities, keeping alive our special charism, the gift inspired by the Spirit, as we live at a particular time and in certainly complex circumstances. The Order is changing rapidly and will soon have a profile diverse from that which we are familiar. This demands from all of us, now and in the coming years, a profound and serene reflection. Together we will find the most appropriate ways to "be" in the world, to live the Augustinian charism at the present time. We remember the words of the Second Vatican Council: "The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time."²

¹ Cf. Letter of the Prior General to Young People, March 19, 2018

² *Perfectae caritatis*, 2.

Our era is characterized by great contrasts and enormous challenges. Being aware of the difficulties should not separate us from a hopeful attitude towards the future while communicating enthusiasm. That is why I ask you to abandon all pessimism. Do not listen to the negative and destructive voices, eternally sad, that look to the past as a false refuge of fear and selfishness³. Do not support them. It is terrible to find young people spiritually aged. Fossilized mentalities, hardened hearts, and selfish behaviors are signs of death and should not characterize any young person. Always be creators of the future, apostles of a new era, communicators of enthusiasm. Yes, you, our young people find yourselves with a broad horizon of problems but also of opportunities. There is no room for conformism or sterile lament. You have to dream together of a horizon of possibilities and put your hands and hearts together to achieve it. Passivity for fear of being wrong and resigning yourselves to accept things instead of being protagonists of the transformation that the signs of our time demand, may be more comfortable, but it is also the least constructive attitude. The biggest mistake is to avoid risk, to watch as passive spectators the problems of the Church and the Order. Such an attitude supposes betraying our faith and our vocation and leads us to disenchantment.

We need answers and options. And it is up to you to have initiative. I know that sometimes it is difficult. There are internal struggles, centered on the temptation of remaining comfortable, of remaining tranquil. The loss of a first love results in a search, as an absolute priority, for a safe haven in which to live without complications. This is nothing but a surrender, an abandonment of religious life in practice. Every choice of selfishness is inevitably a death option. It is very sad to find people who have lost their dynamism, who have no ideals, who do not live our charism with hope, who have lost their vocation. Never listen to the voices of bitterness, negativity and conformism. To follow and live for Christ in the Augustinian charism is a grace and a wonder that fills our life with light and our soul with joy.

But there are also external difficulties: the rejection of newness, being anchored in the past, the routine that involves many of our realities. Critical voices disturb; the alternatives baffle; the prophets are silenced. The "we have always done it that way" attitude appears as an evil motto that blocks us and that we must overcome. Do not be afraid to "stir things up" and do not resign yourself to silence and insignificance. Do not give up being protagonists. Yes, be relevant. Be the first to embody the novelty that you seek and that you demand. The novelty of Christ who calls and who offers us to follow him.

What is our response to Christ's invitation to follow him in the Augustinian way? It is not a response of phrases, or theories, however beautiful, but the authentic testimony of one's life. I believe that, in order to respond as Augustinians to the needs of the Church and the world, we must prepare ourselves well and concentrate in our studies, especially those that lead us to know in depth the thoughts of Saint Augustine and other figures of the Order. Not only in our initial formation, but throughout life. Be aware of the importance of meeting with Saint Augustine, with his thought and spirituality. It is truly essential to be able to live our vocation with a clear identity.⁴ However, we must not forget that a true Augustinian is not one who repeats phrases of St. Augustine, or who quotes the saints or writers of the Order, but rather one who embodies his spirituality in daily life, which shows the features of the charism in one's existence.

³ Cf. *Sermon 346 C*.

⁴ Cf. *Letter of the Prior General on the Solemnity of Saint Augustine*, August 28, 2017: *Acta OSA* 70 (2018) 54-55.

2. Intimacy with Jesus.

A true religious life is not possible except in the encounter with Christ. Saint Augustine reminds us of it magnificently: "This alone I know, that without you all to me is misery, not only outside myself but also within, all wealth is but penury, if it is not my God."⁵ A vocation must be ratified every day. The invitation of the Lord is reaffirmed at every moment and the response must always be updated. Do not let your vocation die from lack of care, for not renewing your daily encounter with the Lord.⁶

We need you to make the care of your spiritual life a priority, without falling into empty activism or passivity. Be vigilant to prevent worldliness from infiltrating you and leading you to the abandonment of prayer and the weakening of the interior life. Neglecting Christ within will then be filled by other gods that enslave the human being. The result will be unhappiness: not only will you not be happy but you will inevitably transmit bitterness to others. Young people: be men and women of prayer. This is essential and it is absolutely indispensable. Pay attention to your personal and community prayer, the celebration of the Eucharist, the instruments of spiritual renewal⁷.

Be attentive to the times and, above all, to the quality of your lives. Some people seek assurances in formalism and appearances. That is not the way. Security is not found in empty ritualism, but in the conversion of the heart to Christ in the encounter with him. Do not be young people who are mundane, sick from secularism, or vain people and self-sufficient formalists. Be friends of Christ and, therefore, members of the family of God.

Yes, our challenge today is the achievement of a living spiritual experience, sustained by a healthy and intense life of personal and community prayer. Only then will we be relevant and, therefore, credible. It may be necessary to change structures and programs to take better advantage of the means offered to us. Allow this truly renovating option to lead you.

3. The identity of true love.

The Augustinian religious life is defined by our discovery of the communitarian dimension of faith and the recognition of the presence of Christ in the midst of those who meet in his name (Mt 18, 20). Although friction, differences of opinion and even discrepancies are inevitable, there is no doubt that friendship and coexistence are possible. The price of love is understanding and forgiveness. From there, we travel the path together, in the joy of being brothers and sisters, sharing what we have and, above all, who we are. We have gathered together, above all, "to have one soul and one heart on the way to God."⁸ Always keep this in mind.

⁵ *Conf.* 13,8,9.

⁶ The Holy Father reminds us that holiness must be a requirement, a necessity, for every Christian. He states: "Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace": Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 34.

⁷ Cf. *Constitutions*, 102.

⁸ *Rule* 1,3.

I am concerned about the weakening of community life. Communities should not be too large, but also not too small. There is the paradox that in an Order like ours, which has common life as a special point of reference, there are nevertheless a large number of communities with only two or three members. I think this should be an exception and not a usual practice.

In any case, however, no structure will be adequate if each of us does not take care of our personal relationships and community experience⁹. Pay attention that your work and duties do not prevent you from "being" in the community to share your life. Pay attention that the groups, the logical friendships, the management of ministerial activities, the meetings with collaborators are not an escape and a justification to flee from your community. May this misunderstood generosity not lead you to lose your way and obscure your vocation. Dedicate time to the community because the brothers and sisters need you as you need them. We do not profess the Augustinian religious life to be always away from home, witnessing absence instead of inclusion. Each member of the community should feel encouraged and sustained by the community, but also the community should feel encouraged and sustained by each individual.¹⁰ A predecessor of mine wrote that the Augustinian community is our first apostolate.¹¹

Another theme on which I want to comment is the need we have to strengthen the sense of the Order, overcoming localism: one is not a professed religious for a particular circumscription, but rather for the Order. Being an Augustinian means being part of a large family. We call ourselves brothers (*fratres*) and sisters (*sorores*). And we must be. We seek unity, the union of souls and hearts. That is why I am also surprised that at times some of us raise exclusive barriers because we are born in one country or another, in one region or another. Nationalism is an evil and a scandal. How can we exclude or reject anyone because of their birth, because of their origin? Please, always have a wide, welcoming, integrating view. Love the Order and tear down geographical and ideological barriers and borders. We are a single Order, a single family. The differences must be integrated and thus create a source of wealth.

4. A free heart.

While we have our basic needs covered, even more, many other people, particularly young people, are entrapped in poverty, a lack of culture, loneliness or a long list of those things that enslave us. Additionally, in our environment, the forms of poverty and exclusion have multiplied and demand of us an answer, which cannot come from worldliness, but from living simply, with generosity and mercy. In front of those who move primarily for economic interests; in front of those who accumulate and those who do not share their goods; in front of those who understand religious life as a profession or as an advance up the social scale, you are an example of detachment, of affective and effective poverty, and an example of freedom.

Be the voice of those who have none. St. Augustine does not hesitate to affirm that "Christ is destitute whenever a poor person is destitute"¹². We all run the risk of living in a bubble, oblivious to the needs of today's men and women, without the cry of the poor reaching us. That is why we must abandon our comfort zones, resolve the scandal of poverty which speak

⁹ Cf. *Constitutions*, 109.

¹⁰ Cf. T. Van Bavel, *Carisma: comunidad*, Madrid 2004, 168-170.

¹¹ Cf. T. Tack, *The Augustinian Community and the Apostolate. Message of the Prior General: Acta OSA 19* (1974) 27-36.

¹² *Sermon* 38,6,8.

to others, of which we even publicly make a vow, without really being poor and without worrying about fighting for justice. For this it is essential to be men and women who are open to welcoming others into our lives, listening to them and showing mercy. Let us never forget that the preferential option for the poor is born of the Gospel and implicit in Christological faith.¹³

It is necessary to leave our comfort and security: "Go out from your land, your country, and your father's house, to the land that I will show you" (Gn 12,1). Is not this the story of every vocation? Certainly. It is about listening to the call and responding to it with generosity and trust. The experience of God moves us to leave spiritual and personal tranquility, to put ourselves back on track. Get close to people, be empathetic, know their needs, do not create a separate elite status that is empty and false. Each of us is God's response to the needs of today's society. That is our responsibility. And you, with your generosity, can and must give a magnificent testimony of divine mercy, always active and always concrete.

5. The time for prophets.

The faith that we have received, the vocation to which we have been called, presupposes a type of unique friendship with God, which has been revealed to us in Christ. It is the loving caress of God, a source of joy and action of the Spirit that broadens and fills our life with meaning. Today, more than ever, we need prophets rooted in the experience of God. Not activists, but rather, witnesses who speak to us about their existence; not sellers of words or entertainers, but relevant Christians who clearly express the enormous beauty of the Gospel, the truth of Christ, his joyful attractiveness. The future is for those who risk their lives, breaking the narrow limits of selfishness. Even going against the current. "Contemporary humanity," wrote Paul VI, "listens more easily to those who give testimony than to those who teach or if they listen to those who teach, it is because they give testimony."¹⁴ It is the time of witnesses. It is the hour of the prophets.

If our elders dare to dream and our young people to prophesy (Joel 3,1), we will be cultivating a seed of hope that will undoubtedly flourish and bear fruit. In a world in which the face of God seems to have been lost, an audacious prophetic witness is urgent on the part of consecrated persons. We know that true prophecy is born of God¹⁵ and that authentic evangelization consists in announcing the Word of God, the work of God. God is in us and what Jesus Christ does through us¹⁶. Christ is always new; the eternal novelty that does not grow old. He "can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity are open with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world"¹⁷.

¹³ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Inaugural Discourse of the V Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal General Conference*, Aparecida, May 13, 2007, 3. The same *Document of Aparecida* (n. 393), reminds us that "the suffering faces of the poor are the suffering face of Christ. These are at the core of the pastoral work of the Church and our Christian attitude".

¹⁴ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

¹⁵ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, 84-85. I recall the three essential traits of the prophet, indicated in that synodal document: passion for the truth; intimate union with God; availability to surrender one's life.

¹⁶ Cf. *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 15, 30; *Sermon* 72, 8.

¹⁷ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 11.

Now is also the proper occasion to strengthen vocation ministry, to meet other young people, inviting them to listen and reflect so that they can respond generously to a possible call. Do not hesitate to present the identity of the Augustinian religious life clearly to young people, showing how our spirituality, inspired by the fruitful thought of St. Augustine and of so many brothers and sisters throughout history, has been a powerful beacon in the Church through the centuries and must remain so today. The past does not have to be a weight to carry, but a stimulus. And never forget that your personal story is the best vocational propaganda. It is not in ideas, but lives lived; it is not programs, but in our witness.

Many of you have also told me of your desire for greater enthusiasm and creativity in our Order, so that we know how to anticipate the current challenges, renewing obsolete structures, recovering the missionary position in the Church, opening ourselves to other mentalities and other cultures no longer predominantly Western. Yes, as I said at the beginning, we must prepare the Order of St. Augustine for a new time, rediscovering the essential beauty and joy of being Augustinians. Now, we need a profound renewal to live radically the charism inspired by the Spirit. We must shake off routineness and resignation, be creative, get involved, take risks. Moving forward always from truth, which is reached by conversion of the heart. Young people: be protagonists of this essential renewal process. The Order needs you. Renewal will only be possible from personal choices and the vitality of small groups. Hopefully in Chapters, in encounters, in meetings, the voice of young people will burst forth like a torrent of life and newness. I hope your testimony will shake us and provoke us, as you truly live as communicators of enthusiasm. I offer to you my availability and that of the General Council to respond to your concerns.

Thank you very much, dear brothers and sisters, for your work and, above all, for your lives. I write to you with sincerity, with full confidence and, also, with demands that spring from affection. I hope we can continue this dialogue. I hope that the ideas that I have expressed to you in this message will find an echo in you and you will develop them, reaching to conclusions and proposals. I commend myself to your prayers as I assure you of mine and I ask our Mother of Good Counsel to protect and accompany our common journey.

May God bless you always.

Roma, 24 April 2018
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