

New Blackfriars

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Comment

St Augustine's two vocations

As he describes it in the *Confessions*, Augustine's conversion in the summer of 386, 1600 summers ago, was an all or nothing affair. It is clear that he had been convinced of the truth of Catholic Christianity long before the famous incident in the garden. Intellectually he had no more problems about it from the time he moved to Milan from Rome, and heard Ambrose preach. So why did he not ask for baptism much sooner?

It is a question Monica seems to have asked herself too. There was, of course, his irregular liaison with the woman he never names, the mother of his son Adeodatus. Augustine was the most doting of fathers, so why could he not make a fond and faithful husband? For social reasons there was no question of his marrying his concubine—perhaps she was a freedwoman. But he expressly says he had been faithful to her throughout their association. He had not, in fact, been a promiscuous young man. So there was really no reason at all why he should not get married—that at least is what Monica thought, so she packed the poor concubine back to Africa.

And Augustine promptly took another! Clearly he was quite determined not to get married. And yet he wished to be a Christian, but could not become one as long as he could not do without a woman. The tension mounted until it reached breaking point in the garden and was resolved by the text he read in Rom. 13.13–14, '... but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires'. What his objection was to getting married he never tells us. I suppose some would say it was a residual Manichaeanism, but that is highly unlikely. It is more probable that since marriage in that era and class meant an alliance with a whole family and its property, responsibilities and social standing, Augustine had no intention of compromising his freedom within such an institution. Also the monastic ideal held a powerful attraction for ardent spirits like Augustine.

In any case the result was that his conversion to the Christian faith coincided with his personal vocation to a celibate, monastic life. As soon as he got back to Africa in 388 he established a monastic community with like-minded friends on his own family property at Thagaste. This, then, was the kind of Christian life to which with complete conviction he felt himself to be called—a life of serious, studious and austere leisure. Augustine would certainly continue to occupy himself with writing, as in fact he did. He was indeed already an eminent man of letters, and would

no doubt continue to be so from his quiet monastic retreat in Thagaste. That was certainly his personal vocation, and had he been left in peace to follow it he would at best have survived in Church history as a very minor figure among the Latin Fathers, producing elegant dialogues on *Free Will*, on *Order*, on *The Master*, works on music and grammar, some polemical writings against the Manichees, and of course a voluminous correspondence.

But he wasn't left in peace. He received another, purely external, vocation, which arose in no sense at all from inner conviction. He came to Hippo in 391, as he says in a sermon (355, PL 39, 1569), to visit a friend whom he hoped to gain for the religious life. Possidius in his *Life* tells us the man was an *agens in rebus*, a member of the imperial security police, and gives the impression that he was not a personal acquaintance of Augustine's, but had written to him as a well-known spiritual director and had asked him to come and see him (*Life*, c.3, PL 32, 36). Well, the man seems to have belonged to the divine rather than the imperial KGB, because no sooner had Augustine arrived than the congregation grabbed him and presented him to the bishop to be ordained priest. And this inevitably meant, and was meant to mean, that when the bishop, Valerius, died Augustine would become bishop of Hippo in his place. To make doubly sure that he did, before Valerius died he had Augustine ordained coadjutor bishop, which in those days was not strictly canonical.

Now, being a bishop—which he was for 35 years—was Augustine's true vocation. But it had nothing whatever to do with his own sense of personal vocation. He hated being ordained priest, but consented because, as he said, 'the slave ought not to contradict his lord' (serm. 355). In other words, his vocation to the ordained ministry came to him as an external demand from the Church (the community of believers at Hippo), in which he heard the command of Christ.

Thus he was called to an objective, socially defined office, task, job, service, and the rest of his life was governed by the obligations which that entailed. There were elements in the 'job-description' of a bishop which he not only disliked but resented—notably the task of being a judge or arbitrator in civil disputes, his episcopal judgments being enforced by the imperial authorities. But he complied.

However, he naturally concentrated on what he considered to be the primary service owed by a bishop to his people—that of preaching, feeding his flock with the word of God. Subordinated to this and coordinated with it was his writing, his use of his erstwhile professional skills as a professor of rhetoric and literature. So his vocation, in a word, was his job—the practical down-to-earth service which the Christian community required of him (which included, of course, the exercise, at times severe, of his episcopal authority), and he fulfilled it extremely

well—all the better, very likely, for his continuing to follow his personal vocation to the monastic, community life.

But is this not essentially what an ecclesiastical vocation, like any secular vocation, ought to be seen as, and is? One is asked by the community or its authorized representatives to undertake a service or ministry, and one agrees, whether eagerly or, as in Augustine's case, reluctantly, and then performs that service to the best of one's ability. This is something quite distinct from an inner or personal vocation to a particular way of life.

And what when, unlike Augustine, people turn out not to be suitable for the ministry to which the church community or Church authority has called them? Or if, after several years of satisfactory ministry, circumstances or personalities change, and the work suffers, the minister begins to crack up, the job is not done? Then surely it should be possible, with due safeguards for natural justice and against unfair dismissal, to admit that it is not their vocation after all, or no longer their vocation, to serve the Church in the ordained ministry. It should then be as simple for ecclesiastical ministers to resign, or retire, or have their employment terminated, as it is for people who serve the civil community in other professions and capacities.

The present discipline and canonical procedure of the Church in the matter springs from a quite exaggerated association of ecclesiastical ministry with hierarchical status. It is also the result of drawing mistaken conclusions from the doctrine that Holy Orders is a sacrament, and from the sacramental relationship it establishes between ordained ministers and the community of the Church. This is compounded by the intrusion of sacerdotal concepts that are at best only semi-Christian.

It is true that by ordination a presbyter or bishop participates in the priesthood of Christ in a special way, over and above the participation in the same (and only) priesthood which comes to all the faithful through baptism and confirmation. But this is no reason why, if a priest or bishop wishes to resign from the ministry for any number of reasons, or if the Church on its part, *salva justitia*, wishes to dispense with his services, this should not be expeditiously arranged at the level of the local Church, without recourse to the highest authority of the Holy See and the very long delays that that involves, and without the impertinent and offensive enquiries into the man's sex life that the highest authority at present insists on.

The man wants to give up the job and the status that goes with it, and of course its canonical obligations, because he no longer feels suited to it, or is no longer doing it very well, or it is no longer the job he thought it was when he took it on, or because he has lost interest or wants to get married. Well, let him, in the name of God and common sense and the interests of the Church he is no longer serving as it requires.

Similar considerations surely apply to the different kind of vocation to the religious life. Terminating such a commitment, for whatever reason, should be a matter for the person and the religious community concerned alone.

The present highly unsatisfactory state of things with regard both to 'vocations'—all the ecclesiastical hand-wringing at the lack of them—and to their termination has also arisen from confounding the two types of vocation; the subjective personal vocation to a way of life and the objective external vocation of a person by the community to a community ministry or service. The objective functional vocation has been progressively endowed with an inappropriate mystique derived from the subjective religious vocation. And for this Augustine is partly, though indirectly, responsible.

As noted earlier, he did not abandon his personal vocation to the monastic life when he was called to the clerical ministry by the Church of Hippo. He moved his establishment from Thagaste to Hippo, and carried out his duties as priest and then as bishop from the bosom of this monastic community. Furthermore, when he succeeded Valerius as bishop of Hippo he made it plain that he would ordain and accept no one among his clergy who would not agree to join this community. That is, he decided that both he and his clergy should combine the two vocations.

In itself this is perfectly legitimate, and likely to produce good results in devoted service to the Church. There is no reason why the two vocations should not be combined. There is every reason why they should not be compulsorily combined, and indeed they never have been. There is also every reason why they should not be confused, but unfortunately they have been, because in the history of the Latin Church reform of the clergy has so often been preceded by and then modelled on reform of religious communities. May the commemoration of the centenary of Augustine's conversion help the Church to move away from this confusion of the two vocations, which is so damaging above all to a true conception of ecclesiastical ministry.

EDMUND HILL OP