



**Reflection for August 26, 2020: Augustine of Hippo [transferred]**

*If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

[John 15:14-15]

*"Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

[Augustine of Hippo]

*Faith is to believe what we do not see;  
and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.*

[Augustine of Hippo]

Augustine of Hippo was one of the most influential theologians in Western Christianity; indeed, one could say that his work has been the starting point for almost all theological discourse for 1500 years. He was born in 354; his mother (Monnica) was Christian, his father was not. His spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, tells of his restless youth, his attraction to Manichaeism and Neoplatonism, and his conversion and baptism in 387.

The words of Jesus that we read in today's gospel were the guiding principle of Augustine's faith. All of his teaching and all of his theological arguments, wide-ranging as they are, were based on the premise that if we tap into our deepest capacity to seek the good we can be assured that we are on the path toward the union with God that we seek. Augustine was well aware of human imperfection and he recognized how often we misunderstand what "good" is. He was convinced that restlessness is built into human existence and he recognized how often we mistake certitude for peace, how easily we mistake our own interests for the common good and our will for God's.

Augustine's teaching is surprisingly timely. In a time when our leaders—religious and political—so rarely engage in genuine dialogue, when our public discourse so often involves presentation of opposing views without allowing for response, when seeking the common ground of compromise is so often perceived to reflect lack of conviction, Augustine shows us that true learning and understanding comes only from engagement with the Other, with ideas that may seem alien and wrongheaded. He teaches us to listen to people when our instinct may be to dismiss them. He shows us that argument, even at its most passionate, allows for the transformation that only God can bring about. He teaches us that love is indeed complex and many-splendored, often turbulent but always an act of will that draws us, at times indirectly, to the God for whom we long.

When I discovered Augustine's poem "In Praise of Dancing," it forever changed my view of this man who seemed to have gone from being a wild and self-indulgent youth to a rigidly moralistic adult. It expresses a nimble humility that is a valuable lesson for us today:

## **IN PRAISE OF DANCING**

I praise the dance, for it frees people  
from the heaviness of matter  
and binds the isolated to community.

I praise the dance, which demands everything:  
health and a clear spirit and a buoyant soul.

Dance is a transformation of space, of time, of people,  
who are in constant danger of becoming all brain,  
will, or feeling.

Dancing demands a whole person, one who is  
firmly anchored in the center of his life, who is  
not obsessed by lust for people and things  
and the demon of isolation in his own ego.

Dancing demands a freed person, one who vibrates  
with the balance of all his powers.

I praise the dance.

O man, learn to dance, or else the angels in heaven  
will not know what to do with you.