

Augustinians – Irish Province: An Emerging Conversation

“See I am Doing a New Thing”

Part 1 - Children of God

Good morning.

I am delighted to be here with you all today, as you continue along your wonderful and courageous journey of exploration and growth. When John asked me several weeks ago if I would share some thoughts with you in these Regional meetings, I had no idea that such important work had been going on quietly over the past few years. I knew little or nothing about the Augustinians as an order and less about their vision to facilitate the emergence of a more inclusive and diverse faith community built around their charism.

But in preparing for these meetings, the little bits and pieces I have learned have inspired great hope and possibility in me, both on a personal level, and in the context of the wider Irish Church. Your charism of Unity, Love and Truth has such relevance and universality particularly at this moment in the history of humanity. The key values of welcome and acceptance of people as they are, of allowing them to be present and to speak their truth, and of the gift of music underline the importance of relationship and communication and heart; these are powerful tools of healing and connection, both of which are needed by our world, and our church, as never before.

So, I am privileged and humbled to be here, to offer you some thoughts and ideas and to journey a little way with you, as you seek to “do a new thing”, just as was promised in Isaiah.

The plan this morning is to explore four key areas over the next couple of hours, but with Jim’s help, to break the input into four manageable chunks, so that it is in fact an emerging conversation rather than just all one-way traffic.

To begin with I want to consider the question of our identity as Children of God.

In the second section I hope to share some thoughts on *Laudato Si’*, in particular the notion of Integral Ecology and the implications I believe it has for all our relationships.

Following that we will think about the challenge to conversion and how each of us is the key to our own potential for change.

Finally, I will explore how we give expression to our discipleship authentically and with integrity, and what that might mean for us as individuals, as communities and as institutions.

So, let’s start then with our identity. I can begin by telling you about myself – I am married to Paul for almost 28 years, we have 3 daughters, 2 sons, and two grandsons, the youngest of whom was baptised recently in Manchester. That was a very special occasion for us as a family because Paul, who is a permanent deacon, baptised our grandson, and it was the first time our whole family were together for 2 years since our eldest son and his girlfriend went to Australia.

What I have just told you reveals very little about my job or qualifications or background – but it should indicate to you that my sense of identity is utterly bound up with my role as a wife, mother and grandmother. To put it another way, my sense of identity is intertwined with those relationships and people who are most precious to me – I am who I am because of my relationships with them.

Now I want to ask you all a question – it is for you, to hear and acknowledge in yourself, rather than respond.

Why are you here today?

Perhaps you were invited to attend by someone and have come along with a sense of curiosity, or perhaps out of a sense of obligation?

Or perhaps you came along because you have a sense of connection with or loyalty to the Augustinian family and your place within it?

Or maybe you were motivated by a deep conviction that we need to explore new ways of being or relating as Church?

There is no right or wrong answer – what matters is that by being here each of you will bring something unique and precious to the day.

I have a second question and I would like you to raise your hands in response to this one: How many of you are here because you believe with every fibre of your being that you are an essential piece of creation, a unique and fundamental expression of God’s love, created deliberately and intentionally to manifest and witness that love to the rest of creation?

For me personally, the hardest thing about that question is the difference between believing it to be true on a general level – on a mental level – and knowing it to be true on a deeply personal level – in my heart and soul. I have no difficulty believing that God loves us all, nor in telling people I know and care for that God loves them unconditionally and infinitely as his precious and beloved child, and I believe it with my whole heart. But I find it very hard to look myself in the face and communicate the same message with anything like the same conviction. And I suspect that this is a common experience for many of us. We know ourselves to be created in the image and likeness of God on an intellectual level – scripture is full of such references and the New Testament outlines to us how the incarnation of the Son of God deepened the intimacy between humankind and its Creator. But we don’t feel it, we don’t experience it personally, and that diminishes us, not only in our relationship with God but with everyone else, and the whole of creation too.

Just as the Father spoke from heaven at the Baptism of Jesus to claim him as “my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” we believe that same parental bond is deepened with each one of us at the time of our baptism. And perhaps, because there is a specific moment at which that bond is expressed, we can believe it, on a head level, to be true.

But even before we are baptised, we are created. It is often said that we are human *beings* not human *doings* and the moment we came to *be* is the moment of our creation. In some sense, we are pre-created before we are procreated: we “*are*” before we “*be*”. St Augustine says in his Confessions “the hand that made us is divine”. Jeremiah and Isaiah both tell us that we were known and loved by God before we existed in the womb, that is even before our creation.

Henri Nouwen tells us that

“God’s love for us is everlasting. That means that God’s love for us existed before we were born and will exist even after we have died. It is an eternal love in which we are embraced.”

That concept is so vast that we can’t begin to get our heads around it or make any sense of it. And maybe, just maybe that is the point. Maybe we are not supposed to understand it, we are not supposed to be able to measure or explain it – it is after all the expression of the love of the Divine creator for each part of creation as unique and deliberate – it is totally and utterly beyond our understanding and we can never hope to capture or limit it. And maybe Jesus came to help to see that is an idea so outside our understanding that it can only be experienced, it can only be lived.

But how do we experience this relationship? Do we experience this relationship? I believe that on some deep instinctive level, buried in our body and soul, we know that we are children of God and that each of us is the conscious and deliberate work of the Creator’s hand. One of the things that convinces me is our instinct to bless. Think of all the ways we incorporate blessing into our daily lives without even realising it. Traditionally people in Ireland blessed each other with greetings such as “Dia dhuit” “Dia’s Mhuire duit” and “Go mbeannaigh Dia duit”. These may simply have been the

normal phrases or language used, but the meaning was known, nonetheless. Think too of phrases like “God bless you” when someone sneezes, or when someone dies how often we express the blessing “May she rest in peace”. These are all things we say and do without a second thought, things which express a desire to protect or care for the other person, to bless them. How could we offer another person the care or protection or love of God unless it was ours to give, unless it was already within us and we felt compelled to share it?

John O’Donoghue expressed it beautifully when he said

“Each person has a unique intimacy with God...Blessings are seen as a communication of life from God...The Holy Spirit is the subtle presence and secret energy behind every blessing.”

I’m more and more convinced that our acts of blessing represent our deeply innate sense of belonging to God, even if we would not consciously recognise or voice it. More than that, we are subconsciously delivering a message to the other about God’s love for them. We are primarily relational in our make-up; very few of us can be truly happy and fulfil our divine potential in isolation from other living beings, all of whom we believe have also been created by God. And that need for belonging and interacting is an expression of the relational nature of God in the Trinity – that infinite relationship of mutual love, of unconditional giving and receiving – what Elizabeth Johnson calls “the Trinitarian dance of Love”. So, our desire for relationship and community and mutuality is also an echo of that relationship as well as our creation in the image and likeness of God.

Perhaps the problem is that we do not see God in that way, as primarily relational, as the Great Lover who wants to always draw us closer. Perhaps the problem is not simply how we see ourselves, but how we see God.

Philip Pinto, a Christian Brother said:

“A personal relationship between you and God...that’s the most important thing in your life. And if you don’t have it and all you have is what someone else has told you about God, then you have a relationship with someone else’s God, not your own”.

The things which are most personal to us are those we feel, those we experience – that is what makes them unique, precious and ours. Deep emotion, acute pain, loneliness, ecstasy – we can try to share these with others, but no one will ever feel them precisely as we do and I believe that is the essence of what Philip Pinto is saying – we don’t think about a relationship with God, we don’t talk about it; we experience it and we live within it. It seems to me that this might be what Jesus meant when he told us:

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbour as yourself.”

Surely this is a direction to experience something deeply personal on an emotional, almost physical level, and to allow that experience to move out to others like a ripple in a lake. Equally Jesus never tells us that such intimacy and personal engagement can only be accessed if we are good, or holy, or ordained, or important – this is a gift or grace, freely available to every one of us, equally, without qualification – precisely because that is what a parent does. Their love and care are provided freely and equally to all their children, without a time limit or a price tag. And if God who **is** love, claims each of us as his beloved child, why would he impose any of our human limitations on that love?

On a personal level much of my own experience of Church since childhood has been based on a set of rules and regulations to be followed and accepted, of rituals to be practised rather than experienced, and of passive listening rather than dialogue and active engagement. I’m not sure this is the foundation for a personal relationship which is vibrant and alive, or that such practice can ever hope to reflect the constant flow of love and community of the Trinity. Three persons so interconnected that they are as one, illustrates a relational interaction the very hallmarks of which

are equality, inclusion and intimacy. It is inconceivable that the God who created each one of us deliberately, who has counted every hair on our heads and carved our names into the palm of His hand, wants anything less for us. Why would he have sent his Son to live as one of us if not to help us understand more fully the depth and scope and universality of His love? And why would we each be temples of the Holy Spirit unless to allow us to enter fully into the "Trinitarian dance of love"?

Richard Rohr has said many things which have resonated with me, but the one which has made the greatest impact on me is this: "God does not love you because you are good. God loves you because God is good and because God has planted a little bit of God in you called the Holy Spirit, and God cannot not love God".

We somehow assume that we are the ones searching for and seeking out God. But people like Henri Nouwen and Richard Rohr would tell us that it is God who is searching for us, reaching out to us, and that we are the ones who are hiding, who are running away. If we don't believe that we are God's beloved, it is not surprising that we might hide or run away. If we do not recognise that we are loved completely and infinitely because we are His, why on earth would we believe that He is looking for us and calling us into relationship? Maybe we can start to believe it if we begin to recognise the signposts and messages and indicators which he has placed all around us; maybe we can see and recognise them if we open our eyes and hearts and are willing to risk letting go.

Each one of us is a living expression of God's love for creation and as such we are messengers and messages of that love for the rest of creation. Each one of us, along with every aspect of creation is the communication of that love to others. In our creation by God, in our role as messengers of His love, we actually become the message. Everything in the world which we share reveals that message, an ongoing love poem from God which has no end. Gerard Manley Hopkins says: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God".

The potential to experience the presence of God in our lives is all around us, all the time, and not only in our churches and rituals. That potential is in every person we meet, and in every life, element, colour, scent, breath and dimension of the common home which we all share.

God has created the maximum possible opportunities for us to experience that grandeur and His loving presence, if we are willing to pause in our doing, to open our heart and our eyes, to be.