

Augustinians – Irish Province: An Emerging Conversation

“See I am Doing a New Thing Part 3- Change Begins with me

In many ways, I feel poorly equipped to stand here before a community of the Augustinian family and speak about change – or as we often call it in a religious context – conversion.

Conversion is a core element of our faith, and of most Christian faiths, and probably of most world religions. As a principle it carries within it the acknowledgement that we are imperfect, that we get things wrong and the acceptance that we aspire to be more. For me, St Augustine’s words that our hearts are restless until they rest in God are an attempt to articulate something of a journey of conversion or change.

I won’t presume to talk to any of you about the life and journey of St Augustine - suffice it to say that he is recognised as one of the greatest conversion stories in Christianity. His story, no less than that of St Paul, is often cited as an example of the persistence of God’s call or invitation and the extent of the changes we can accept and even embrace as a result. There are countless other stories of God’s reaching out to humanity and the change it effects on those who respond, but for many of us, the process of change – or conversion – is much less dramatic, more an opening of our eyes than a sudden loss of sight.

The notion of conversion, of effecting change, at least in religious circles has often hinged upon the spreading of the Good News of God’s love to those who have not previously heard it. As baptised Christians this is what we sign up to or are signed up to by our parents or guardians, and it is our lifetime’s work. But when you look around the world, or our country today, there are many people who would question how well that approach has worked, and how authentic was the system which was advocating that approach. The truth is that many of those seeking to convert others by bringing the Good News to them have chosen to do so on the basis that God can be confined within and communicated by a set of rules and regulations and a sense that, as custodians of the message, they know the best way to make others “holy”. The function of conversion has become about the imperfections of the other, about making them change and about instructing them on the best ways to do it.

I heard a story last weekend about a couple who had been married for almost 50 years – let’s call them Sarah and John. At the time of their marriage, Sarah had seen it as her role to change and “rescue” her husband, John, who even in those early days, had an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. Sarah spent the next 25 years controlling, nagging, badgering John and trying to fix him. She was angry when he got drunk and resentful when he was sober because she knew that it was only a matter of time before he got drunk again. Nothing she did made any difference and she became more and more unhappy. Then as their silver wedding anniversary approached, Sarah found herself thinking about their life together and she began to realise that she had never recognised, in all those years, how much John loved her. She had chosen to see his behaviour as a sign that he didn’t love her and had responded by emphasising his shortcomings and weaknesses rather than just accepting and loving him. As she began to see that he loved her very much, that his drinking was part of who he was and began to accept him as he was rather than try to change him, many things began to change. Once she began to recognise that she and her negative attitude towards John were part of the problem, she took a different approach and their relationship changed completely. Once she focused on loving him rather than trying to change him, he began to change, their relationship began to change, and she – who had no need to change when they got married, also changed. The second half of their marriage had been the happiest years of her life and of their lives together, and she felt like a different person.

My point in telling you that story is simply to illustrate that we cannot change other people. We cannot make them holier, we cannot make them good, we cannot make them better. The only people we can change is ourselves. Jesus makes this very clear when he tells us to take the plank out of our own eye before we try to remove the splinter from our brother's eye. And yet no matter how often we hear that message our innate response to a situation which is painful, difficult or unjust is to change the situation or the other person, rather than ourselves. Jesus communicates the same message to Martha, who, tired and resentful of her workload takes her frustration out on her sister Mary, whom she perceives to be shirking her responsibility. Jesus puts her straight and tells her that, in shunning busyness for relationship, Mary has chosen the better role and leaves Martha to ponder her own choices and mind-set.

One of the difficulties with a focus on rules and regulations, with fulfilling other people's expectations, is that we risk losing the sense of the relationship with the other – like Sarah and John. Sarah had her own set of rules which took the place of loving John and John was supposed to follow them. The trouble was that John didn't follow them but he still loved Sarah. Gradually the rules became the thing that mattered to Sarah and the relationship began to die as a result.

The need for conversion, for a change of heart is also a recurrent message in *Laudato Si'*. It is in part an invitation to address the ecological crisis but it's also a recognition that our social and human structures, our rules of engagement, are part of the problem. Since they are central to how we relate as humans, they have to be part of the solution too - and it's worth digging a little deeper into what it can mean for us. The Pope's starting point is that we are all interconnected and interdependent, primarily through our creation by and in God. That makes us all important, offers us all a certain dignity but also imposes on us a level of responsibility. If my actions and choices have consequences for those I know, and for the rest of creation, then I am called to exercise good judgement, informed by Gospel values, in those actions and choices. But the pope also asks us to work from our heart space – to fall in love - not just with the plants and animals – but with the whole creation. He encourages us to rediscover a relational space where the connection becomes the key which then shapes our behaviour. The ripple effect can therefore be a positive one as well as a negative one, just like in the story of Sarah and John.

We have already identified that we are made to be relational and that God's modus operandi is love – unconditional, infinite and available. Many of the images and much of the language which is used in Scriptures and in the Gospels also use relational language – the bridegroom and the bride, the shepherd and his flock, the prodigal son and his father, and everywhere in the psalms are references to mother and father, to marriage and childbirth. This suggests to me that God is far more focused on the relationship than on the rules and regulations and that what we need to do is to accept the invitation, the degree to which we are loved, and then to allow *that* to change us. It is often our fear of being judged, of being exposed as unworthy, as having broken the rules, which prevents us from responding to the invitation. Maybe we need to spend less time and energy trying to be perfect, and instead accept our flaws, weaknesses and imperfections, trusting that God knows all these things about us and loves us anyway. Author and researcher Dr Brene Brown writes: "Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."

As a lay woman in the church here in Ireland, the emphasis on following rules and observing rituals has often left me wondering how it all facilitates my relationship with God. I know that in order to

have good relationships with my husband and children, I must be open to adapting, changing and not always being right, otherwise it is not a relationship, a family or community, but an autocracy. It sometimes feels to me like the structure and the ritual within the Church is inhibiting rather than nurturing the connection, the relational potential. The stream of evidence highlighting the imperfections and flaws of the institution and its custodians in recent years, seems to widen the gulf between its prescriptive approach and the message and ministry of Jesus I meet in the Gospels.

At the age of 99, Edith Eger, a holocaust survivor who became a clinical psychologist, wrote a book called "The Choice" and if you haven't yet read it, I would recommend that you do. Although she charts her horrific journey through the war, it is her journey of healing for the rest of her life which is the real inspiration, and the gradual realisation that the thing of which she was most afraid was herself. I think that many of us are not unlike Edith Eger, although our stories may be very different. What struck me about her story was that she not only carried a message of hope to many other people, she *was* the message by the way she lived her life and by the choices she made. She is not the only person to inspire with her life story – Victor Frankl, Nelson Mandela, Anne Frank, Ghandi, Helen Keller, Mother Teresa and Maya Angelou are all people whose life stories have offered hope and possibility to many. What they have in common is that rather than become a victim of their challenges, their situation, their misfortune or their reality, they have accepted themselves on a more fundamental level; their innate identity, whatever they perceived it to be was the starting point. Ghandi's advice was very simple: "be the change you want to see in the world".

Each of us has the capacity to change, the opportunity to draw closer to the Creator who made us and loves us. What holds us back is our fear and lack of trust – that is true as much for the institution as for the individual. While we present ourselves as people of faith, or aspire to be people of faith, we consistently opt for certainty and knowledge, rather than moving into uncertainty, the unfamiliar and untested ground. We think about taking the leap of faith, and then move back into our comfort zone. We consider the potential for growth and development, and then decide that it's safer to stay in one place. We toy with the possibility that we might need to change or have the capacity to change and then focus on changing the other. In so doing we choose not to see or accept our dual role as messenger and message – that our creation as children of God makes us both the message and the messengers as we witness to that identity for others.

I would like to finish off this section with a short film clip from an American author, Marianne Williamson.