

First Perseverance of Br Augustine Primavesi

14th May 2014

Dear Br Augustine, you have just been granted your First Perseverance and thereby given the green light to continue discerning your vocation in the novitiate. This you will do under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the help of your novice master and the community. The novitiate is a unique time in your life, which will never be repeated. You are afforded the opportunity for solitude and prayer, to be alone with God, as never before. Yes, I know there are interruptions, when you are called upon to attend classes, do all sorts of manual work and, of course, join the brethren in choir or in the refectory, but the rest of your time should be given up wholly to prayer and solitude. You have to learn to live with yourself and with God in your cell and to make the best use of your time. What is a cell for? How do I use the spare time I am given? How do I learn to detach myself from my former life, my family and friends? How do I become a monk?

We often hear it said that the habit doesn't make the monk and I'm sure that you have already discovered that for yourself. Conversion, which is what it takes to become and remain a monk, is no easy task. Without a constant recourse to prayer and the grace of God, we soon give up, and when you give up it's really hard to start again, as we know full well from going to confession. Every aspect of monastic discipline is meant as an aid to conversion, to put us firmly on the road of truly seeking God.

The habit is a constant reminder that we have put on "the clothes of the monastery". In the words of St Benedict, "Then and there in the oratory, he is to be stripped of everything of his own that he is wearing and clothed in what belongs to the monastery." The habit symbolises the relinquishing of everything that is our own. We give up our possessions, our past life, our very selves and, in turn, give ourselves to God in the monastic life, in this monastery and community, handing over even our body and our will. The monk is to be "well aware that from the day of his profession, he will not have even his own body at his disposal." That, Br Augustine, is what you're preparing for in the novitiate. The monastic discipline you are acquiring now will release you from slavery to self-interest and self-centredness, so as to enjoy the freedom of the sons of God. That is our goal, the freedom and joy which can be ours if, in Christ, we empty ourselves of all that is not pleasing to God and does not lead to Him. Christ's gift of freedom results in that "perfect love which casts out all fear," the love, which is the fruit of humility, lived out each day in the company of our brethren with their countless weaknesses and needs. The habit also reminds us that we should be dead to the world, by which we mean, in the words of St Paul, "dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Related to the wearing of the monastic habit is the use of the cell. St Benedict never envisaged that development and most reforms have tried to go back to the use of the dormitory, though today even the Cistercians have opted for a cell, albeit a small one that is only used for sleeping at night. Your cell is the one place where you can be truly alone and where you will be left alone to be

alone with God and with yourself. As you are already aware, that solitude can be heaven, but it can also be hell. In your cell you will come to enjoy the presence of God. However, the closer you are to God, the more insistent the devil's attempts to bring you down. You will see God face to face in heaven, but you will encounter Satan face to face in your cell. So, make your cell a "house of prayer," your personal oratory. Make a habit of falling asleep saying your prayers, so that you awake with that prayer still on your lips. And don't forget to rest when you're tired and make sure you get a full night's sleep. Later on, I can assure you, it will be more difficult.

Silence is essential if we are going to devote ourselves to prayer and reading. Until recently, there were no other distractions save the choice of books on our shelves, but times have changed dramatically, what with radios, laptops, iPads and mobile phones, to name just a few of the available gadgets to be found in a monk's cell. I'm not pointing the finger at you or at anyone else, as I am probably one of the worst offenders. There is a danger, though, that a computer or a mobile phone can bring the world right into your cell day and night. There is a danger that silence will disappear at the wearing of a set of headphones. There is the real possibility that a monk, who vowed to live a chaste, celibate life and a life of evangelical poverty, will suddenly find himself betrothed, as it were, to a machine, a gadget, a digital wonder. These things, incredibly useful as they can be for study, work and legitimate communication, can also enslave us and separate us from God and from our brethren. Love becomes no longer human but virtual, insubstantial and illusive.

Finally, when I talk about detachment from your former life, your family and friends, I don't mean, as at one time we did, that you blot these out completely and forget about them. No, your family will become our family and your friends, our friends. Much of what you learnt in your past life, you will use in the future for the good of the monastery. But rather like a young man getting married, you must learn to put your wife first and devote yourself to her. Your parents will come to understand that the monastery is now the focus of your life and that we, the community, are your family. You must adapt gradually to a new life with new criteria and new priorities.

Dear Br Augustine, ask your three heavenly patrons to pray for you: the great Augustine of Hippo, the Apostle of England and Augustine Baker, that great teacher of the art of mental prayer and son of Abergavenny. They will show you the way you should go, the monastic way that leads to Heaven.