

The Augustinian Theme of Harmony:  
A Contribution of a Spiritual Tradition to a Better Understanding  
of the Self and Others.

**ABSTRACT**

Introduction

After spending many years in South America and in the inner city of Chicago, I came to the university with the question: how does an Augustinian community live its spirituality in a situation of violence? I realized too that violence was somehow connected with the inner person, at the level of the heart. After having done some research, I came across the notion of harmony in Augustine's writings and saw the possibilities for a thesis. What I decided upon, then, was this: as an Augustinian, I wanted to see how harmony appears in the bishop's writings and in those of the Augustinian Order and how it contributes to understanding human relationships. No one has looked at the theme of harmony from this perspective before, and here lies the originality of this study. We know that spiritual traditions are revitalized when their contents are examined in the light of new needs and concerns emerging from the concrete situations in people's lives.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis which launches the research is the following: "the element of harmony in Augustine's own religious experience has the potential to provide a better understanding of the self and of others." After collecting and analyzing an abundant material I raised this question: "to what extent does the spiritual tradition of the Augustinian order reflect the thought of the bishop of Hippo?" Answers to this question paved the way to see

better how harmony offers new connections of relating and a clearer understanding of the self, God and others. This is the goal of the thesis.

### Chapter One: Christian and Augustinian Spirituality

Since this is a thesis in spirituality, Chapter One clarifies what we mean today when we use the word “spirituality.” We know that there is much ambiguity and confusion around this concept. Following the clarification I retain the Christian meaning and adopt one of the best definitions of Christian spirituality. Nicholas defines it as the “**art of living** the Gospel and conforming oneself to the teachings of Jesus Christ under the action of the Holy Spirit.” Since no one can embrace with equal intensity all the values of the Gospel, a selection of biblical themes and values are made which give rise to particular spiritualities, like the spirituality of the hospitality and the spirituality of compassion. Religious congregations and people organize themselves around the life style of a holy person, as found in the radical poverty of Francis of Assisi. **Augustinian spirituality is the particular spirituality** of a religious congregation with two sources separated by a time period of eight hundred years: Augustine’s inspiration rooted in the *anima una* of the Jerusalem community portrayed in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the ecclesial vision of apostolic fraternity when the Order of St. Augustine was formed by the gathering of hermit communities in 1244 and 1256. Love, interiority, and community characterize this congregation’s spirituality. “To carry one another’s burdens” is the great secret and art of Augustinian living.

### Chapter Two: Harmony as Term and as Theme

Chapter Two provides a general framework for approaching the theme of harmony. The method used to critically interpret the texts is thematic and historico-theological.

Augustine defines the term “harmony” as a “rhythm of relationships” in a way similar to how the diverse parts of the human body work together. The theme is larger than the term. Since the term involves a short definition about the nature of something, we need to “unpack it,” as it were, and take into account other words which help us to perceive different aspects of the notion of this concept so that we may consider it as a theme.

So, when we speak of the theme of harmony we refer to a series of connections, expressions, goals and components of the theme, such as beauty, unity, and concord. Like an echo we find this theme reverberating in Augustine’s *Rule*, elucidating the rationale for living together: *to be one mind and heart on the way to God*. The Order embraces the *Rule* of its spiritual Father as the foundational text with the ultimate aim *to be lovers of spiritual beauty*, an objective often forgotten. Likewise, the Fourfold Communion of Jordan of Saxony and other spiritual writings describing the Order’s identity have faded away into oblivion. It is important to note that there is an identity crisis in the congregation which calls out with urgency for a new awareness and a new appropriation of the core message.

#### Structure of Chapters Three, Four, and Five

Chapters Three, Four, and Five deal with selected notions of the faith (creation, prayer) and follow the same structure. Each chapter is divided into two parts. The first part examines how the various aspects of the theme of harmony appear within that particular mystery or doctrine in Augustine’s writings, like the letters and sermons. The second part of the chapter follows the same pattern with the Order’s Chapter documents and writings from spiritual authors, like Thomas of Villanova. The focus in the second part is to see if the Order received, or not, the different aspects of the theme of harmony articulated in

Augustine's writings. New perspectives on understanding the self, God, and others are identified at the end of each chapter.

### Chapter 3: Creation and "rightly ordered love"

Chapter Three, then, deals with the doctrine of the beauty of creation, for it is here where Augustine identifies the foundational design of harmony and the praxis of "rightly ordered love" between the creature and Creator. People live in peace, in concord, and in sharing their goods. Disharmony results with excessive self-centeredness and a deliberate turning away from the divine Other as the source of life. A life of discord is like a wood chip revolving around an axis of profound emptiness. Human living is in harmony with the self and others when God is the source and center of one's love and existence.

### Chapter Four: Prayer & Communion

As an expression of Christian spirituality, the spirituality of the Order is never a private matter, but a movement oscillating between the inner self and others. Chapter Four marks out the path to that center of human life with the linking of prayer and of communion. Augustine's "prayer from the heart" reveals how one's deepest desires find expression in the words of prayer. The notion of desire as a component of prayer needs to be retrieved by Augustinian communities. Contact with God in the heart enables one to recognize the diversity of divine presence in others from which a communion emerges. As a gift of God, this communion is symphonic and is created through the convergence of interiority, where two inner horizons meet in the "kiss of peace."

## Chapter Five: the *Totus Christus*

In Chapter Five an expression of the theme of harmony breaks boundaries with the doctrine of the *totus Christus*, a forgotten component of Augustinian spirituality. For Augustine, the mystery of Jesus Christ is not only perceived in its historical and sacramental understanding, but also in a cosmic sense, the whole Christ, present in the community of the faithful, with the poor and downtrodden, and in moments of discord. Here the relationship of the self, to God, and with neighbor moves from an “other” orientation to one of “identity.” “Whatever you did not do for one of the least . . . you did not do for me” (*Mt.* 25:45). The collective identity of the “I” in the “we” and the “we” in the “I” – the *anima una* in its global dimension -- emerges and needs to be recovered by the congregation. The whole Christ is the ultimate horizon of Oneness that is both transcendent and immanent.

## Conclusion

The conclusion showed the demonstration that I have made: the theme of harmony appears in Augustine’s writings and in those in the tradition of the Order of St. Augustine and how this theme contributes to a better understanding of the self and others. There are areas where the congregation in its spirituality has been both faithful and forgetful. We return to my original question: how does an Augustinian community live its spirituality in a situation of violence? The basic attitude is this: where discord breaks the bonds of relatedness, harmony reinforces them. The Augustinian is called to be a “principle of harmony” and to stand up to all the forces that cause fragmentation and alienation. It is a wake-up call to appropriate its core teaching: to be “lovers of spiritual beauty.”