

# OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE OF THE LAY AUGUSTINIAN COMMISSION AND THE ROLE OF THE LAITY IN THE AUGUSTINIAN ORDER

(First Draft)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The World today is characterized by widespread multiculturalism. This multiculturalism is also present in the church because the church lives within the context of the existing society. St Augustine's teaching gives us a very clear understanding of the role of the Christian in society. His teaching, as is well manifested in the City of God, is very relevant for us Christians living in today's world.

St Augustine set a benchmark for our behaviour as Christians and though he saw the Church as an active member of society he does not expect Christians to lay the rules of the game in society. Christians are to be proactive – we cannot be passive bystanders.

St Augustine teaches us to adapt to the realities of the world around us. It is in the spirit of St Augustine's teaching that the Christian should be adaptive and responsive to the world around him. God's message needs to be "packaged" so to speak in such a way that it can be communicated to, and is understood by the culture of the society in a time and place.

It is our role and duty as Augustinians to live by this teaching: Love God, build a direct personal relationship with God, give prominence and meaning to the community you live in, and communicate God's love and the message of redemption in a language that can be understood within the cultural context of society.

Today's world and its challenges require us as lay Augustinians to be committed to our Christian belief and mission, and be prepared to actively support the Augustinian Order in its pastoral and social mission. We need to be ready to complement and extend the work of the religious members of the Augustinian Order while the Order on its part needs to see us, lay Augustinians, as an integral part of the Order, committed and active in the Order to assist the Order to accomplish its mission in the spirit of St Augustine's teachings.

The conclusions of the second international congress for lay Augustinians puts the message loud and clear: The lay Augustinians must be active, committed and recognized as an integral part of the Order in a proactive fashion.

This Congress has elected a lay Commission to express, communicate and act on the message outlined above and to make representations to the General Chapter convening in September 2007 to request an official status for the lay Commission consisting of lay Augustinians and working in close cooperation with, and as an integral part, of the Augustinian Order.

The following constitutes a broad framework that is being presented to the members of the elected lay Commission for their comments. This material is to be evolved into a document that will be submitted to the General Chapter in 2007 once the Prior General accedes to our request to put this item on the Agenda of the General Chapter. Your comments are herewith requested and it would be appreciated if I can receive your comments by end September 2006.

I will develop the document, circulate it again and then discuss it with the outgoing members of the current lay Commission that is meeting in early December for its final session to evaluate the outcome of the second International Congress for Lay Augustinians. At this meeting the outgoing lay Commission will make its own recommendations that hopefully will be reinforcing our own.

## **2. OUTGOING LAY COMMISSION EVALUATION**

As explained by Fr Wim during the Congress the current Lay Commission as constituted by the last General Chapter consisted purely of religious members of the Order. It was later agreed to co-opt a number of lay persons who have cooperated with the appointed Lay Commission to prepare for and organize the second International Congress for Lay Augustinians. The major and basically only task of the outgoing Lay Commission was that of organizing the Congress. The Congress however included various experiences of lay Augustinians in various parts of the world and opened up and addressed the issue of a structured role for the laity in the Order. The outgoing Commission therefore has amply prepared the ground for the constitution of a structured lay Commission and a more recognized role of the laity in the Augustinian Order.

## **3. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE ELECTED LAY COMMISSION**

In order that the lay Commission be properly constituted it does in principle need the approval of and confirmation of the General Chapter. It is therefore assumed that unless it is otherwise agreed the present elected commission is principally oriented at delivering a clear message to the General Chapter in 2007 but its life can be easily extended to the next international Congress if all is agreed and supported by the General Chapter. This issue obviously needs clarification because in a sense the Commission can be seen to exist until the next international Congress unless some other formula is in the process agreed to. The terms of reference of the Augustinian lay Commission as now constituted can now be seen to be the following:

- i. To make recommendations on the role of the laity in the Order
- ii. To make recommendations on the integration of the Augustinian laity within the Augustinian Order
- iii. To make recommendations on the nature of representation in the Order as well as the coordination and organization of the lay Augustinians.

These terms of reference will guide the work of the current lay Commission until its representations to the General Chapter in September 2007 at which point they may be partly reviewed in line with developments. These terms of reference should not be seen as exhaustive and could be extended to respond to the development of needs.

#### 4. ISSUES INVOLVED

There are four issues involved in these terms of reference.

- i. ROLE OF LAY AUGUSTINIANS - The role of the lay Augustinians has to respond to the social and cultural environment that the Augustinian Order operates in. There should be no rigid definition of this role but it should be seen as an extension of both the pastoral and the social activities of the Augustinian Order. The Augustinian Order also has an observer status within the United Nations and is therefore also committed to comment on, and participate in the development of the architecture of the World Order. That means that the Order also has a socio-political role within society – a role that demands that the Augustinians express themselves openly and participate actively in promoting a just and equitable social order at all levels of society. The lay Augustinians also have a role in the spiritual dimension. Not only by ensuring their own education but also by actively participating in the spiritual dimension of the work of the Augustinian Order. In true Augustinian spirit the lay Augustinian should be actively involved in both the spiritual and material dimension of human society.
  
- ii. INTEGRATION IN THE AUGUSTINIAN ORDER - so far the involvement of the laity has been left to either arbitrary and voluntary involvement or limited to an ad hoc arrangement as is amply demonstrated with the case of the constitution of the current lay Commission. As the various experiences recounted at the Congress demonstrate there are different examples of how lay Augustinians actively interface with the religious members of the Order in the Order's mission and activity. The state of the modern world now requires that the role of the laity be formally recognized, not for formality's sake but in order to make the role of the laity more effective and more reliable from the Order's point of view. With the depletion in numbers of the religious members of the Order and with the increasing challenges that the material world is presenting to the Christians, this element of formalization of this role in a constituted fashion becomes ever more urgent. The lay Augustinians have to be seen as forming an integral part of the Augustinian Order. This we feel is very much in harmony with the spirit of St Augustine and with the history of the evolution of the Order. There may be "amenable" legal basis for this integration which may be useful to structuring such integration for instance: In an article entitled THE AUGUSTINIAN FAMILY ACROSS THE CENTURIES written by Balbino Rano OSA and printed in an Augustinian publication dated 1988 and entitled SHARING A COMMON LEGACY Fr Rano explains that according to the Constitutions of the Order of St Augustine: *the Order has the faculty of affiliating to itself those faithful who merit special recognition because of their distinguished cooperation for the good of the Order. This affiliation is granted by the Prior General on his own initiative or upon the request of any community in the Augustinian family.*

- iii.*     REPRESENTATION   In the conclusions of the Congress there were various recommendations on how representation can be organized. There is no doubt that if this is to be undertaken in a democratic fashion one would have to develop quite a complex system. However it is at least my view that one should not try to be too rigorous on this issue. Yes the system should be as democratic as possible and as representative as possible but this will have to depend on the situation in the various provinces and regions. This is an area where more comments are required but the general feeling is that regions have to be well defined and agreed and one or two representatives from each region should finally sit on the lay Commission which would then be formally accepted by the Order. The lay Commission in the final analysis should not exclude religious members of the Order but here again this is an area which requires more debate.
- iv.*     COORDINATION AND ORGANIZATION   There is no doubt that if the laity is going to be a proactive dimension of the Order then the lay Augustinians need to be both organized and coordinated. It is essential that structures are not only created at the top end of the Order but should also exist at the level of parishes and provinces. The involvement of the laity and lay initiatives should be based on a foundation of organized activity and sustainable effort at the grass roots. Information should be disseminated at Province level and should be the basis of the entire lay activity within the Order. As stressed at the Congress in the post modern world action not intellect will allow Christians to achieve the high moral ground. It is therefore absolutely necessary that lay Augustinians do not put as their target the formalization of their role but rather they should place emphasis on the substance of their involvement in the Order. The advantage of belonging to the Augustinian Order in its international dimension lies in the potential of exchanging information and taking cross border initiatives. This is absolutely necessary in a globalized world aided as it is by virtual inter connectivity. The initial effort taken at the Congress to create an email address directory needs to be generalized into a Order wide effort to increment the entries in this directory and to create a corresponding directory of websites that ideally should be also linked to the main Augustinian website. This is important if we are going to make an Augustinian response to the development of the globalised world. Such interconnectivity will allow us to disseminate information, share experiences, coordinate effort, seek advice, solicit solidarity for common initiatives as well as educate and disseminate knowledge. A great deal of this development can be based on the initiative that was started at the Congress and which should be an active scope for the lay Commission.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In the final analysis physical meetings are important. Three levels for lay Augustinians are envisaged – national, regional and international. National meetings should be held on a yearly basis. Regional meetings could be held every two years and the international Congress could still

be held every four years (or more frequently), but if there is a structure of meetings as envisaged here the frequency suggested could make a great deal of sense in order not to create meetings which are held too frequently. In this context the international Congress for lay Augustinians will no longer be a one off event every four years but will serve as the international forum that will coordinate the activities of the lay Augustinians. It will have more significance and will become an active and integral part of the Augustinian Order structure. Its own agenda will become more action oriented and definitely more integrated with the work that the laity will undertake within the Order.

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