

## Spiritual Discernment in the Thought of Saint Augustine

by

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### Introduction

For Augustine, loving is more important than knowing, but we cannot love what we do not know. Discernment, therefore, is not simply about knowing what I want to do, or even what God wants me to do. Ask yourself, “What do I love?” This is what Augustine invites us to do. *Amor meus pondus meum*. My love is my weight, he says. (*Confessions* 13,10) He means that the object of my love is what guides me, leads me, draws me onward in my life. If what I love is good, my love leads to holiness. If bad, it leads to destruction. So proper spiritual discernment, vocational discernment, for Augustine begins with learning to love God above all else, and our neighbor in God.

*“Holy love raises the soul to heavenly thoughts and kindles in it a longing for heaven. Every kind of love has its own energy, and in the soul of a lover love cannot be idle; it must lead somewhere. Do you want to discern the character of a person’s love? Notice where it leads. The two commandments of love – love of God and love of neighbor – are like a pair of wings, and as soon as they are disentangled from every hindrance the soul flies. And where does it fly to? Where else but to God? It mounts to God in flight because it mounts by love.”* (Commentary on Psalm 121,1)

But to love God we must know God, and to know God, Augustine says, we must love God. Yes, it’s a kind of circular reasoning. But think about it. We cannot really love someone that we do not know, and yet can we really know that person without loving them? No, not completely. Getting to know the person and loving them proceed together, one step at a time, gradually, as in a friendship. So, it is with God. Do you want to know what God wants you to do with your life? Then get to know God better, to love God more deeply. God does not reveal His will for you in a flash, an instant. You don’t go on a week’s retreat and discern a vocation while there. Like building a friendship with God, discernment takes time. But discernment can’t be passive. I don’t sit around, going about my business thinking God will let me know eventually what I should do. This is not discernment. Discernment implies activity and requires it.

But how? How do I go about getting to know and love God to understand and accept what he wants me to do with my life? To understand discernment as Augustine does, we must look closely at three aspects of our lives: prayer, friendship and self-knowledge. For Augustine, these are not entirely distinct, isolated activities in our lives. They act together, in harmony with each other. We don’t pray for a while, then go out and spend some time with friends, then think about ourselves. These three activities are like different facets of a gemstone. When you hold up a gem in the light and rotate it in your hand you can see different aspects of the gem. But the gem is one, it is not many different gems. So, it is with our spiritual lives. Love of God, as in prayer, and love of others, as in friendship, are how we come to know ourselves. Prayer, friendship and self-knowledge act together in our lives, and by doing so lead us to an understanding of God’s will for us, our vocation. A prayer of Augustine illustrates this point.

*Lord Jesus, let me know myself, let me know you,  
 And desire nothing else but you.  
 Let me hate myself and love you.  
 And do all things for the sake of you.  
 Let me humble myself and exalt you,  
 And think nothing else but you.  
 Let me die to myself and live in you.  
 And accept whatever happens as coming from you.  
 Let me forsake myself and walk after you,  
 And ever desire to follow you.  
 Let me flee from myself and turn to you,  
 That I may deserve to be defended by you.  
 Let me fear for myself, let me fear you,  
 And be among those who are chosen by you.  
 Let me distrust myself and trust in you,  
 And will to obey for the love of you.  
 Let me cleave to nothing but only to you,  
 And be poor for the sake of you.  
 Look upon me, that I may love you,  
 Call me that I may see you,  
 And forever enjoy you. Amen.*

In this prayer Augustine seeks to know himself by knowing God, “*Let me know myself, let me know you.*” This is a prayer for clarity. Only by knowing God can we know ourselves, discover who we really are and know what God asks of us. Augustine tells us that to know God and to enjoy him we must desire him beyond all else, “*Let me desire nothing else but you.*” But what about our friends? Shouldn’t they be important to us? How does the love of our friends, our devotion to them, fit with love of God *alone*?

Augustine does not downplay the importance of loving one’s friends. In fact, in his *Confessions* he makes it clear that he would not have arrived at the proper love of God and acceptance of his vocation without the help of his many friends. In understanding what Augustine means when he prays to desire nothing else but God, and to cleave to nothing else but God, we need to keep in mind that for him God is not a being standing in relation to other beings. So, we do not choose between loving a friend or loving God. For Augustine, God is Love itself. So, God is not a rival to our friends.

“*Do you really imagine it benefits God that you love God? That because you love God he gains something? And that if you don't love God, he will have less? When you love God, it's you who benefit by it.*” (Sermon 34,8)

When we hear it said that we shouldn’t love another person *more* than God, what is meant is that our love for the other should be pure, not selfish. This means that our love for others should be aimed at promoting their true good, which is God, not something harmful. When our love for our friends is pure, we love them *in* God. God is the very ground of our love for them, the reason we love them, and the end to which we love them. So, we should desire God above all else.

For Augustine prayer is desire for God, a longing for God. Simply put, this is what prayer is. When we long for the deepest happiness, for our most complete sense of fulfilment, we are longing for

God. And when we long for God in this way, we are praying. In his letter to the noblewoman, Proba, Augustine wants her to understand that all that we desire in life is superficial and ultimately dissatisfying, even human intimacy. We cannot be completely happy, not truly satisfied, until we are united with God. *“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you,”* he says to God. This is the core of self-knowledge according to Augustine. Whatever else we come to know about ourselves through our life experiences, through our friendships, leads us ultimately to the truth that our hearts remain restless until we rest in God. Spiritual discernment, vocational discernment, is ultimately about searching continuously for that resting place.

In the chapters that follow we will examine more closely the role of prayer, friendship and self-knowledge in discernment.

## PRAYER

For Augustine, prayer is a great mystery. We can understand it partly, but not fully. It’s like an iceberg. A small portion of it is visible to us; however, the great bulk of it is unseen. The same is true of our prayer. When we pray, we are aware of a part of it, but there is more to our prayer than what we see. We may not feel it, not be conscious of it, but God is.

Hence, when we set out to pray, we may come away from it feeling empty, unsatisfied. We may even wonder if we really prayed at all. Part of the reason for this dissatisfaction with our prayer is that we are really dissatisfied with ourselves. On some level we think of ourselves as inadequate. We do not accomplish what we set out to do. We make good plans for ourselves but then let them fall away, as when we intend to go to the gym, but we aren’t consistent, and then we drop the whole thing. It’s the same thing with our friends. How many times do we massively disappoint someone close to us, and feel guilty for doing so, but are too embarrassed to admit it, to make it up to them? We carry around these and other anxieties, and they make us feel bad about ourselves. Then, when we think about praying, we don’t feel up to it. It’s just one more thing we’re bad at doing. God must really be disappointed in us, we think.

If this is the way you feel about yourself, anxious, dissatisfied, you’re not alone. As he was growing up, Augustine felt this way most often about himself and his prayer. He thought he was not getting anything out of it. His later advice to those who carry around anxious thoughts about themselves was, first, to start by admitting this. *“I’m worried, I’m anxious about stuff in my life.”* Remember the prayer of Augustine, *“Lord, let me know myself, let me know you.”* We begin to pray by gradually coming to know the truth about ourselves. That means coming to know ourselves, not through some illusion, but as we really are. *“At times I’m not as good a person – not as good a friend – as I think I am, and as I want to be.”* There are good aspects of ourselves, too. Sometimes we think so poorly of ourselves that we fail to recognize the good that we do for others. We block our positive features out of our consciousness. But God enables us to know ourselves by gently leading us to the truth. As we begin to know ourselves as we truly are, and as we want to be, we begin to know ourselves as God knows us, and in doing so, we begin to know God in our hearts. And knowing God in this intimate way is prayer.

So, prayer and self-knowledge are intertwined. I cannot make progress in prayer until I begin to be honest about myself. But we gain true knowledge about ourselves only gradually throughout life, and sometimes through our mistakes. Mistakes are part of the growing process. We become

the compassionate persons that we are, in part, through our mistakes, not despite them. St. Paul expresses this point in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

*“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I set aside childish ways.*

*Now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Cor 11-12)*

There are two important points in what Paul is saying. First, our speech and thought progress in stages from childhood into adulthood. But Paul knows that we don’t reason as a child one day and then suddenly as an adult the next day. We move gradually and unevenly, back and forth, by fits and starts, from childhood to adulthood. We can consider what Paul says about these phases in growth analogously in terms of prayer. Instead of thinking about sequential stages, one proceeding after another, we might think of interwoven moments in prayer. We have good days, bad days, and days when we don’t even show up. Augustine acknowledges that at times prayer can come to us easily; at times all we can manage to do is to worry.

*“At times we may in some measure scatter the clouds as our prayer draws us on, and even come within earshot of that divine melody, so that by pressing forward we may see something of the house of God. Yet under the weight of our weakness, we fall back into familiar things and slide down again into our ordinary way of life. As we have found there a cause for joy, so here there is no shortage of things to worry about.” (Commentary on Psalm 41,10)*

This movement between delight in prayer and disappointment, the ebb and flow, is therefore natural and should not be a reason for doubting ourselves or God. We plod onward. That’s the best we can do. Setbacks in prayer are only apparent. Progress in prayer is not linear, it zigzags. Sometimes in trying to pray we feel so completely alone and confused that we can’t even put into words what we are feeling, and we just end up in tears. But that’s okay. God doesn’t always expect us to speak.

*“Prayer is very often carried out more with sighs than words, more with weeping than with speaking. But he places our tears in his sight, and our sighing is not hidden from him who created all things by his Word and does not seek human words.” (Letter 130,19)*

St. Paul’s second point is even more important. Prayer does not enable us to experience God as completely as we would like. We cannot fully know and love God in this life. Prayer involves disappointment and even darkness. So, if we expect some kind of lasting joy or peace in our lives because of prayer, we are not going to find it. God is mostly seen mysteriously in the darkness of our innermost self. Paul says, *“Now we see dimly as in a reflection ... now we know only in part.”* As Augustine observes, we sometimes hear the divine melody in our prayer, but that moment doesn’t last very long and *“under the weight of our weakness we fall back into familiar things ... where there is no shortage of things to worry about.”* So, we should take heart when we are disappointed in prayer, as when experiences of deep satisfaction on some days give way to boredom on others.

How to pray? Augustine teaches us to follow what Christ says. When his disciples asked him how to pray, Jesus taught them the prayer we call the Our Father (Matthew 6:9-13). He notes that everything we should ever pray about is in that singular prayer. Praise and Gratitude: “Hallowed be thy Name.” Petition: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Contrition: “Forgive us our trespasses.”

*“For whatever other words we might say, if we pray correctly and properly, we say nothing else but what is contained in that prayer of the Lord.” (Letter 130,22)*

Once again, for Augustine prayer is simply the desire for God.

*“Because now you are unable to see, let your task consist in desiring. The entire life of a good Christian is a holy desire. Desire is praying always. God stretches our desire through delay, stretches our soul through desire, and makes it large enough by stretching it.” (Commentary on the First Letter of John 4,6).*

We are praying whenever we long for God. But what does it mean to long for God? We can think about the desire for God in terms of the desire for our true good. There are many goods in our lives. We cherish our families and friends. We seek to support ourselves financially. We want to be healthy. These are all goods that we rightly desire. However, our true and deepest good consists in becoming a loving, virtuous person and enjoying a happiness that is lasting because it extends beyond death. When we desire this true good, we desire God.

*“There is a kind of prayer that never ceases, an interior prayer that is desire. Your continuous desire is your continuous prayer. You will only stop praying if you stop loving. The chilling of love is the silence of the heart: the blazing of love is the heart’s cry. If your love abides all the time, you are crying out all the time: if you are crying out all the time, you are desiring all the time.” (Commentary on Psalm 37,14)*

Augustine teaches that the goodness and happiness which we desire can be expressed when we promote in others the same desire for God that we experience in ourselves.

Let me explain. We are often involved in performing simple acts of kindness for other people. These acts of charity are ways in which we promote in others their own love of God. How so? How does a kind deed on my part toward another move them toward the love of God? It can do so by enabling them to feel loved, to experience goodness. This love, if it is true and not self-interested, is the presence in their hearts of the Holy Spirit. It can then happen that they are attracted by that feeling of love and goodness to desire goodness. Thus, our act of charity promotes in the other person their own love of true goodness, which is the love of God. When we do this, when we promote the true good of another, we are also desiring God.

*“It is not a different love which loves the neighbor from the one which loves God. With the same love as we love our neighbor with, let us also love God. But because God is one thing, our neighbor another, they are loved with one love, and yet they are not one thing being loved.” (Sermon 265,9)*

*“We, of course, truly love our neighbors as ourselves if we bring them, to the extent we can, to a similar love of God. We, therefore, love God on account of himself and love ourselves and our neighbor on account of him. (Letter 130,13)*

Key to understanding Augustine on these points is to remember that he distinguishes between different kinds of happiness, some true, some false, and some more complete than others. He once likened the happiness he felt when he committed a sin to a “truant’s freedom,” the delight he felt as a student when he had cut class. His happiness on that occasion was dampened on account of the nagging feeling in the back of his mind that what he was doing was wrong. However, even when we are happy about something good, that happiness doesn’t always last. For example, parents

are generally happy with their children, but they can also be upset by them, either for a short time, or longer if their children turn against them.

Only that happiness is true which is lasting, and the only happiness that is lasting is in God.

Augustine also reminds us that at times the desire for God must be revitalized with words. This happens when we attend Mass or pray with other people. Augustine says that on such occasions, when we hear the scripture readings or the psalms being recited, or join in the singing of hymns, our desire for God is strengthened.

*“We, therefore, always pray with a continuous desire. But at certain hours and moments we also pray to God in words so that through them we may arouse ourselves more intensely to increase our desire for him.” (Letter 130,18)*

Augustine recalls the strong effect on his prayer of the beauty of the liturgy, the singing of psalms and hymns in the church during his baptism.

*“How I cried out to you in those psalms and how they kindled my love for you.” (Confessions 9,8)*

*“And so, we were baptized, and I could not get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled me. How profusely I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled into my heart until it overflowed in loving devotion; my tears ran down, and I was the better for them.” (Confessions 9,14)*

But Augustine also reminds us that in pursuit of that deep satisfaction, that lasting happiness, we must step away at times from the noise of our daily lives and pray in silence. Personal prayer, the prayer of the heart, is best practiced when we surround ourselves with silence. But this can be the most difficult form of prayer. As beautiful an experience as silent prayer or meditation can be, at times we can feel frustrated with it. We simply cannot quiet ourselves down. Our minds are not accustomed to silence, and we can find it impossible to be rid of distractions and even anxieties. Augustine knew this frustration personally, and he knew how to describe it to others.

*“If I try to list the anxious distractions that clutter our minds, when would we ever find time enough? Is there anyone who does not suffer them? So insistent are they that we are scarcely able to pray. Often intrusive images rush in upon us, ones we are not seeking. We pass from one to another. Then you want to go back to your starting point and rid yourself of what you are currently thinking about, but something else which you did not want comes instead.” (Commentary on Psalm 37,11)*

We all lead active lives. And when we are not busy with work or school or friends and family, we are on some kind of social media seeking dopamine hits by constantly scrolling on our phones, listening to music or playing video games. Sleep is the only time we are surrounded by silence.

Spiritual discernment cannot take place in this noisy environment. Period. If we want to discover what God wants us to do with our lives, we must “be still and know that I am God.” (Ps 46:10). Not all the time, of course, but sometimes. We engage in discernment when we read the Bible.

Prayer in silence is only one of the ways, but a necessary one, that God leads us to know and love himself. It is in silence that we uncover the meaning of the scriptural passages which we read.

*“Let us leave a little room for reflection in our lives, room too for silence. Let us look within ourselves and see whether there is some delightful hidden place inside where we can be free of noise and argument. Let us hear the Word of God in stillness and perhaps we will then come to understand it.” (Commentary on John’s Gospel 124,7)*

*It is difficult in a crowd to see Christ; it is by a certain solitude of contemplation that God is seen. A crowd has noise; this seeing requires secrecy. Do not seek Christ in a crowd. (Commentary on the Gospel of John 17,11)*

What takes place in silence that makes it so valuable for discernment? In silent prayer we can find a kind of joy and peace that can come only from God, and that we cannot find when we are surrounded with chatter and noise. We need this peace to free our minds from those attractions and impulses that make it difficult for us to discern our life path. Augustine describes God’s presence in silence as a divine music.

*“In our silence something sounds softly to us from above, reaching not our ears but our minds. Any who hear that music are so disenchanted with material noise that the whole of human life seems to them a confused uproar, which stops them hearing another sound that is delightful, a sound like no other and beyond description.” (Commentary on Psalm 42,7)*

*“I love you, Lord. You pierced my heart with your word, and I fell in love with you. But what am I loving when I love you? I love a kind of light, a kind of voice, a certain fragrance, a food and an embrace, when I love my God: a light, voice, fragrance, food and embrace for my inmost self. This is what I love, when I love my God.” (Confessions 10,8)*

## **Conclusion**

To discern our vocation, we must set time aside for prayer. For Augustine, without prayer we end up listening only to ourselves or to our friends, but not to God. There are different ways of praying. Prayer is essentially desiring God. The Mass is the most perfect form of prayer. If we don’t attend Mass, we don’t have a religious vocation. But we can also read the Bible, pray the Rosary, spend quiet time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, meditate on good books. We can pray with others, but we must make time to pray alone and in silence. Augustine also reminds us that when we have difficulty praying, some of our best prayers are wordless, as in those times when all we can do is cry. However, the first step in spiritual discernment is to ask God for guidance. Nothing is more important.

## **FRIENDSHIP**

*“In this world two things are essential: life and friendship. Both should be highly prized, and we must not undervalue them. God created us that we might exist and live: this is life. But if we are not to remain alone, there must be friendship.” (Sermon Denis 16,1)*

*“There is no greater consolation than the sincere loyalty and mutual affection of good and true friends.” (City of God 19,8)*

In discerning our vocation, we should rely on our friends for help. Some of them may tell us, “You should be a priest,” or “You should get married,” or even “You should be a doctor.” We smile and appreciate their honest advice, but it’s not as simple as that, is it? Our friends are an important guide and support in our lives, and we would not be who we are without them. And it can so happen that a direct word from a good friend can sometimes lead us to realize what God wants us to do. It can happen that way. But by far in most cases, it doesn’t. And we really don’t want our friends to tell us what we should do with our lives. We allow close friends into the deepest questions or doubts in our lives, not because they can answer them, but because we need their support. We want them to be there with us.

Augustine enjoyed spending time with friends. But his friendships were not just about hanging out, though he also did that. He was not embarrassed to admit that he needed his friends’ emotional and even their spiritual support. He tells us that he could not face so many life challenges without speaking about them with his friends, because when he’s with them he feels God’s presence. In confiding his troubles to his friends, he is also confiding them to God.

*“I confess that I cast myself without reservation on the love of those who are especially close to me, particularly when worn out by the upsets of the world. In their love I rest without the slightest worry, because I perceive that God is present there. In this security I am undisturbed by my fear of the uncertainty of tomorrow. For when I see that a person is aflame with Christian love and has therefore become a faithful friend to me, I know that whatever thoughts or considerations I entrust to him, I entrust to God in whom that person dwells, and by whom he is who he is.” (Letter 73,10)*

But Augustine discovers early in life that not all friendships are good, because not all friendships reflect the love of God. This was a hard lesson for him, one that he never forgot.

He was around twenty-two years old when he was seriously hurt in a friendship. He became close friends with a young man whom he had known since childhood. The two were inseparable, although since he was seventeen, Augustine had been living with a woman, and they had a son. Life and love were complicated for him in a manic kind of way during those years. “*I was in love with loving,*” he admitted about himself. He meant that at that time his love for others wasn’t yet genuine although it felt like love. Augustine doesn’t tell us his friend’s name, only that “*he was exceedingly dear to me ... a friendship sweeter to me than any sweetness I had known in all my life.*” (Confessions 4,7) Long story short, Augustine had persuaded his friend to join him in a religious sect opposed to the Catholic Church. The two of them shared this false religion. But when the friend was near death and unconscious with a severe fever, he was baptized as a Catholic. This upset Augustine. When his friend regained consciousness, Augustine tried to convince him to reject the baptism, but the friend warned him that he would end their friendship if Augustine persisted in talking like that. Shortly thereafter his dear friend died.

Augustine fell into a deep depression.

*“Black grief closed over my heart and wherever I looked I saw only death. My hometown was a torment to me and my father’s house unbelievable misery. Everything I had shared with my friend turned into hideous anguish without him. My eyes sought him everywhere, but he was missing. I had become a great enigma to myself, confused as to why I was so upset and sorrowful. Weeping alone brought me consolation, and took my friend’s place as my only comfort.” (Confessions 4,9)*

*“I was amazed that others went on living when he was dead whom I had loved as though he would never die, and still more amazed that I could go on living myself when he was dead — I, who had been like another self to him. It was well said that a friend is half one’s own soul. I felt that my soul and his had been but one soul in two bodies, and I shrank from life with loathing because I could not bear to be only half alive.” (Confessions 4,11)*

Augustine tried to pray but couldn’t. He tried to distract himself from his grief with trips to the countryside, with drinking and partying and sex, but he remained depressed. He moved to Carthage, far from home, but found no relief. Finally, time passed, and he formed other friendships that soothed his grief. His writing about this experience expresses the deep beauty that he finds in friendship.

*“There were joys to be found in their company which powerfully captivated my mind — the charms of talking and laughing together and kindly giving way to each other’s wishes, reading elegantly written books together, sharing jokes and delighting to honor one another, disagreeing occasionally but without anger, as a person might disagree with himself. We would teach and learn from each other, sadly missing any who were absent and cheerfully welcoming them when they returned. Such signs of friendship sprang from the hearts of friends who loved and knew their love returned, signs to be read in smiles, words, glances and a thousand gracious gestures. So were sparks kindled, and our minds were fused inseparably, out of many becoming one. This is what we esteem in our friends, and so highly do we esteem it that our conscience feels guilt if we fail to love someone who responds to us with love, or do not return the love of one who offers love to us.” (Confessions 4,13-14)*

Later, he looked back somewhat critically at these friendships, because although they helped him to overcome his grief, he judged that they didn’t lead him to love God. *“In their company I loved what I was loving as a substitute for you.”* As he grew older, his friendships matured. He recognized that as our faith progresses, our prayer progresses, and as our prayers grow stronger, our friendships naturally draw us closer to God. So, these early friendships, even the one with his friend who died, although far from perfect, were stepping stones toward a deeper, more spiritual self-knowledge, leading him toward the true friendships of his life.

From Augustine’s perspective, we can rely for support and guidance from our friends in discerning our vocation only when those friends are morally strong and spiritually stable. This doesn’t mean that they’re perfect, that they have it all together. Augustine didn’t have it all together, nor did his best friends. Many years later, *as a bishop*, he preached a homily in which he admitted to his congregation that he was still struggling with faults unknown to others.

*“Certainly, there are still faults in me that deserve criticism. I have plenty of trouble in my thoughts, fighting against my sinful impulses; I have a prolonged conflict, a conflict that never seems to stop, with the temptations of the enemy who strives to overpower me. I cry out to God in my weakness.” (Commentary on Psalm 36,19)*

Augustine knew that what was true about himself in terms of spiritual weakness, was true of others, of his friends. He believes that friendship is good, and that it delights us. He had good friends, and they made him happy. But he also warns us that just as we cannot know our innermost self, it can frighten us at times that we cannot really know our friend's deepest thoughts and doubts.

*“Human beings can speak, they can be heard; but can we ever get to the bottom of a person's thoughts, or see into anyone's heart? Who can grasp what another person is thinking there within the heart?” (Commentary on Psalm 41,13)*

*“In no human affairs is anything dear to a human being without a friend. But where is such a friend found about whose heart and character one can in this life have a certain confidence? For no one is known to another as each is known to himself, and yet no one is known to himself.” (Letter 130,4)*

But this nagging uncertainty about even close friends is no reason to avoid friendships.

*“Do you want to find good people? Be one yourself, and you will find them.” (Commentary on Psalm 47,9).*

If you want good friends, be a good friend. When we love others sincerely, as when we help them in some way, they feel our goodness, and this feeling in turn can draw them into desiring to be good to us. This is how friendships are born, when both friends are attracted to the goodness in the other.

However, Augustine believes that for the initial friendship to become a true friendship we must love our friends *in God*. *“Blessed is he who loves you and loves his friend in you.”* But what does it mean to love a friend in God? Essentially, it means that only those friendships are true and good which come from God and lead us back to God. So, both conditions are necessary. True friendship is a gift we receive from God, and it leads us to God.

*“There is no true friendship unless God bonds it between friends that cling together by the love poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.”*

*“You only love your friend truly when you love God in your friend, either because he is in him, or in order that he may be in him. That is true love and respect.” (Confessions 5,19)*

Friends should aim to lead each other to love God. Simply put, this is what it means to love our friends “in God.” But how do we do this? Ask yourself how you care for your friends' spiritual lives. Do you ever speak to them about God? Are you the kind of friend they would open up to about religion, or would you be embarrassed and quickly change the subject? Do you ever pray for them or with them? Loving a friend in God certainly doesn't mean talking about church or prayer all the time, but it does require that we do so as needed. Augustine recognizes that each of us is spiritually weak at times, and that no matter how mature we think we are, we can easily lose our way. On these occasions we all need to rely on our friends to steer us back to spiritual health, to care for our souls, and we also need to care for theirs.

*“If your delight is in others, love them in God, because they too are frail and gain stability only when grounded in him. Otherwise, they would go their way and be lost. Love them, then, in him and draw as many with you to him as you can. Tell them, ‘He is the one we should love, for he is not far off.’ Where we taste the truth, God is there. He is in our very inmost hearts. Stand with him and you will stand firm, rest in him and you will find peace.” (Confessions 4,18)*

Augustine did not shy away from offering spiritual advice to his friends, even when it was inconvenient. As a bishop he had a close friend who was a powerful Roman governor. When he urged the governor to pardon a condemned criminal, he didn't apologize for using strong language, because friends speak frankly with friends when their spiritual good is at stake. *"No one can be another's friend unless he has first been the friend of truth itself,"* Augustine wrote to him.

*"I seem to say this with not enough respect, but I rightly fear to be displeasing first of all to God and then to the friendship you have consented to enter into with me. When I speak with you on your own behalf, I am franker to the extent I am more your friend."* (Letter 155,11)

On another occasion, a young man, a student, wrote to Augustine and asked him some advice about his career ambitions. Dioscorus did not believe in God. He wanted a friendship with the bishop, and Augustine wanted a friendship with him, but he urged him to focus on the pursuit of truth rather than popular appeal.

*"Believe me, my Dioscorus; it is true. I pray that I may enjoy your friendship in the desire for the truth, by whose shadow you are turned away. After all, you do not see truth, nor can you in any way see it as long as you pile up fragile joys from the flattery of human beings."* (Letter 188,5)

So, the role of friendship in discernment is to love our friends by persuading them, guiding them into finding and holding on to their deepest truth, which is God. Augustine firmly believes that discernment, the search for God, is a shared search with friends. He knew from his own experience that we do not find truth alone.

Two of Augustine's closest friends, housemates of his in Milan, helped him to discern the greatest truth of his life, that he should become a Christian and change his career. His best friend was Alypius, a student of his, whom he called *"my heart's brother, this man so closely united with me."* (Confessions 9,7; 6,16) Another companion was Nebridius, *"a friend most tenderly loved,"* (Confessions 9,6) who had earlier persuaded Augustine to abandon his addiction to astrology. Now at twenty-nine years of age, Augustine was a professor in Milan with an important job in the emperor's court. But his professional and personal lives were a mess. His job was stressful, yet he was ambitious, yearned to become wealthy, and maneuvered among influential men to further his political career. At the same time, he dreamed of forming a community with his friends and devoting himself to the study of philosophy. Gradually he grew more deeply attracted to Christianity, but at the same time he struggled to understand and accept Catholic teaching. In this confused state of mind, he and his friends spoke openly with each other about their problems.

*"Those of us who lived as friends together sighed deeply over these experiences, and I discussed them most especially and intimately with Alypius and Nebridius. So, then there were three gaping mouths, three individuals in need, gasping out their hunger to one another and looking to you to give them their food in due time."* (Confessions 6,11;17)

Augustine's dream of living in a philosophical community clashed head on with his desire to marry, and he couldn't resolve the tension.

The question of marriage for Augustine was vexed. For thirteen years, he had been living with a woman and their son. By Roman law they were forbidden to marry, because she belonged to a lower social class than he. But because marriage was such a difficult legal issue at this time in Roman history, this sort of arrangement, though not ideal, was considered quite respectable. At the same time, Augustine was contemplating baptism. However, this growing desire provided a second

complication. St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, would not allow anyone to be baptized who was living with a partner outside of legal marriage. So, if he decided to be baptized, Augustine would have to separate from her. When he sent her away, he fell into depression once again.

*“The wound inflicted on me by the separation did not heal. After the fever and the immediate acute pain had dulled, the pain became a cold despair.” (Confessions 6,25)*

So, he looked for a woman to marry, because he thought he couldn’t live without having sex. He turned to Alypius for advice.

*“Alypius dissuaded me from taking a wife. He repeatedly played on the fact that once I had done so it would be impossible for us to live together in carefree retirement and devote ourselves to philosophy as we had long desired, and still desired, to do.” (Confessions 6,21)*

Nevertheless, their conversations on this matter were not easy. Augustine was attracted to marriage not out of a noble desire, but out of sheer lust for sexual pleasure. At first, he fought against Alypius’s counsel.

*“I beat away his words of sound advice as though protecting a sensitive wound. He looked on with astonishment that I, for whom he had no small regard, was so deeply caught up in sexual pleasure that whenever the subject came up for discussion between us, I told him that I was utterly incapable of living a celibate life and defended myself in the face of his obvious astonishment.” (Confessions 6,21-22)*

Later, Nebridius joined them in these difficult conversations, and Augustine felt gratitude over their concern for him.

*“With my friends Alypius and Nebridius I argued about the fate of the good and the bad. In my misery I didn’t consider from whom I acquired the power to discuss these unpleasant things with them and benefit from our conversations. I loved these friends for their own sake and felt myself loved by them for mine.” (Confessions 6,26)*

Augustine continued to obsess over this moral and spiritual confusion for well over a year while he continued to live with his friends and work in Milan. But now, at the age of thirty-one, his spiritual crisis had reached its peak. He found himself in an emotionally vulnerable state. His closest friend, Alypius, stood by his side and helped him to discern the most difficult decisions of his life, to be baptized, to quit his job, to embrace celibacy and to become a monk.

There were others who played a significant role in Augustine’s spiritual discernment at this time, including his mother, St. Monica, his bishop, St. Ambrose, a priest, Simplicianus, and a government official and fervent Catholic, Ponticianus. Augustine was surrounded by loving friends and family who saw his distress, answered his many questions, and gave him advice. Simplicianus told Augustine the moving story of the conversion of a brilliant teacher who reminded both of Augustine. Ponticianus spoke to him about the beauty and simplicity of the monastic way of life. These conversations reassured Augustine in the long, back and forth process of his discernment.

When, finally, Augustine’s uncertainty reached its climax, Alypius was with him.

*“I went out into the garden and Alypius followed. My privacy was not disturbed by his presence, and, in any case, how could he abandon me in that state? He stood fast at my side, even though this argument in my heart raged only between myself and myself. He silently awaited the outcome*

*of my anguish. But then I arose and left him, for solitude seemed to me more suitable for weeping. This was what I needed, and he understood it, for I think I had risen to my feet and blurted out something, my voice already choked with tears. He remained, in stunned amazement, at the place where we had been sitting.” (Confessions 8,19; 27-28)*

After a while, Augustine returned to Alypius’s side and told him about reading a scripture passage that had moved him to abandon his past sins and embrace Christ. He informed his friend that he had then and there decided to seek baptism. His decision moved Alypius who had also been struggling with this decision to do the same. So, while Alypius’s friendship aided Augustine in discerning his spiritual path, Augustine’s friendship helped Alypius to realize his own.

*“No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than all dark shades of doubt fled away. I closed the book and told Alypius what had happened. My face was peaceful now. He then told me what had been happening to him. He chose to adopt my decision for himself without any delay. We went indoors and told my mother, who was overjoyed.” (Confessions 8,29-30)*

Augustine’s decision to be baptized was closely coupled with his decision to renounce his lucrative career in Milan and return to his native Africa to pursue a religious life in a community of friends who would seek God together in prayer, study and conversation. Augustine made these decisions for himself. But none of them would have been possible without the close support of his friends, among them especially Alypius and Nebridius.

Augustine allows us to see Alypius as an example of how friends support one another in discernment. Note the many ways in which Alypius assists his friend. He didn’t shy away from challenging Augustine about sexual chastity. When, later, Augustine was dealing with this emotional and spiritual crisis, Alypius wouldn’t leave his side. He sat silently beside him in the garden, not chattering to him, but allowing Augustine time to think quietly. Then, when Augustine told him he wanted to be alone, Alypius understood. As a good friend, however, he remained nearby and waited until Augustine returned and wanted to talk about what had happened. At this point, Alypius affirmed his friend’s decision, and confided to him that he, too, wished to be baptized.

## **Conclusion**

For Augustine, spiritual discernment requires prayer accompanied by authentic and lively friendship. We do not discern our vocation in isolation from others. Friendships begin with the expression of kindness and goodness between individuals, but they only become true friendships when the two are friends in God, that is, when by their words and deeds they draw each other toward God.

## **SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

*“Lord, you know me. ... The knowledge that I have of myself, I possess because you have enlightened me, while the knowledge of myself that I do not yet possess will not be mine until my darkness shall be made as the noonday sun before your face.” (Confessions 10,1)*

For Augustine, we only come to understand ourselves as we grow closer to God: *“the knowledge that I have of myself, I possess because you have enlightened me.”* Prayer is an essential way that we come to know and love ourselves. Augustine prays that God may reveal himself to himself.

*“I know myself less clearly than I know you. I beg you to reveal yourself to me as well, O my God, so that I may confess the wounded condition I diagnose in myself to my brothers, who will pray for me.”* (Confessions 10,62)

Augustine insists that prayer and friendship act together to bring us to understand ourselves. Our self-discovery is not accomplished in isolation from friends. He wants his friends to show that they love what is good in him, and to tell him when they disapprove of his faults. Remember that his closest friend, Alypius, criticized him over his sexual involvements, while Nebridius convinced him to abandon astrology. But whether his friends approve of him or disapprove, he knows that they do so out of genuine love for him. And because he knows this, he can open up to them about himself.

*“Yes, let a brother love in me what you teach us to be worthy of love, and deplore in me what you teach us to be deplorable. But let it be a brother who does this, let it be a brother who when he approves of me will rejoice over me, and when he disapproves will be saddened on my account, because whether he approves or disapproves he still loves me. To such people I will disclose myself.”* (Confessions 10,5)

When he speaks to me honestly about myself, my friend can be a mirror through which I see myself. But, for Augustine, both prayer and friendship lead us to listen for God’s voice deep within our innermost self.

*“Do not go outside of yourself, but return to within yourself, for truth resides in the inmost part of man.”* (True Religion, 72)

*“You were closer to me than I am to myself. You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being.”* (Confessions 3,11)

*“Nothing is more intimate to a person than his conscience.”* (Commentary on Psalm 45,3)

For Augustine, our conscience is the interior place where we encounter the voice of God. But it does more than to remind us of the difference between good and bad by telling us ‘do this’ or ‘don’t do that’. Conscience brings to life the memories that make up our personal story. This story tells us who we are. The voice of our conscience is the voice of God to whom Augustine prays, *“I beg you to reveal yourself to me, O my God,”* And as we come to know our story, we share it with our friends. *“To such people I will disclose myself.”*

No human life is without trauma and suffering. Much of this pain is caused by other people, some also by circumstances, but still some is brought on by ourselves, through our own faults. Because these latter memories are hard to face, we tend to hide from them by leaving them buried in our memory. Augustine teaches that we come to know ourselves first by reflecting about our past, thus allowing God to surface these memories in us. He admits, though, that it is often too painful for us to acknowledge the whole truth about ourselves. We prefer to deny many of our past actions.

*“There are many kinds of distress, and in all of them we must seek refuge in God, whether the trouble concerns our income, our health, some danger threatening those we love, or something we*

*need to support our life. However, dearly beloved, I must tell you that among all the problems that confront us, there is none worse than a guilty conscience. If there is no peace within us because of our abundant failings, what are we to do? Where shall we flee when anxieties begin to strike? The person we had thought to find refuge with, our own self, has turned out to be our enemy, and where can we go to escape ourself? Wherever we run, we drag this self after us, and wherever we drag a self in this state, we make it our tormentor.” (Commentary on Psalm 45,3)*

*“Is hearing the truth about oneself from you, Lord, anything different from knowing oneself? And can anyone come to this self-knowledge and insist, ‘It’s not true,’ unless he is lying to himself?” (Confessions 10,3)*

Augustine urges us to take thorough inventory of ourselves and allow memories of our misdeeds to surface in our conscience so that we humbly recognize them.

*“Forge ahead, my brothers and sisters; always examine yourselves without self-deception, without flattery. After all, there’s nobody inside you before whom you need feel ashamed, or whom you need to impress. But there is someone there, the One who is pleased with humility. Examine yourself. Always be dissatisfied with what you are, if you want to arrive at what you are not yet. Because whenever you are satisfied with yourself, you are stuck. Always add some more, always keep on walking, always forge ahead.” (Sermon 169,18)*

Humility consists in honesty about oneself. For Augustine, that person is humble who is honest about his faults and willing to admit them. A humble person also recognizes that whatever good he does or evil he avoids is done through the grace of Christ and not through his own efforts alone. Humility is the basis of the Christian life. Without it no one can know God’s will. Discernment therefore requires humility as its starting point.

*“If you should ask me what the ways of God are, I would tell you that the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is humility, and no matter how often you keep asking me I will say the same over and over again.” Not that there are no other guidelines to follow, but if humility does not precede all that we do, our efforts are fruitless.” (Letter 118,22)*

Augustine not only preached about humility, but he also practiced it in his own life. His past life was literally an open book. He called it *Confessions*. In it he courageously reveals his faults from childhood through adulthood. He does so, he tells us, so that we can learn to do the same and to find God by looking closely at our deepest anxieties, not by ignoring them. Yes, for Augustine, sin is most clearly experienced as an anxiety. We commit sin when we offend God by failing to love him or our neighbor. Sin is what we do or fail to do. However, we experience sin as an anxiety.

*“When at last I cling to you with my whole being there will be no more anxiety or struggle for me, and my life will be filled with you. But now it is very different. I am a burden to myself. Joys over which I ought to weep do battle with sorrows that should be matter for joy, and I know not which will be victorious. But I also see forms of grief that are evil at war in me with joys that are good, and I know not which will win the day. This is agony, Lord!” (Confessions 10,39)*

When we look at this passage closely, we see that it contains some startling statements. Augustine penned them while he was a bishop in Africa at the age of about forty-two. He is no longer the young man who sat in the garden in Milan ten years earlier and experienced a religious conversion. He actively cares for the spiritual needs of his people, celebrates Mass, preaches, prays, leads a

monastic community and writes important books about God. So, what he says here about himself can seem hard to understand. *“Joys over which I ought to weep do battle with sorrows that should be matter for joy, and I know not which will be victorious.”* What he is saying is that “if my mind and heart were really fixed on God, many of the things I do that give me sinful pleasure would be things I regret doing. At the same time, the suffering I experience would instead be a cause for joy, because it heals me. And I do not know whether, by the end of my life, the deceptive pleasures or the healing suffering will be victorious over my soul.”

Another statement can seem just as puzzling. *“But I also see forms of grief that are evil at war in me with joys that are good, and I know not which will win the day.”* Here he admits being torn between demoralising feelings, such as guilt or shame, on the one hand, and the many moments of spiritual joy which flow from his experience of God. He adds that he doesn’t know which of these two sets of emotions will eventually dominate in him, and for this reason he admits to feeling anxious.

*“I have become an enigma to myself.” (Confessions 10,50)*

Some interpreters of Augustine criticize him for being pessimistic about the human condition. They write about the “dour Augustine” who is overly scrupulous and self-critical. But concretely speaking, what kind of painful experiences is Augustine talking about? He tells us explicitly in book 10 of his *Confessions*.

*“In my memory sexual images survive, because they were imprinted there by former habit.” (10,41)*

*“I struggle every day against over-indulgence in eating and drinking.” (10,47)*

*“Every day colors and shapes affect me, and I can never rest from them. (10,51) I fight against tempting images so that I’m not gripped by them.” (10,52)*

*“How many things craftsmen have made: clothing, footwear, and artifacts of every conceivable kind, pictures too. But notice how far these artisans have gone beyond producing what is necessary or useful for us. As for me, I still get caught up in these beautiful objects.” (10,53)*

*“There is the temptation to want praise and affection from others in order to make such admiration itself the cause of my joy. It leads only to a miserable life and shameful pretention. The enemy lies in wait for those of us who because of our official positions in society are loved and respected by our peers. On every side the devil uses popular approval to trap us, so that we look for gratification in flattery. I enjoy being praised. I get increased satisfaction over my good qualities when they are praised by another person, but I feel deflated when I am criticized. On the other hand, I am saddened at times by the admiration I receive when qualities of mine which I do not like are praised, or even when those of my good points which are not important are rated more highly than they deserve.” (10,59-61)*

This is the kind of self-examination Augustine is talking about. He is self-critical, yes, but not in a way that crushes his spirit.

*“You do not know yourself unless you learn about yourself through trial, temptation and testing. But, when you do learn about yourself, don't neglect yourself. And if you used to ignore yourself when you didn't know yourself, don't be careless about that self when you come to know it.”* (Sermon 2,3)

Can't we all can recognize ourselves in something Augustine sees in himself? Perhaps we are at times subject to unwanted sexual images due to our past behaviors; or we've been known to eat or drink too much. Anyone who spends time watching television or the internet, or playing video games, can struggle against the addictive quality of the views produced by these devices. And then there's shopping for the latest expensive, fashionable shoes, or electronic gadgets. Lastly, who of us doesn't enjoy being praised by our peers, especially when they exaggerate our achievements, or doesn't feel sad when they criticize us?

These are the faults that Augustine tells us are worrying him as an adult, as a bishop! This is the personal inventory that his conscience reveals to him as he looks at himself in all humility. But having admitted all of this about himself, he surprisingly feels relief, because he knows that now God is even closer to him than before.

*“If you keep your eye on your sins, then even while you look at them, God forgets them.”* (Commentary on Psalm 122,3)

*“I am needy and poor, but I am the better for recognizing it and seeking your mercy until my shortcomings are made good and my imperfect self is made perfect in your peace.”* (Confessions 10,63)

Augustine recognizes that by coming to know ourselves more deeply through awareness of our faults, past and present, we also come to know ourselves as God knows us, and we experience the joy that only he can give.

*“You shed light upon me and give me joy, you offer yourself, lovable and longed for. To you, then, Lord, I lie exposed, exactly as I am.”* (Confessions 10,2)

Augustine also recalls that not everything in his past relationship with God has been marred by anxiety over guilt or shame. He remembers that there have been reassuring moments of quiet joy.

*“You have dwelt in my memory, and it is there that I find you when I remember and delight in you. These are my holy joys, and they are your gift to me, for in your mercy you look graciously upon my poverty.”* (Confessions 10,35)

So, the experience of coming to know oneself through one's story involves not just difficult memories, but also deep spiritual joys. Augustine speaks a great deal about experiencing God's mercy once he acknowledges that he has sinned. But what exactly constitutes that mercy? What does God's mercy feel like? We realize that we are not yet the best versions of ourselves. But, for Augustine, God's mercy consists in putting his arms around us and telling us, “I've got you. No need to fear, no need to feel anxious anymore. I have you, I've got you.”

*I trembled with awe, yet all the while hope and joy surged up within me at your mercy, Father. (Confessions 9,9)*

*“Your voice is joy to me, your voice that rings out with a flood of joys. Give me what I love for I love indeed, and this love you have given me.” (Confessions 11,3)*

Augustine’s deep reflection on the loving relationship between God and himself is ongoing. It does not occur once and for all. He makes time for it.

*“It is still my constant delight to reflect like this; in such meditation I take refuge from the demands of necessary business, insofar as I can free myself.” (Confessions 10,65)*

## **Conclusion**

*Lord, let me know myself. Let me know you.*

Self-knowledge is a gift of God that we receive through the combined experiences of prayer, friendship and a penetrating reflection on our life. At its best, self-knowledge involves the inner healing of wounds. By acknowledging our weakness, we come to know God’s mercy as a loving embrace that relieves our anxieties, giving us a foretaste of the eternal joy and peace to which our hearts are directed. This is self-knowledge.

*“You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (Confessions 1,1)*

## **General Conclusion**

Spiritual and vocational discernment depends upon prayer, friendship and self-knowledge. For Augustine, we can only know what God wants us to do with our life when we know and love him. We come to love him by getting to know him through prayer, through our friends and through deep reflection on ourselves.

The deepest spiritual discernment in Augustine’s life was at the same time a vocational discernment. When at the age of thirty-one he decided to be baptized as a Catholic Christian, he also determined to quit his prestigious job in Milan, to return to his home in Africa, to embrace celibacy, and to form a religious community with like-minded men. These four decisions were not separated from each other. Together they were aspects of a single spiritual movement of his soul. But his progress in this discernment was slow and marked by serious emotional disturbance.

At times he wanted to be baptized and serve God by abandoning his secular career and living in a religious community with friends, but at other times he felt afraid to do so.

*“When I was making up my mind to serve the Lord my God at last, as I had long since planned to do, I wanted to follow that course, and at the same time I wanted not to. I neither wanted it wholeheartedly nor turned from it wholeheartedly. I was at odds with myself, and hurting myself.” (Confessions 8,2)*

He wavered painfully between decision and indecision.

*“Let it be now,” I was saying to myself. “Now is the moment, let it be now,” and merely by saying this I was moving toward the decision. I would almost achieve it but then fall just short; yet I did not slip right down to my starting point but stood aside to get my breath back. Then I would make a fresh attempt, and now I was almost there, almost there. ... I was touching the goal, grasping it... and then I was not there, not touching, not grasping it. (Confessions 8,25)*

Finally, following a great deal of interior distress, he arrived, drenched with tears, at a deep spiritual calmness while prayerfully meditating on the scriptures, and feeling the support of his friend, Alypius. His discernment was complete; the decisions were made. In addition to being baptized, he decided to renounce both marriage and a career he thought was dishonest, and to live in a religious community.

*“... and now indeed I stood there, no longer seeking a wife or entertaining any worldly hope, for you had converted me to yourself.” (Confessions 8,30)*

*“I was free at last from the relentless need to seek advancement and riches. I believed it to be your will that I should withdraw myself from the marketplace of public speaking, so that young boys should no longer buy from me the weapons for their feverish career ambitions. So, I announced my retirement. The citizens of Milan would have to provide another word-peddler for their students, because I had made up my mind to give myself to your service.” (Confessions 9,1-13)*

He gathered around himself men who would join him in serving God.

*“You gather like-minded people to dwell together, and so you brought into our fellowship a young man named Evodius, who was from our hometown. He was baptized and abandoned his secular career to enlist in your service. We stayed together and made a holy agreement to live together in the future. In search of a place where we could best serve you, we planned to return as a group to Africa.” (Confessions 9,17)*

Every Christian’s vocational pathway involves a personal dimension. No two stories are the same. Augustine gives us certain clear principles for spiritual and vocational discernment that provide guideposts for those who undertake this adventure. His own story demonstrates that discernment is difficult and often confusing. Prayer, friendship and self-knowledge in the course of discernment expose us to risks and to uncertainties. But he is confident that God accompanies us in this search. We are not alone. We reach out to God in prayer, in friendship with others, and in spiritual encounter with our true selves. These three longings lead us to discover God’s will for us.