

A Clay Lamp

1. Introduction

When we have to explain a complex reality to simple persons, generally we use metaphors, images, and comparisons. Augustine was doing the same in his sermons. He knew that when he was preaching in Hippo, the majority of his listeners were persons of low culture and faith that is based on what they could remember in their memory. For this reason, Saint Augustine as a good orator, fills his sermons and explanations of the Sacred Scripture with images, comparisons and examples which were familiar to his listeners. In this manner, in Sermon 46, the known sermon about the pastors—with its clear connotation and anti-Donatist context, Saint Augustine, in order to speak of the figure of the one who has received from God the task of pasturing his flock, uses an image, which is present all throughout the sermon: the image of the lamp.

Both Augustine and his listeners were familiar with clay lamps, since they were using them every day, and when the sun sets, life continued under the timid light of these lamps. We know through Saint Possidius that Saint Augustine wrote, or rather, dictates his works under the light of these oil lamps (*Vita* 24), and being young and still being in Italy, he was probably complaining about that light of the lamps of Rome, which was not as good as that of the lamps of Africa due to the quality of oil. In his homeland, oil was better and cheaper. (*Acad.* 1, 3, 6).

The image of the clay lamp will be used by Augustine in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, the sermons dedicated to expound the book of the Psalms, in order to explain the mystery of Incarnation: Christ assumes human nature with everything that is implied by it, its clay, its fragility, its expiration – against docetism and the various Gnostic versions of the incarnation-, but filling it with the inextinguishable life of God, who would be the fire that exists in the lamp. (*en. Ps.* 138, 14)

For Saint Augustine, the clay lamps are also figure of the good and evil Christians, since when an evil Christian allows the fire of God to be put off in him, he does not only fail to give light to the house, but he also fills it with smoke and bad smell. (*Io. eu. tr.* 23, 3)

The pastor of the soul is then for Saint Augustine like a clay lamp (*s.* 46, 5), filled with oil. He has received something, which is not his: the fire of God. It is a fire that must be communicated to his brothers, illuminating them with the correct teaching of the Word of God, with the strength of the sacraments, but also giving warmth and light with the testimony of his life, giving to the brothers an example of surrender in order to imitate Christ, allowing life to be consumed with joy, in the ministry and service given to the brothers in favor of the Church.

The lamp has not received fire for its own advantage, but for the rest. If the lamp is put to light, as the Gospel says and Augustine comments, it is for the purpose of putting it not under the bushel, but on a candlestick in order to give life to all those who are at home. (Mt. 5: 15) This is the mission of the pastor of souls within the Church, to be like a lamp that has received a gift that he must communicate to the brothers, but without forgetting, the essential element in the Augustinian discourse, that even though he has received something wonderful, the fire of God continues to be a poor fragile clay lamp. For this reason, it ought not seek vainglory, nor search for his own praise or personal interest in his pastoral ministry. (*s.* 46,6) He must be humble and must primarily seek not his own interest, but that of Christ. (Phil. 2: 21, *s.* 46. 2)

The lamp is nourished with the old, and the pastor of the Church distributes that very oil from which he is nourished. (*s.* 339, 4) He is not simply an officer, nor the owner of what he

gives to his brothers. He is a minister, a servant, (s. 339, 4), who is also nourished with what he gives. From here comes the importance of the interior life of the pastor. If the lamp is not nourished by the oil of spiritual life, the fire of God is put off and what is then the use of a lamp that does not give light?

2. The pastor of souls according to Saint Augustine in Sermon 46

We have heard in many occasions that Saint Augustine had never dreamt of becoming a pastor of souls. His initial dream, after having received baptism during the Easter eve of the year 387, was to serve God as a monk, as a *servus Dei*, until the end of his life, dedicated to prayer, meditation of the mysteries of God, manual and intellectual work, community life, reading of the Word of God and the celebration of his mysteries. All this is reflected in his letter to Nebridius, his *alter ego*, (ep. 10, 2). This spiritual plan is enclosed in what he calls “*deificari...in otio*.” Nevertheless, as we know well, the Church asks of his services as pastor, since the Catholic Church of North Africa was living moments of true and great crises. In North Africa, at the end of the fourth century, there existed a divided Church for more than a century caused by a painful schism (the Donatist), which had become very great in the Church of Hippo. It reached even the point that the Donatist bishops had prohibited the bakers to sell bread to Catholics. (c. *litt. Pet.* 2, 184) It was a Church with a clergy who had poor preparation, and in some occasion, a doubtful moral life. It was a Church not capable of facing the other adversaries like Manichaeism and paganism. It was a Church who saw the Catholic faithful, vacillating in their faith, filling again the theaters and amphitheaters, and hailing with the same voice with which they sang divine praises, the gladiators and charioteers. (en. *Ps.* 39, 8) For this reason, when Bishop Valerius, who was not so able in his Latin (He was then of Greek origin, [*Vita*5]) and at the same time, was advanced in age, and the faithful people of Hippo recognized Saint Augustine among the faithful, they literally seized him (Augustine referred to it, “*I was seized (apprehensus) and was made priest*” s. 355, 2) and moved him to accept priesthood in the Church of Hippo. Saint Augustine, even though he was tempted to escape to solitude because of his feeling of unworthiness of the priestly ministry and having been weighed down by the weight of his sins (*conf.* 10, 70, we do not know if before or after his priestly ordination, which possibly happened in January 391), decided to accept the will of God meditating on the words of Saint Paul in 2 Cor. 5: 14-15: “*If one died for all, all therefore dies. And He died for all, so that those who live may not live anymore for themselves, but for the one who died and rose for their sake.*” Since then, Augustine renounced his life of *otium sanctum*, in order to embrace the *amoris officium* (*Io. eu. tr.* 123, 5), the pastoral ministry, without leaving his being a monk and this must be underscored. Even though he was a priest and a bishop after, Saint Augustine never left his being a monk and his lifestyle as a monk, in as far as his obligations allowed him. These were onerous charge or *sarcina* (backpack of the Roman legions: s. 339,2), which Divine Providence had put on his shoulders. Constant in the reflections that Saint Augustine makes on pastoral ministry, is to indicate that it deals not with any honor (*honor*) but with a weight and charge (*onus*: s. 301, 8), which can only be carried out with dignity and joy with the help of the grace of God. It is interesting to note, as in the Letter 21 written almost at the same time of his ordination in January 391, that Saint Augustine writes: “(. . .) *in this life, especially in these times, nothing is more easy, more pleasing and of greater acceptance among men than the ministry of bishop, priest or deacon, if it is carried out for mere compliment and adulation. But at the same time, nothing is more disgraceful, sad and abominable before God than this conduct. In the same way, there is nothing in this life, especially in these times, more grave, heavy and risky than the obligation of the bishop, priest or deacon; Neither there is something more holy before God if is carried out according to the demands of our Emperor.*” (ep. 21, 1)

For Saint Augustine, the pastor will be a minister, a simple servant, according to that phrase

often repeated in his writings: *Dispensator verbi et sacramenti* (c. litt. Pet. 3, 67). He is neither the owner nor the mediator. In Augustinian theology, which has, in many cases, as background, the neo-platonic thought particularly that of Porphyry, who, through theurgy, was proposing many mediators between God and men (civ. 10, 10) -, for Saint Augustine, it will be very clear that there exists only one mediator between God and men: Jesus Christ. Nobody goes to the Father if not through Him, who is the Fatherland and way at the same time. (s. 123, 3, 3)

Christ is the only priest, (conf. 10, 69), and he who carries out the priestly ministry on earth in whatever form, will do it in the name of Christ, with the power received from Christ through his Church and in favor of the same Church, in communion with her leaders, tradition, magisterium and rule of faith. (ep. 265, 6). Hence, Saint Augustine is careful in using the Word “priest” (sacerdos), then the only and High Priest anointed by the Father since all eternity is Christ. (c. Faust. 12, 36) For this reason, the Word “sacerdos” in the Augustinian writings, in most cases, is applied either to the priesthood of the Old Testament, (c. ep. Par. 2, 14), or directly to Christ, the Eternal Priest. (De Trin. 1, 20) The other degrees of priesthood will be referred to by the term bishop (episcopus), presbyter (presbyter) and deacon (diaconus), even though it does not exclude the term co-priest (consacerdos), to refer to those who share with him the priestly ministry received from Christ through His Church. (ep. 34, 5)

But let us return to the metaphor that we proposed at the beginning and that appears in Sermon 46, particularly in its first part, the image of the oil lamp. This is he who carries out a pastoral work within the Church and let us see some characteristics, which he must have.

1. The good pastor is a lamp that must illumines.

A. It illumines with the Sacred Scripture

*The mission of the one who has been constituted pastor in the Church is to illumine the people with the Word of God (s. 46.), which is the light that shines in darkness until it begins to dawn. For this reason, the pastor has been deputed *dispensator verbi et sacramenti* (c. litt. Pet. 3, 67) He must nourish the people of God with His Word and the sacraments, since the Bible is no other than the letters that our God the Father sent us who is in the Fatherland, the kingdom of heavens, and from there, he encourages us not to abandon the pilgrimage towards it. (en. Ps.64, 2)

*The preaching then of the good pastor must start not from human doctrine or contemporary philosophies, but from reflection and daily meditation of the Sacred Scripture. The Bible is like the river where the preacher of the word ought to nourish himself. Before starting to speak he must pray. He ought to be praying, before being a speaker (doctr. Chr. 4: 32): “*On these mountains (the Bible) that we are showing, emerge the rivulets of preaching the gospel (. . .) and in every place of the earth, he was made happy and fertile for the sheep that must be pastured.*” (s. 46, 24)

*In the midst of a world where there is no time for nothing, the good pastor must exhort his faithful who search for space and time in order to have a living and meaningful encounter with the Word of God: “(. . .) *daily the codices of the Lord are put in sale, the lector reads them; buy them for yourself and read them as well, when there is time; rather do everything to find this time. It is better to spend time reading it than doing worldly foolishness.*” (s. Dolbeau 5, 14)

*The good shepherd, then, as Saint Augustine says in Sermon 46, “puts the sheep on the mountains of Israel”: “*Gather together on the mountains of the Sacred Scripture. There, the delights of your heart are found; there is nothing poisonous and extraneous. There are bountiful pastures. Come in good health, in good health, feed on the mountains of Israel.*” (s. 46, 24)

B. The lamp, which is the pastor, is nourished with oil.

First and foremost, Saint Augustine points out that the pastor is worth his wage. (Mt. 10:10) Like a lamp, which needs oil in order to give light, he must also have his material needs met. For this reason, Saint Augustine cites the words from 1 Cor. 9: 7 in Sermon 46: “*Whoever pastures the flock and does not receive its milk?*” (s. 46, 3), to put forward three things. First, even though the pastor has the right to have his material needs met by those whom he pastorally ministers, he must not put all his interest in fulfilling the said needs. To exercise the work of a pastor of souls within the Catholic Church is not an office or work like any other. It is a ministry. It is something that he has received as a task from God, and where the heart is placed at the service of charity, in exercising an office of merciful love (*misericordiae officium*: s. 46, 4.), not in searching meanly for a way of satisfying once own necessities. For this reason, the good shepherd “*does not take so much joy in the fact that they have addressed his need, but that he is pleased by the fecundity of the sheep.*” (s. 46, 4)

Second, it is necessary to exhort and to teach the flock to be interested in their pastors. They receive his work and service, and the flock cannot neglect his material needs. The worry of the pastors is way through which the sheep shows that the work of God in them is bearing fruit. Saint Paul was not demanding the pay that was due him by right, but, Saint Augustine says, he was accepting what the faithful were giving him: “*He desire that all the sheep bear fruit and are not sterile without abundance of milk (for his pastors).*” (s. 46, 4)

Third, speaking of the compensation received from pastoral ministry, Saint Augustine points out clearly that it does not deal with a pay, nor recompense. It is only a way of satisfying his own proper needs and of creating a commitment of the faithful with the ministers of God. The only recompense of an Augustinian pastor, in the fullest sense of the word, is in God. Whoever searches for one’s own glory, the exaltation of his ego in pastoral ministry is mistaken. Pastoral work is exercised in the name of God, searching for the glory of God and knowing that the recompense is only in God. (*mercedem dispensationis a Domino*: s. 46, 5)

For this reason, Saint Augustine condemns the ministers of the Church who see in pastoral work a platform where their proper persons are exalted, in order to make themselves object of praise and exaltation on the part of the sheep. Whoever does this, vests himself with the wool of the sheep, that is to say, he seeks honor and praise. (s. 46, 6), but he is mistaken. His role is not to put himself at the center nor at the sight of the faithful. Pastoral work is made in the name of Christ and it is necessary to attribute glory only to Him. The evil pastor nurtures his ego and pride with pastoral work, setting aside the rest, because he believes that he is the sole protagonist, reaching the point of displacing the same Christ. Thus, Saint Augustine says: “*The pastors boast in themselves, but he who boasts in oneself, may boast in the Lord. [2Cor. 10: 17] This is how to pasture (the body of) Christ. This is who to pasture in Christ, and to pasture with Christ, not to pasture oneself by leaving out Christ.*” (s. 46, 30).

C. He is a lamp that must burn and shine.

He who has been made pastor of the Church, despite his clay figure, has received the fire of God in order to be placed on the candle stand of the Church from where he must illumine the people not only with the light of the Word of God, but with the example of his own life as well. There are bad pastors, who, placed at the sight of the whole faithful people, kill the flock with the bad example of their life. (s. 46, 9) They discourage the strong and the weak. They give them occasion to justify their own sins, as if these flocks were saying: “*If my pastor lives this way, who am I not to do what he does?*” (s. 46, 9) It deals with the bad pastors to whom Augustine refers the words of the Gospel: “Do what they say to you, but do not do what they do.” (Mt. 23:3) The evil example is like a poison that the evil pastors give in place of the nourishment

with which they kill the flock. (s. 46, 22)

For Saint Augustine, not only the question of testimony and having a good conscience will be very important, but also the issue of having a good name. (ep. 83, 4) It is not enough for a pastor to have a peaceful conscience, knowing that it does not do anything illicit, but that his conduct may possibly be a motive of scandal for the weakest and that this goes undermining his good name and it becomes a reason of the fall of the more weak in faith. For this reason, Saint Augustine commends that the pastor of the Church ought to be a transparent person, knowing that his life is seen by the faithful (s. 355, 1), avoiding all kinds of scandals, living with simplicity and joy his proper vocation. Saint Augustine knows that in some occasions, it is not possible to avoid scandals in the Church, like those we live today, but Saint Augustine laments more not for the fact that they give scandals, but for the fact that there are persons who take delight with them and make the faithful believe that all pastors or consecrated persons live an evil life like the evil pastors: *“For what reason do they sit to judge, or what do they try to find out, but the fall of some bishop, cleric, monk or nun? Immediately, they believe, they argue, they announce that all are the same, even though not in everyone, it can be found (...) Since they take delight from our pains for their evil tongue, we can compare them with ease; If we are to understand them in a bad sense, they are those dogs who were licking the wounds of poor Lazarus (...) But Lazarus bore all the indignities and fatigue until he came to rest at the bosom of Abraham. (ep. 78, 6)*

And the solution of Saint Augustine to these evil pastors, who live an evil life, who have received the oil and not shine, is very drastic; as clay lamps that do not function, they must be thrown: *“If the lamp, after having been filled with oil, does not shine, it would not be worthy to continuously be on the candle stand, but to be broken instantly.”* (s. 46, 5)

D. He is a lamp that must illumine with the teaching of the Gospel.

A good pastor is not the one who in his preaching of the Word of God, compromises with the pleasures and fashion of the time, proposing a relativism and a minimalist ethics, putting the sheep far from the truth of the Gospel, the Tradition and the rule of faith of the Church. Thus, Saint Augustine articulates these words about these evil pastors: *“Live as you please, be assured, God loses no one; just that you have Christian faith.”* (s. 46, 8) Those who do this, promising a false happiness in this world (s. 46, 11) are building the sheep on sand. When tribulation comes, they will succumb.

The good shepherd builds his sheep on the rock (Mt. 7: 24-26), who is Christ, (1 Cor. 10: 4), exhorting them to imitate the sufferings of Christ (*Christi passionis imitandae*), and not to search for comforts and pleasures, (s. 46, 10) and reminding them that if they are closer to the Lord, it is necessary to prepare themselves for the temptation and test. (Sir 2: 1: s. 46, 10) Then those who may want to live well in Christ, they will suffer the tribulation. (2 Tim 3:12: s. 46, 11) However, the good shepherd must also remind the sheep not to fear, for God's grace is not wanting, and he who has sent the tribulation, has sent in advance the grace and strength to overcome it. *“To promise the mercy of God to the one who is too much fearful and even afraid of it; the mercy that will consist not in having temptations, but in God not allowing him to be tempted beyond his strength. (...)”* (s. 46, 12)

E. He is a lamp who must shine in order to guide the weak and the lost.

The pastor of the Church, as a lamp that shines, must also take care of the sick sheep, particularly the sheep sick in the spirit, both the sheep who suffer infirmity of a certain sin that took freedom and joy away from him, and particularly the sheep who are like the paralytic in the Gospel, he who must remove the roof of the place where the Lord was and must be taken down

in order to be presented before Christ. These sheep are like the paralytic, who were taken over by the paralysis of sin, in concrete, by the paralysis of concupiscence and this renders them incapable of doing the good. The good pastor, like Christ and in the name of Christ restores the health of the soul to them: *“It is as if you would like to do this with the soul: to open the roof, to put the paralytic soul before the Lord, dislocated in all its members and with any good work, weighed down by his sins and suffering with the evil of his desire (...) That consolation with which what has been fractured is bandaged, comes to him. God is faithful, He who does not allow that you may be tempted beyond what you can bear (...)* (s. 46, 13).”

The good pastor of the Church also searcher for the lost sheep, by preaching and insisting in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4: 2: s. 46, 14), by not putting human pretexts that they are not going to listen, that they are not going to pay attention or that what can be done is a waste of time. The pastor of the Church is a minister who has received some talents from the owner who is God (Lk. 9: 21& ff.) and with them, he must negotiate, he must proclaim salvation to all, without sloth, without asking himself whether it will be useful or not. The pastor is a servant, not a collector. On the day of judgment, God will be the one who will demand an account from those who did not want to listen to the words of the preaching and the invitation to conversion. The obligation of the pastor is to preach, to speak, to persist, to negotiate with the talents received from God: *“Frequently this other is said: Why correct him? It is a waste of time. He does not listen to you. He says: But I did not want to give in order not to lose your money.’ He replied: ‘You ought to have given my money, in order to exact it with interest upon my return, I put you as giver, not as collector; you ought to have preoccupied yourself of giving, allowing me to collect.’”* (s. 339, 4)

The good pastor looks after the most needy and weak sheep, showing his charity of the pastor particularly with those who cannot respond to him: *“We are servants of His Church, particularly of his most weak member.”* (op. mon. 29, 32) Saint Augustine is going to put this into practice. Saint Augustine, on the day of his Episcopal ordination anniversary, served food to the poor people of Hippo, to those who were poor with him (*compauperes*) (s. 339, 4) Saint Possidius in *Vita Sancti Augustini* narrates to us that in case of necessity, Saint Augustine, as Saint Ambrose and other saints had done, ordered the selling of sacred vessels in order to help the captives and indigents. (*Vita Augustini*, 24)

F. It is a lamp that must be configured daily with the Light who is Christ.

If it is true that the pastor is a lamp and that it has received the light and fire of God, he must try, every day, with his intense spiritual life, with his process of continuous formation, with his work, with his community life and the frequent reception of the sacraments—to configure himself more intimately with Christ, the High Priest, in whose name he exercises his ministry, in a way that the voice of Christ is prolonged through the voice of the pastor, and the love of the same Christ is shown and manifested in the charity of the pastor. The pastors are those who visibly pasture the flock, but in reality he who pasture them is no other than the only Pastor, who is Christ. For Saint Augustine, all the good pastors are but only one thing. They are only one in the unity of the great body of Christ, which is the Church, and he who pastures the Church is the same Christ; one unity of charity is given: *“But all the good are in one. They are only one thing. They pasture. It is Christ who pastures. The friends of the Spouse do not say that it is their own voice, but they take pleasure in the voice of the spouse. Therefore, it is He himself who pastures when they pasture. He says: It is I who pasture; then in them is found His voice, in them is found His charity.”* (s. 46, 30)