Spirituality



Joseph Kelly and his wife, Alina Rudnicka, pose during a hike in the Polish Tatra mountains this summer. (Courtesy of Joseph Kelly)

by Joseph Kelley

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Editor's note: *This is part of an occasional series on Augustinian spirituality. Pope Leo XIV is the first pope from the Order of St. Augustine, a religious order founded in 1244 on the values of community and friendship; service to the poor; and intellectual pursuits. Today there are some 2,800 Augustinians across 47 countries.*

At the beginning of the *Rule of St. Augustine*, the saint writes: "Be of one mind and heart, intent upon God, for that is the reason you have come together." Those words make good sense for a community of vowed religious in a monastery or convent. But does it work for a smaller community? Say, a couple in a committed relationship?

We may easily accept the first phrase, "be of one mind and heart," as a worthy ideal for spouses, partners or friends, especially because Augustine understood unity to embrace difference. By encouraging oneness he did not mean uniformity or sameness. In fact, the remaining eight chapters of his Rule address how to negotiate differences. He knew that communities of any size are comprised of individuals who have different needs, expectations and capacities. Committed couples are no different than vowed religious in that we inevitably find ourselves confronting the tension this creates.

In his Rule, Augustine explores differences based on health and strength, family backgrounds, social roles and status prior to joining the monastery. His constant refrain when advising how to manage them is to recognize and embrace these differences without judgment; to accept and accommodate them with love and mutual concern. He also reminds members of the community that there will be times when they need to hold each other to account, to practice fraternal correction. Such correction or confrontation should be motivated by, and practiced with, love.

My wife and I do not always agree on what to say, how to respond or what to think about a given situation. We sometimes come to different conclusions, along different timelines and for different reasons. Every couple has their differences; we perhaps have more than the average, having grown up in different countries, speaking different languages, learning different histories and nurturing different hopes. We have had to go above and beyond to negotiate our differences.

I have found Augustine’s message to fifth century monks and nuns eminently relevant, helpful and useful for our modern marriage, advising us on relating to one another with as much mutual understanding and loving forbearance as we can muster. We have been married for over 40 years, and despite our differences — or, I believe, because of them — our oneness of mind and heart continues to grow. To be sure, our personalities have not grown more uniform; we still marvel at how different we can be and yet live in love and unity.

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Before meeting my wife-to-be, I spent 15 years as a member of the Order of St. Augustine, reading and trying to live by his Monastic Rule. Although I eventually left the religious community, I still value the formation and friendships of that experience. I have carried what I learned about myself, about God, and about community into my marriage. Those lessons have also enriched my role as father and grandfather. Augustine's insights into how to manage difference with respect and love has been one of my most important takeaways from Augustinian community life. But there is another.

Augustine's inclusion of the words "intent upon God" introduces spirituality into the relational equation. Some couples are intent upon God. They see their relationship as sacramental; they remain open to — "intent upon" — the divine presence in their life together. That intention may have been part of their relationship from the beginning, or divine intention may have emerged slowly over time.

For Augustine, being intent upon God is found beneath and beyond difference. It is found in our union with Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation, of God's passionate desire to become one with us, is the heart of Augustinian spirituality. It is also the mystery hidden in a Christian marriage: spouses are not only united with each other, they are also united with Christ by the Holy Spirit. Their union is a sacrament, a visible sign of union with Christ.

Before his conversion and monastic turn, Augustine lived faithfully with a woman — we do not know her name — for over 10 years. They had a son together. I have to believe that this little family tutored Augustine in how to love amidst difference and discover the mystery of God in the process. Just as relationships can do for all of us.