

The Order of St. Augustine

A Brief History of the Order Of Saint Augustine Origins and Ministries

St. Augustine died in 430, but his legacy continued not only through the example of his life and writings, but also through his experience of community life and service to the Church.

On his return to Africa after his conversion, he lived in Christian community in Tagaste. When he first went to Hippo he founded a community of lay people, and yet again, when he became bishop of Hippo he gathered the local clergy together in shared common life. In 397 he wrote a short rule of life for Christians living in community, one of the oldest, extant monastic rules.

This rule spread quickly as a guide for communities of Christians wishing to live out the Gospel together in mutual support. It was used across Europe from the fifth century by small groups of hermit monks and nuns as well as by the diocesan clergy. It became the practical Christian life companion piece to Augustine's intellectual and doctrinal influence.

In the 13th century Europe was in the midst of great social change: a new merchant class to rival the nobility; urban centers ("cities"); new centers of learning ("universities"). During this time a new breed of religious community was emerging in the Church to meet the changing social conditions. These communities witnessed to their faith in the growing urban centers, among the merchants and their stalls, attending to the poor and those dispossessed by the changes in European society. They did not retreat to the grand monasteries, nor attach themselves to a bishop's cathedral. They preached the Gospel wherever they discerned the need, and they lived off the generosity of God's people. Because of this dependency on alms, they became known as "mendicants," or beggars.

There were four major mendicant orders, all founded in the first half of the thirteenth century: the Dominicans in 1216 in Spain, the Franciscans in 1223 in Umbria Italy, the Augustinians in 1244 in Tuscany, Italy, and the Carmelites who originated in the Holy Land and spread throughout Europe in the late 13th century. While Dominic Guzman and Francis of Assisi are the well known founders of their respective orders, Pope Innocent IV founded the Augustinians in the mid-13th century to affirm and to further the good works and preaching of the growing mendicant movement. He gathered groups of hermits living in communities throughout Tuscany, gave them the Rule of St. Augustine, and coaxed them from their eremitic life to the active service of God's people.



Many members of the new mendicant orders quickly became leading scholars at the growing universities. The Augustinians dedicated themselves to study and writing as part of their service to the Church and as early as 1245 there was an Augustinian house of study in Paris affiliated with the university and by 1248 the new Order had established a community in the town of Clare in Suffolk, England where they became known as the “Austin Friars” (an “Austinfriar” has a minor role in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*).

From Clare Priory they founded houses of study at the newly organizing centers of learning at Oxford (1266, now Wadham College) and Cambridge (1289, now Corpus Christi College). As the 14th century dawned, the Augustinians had also established houses of study at Bologna, Padua, Rome, Florence, Prague, Strasbourg, Cologne, Vienna, Erfurt, and Magdeberg.

The Order continued to spread during the 14th and 15th centuries. But there were serious setbacks that weakened the Order: the Black Death in the mid-14th century (5,000 of the 8,000 members at the time are believed to have died); the 16th century Reformation in Germany and England (Martin Luther was a member of the Order, some friars followed him while others were his staunchest opponents; the English province was destroyed, but John Stone was a martyr for the faith); and intermittent government

suppressions. The Spanish Augustinians, however, led a revival in the late 16th and 17th centuries, and the Order expanded in Latin America and new foundations were established in China, Africa, India, the Philippines, Iraq, and Japan. In the nineteenth century Irish Augustinians brought the Order to the United States and Australia. In the twentieth century there was a renewal of European segments of the Order, expansion of the Order in several African countries, development of ministries in Central America, new presence in Korea, a return to presence in Japan and China and renewed vitality in Latin America.

The Order currently (2010) numbers some 3,000 members in 50 countries.

The Order’s international headquarters, international college, and Pontifical Institute for Patristic Studies are located in Rome, just off Piazza San Pietro.

The Order in the United States

In 1794 the Irish province sent missionaries to the United States, and the new province was approved by Rome in 1796. Since that time two other provinces were established in the U.S. and one in Canada.

Augustinians began their ministry under the direction of Bishop John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in the U.S. They travelled for many years as



itinerant missionary priests to small Catholic communities in Boston, Brooklyn and Baltimore. In 1801 the Order opened its first foundation, the parish of St. Augustine in Philadelphia, and a grammar school in 1811. They opened a seminary and academy fifteen miles west of the city in 1842 and named it in honor of the 16th century Augustinian bishop St. Thomas of Villanova. From this new academy Villanova University came to be. The Villanova community went on to found Merrimack College in 1947, a university in Havana, Cuba (now closed) and St. Thomas University in Miami (now sponsored by the Archdiocese of Miami).



Growth in parish ministry grew with clusters of parishes in New York State, Lawrence, MA, and on the Mainline in Philadelphia. Involvement in secondary education began with Malvern Prep PA (1842 - a continuation of the original Academy at Villanova) and St. Rita of Cascia High School, Chicago (1905). In the 1920s three schools opened: St. Augustine High School, San Diego, CA, Villanova Preparatory School, Ojai, CA, and Cascia Hall, Tulsa, OK. In the mid- and late- 20th century, more schools opened: Bonner High School, Drexel Hill, PA; Carroll High School, Washington, DC,, Austin Prep, Reading, MA, Austin Prep, Grosse Point, MI, Augustinian Academy, St. Louis, MI, St. Augustine College Preparatory School, Vineland, NJ, Central Catholic High School, Modesto, CA, Providence Catholic High School, New Lenox, MA, and Villanova College, Toronto.

The Augustinian Secondary Education Association (ASEA) coordinates and supports the schools' mission through meetings of senior school administrators, shared resources, and annual national meetings of members of the school communities, the Augustinian Values Institute (AVI) and the Student Augustinian Values Institute (SAVI).

U.S. Augustinians re-established the Order in Japan in 1952, took responsibility for a prelature in Northwestern Peru in 1963, and began missionary work in South Africa in 1997.

The Order in California

The Augustinians were invited to San Diego in 1922 and established St. Augustine High School and took on pastoral care of St. Vincent's parish in Mission Hills (a year later they moved to St. Patrick's parish, North Park). They came to Ojai in 1924 and founded Villanova Preparatory School and accepted pastoral care for St. Thomas Aquinas parish.

They assumed pastoral responsibility for the newly established parish of Our Mother of Good Counsel in the Los Feliz area of Los Angeles in 1926.

Steady and dedicated ministry continued during the Depression and World War II but as the Augustinians became first a Vice-Province and then a Province of the Order, the houses of the Order in California expanded. In 1966 a house of studies opened in Camarillo and another opened in San Francisco in 1969.

In 1970 Augustinians established Villa Nueva Apartments in San Ysidro, a housing effort for close to 400 families of modest income. In the mid-1970s the Order accepted care of Hogar Infantil “La Gloria” in Tijuana, a home for some 50 disadvantaged children.

They were founding members (along with the Sisters of the Holy Cross) of Central Catholic High School, Modesto, and served there for 13 years.

In 1980 the Order accepted ministry to Our Lady of Grace parish in Castro Valley, and in the same year established St. Rita’s Retreat in Gold Hill, Oregon. They continue pastoral care in Medford and Myrtle Creek.

An additional community house was formed in San Diego (Austin House) in 1981, and Monica House was opened a few years later. Monica House is the home of the Augustinian Volunteers who have served in California since 2003.

Over the years, California Augustinians have also served on special assignments in Central America, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, and Peru, as well as in the states of Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Wisconsin, and in Washington, D.C.

For a fine and complete presentation of the life, stories, and ministries of the over 200 Augustinians who have served in the Western United States (1922-1985), read *Before All Else* (Augustinian Press, 1987) by John R. Sanders, OSA.

For more about St. Augustine and the Order of St. Augustine, go to www.augnet.org and www.osanet.org

