



This is our Story: Augustine of Hippo and School Sisters of Notre Dame

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August, 386 CE: the thirty-three-year-old man was enjoying a country villa in Cassiciaco, Italy, (photo below) with his mother, brother, son, friends, and former students, living what he envisioned as a communal way of life filled with philosophical conversation during his retirement from teaching in Milan. Early in the next year Augustine took a catechetical course from Bishop Ambrose and then, with his son Adeodatus, was baptized during the Easter Vigil, April 24-25, 387. That same year Augustine's mother Monica died and was buried at Ostia, the Italian port city from which they were planning to embark in order to return to the family estate in Tagaste, present day Algeria. Once in North Africa, father and son embraced a life of aristocratic leisure, which was shattered, however, by the death of Adeodatus soon after. Augustine's life changed still again, less than five years later, when, in Hippo, the church congregation acclaimed him, forced him to agree to ordination before being consecrated bishop in 395.



For the next 35 years, Augustine served the people as their bishop and lived a communal life with his priests, out of which experience he gave to the Church the Rule which bears his name and which is the tradition out of which the School Sisters of Notre Dame live today.

Acts 4:32, is the scriptural inspiration of Augustine's Rule: *"The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common."*¹ Besides the common life, Augustine focused theologically on the primary of grace, that God dwells in the depths of the soul, and that interiority is a spiritual path. God's love and true love builds up others, so relationships are important. At the same time and probably because of his own background, Augustine also emphasized the pursuit of truth through learning. Finally, fascinated with God's beauty *ever ancient, ever new*, he was drawn to beauty which he extended to music, *whoever sings, prays twice*.and

Ministry for Augustine's community was episcopal or clerical service, since he was a bishop living with priests of his diocese. Their service within the church was primary but their setting itself created ministry needs specific to it, for example, answering heretics' challenges, providing education for those lacking it, and for one of his later followers, starting what today we would call a credit union. Over the next centuries, although the Benedictine (480-547), Franciscan (1181-1226) and Dominican (1170-1221) traditions came into being, many independent penitential and eremitic communities followed the Rule of Saint Augustine. In 1243, wanting to bring some organization, Pope Innocent IV united some of these groups into one order, the Tuscan Order of the Hermits of St. Augustine. In 1256, Pope Alexander IV united the members of this "little union" with other groups into the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine. This "Grand Union" introduced central government into the Rule of Augustine, binding the groups under one prior general in Rome with provincial supervisors ruling the various provinces.

In the sixteenth century, when Peter Fourier (1565-1640) was doing his seminary studies and considering religious life, many expected him to join the new tradition in the Church: the Jesuits founded by Ignatius of

¹ New American Bible translation.

Loyola (1491-1556); but Peter—wanting to be a parish priest—chose the Canons Regular of St. Augustine at Chaumousey, which “enjoyed the dubious distinction of being the most lax, in a century when laxity [in monasteries] was the order of the day.”² Peter observed the Augustinian Rule, grew in prayer, prepared to be a parish priest, all the while enduring the opposition of many of the men in his community.

After ordination, Peter picked a poor parish, re-evangelized its members, catechized and educated the children, provided for the poor and the ill, tested and guided five young women who wanted to live religious life. Eventually these five, who included Alix Le Clerc, became the nucleus of the new *Congregation de Notre Dame*. For them Peter wrote the Small Constitutions of 1617, based on the Rule of St. Augustine, but not including central government. William Lawson summarized the situation this way:

What the founders and the first associates had wanted from the beginning was a religious order on the lines of those of the friars and the clerks regular, centrally governed, universal in their possibility of expansion, and with members who belonged not to a particular house or country but to the Order, so that they could be sent by authority wherever they were needed; but in the view of the ecclesiastical authorities of those days, nuns were not fit to govern themselves beyond the limits of a single monastery, and even within that enclosure the bishop claimed considerable authority. All proposals for centralized government for a congregation of nuns—by Angela Merici, Francis de Sales and Mary Ward—had been turned down. Pierre Fourier’s similar suggestions had been rejected; and only his personal influence kept the still unified Congregation of Our Lady from breaking up into independent convents.³

Peter Fourier continued to work on the Great Constitutions, or the Constitutions of 1640, completing and sending them to the nuns at Mirecourt only four days before his death. Copies were made for the convents which wanted them. “There is, however, no evidence of the degree to which the Constitutions—which included central government—were adopted as the pattern of religious life.”⁴ We do know that the Sisters at Stadtamhof chose—in 1747—these Great Constitutions dated 1640.⁵ Saying this about the Great Constitutions and the Sisters at Stadtamhof does not suggest that central government for SSND came solely from this source, but it does suggest that the vision for governance that was Michael Wittmann’s (for ten years he served as extraordinary confessor⁶ for the Stadtamhof community) was also that of Peter Fourier before him.

School Sisters of Notre Dame both adopted and adapted pieces of the Constitutions of 1640. Besides their Augustinian roots, both congregations share Mary’s guidance: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5) and the blessing of the children at the end of the day: “My dear children, I commend you to the Holy Spirit through the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and I entrust you forever to her blessed hands.”

-Barbara Brumleve, SSND – August 20, 2025

² Zimmerman, Dorothy Marie, SSND, *Like a Lebanon Cedar: A Biography of Saint Pierre Fourier, 1565-1640*. Elm Grove, Wisconsin: Unpublished manuscript, 1993. Rabelais had summed up the experience in many monasteries of the day with the maxim “*Fais ce que voudras*”—Do as you please. Quoted in Zimmerman, who continues “Pierre chose rather to observe the dictum of his holy father St. Augustine—‘Love God and do as you please.’” (p. 30)

³ Lawson, William, SJ. *Pierre Fourier: Canon Regular-Parish Priest-Founder of the Congregation of Our Lady*. London: Burns & Oates, 1969, p. 217.

⁴ Lawson, p. 253-54.

⁵ The Stadtamhof convent, founded in 1735 from the monastery of Luxembourg, was the site of Caroline Gerhardinger’s (Mother Theresa of Jesus) elementary education. The information about the adoption of the Great Constitutions of 1640 comes from correspondence dated May 15, 1980, from Sister Paule Sagot to Sister Barbara Brumleve. Sagot wrote that the Congregation’s archivist in Paris, described as “the most expert on the subject of our origins and the history of our Congregation” had written as follows: “She was able to answer me [Sagot] about your first question: What edition of the Constitution did the sisters of Stadt am Hof follow? This house chose, in 1747, the Constitutions dated 1640 (first edition in 1669, second in 1694).” Source: “Introduction: An Essay on Sources and Influences” in *Congregation of Notre Dame (Canonesses of St. Augustine): Source Book on Its Founders and History*, compiled by Marjorie Myers, SSND, and Barbara Brumleve, SSND. SSND Heritage Research Publication, No. 8, p. viii.

⁶The *extraordinary confessor* came for confession during Ember Days, thereby providing a confessor different from the usual one.