

## **BESE-SONO IN THE ATONI PAH METO COMMUNITY: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S LOVE IN THE PRACTICE OF CULTURAL SOLIDARITY**

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### **Abstract**

*This article analyzes the practice of bese-sono in the Atoni Pah Meto society as a manifestation of love for God, using the theological perspective of Saint Augustine. Employing a qualitative approach, this study utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants, including religious leaders, traditional leaders, community leaders, educational leaders, government leaders, and ordinary people (10 in total). Secondary data were gathered through a literature review of sources relevant to the topic. The findings reveal that bese-sono is a manifestation of deep love, where self-sacrifice for the common good becomes a concrete expression of love for God and others. This is demonstrated through social rituals. In this context, Augustine's teachings on love for God provide a theological foundation for understanding the practice of bese-sono as an expression of solidarity that unites members of the community. This is possible because a deep understanding of the values of love can shape a harmonious social life and strengthen relationships among individuals in the broader society. Thus, this study offers a new theological perspective on sacrifice and solidarity in local communities, enriching the field of social theology.*

**Keywords:** *Bese-Sono, Love, St. Augustine, Solidarity, Social Theology, Local Culture*

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini menganalisis praktik *bese-sono* dalam masyarakat *Atoni Pah Meto* sebagai perwujudan kasih kepada Tuhan, dengan menggunakan perspektif teologi Santo Agustinus. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif, Artikel ini bersifat kualitatif dengan menggunakan data primer dan sekunder. Data primer diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap informan kunci, yakni: tokoh agama, tokoh adat, tokoh masyarakat, tokoh pendidikan, tokoh pemerintahan dan masyarakat biasa, sebanyak 10 orang. Data sekunder diperoleh melalui studi literatur yang relevan dengan topik studi ini. Temuan studi ini menunjukkan bahwa ternyata *bese-sono* merupakan manifestasi kasih yang mendalam, di mana pengorbanan diri untuk kepentingan bersama menjadi ekspresi nyata dari kasih kepada Tuhan dan sesama. Hal tersebut ditunjukkan melalui ritual sosial. Dalam konteks ini, ajaran Agustinus tentang kasih kepada Tuhan memberikan dasar teologis untuk memahami praktik *bese-sono* sebagai bentuk solidaritas yang mengikat anggota komunitas. Hal ini dimungkinkan karena pemahaman mendalam terhadap nilai-nilai kasih dapat membentuk kehidupan sosial yang harmonis dan memperkuat hubungan antarindividu dalam masyarakat yang lebih luas. Dengan demikian studi ini menawarkan perspektif teologis baru tentang pengorbanan dan solidaritas dalam masyarakat lokal, yang dapat memperkaya studi teologi sosial.

**Kata Kunci:** *Atoni Pah Meto, Bese-Sono, Kasih, Pengorbanan, St. Agustinus*

## INTRODUCTION

Love is the commitment to give the best for others, shown through solidarity, care, support, and sacrifice to foster harmony in society (Kristanti et al., 2020). The Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* 26 emphasizes that true love manifests in action for others' well-being. Yet, social tension and eroded solidarity persist. (Tschudin & Smith, 2024), report intercultural conflicts in the Sahel, while Smith (2024) highlights global challenges in intercultural engagement. In Indonesia, Yudana & Sujana (2023) observe potential unrest in Kuku Village, Bali, ahead of the 2024 elections. These situations reflect a decline in love of God. Within this context, the *Bese-Sono* tradition of the *Atoni Pah Meto* in North Central Timor (TTU) emerges as a significant subject for theological reflection. Now largely Catholic, the *Atoni Pah Meto* maintain a worldview centered on harmony with *Usi Neno* (God), others, and nature.

Previous studies have discussed divine love and solidarity (David et al., 2022) or local wisdom in conflict resolution (Korbaffo et al., 2021), but none has directly linked Augustine's theology of love with indigenous rituals like *Bese-Sono*. Obe & Firmanto (2024), explore dryland farming theology under Church social teaching but overlook love's theological depth. David et al. (2022), focus on love in interfaith dialogue, while Korbaffo et al. analyze border conflict resolution via civic culture. A relevant local study by Ambarita, Siahaya, and Kyong investigates religious diversity and harmony in Negeri Waraka through traditional practices that promote interreligious unity. While not theological in scope, it affirms that indigenous traditions can foster deep communal values. These works, though valuable, lack a direct theological engagement with local ritual (Ambarita et al., 2024). This study addresses that gap by examining *Bese-Sono* as a lived expression of Augustine's theology of love and community solidarity.

This study explores how *Bese-Sono* embodies love in the *Atoni Pah Meto* community through Augustine's concept of divine love. It analyzes *Bese-Sono*'s communal function as interpreted via Augustine's theology, contributing to intercultural theological frameworks that build cohesion and dialogue. The study asks: What does *Bese-Sono* mean within *Atoni Pah Meto* culture through Augustine's lens? How does Augustine define divine love? What are the challenges of applying Augustine's theology within the *Atoni* context, amid cultural shifts and tensions between Christian belief and ancestral customs?

In Augustine's theology, *caritas* is foundational, not as emotion or ethics but as an ontological force shaping relations with God and others. *Caritas* is divinely ordered love, first directed toward God and then others. In *De Doctrina Christiana* I.27.28, Augustine writes: "*Amor ordinatus est, quo diliguntur quae diligenda sunt secundum ordinem diligendi*"-Ordered love is that by which things that ought to be loved are loved in the right order (Hipponensis, n.d.-c). Proper living, then, consists in loving things as they ought to be loved, with God as the highest object of desire and devotion. All human relationships gain moral coherence only when they reflect this divine order of love. This concept is intimately connected to Augustine's Trinitarian theology. In *De Trinitate* VIII.10.14, Augustine describes the Trinity as comprised of the lover (*amans*), the beloved (*amatus*), and love itself (*amor*): "*Tria sunt: amans, et amatus, et amor*" (Hipponensis, 1845c). In this way, divine love is not static but relational and mutual. This dynamic becomes the theological model for human solidarity, grounded in self-emptying love (*kenosis*), openness, and equality. Such a relational framework provides a powerful lens for interpreting social and cultural practices that aspire to communal harmony and shared responsibility. In *De Civitate Dei* XIV.28, Augustine proposes two kinds of love that shape two different communities: *amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei* (self-love to the contempt of God), which gives rise to the earthly city, and *amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui* (love of God to the contempt of self), which establishes the heavenly city (Hipponensis, 1845a). Cultural rituals like *Bese-Sono* express divine love when they promote justice, equality, and sacredness.

Manafe & Neolaka (2022) show that rituals like *Tae Lilo* support social reconciliation and identity formation, echoing Augustine's ordered love. Yet few studies align Augustine's theology with indigenous rites. This study interprets *Bese-Sono* through *ordo amoris*. (Afi & Banamtuan, 2020) offer insight into *Atoni* cosmology through *Poitan Liana*, where spiritual and material life intertwine, echoing Augustine's cosmic moral order.

Ryliškys (2024) presents Augustine’s theology as kenotic, self-giving, mirroring *Bese-Sono*’s emphasis on mutual sacrifice. (Otu, 2017) links Augustine’s ecclesiology to transformative communal love. Though Otu does not focus on indigenous traditions, his reading supports this study’s thesis: traditional practices like *Bese-Sono* can enact social transformation grounded in *caritas*. Davidson (2023), reinterprets Augustine’s *paterfamilias* as a servant-leader, helpful for viewing indigenous elders as love-rooted leaders.

Tian (2024), via Arendt, critiques *ordo amoris* as potentially exclusionary. Yet she acknowledges the inclusive nature of divine love that embraces all creation. This resonates with *Bese-Sono*, which involves people, spirits, ancestors, and nature. Asra et al. (2020), show ecological wisdom in rituals like *Besale*, also reflected in *Bese-Sono*. But extractive industries threaten such practices. Augustine’s ordered love upholds ecological ethics. (Paluseri et al., 2015), critique weak state support for culture and environment, while (Kartika et al., 2021), note CSR efforts often serve corporate image. The Catholic Church serves as a crucial bridge, blending faith and tradition to advance justice and ecology.

Comparative perspectives add depth. (Mika et al., 2019), show how Maori weave solidarity into governance. (Feinman et al., 2022), describe Native American tribal sovereignty grounded in ritual. The *Atoni Pah Meto* lack such institutional support. (Safitri & Hamid, 2023), show how development clashes with local cultural claims. In this contested space, Augustine’s *caritas* becomes transformative, not passive, love that resists injustice.

This review situates *Bese-Sono* within theological and anthropological thought. Augustine’s *ordo amoris* and Trinitarian *caritas* offer a strong lens for interpreting indigenous rituals as spiritually and socially transformative. Yet, sustaining these rituals demands institutional support and interdisciplinary engagement. *Bese-Sono* thus becomes more than cultural tradition, it is a living theology of love that orders the world through divine justice and grace.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in Alfred Schutz’s social phenomenology (Schutz, 1967), combined with the theological hermeneutics of Saint Augustine. The aim is to understand the religious experiences embedded in the *bese-sono* ritual, and to interpret its symbolic-cultural meanings through the lens of Augustine’s reflections on love (*caritas*) (Augustinus, n.d.), the order of love (*ordo amoris*), and the community of love (*communitas caritatis*) (Augustinus, n.d.).

The research was conducted in two regions of North Central Timor Regency-Bikomi and Tunbaba-which are known for preserving traditional rituals such as *bese-sono* and have a predominantly Catholic population, making them contextually relevant to Augustine’s theological perspective. Informants were selected purposively based on their active involvement in the ritual and their reflective insights on social and theological values.

**Table 1.**  
Key Informants

No.	Informant	Age
1.	Religious Leader 1	61
2.	Religious Leader 2	42
3.	Traditional Leader	71
4.	Teacher	61
5.	Village Head	27
6.	Community Leader	75
7.	Ordinary Community Member	62
8.	Head of Family	76
9.	Housewife	54
10.	Settler	53

Data Collection Techniques: Semi-Structured Interviews conducted in November 2024 with all ten informants using open-ended questions to explore the symbolic, religious, and communal meanings within the *bese-sono* practice. Participatory Observation: Carried out in August 2024 during two *bese-sono* rituals, with the researcher directly involved in the events and communal interactions to understand the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) of the *Atoni Pah Meto* people.

Data were analyzed using a two-fold integrative approach: Thematic Phenomenological Analysis (based on Alfred Schutz). Interview and observational data were coded into major themes such as: *responsibility and the knife, rice as a blessing, communal eating, and sacrifice as love*. These lived experiences were interpreted through Schutz's key concepts, such as *intersubjectivity, typification, and social biography*, to capture the shared meanings underlying the ritual. Theological Hermeneutics (based on Saint Augustine). Each cultural symbol was interpreted in light of Augustine's theology of love: The *knife* symbolizes responsibility and *ordo amoris*. *Rice* signifies the blessing of love that sustains community (*caritas*). *Communal eating* represents *communitas caritatis*, the embodiment of divine love. The interpretations were dialogical and contextual, avoiding rigid doctrinal imposition.

Data validity was ensured through: Source Triangulation: engaging multiple types of informants. Methodological Triangulation: combining interviews and observation. Member Checking: verifying findings with key informants. Researcher Reflexivity: maintaining awareness of positionality and interpretive bias.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ***Bese-Sono in the Atoni Pah Meto Community***

Based on interviews with traditional leaders in the Bikomi region on November 15, 2024, it was explained that *bese* means knife and *sono* means spoon. However, in the context of customary traditions, *bese-sono* is not merely eating utensils but a symbol imbued with deep meaning. *Bese* is associated with *mu'it* (animals) that are sacrificed to obtain *na'* (blood) and *sisi* (flesh), while *sono* relates to *mnes* (rice) harvested from the fields. Discussions regarding *bese-sono* take place in a formal and sacred atmosphere as part of the preparation for the celebration. These deliberations are led by *amnasit* (traditional elders), such as *ahonet* (those who hold ancestral lineage), *tobe* (those with territorial authority), *mafefa* (traditional spokesperson), or other customary figures. The primary purpose of these meetings is to distribute roles and responsibilities among community members for the ritual preparations and implementation. Additionally, these gatherings ensure the success of the central communal meal known as *tah tok* (formal seated meal). In contrast, meals outside the formal event are referred to as *tah thaek* (standing meal), which are not part of official customary proceedings. Moreover, discussions about *bese-sono* are closely tied to the traditional rituals conducted prior to the ceremonial celebration. The following is a prayer excerpt from one of the traditional leader informants:

*“Oo Neno Tunan ma Pah Pinan, Apinat-Aklahat, Afinit-Aneset, Ahaot-Afafat. Hai mibes ma mi'luli, hai mi'baunom misauntom ma minebtom, hai ka mnten Kit fa, Usi. Alaha hai mifuatab neoba hai ape'an-alikin, ahonit-ataos, es naket ma natnoe nok Kit, Usi. Nane hai mfelaha nek seunbanit neo Kit Usi, fun Hit tataim hai susar manukat i, ma hai mitutne neobaha hai ape'an ma alikin”.*

“(O Lord, the owner of heaven and earth, who is fiery and consuming, greater than all things and the guardian of all things. We are humble and respectful, bowing before You because we are unable to draw near to You. We make this request through our ancestors, who gave birth to us and are now close to You. To You, we express our gratitude and thanks for accepting our request, which we bring before You through our ancestors)”.

An interview conducted on November 15, 2024, with a community leader and teacher from the Bikomi area revealed that *bese-sono* refers to the ritual of eating and drinking during major communal celebrations. These celebrations include the establishment of traditional houses (*uem adat*), weddings (*matsaos*), funerals (*maten*), and the traditional New Year (*tfua ton*). Two



categories of animals are prepared for these occasions: pigs, which are fed rice, and buffaloes or cows, which are fed grass. Rice, too, is divided into two types: for *kase* (respected or high-status individuals), rice is usually store-bought, while for *meto* (ordinary people or relatives), each family contributes rice in woven baskets, which is then collected and prepared communally. For practicality, participants typically bring rice rather than meat. The informant further clarified that *bese-sono* is primarily associated with marriage and death rituals. In the division of roles, the wife of the *atoen amaf* is tasked with food preparation, while the male *atoen amaf* is responsible for guarding the meat. Importantly, *bese-sono* also symbolizes communication between traditional leaders, God, and ancestral spirits. As a central element of the celebration, *bese-sono* reflects acknowledgment of God as the Creator, who provides the animals and resources necessary for the ritual to take place in harmony.

An interview with a village government official on November 16, 2024, revealed that decisions resulting from collective agreements must be jointly observed and implemented. Each family member holds a moral obligation to fulfill their responsibilities. Typically, *bese-sono* is collected at the house of an *ahonet* or a trusted community figure before the celebration begins. Once gathered, family members collaborate according to their assigned roles. Preparing the sacrificial animals and rice involves substantial effort from both men and women. The men are responsible for tasks such as slaughtering and processing the animals into meat, while the women gather and prepare the rice into cooked meals. This collective workforce is referred to as *hae ma'nafa, fit ma'nafa* (light legs, light calves), symbolizing their readiness and energy. Meanwhile, the traditional leadership group, known as *amnasit* (elders), is tasked with overseeing customary matters and leading the ritual prayers.

Based on the author's field observations on August 29, 2024, the majority of this community consists of farming families deeply familiar with religious rituals designed to sustain harmony with the divine. Their belief system acknowledges *Uis Neno*, the God who dwells in the high heavens, and honors the presence of ancestral spirits (*be'i-na'i*) in the dark realm. The author also observed strong communal solidarity during wedding preparations: parents led planning meetings, families collectively agreed to prepare livestock, and both men and women worked together to set up the venue, slaughter animals, and offer prayers before the communal meal.

Meanwhile, interviews regarding solidarity and sacrifice during the celebration revealed interesting insights about *bese-sono* from the informants, including ordinary people, heads of families, housewives, and settlers. The following is an excerpt from the results of the interview with the informants:

"If the result of the agreement is that we bring *bese* like this, then we are ready. If we bring a few sacks, yes, we are ready. If we are not ready, others will talk about us. We work together; we can't work alone. We work together because we are a family. We also work without expecting anything in return. What do we, as neighbors, have to demand?" (Ordinary people, Oelnitep, November 17, 2024)

"When the family has an event, we must help. We help with our energy. We are present and work. The work does not demand anything. We are family. One day, when we have an event, they will definitely come to help us. So, we all must help each other in life". (Head of family, Jak, November 20, 2024)

"If the family invites us, we must go. We are here because we are a family and live together. If we don't bring anything, just being present is enough. We help with the work, cook, and serve people. Helping with work does not require payment. Helping to cook is good because we live together and must help each other". (Housewife, Oelnitep, November 15, 2024)

"Usually, we attend events when invited. We also donate rice or give money. If we hold an event, they come to help with the work. We participate in their events because they consider us family and brothers". (Settlers, Oelnitep, November 13, 2024)

Regarding the interviews with two Catholic priests on November 21, 2024, about sacrifice and selfless devotion, it can be concluded that:

“Sacrifice is a noble act that honors the Creator and appreciates the ancestors, with the aim of creating a good life. This sacrifice embodies the meaning of complementing one another in life together, with a willingness to give of one's energy, time, and resources. Solidarity and sacrifice arise from the impulse of love, which is a gift from God, just as Jesus was willing to sacrifice for humankind”.

### **Bese-Sono and Love for God**

In the *Atoni Pah Meto* tradition of Timor, *Bese-Sono*, the offering of meat (*bese*) and rice (*sono*) in various customary rites such as funerals, weddings, or house consecrations, is not merely a cultural gesture, but a concrete sacramental symbol of love (*caritas*) and spiritually rooted communal life. According to a traditional elder, “*Bese* is not just an ordinary slaughter; it is the deepest symbol, it is a burnt offering on the altar,” while *sono*, taken from dryland rice rather than paddy rice, signifies the fruit of labor and blessing of *Usi Neno*, the God of life. Within the framework of public theology, this study interprets *Bese-Sono* as an embodiment of *caritas incarnata*, true love made flesh, through a theological-hermeneutical lens, with special attention to Saint Augustine's doctrines of *ordo amoris* and *caritas incarnata*.

In Augustine's theology, love possesses a divine order (*ordo amoris*): it begins with God and flows toward others. He writes in *De Doctrina Christiana* I.22.20, “*Amor ergo Dei et proximi vera est et perfecta caritas*”- love of God and neighbor is the true and perfect form of charity (Hipponensis, n.d.-c). This divine logic is mirrored in the ritual structure of *Bese-Sono*. The first portions of meat and rice are “placed in the *tupa* and *kasu'i*” as offerings to God through the ancestors. This rite expresses a hierarchical love: from God (*Amoet-Apakaet, Usi Neno*), to the ancestors (*ahonit*), and finally to the living community.

In symbolic, theological reflection, *Bese-Sono* becomes *caritas incarnata*, love embodies in material elements of meat and rice, offered in communal togetherness. A traditional elder states, “*Bese* is a blood offering to God, and *Sono* is rice prepared by ordinary people through collective labor.” Using symbolic and contextual hermeneutic hermeneutics, this ritual can be viewed in light of Augustine's vision of the *Caritas Dei*. In *De Civitate Dei* XIX.17, Augustine writes, “*Civitas Dei... societas est sancta, quae caritate Deo inhaeret et proximo propter Deum*”- The City of God is a holy community, which clings to God in love and loves its neighbor for the sake of God (Hipponensis, n.d.-a).

Furthermore, in *De Trinitate* XV.17.31, he affirms, “*Caritas est spiritus Dei per quem diffunditur in cordibus nostris*”- Charity is the Spirit of God poured into our hearts (Hipponensis, n.d.-d). Thus, love in *Bese-Sono* is not mere ritual, but an encounter with the Trinitarian communion of love embodied in the communal meal.

Nevertheless, a tension persists between true charity and socio-cultural expectation. The Village Head observes that *bese* and *sono* are usually contributed by participants, but “in the spirit of *matop, ma mafit, bin kuan bale*, supporting and strengthening one another.” The Traditional Elder warns that the motivation must stay grounded in *Afinit Aneset*- thanksgiving to God, rather than falling into hollow obligation. Augustine cautions against concupiscentia—love disordered by self-interest. In *De Civitate Dei* XIV.7, he writes, “*Dilectio ordinata est amor usque ad contemptum sui; inordinata vero amor usque ad contemptum Dei*”—Ordered love leads to self-denial; disordered love leads to contempt for God (Hipponensis, n.d.-b). Hence, the love represented in *Bese-Sono* must remain rooted in gratuitous devotion, not transactional return.

The symbolism of slaughtering a male animal in the ritual intensifies the theological message of *amor Dei*. A Traditional Elder emphasizes, “*Bese* must be male and bloody, because it signifies that what is offered to *Usi Neno*.” The blood is mixed with young coconut water and poured on the ground as sacrificial offering. Augustine's *ordo amoris* confirms this logic of sacrificial love. In *De Civitate Dei* XIV.28, he writes, “*Amor igitur ordinatus est quo bene amantur ea quae amanda sunt; et ordine amantur singula*”- Ordered love is the love by which the things that ought to be loved are rightly loved; and each thing is loved in its proper order (Hipponensis, n.d.-b). True love gives the best, not the leftovers. In *De Trinitate* VIII.10.14, he adds, “*In sancta societate, quae caritate copulatur, unusquisque pro altero vel orat vel docet vel exhortatur vel consolatur*”—In the holy society united by love, each one prays, teaches, exhorts, or consoles the

other (Hipponensis, 1841a). The sacrificial act of *bese* therefore is not simply tradition, but the tangible action of a communion of love across the visible and invisible realms.

The Village Head's comment, "If there is not enough *bese* and *sono*, we prepare a reserve," reveals a deeper communal logic. According to elders, when shortages occur, customary leaders prepare *bese bono* (reserve offering) to ensure the ritual flows smoothly. This embodies *communio caritatis*, a communal order of mutual provision. Augustine calls this the *ordo societatis*, the order of society shaped by divine love. In *De Civitate Dei* XIX.13, he writes, "*Pax omnium rerum tranquillitas ordinis...*"—The peace of all things is the tranquility of order... in this earthly peace, human society is harmoniously ordered according to the condition of mortality (Hipponensis, 1845b). Thus, the sharing of *bese bono* is not logistical improvisation, but an embodied practice of peace and responsibility in love.

Augustine's well-known maxim in *Confessiones* VII.8.12, "*Dilige et quod vis fac*"—Love, and do what you will (Hipponensis, 1841b), becomes a criterion for discerning authentic love. A community elder observes, "If someone helps only because they fear exclusion, that is not love, it is fear of shame." Social conformity may simulate love, but lacks interior freedom. Thus, spiritual vigilance is required so that *Bese-Sono* does not collapse into mere formality, but remains a genuine outpouring of freedom and grace.

A recent study by (Exline & Wilt, 2024) affirms that authentic gratitude arises from deeply shared collective experiences. As one community elder put it, "When all the relatives come and we eat from the same pot, it is a sign that *Usi Neno* still loves this family." This practice resonates with Augustine's concept of *adoratio cordis*—worship from the heart. In *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CIII.2, he writes: "*Ista est enim vera adoratio: non linguae sonus sed cordis affectus*"—True worship is not the sound of the tongue, but the affection of the heart; not noise, but intention (Hipponensis, n.d.-e). Sharing from the same pot becomes a Eucharistic sign: love embodied and distributed as food, rooted in heartfelt worship and communion. Within this sacramental horizon, the shared pot functions as a domestic altar, mirroring the Eucharistic table where Christ offers Himself as nourishment. *Bese-Sono*, then, is not merely an act of communal hospitality but a foretaste of the Eucharist—an anticipatory participation in divine love made tangible through food and fellowship.

The Village Head also notes the active role of youth: "They now help carry *bese* and *sono*, sometimes even without being asked." This shift from passive heritage to active participation marks a revival of *caritas non ficta*, genuine love. In light of Augustine, this reflects the Spirit's quiet work of freedom. As Talan et al. suggest, such spontaneous love in youth is a sign of hope and renewal for the future of faith (Talan et al., 2024).

The ritual also carries a strong ethical dimension within public theology. A community elder explains that during major events, food is intentionally set aside for the absent or poor. This action widens the scope of love beyond immediate kin. Augustine writes in *De Doctrina Christiana* III.10, "*Qui autem minor est in societate sanctorum, eius est infirmior caritas*"—The least in the communion of saints has the weakest charity (Hipponensis, n.d.-c). To reach the periphery is not an option but the core of *caritas*. *Bese-Sono* thus becomes a window into the heart of God's mercy made flesh in shared food.

In a world shaped by consumerism, individualism, and transactional logic, the praxis of *caritas* faces profound challenges. Communal rites risk being reduced to displays of social capital, threatening the spiritual core of *Bese-Sono*. Public theologian Ivone Gebara warns that true love must resist domination and utilitarianism. In her essay *Interdependence, Christianity, and Environmental Crisis* (Daniels III et al., 2024), she affirms: "Authentic love is not consumption; it is a relational ethic that seeks justice for the vulnerable and sustainability for the earth." This view aligns with the call for *Bese-Sono* to remain an act of *Afinit-Aneset*—a genuine offering, not manipulative giving. It urges Christian communities to reclaim rituals as spaces of resistance against commodification, and as living witnesses to a theology grounded in gratitude, not gain. In this sense, *Bese-Sono* is more than a sign of communal unity; it echoes the Eucharist itself, where Christ offers His body in love, just as meat and rice become signs of divine love made

edible.

*Bese-Sono* embodies *caritas incarnata*, divine love made flesh in communal ties, shared meals, and collective offerings. Through *ordo amoris*, it becomes a sacramental act that unites *Usi Neno*, ancestors, and the living. Yet, to preserve its spiritual depth, ongoing discernment is essential. *Bese-Sono* enriches contextual and public theology, testifying to love as a sacred, communal vocation.

### **Love and the Practice of Life According to St. Augustine**

Saint Augustine taught that love for God is the root of all moral actions and love for others. In *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessiones*, he affirms the two great commandments: love of God and neighbor (Mt 22:37–40). For him, divine love is not a sentiment, but a deep devotion that grounds social harmony. True love leads to the common good and involves sacrifice for others, not self-interest.

Applying Augustine's teachings within socio-cultural contexts is not without challenges. In the *Atoni Pah Meto* community, *bese-sono* reflects solidarity and sacrifice for the common good. However, in practice, such acts are not always selfless. Many participate with expectations of social recognition or elevated status. This contradicts Augustine's view that true love must be offered freely, without seeking personal gain (Atawolo, 2022). For him, authentic love flows from pure intentions directed toward others' well-being.

Additionally, Augustine stressed that sacrifices made out of love should be aimed at the well-being of others and should reflect a deep devotion to God. He explained that loving God involves letting go of selfishness and placing God at the center of one's life. For Augustine, love for God, which leads to moral and spiritual goodness, should be the primary motivation behind all actions. However, in practice, both within the *Atoni Pah Meto* community and in the wider social context, sacrifices are often shaped by social norms or personal desires, which can divert these moral actions from the true principle of love (Coleman et al., 2019).

Shifts in global social dynamics also illustrate the relevance of Augustine's principle of love. During the Mpx outbreak, global solidarity became crucial. As Gostin et al. (2024), argue, fair access to vaccines and medicines demands international cooperation rooted in equity. Augustine's view of true love, as selfless concern for others, offers a moral framework for such crises. Wealthy nations, guided by *caritas*, must transcend political interests to protect the vulnerable, embodying love as just and inclusive action.

Global solidarity in addressing crises is frequently hindered by international inequalities and political agendas. Wealthier countries may delay or limit the distribution of health aid to poorer nations, perpetuating inequality. This highlights the distinction between solidarity motivated by genuine love and solidarity shaped by political or economic interests (Keightley et al., 2025). In this context, Augustine reminds us that true love, in its purest form, cannot be swayed by self-interest; instead, it calls for sacrifice for the greater good.

Environmental challenges also reflect the need for solidarity grounded in love. Wang et al. (2024), emphasize that emotional solidarity, deep interpersonal connection, can foster environmentally responsible behavior. From Augustine's view, love for God includes care for creation. Thus, ecological concern becomes a form of *caritas*, where love extends beyond humans to all of God's work. Responsible environmental action, then, is not just ethical but theological.

Solidarity is also crucial in the platform economy, which redefines modern labor. Zhou & Pun (2024), show how social media can promote worker unity, though often compromised by self-interest and power imbalance. Augustine reminds us that true solidarity, rooted in love, must prioritize the common good over personal gain. As the platform economy expands, ensuring justice and mutual care remains essential to uphold this moral vision.

Augustine's teachings on true love guide human actions, influencing social relationships, solidarity, environmental responsibility, and the digital realm. True love, for Augustine, goes beyond personal sacrifice and is expressed through actions that benefit the common good. While social pressures and self-interest complicate this, his principle of love offers a valuable



framework for reflection. By prioritizing collective well-being over egoism, we can rediscover love's true meaning, fostering a more just and compassionate society.

### **Love: Challenges and Their Relevance**

Augustine's concept of solidarity remains relevant in today's fragmented society but faces internal and external challenges. Internally, overcoming selfishness and practicing genuine love is difficult, as love is often viewed as a personal emotion in materialistic societies (D'Andrea, 2024). Externally, economic inequality exacerbates the issue, with love sometimes used to reinforce social status rather than promote the common good (Garbe, 2024). Augustine stresses that true love must be shown through actions for others without seeking personal gain. Despite its relevance, his teachings face obstacles in a society marked by social and economic inequalities.

Nonetheless, the principle of solidarity in Augustine's teachings remains pertinent within local communities such as *Atoni Pah Meto*. Social practices like *bese-sono*, which emphasize unity and mutual contributions to the common good, embody the values of love taught by Augustine. *Bese-sono* represents a form of sacrifice and deep cooperation, demonstrating the love and solidarity within the community. The *Atoni Pah Meto* people believe that solidarity extends not only to human relationships but also to their connection with nature and spiritual values (Manafe & Neolaka, 2020). In this sense, they apply Augustine's teachings on love and solidarity, which encompass not only human relationships but also their bond with God and the broader universe.

Modernization and globalization pose significant challenges to the preservation of these values. As individualism, consumerism, and personal achievement continue to grow, collective solidarity practices like *bese-sono* are at risk of fading (Arif, 2015). The *Atoni Pah Meto* community is under pressure to adapt to the demands of a modern world increasingly centered on personal and material success. This situation calls for a critical examination and preservation of practices rooted in spiritual and collective love-based solidarity. In this context, Augustine's teachings, which link love with sacrifice and devotion to God, become essential as a guide to safeguarding social and cultural values amidst the challenges posed by globalization and modernization.

However, this social challenge also creates an opportunity for the community to practice solidarity in a broader context. For instance, individuals facing economic inequality often struggle to embrace solidarity in the face of growing social disparities. This inequality intensifies the tendency for people to prioritize their interests (Rochadi, 2020), leading to the neglect of values like love and sacrifice for the common good. Nonetheless, Augustine's teachings remain pertinent, reminding society that solidarity involves material well-being and the spiritual and moral connections between individuals.

This study, reflecting on Augustine's teachings and current social challenges, seeks to deepen the understanding of the connection between Augustine's social theology and the practice of solidarity in local cultures, particularly within the *Atoni Pah Meto* society. By enhancing the understanding of love and solidarity in a modern context, communities can address increasingly complex global issues while preserving noble social values and maintaining a strong spiritual relationship with God. Augustine's teachings on love and solidarity are expected to offer relevant solutions to societies facing growing social and economic inequalities while also inspiring collective action for the common good, embodying the spirit of sacrifice and reverence for both God and others (Sugiarto et al., 2022).

### **CONCLUSION**

This study contributes to social theology by emphasizing the relevance of St. Augustine's teachings in preserving local cultural solidarity, particularly through practices like *bese-sono*, amid modernization pressures. Augustine's focus on selfless love for God and others highlights the importance of solidarity in both spiritual and social contexts. The study demonstrates that these values remain crucial for strengthening social bonds in rapidly developing societies, helping communities resist the negative effects of modernization. However, the study has limitations, such as a small sample size and its focus on only two locations in North Central

Timor, which may not fully capture the diversity of practices in other regions. Future research could expand the scope to investigate the impact of modernization on cultural solidarity practices in urbanizing communities and explore how globalization influences the preservation of social values and traditional practices.

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