

***Encouragement for the Journey:
Being an Augustinian Educator***

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I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak at this Augustinian Ethos Conference. In some ways, I am an accidental speaker because of a chance conversation at the Augustinian Values Institute meeting in Toronto last month. But, as an Augustinian Educator, I have come to relish experiences which interrupt my plans. I think this is very Augustinian. At a presentation for the 1650th anniversary of the birth of Saint Augustine, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking at Saint Augustine Parish in Hammersmith in London, described the life of Saint Augustine as a life interrupted – a life where the important things happened outside of the plans Augustine had for himself.

As you begin a journey of Augustinian schools, I ask you to be ready, like Augustine, to put aside preconceived notions of being an Augustinian Educator when you find new insights. Please let this experience and subsequent ones you may participate in lead you to a better awareness of your role as an Augustinian Educator.

Anton Pegis struggled 70 years ago with the meaning of Augustine's thought. He observed,

To attempt to portray the unity of a heart and a mind which lives as deeply and intensely as did Augustine is always a rash undertaking. How can the historian reproduce the life of a man? As it has well been said, we can only follow after Augustine – and it does not even lie within the power of man [sic] to do so. This may be a worrisome paradox, but it is the lesson of Augustine's life and thought, and it is the lesson that is inscribed at the very center of his teaching. He is eminently the disciple of the love of God. But this love is

*not a doctrine but a life,
not an abstract analysis but a journey,
not a theory but an experience.*

Now precisely, how is an experience communicated? It can be possessed only by those who live it, and it is uniquely theirs as their own being. The greatest work that Augustine has produced is his own life: how shall we read that?²

Life, journey and experience should be touchstones for an Augustinian educator. Our work is not about abstract pedagogical constructs but about our students and our lives, journeys and

² Anton C. Pegis, "The Mind of Saint Augustine." *Medieval Studies* 6 (1944), 8.

experiences. Like Augustine we must have what McLarney calls a hermeneutic of alignment³, or what I would call pedagogy of alignment. Augustine, the preacher worked to bring the Scriptures into the lived experience of his listeners. Like Augustine, we need to align our teaching so that our content comes into the lives of our students. This is a distinction between Augustinian and Jesuit pedagogy. While Augustine worked to bring the Scriptures into lives of hearers, Ignatius of Loyola worked to bring his listeners into the Scriptures. Ignatius worked for others, while Augustine worked with others.

Working with others, as Augustinian educators, we need to be part of learning communities where students learn, we learn and we learn with students. Among the important aspects of Augustine's experiences on his life journey is, what I term, his Genius for Friendship. Rarely alone, he learned with others. As he describes this,

My soul found all manner of joy when I was in their company — to talk and to laugh and to be kind to each other — to read engaging books together, to go from the lightest joking to talk of the deepest things and back again — to differ without discord, as I might differ with myself, and when on the rarest occasion disagreement arose, to find it highlights the sweetness of our normal agreement — to teach or to learn from each other — to be impatient for those absent and welcome them with joy when they return — these and similar things, emanating from our hearts as we gave and received affection, shown in our faces, our voices, our eyes, and a thousand other gratifying ways, ignited a flame which fused our very souls together and made the many of us one.⁴

We should not be, like Augustine prior to his conversion, proud of gaining followers among our students. Like Augustine, the bishop, we should see our salvation as uniting with others in community.⁵

In Augustinian learning communities we need to learn and teach our students to listen for when our experiences call us to change, transform our understanding and convert our ways of being, doing and/or thinking. To do this we need to develop like Augustine, what I term, an Ear

³ Gerald McLarney (2014). *St. Augustine's Interpretation of the Psalms of Ascent*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2.

⁴ *Confessions*, IV, 8, 13.

⁵ See, *Sermon 340*, 1.

for Eloquence. This is Ear for Eloquence led Augustine to change to seek wisdom. He tells us, in the *Confessions*, that reading a book opened his ears. He says, *That particular book is the Hortensius containing an exhortation to philosophy. It very definitely changed my ways of feeling, modified my prayers to You, O Lord, and gave me new purpose and ambition. All of a sudden I saw all the vanity I had hoped in as worthless, and I longed after everlasting wisdom with an incredibly intense desire. I started a journey upwards.*⁶

We must guard ourselves against sellers of words⁷, like Augustine was before his conversion, and develop in ourselves and our student an Ear for Eloquence which is led by discernment for truth. This is what has traditionally been called Augustinian Interiority. The hallmark of Augustine's interiority is his understanding that truth resides within not outside of a person. He tells us, *Do not look outside. Return to yourself. Truth resides inside a person. When you discover that you can change, transcend yourself.... Go where the light of reason is illuminated.*⁸ Augustine discovered this interiority through a conversion which changed his way of being, doing and thinking. Through conversion, his Ear for Eloquence finally heard God, who was always with him, even in error. Discovering interiority, he prayed to God, *You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being, and higher than the highest peak of my spirit.*⁹

Interiority can be seen as a solo performance but, Augustine's Ear for Eloquence came to understand that Truth within him was connected to the Truth of others as a common property. He comments, *Truth is the inheritance of all, and thus is not the particular property of anyone. What is in common belongs to everyone so that all who come to it may use it and be enlightened.*

⁶ *Confessions*, III, 4, 7.

⁷ *Confessions* IX, 5, 13.

⁸ *True Religion*, 39,72.

⁹ *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

*It is equally distant and equally close to everyone.*¹⁰ Or he notes in another place, *I must tremble in the face of your judgments, Lord, because your truth is neither mine, nor his, nor hers. Rather, it belongs to everyone whom you call to share it in communion with you. Likewise, you give us the terrible warning not to take truth as personal property, for fear we will find ourselves deprived of it.*¹¹

To have a discerning Ear for Eloquence and mirror Augustine's communion with others, Augustinian Educators need to have two crucial Augustinian virtues, Active Listening and Humility. We need in our Augustinian Learning Communities to be listening in an Active Listening way so we truly hear the thoughts and experiences of others, especially our students. Without this listening, how can we have a pedagogy of alignment where we bring our subject matter into the lived experience of our students? This will require us to implement approaches which in American educational jargon are becoming "guides on the side" rather than "sages on the stage." In such approaches, we accompany our students as much as lead them. In Augustine's understanding of leading and teaching, service is crucial. He notes, *My attitude, as I teach you, is to remember and keep in mind my duties as a servant. As a result, I speak not as a master but as a minister, not to pupils but to fellow pupils, not to servants but to fellow servants.*¹² This is not only Servant Leadership, it is also Servant Teaching.

Or an Augustinian Educator, service is deeply connected with the virtue of humility in searching for as well as teaching Truth. As Augustine says, *The first step in the search for truth is humility. The second, humility. The third, humility. And the last one, humility. Naturally, that does not mean that humility is the only virtue necessary for discovering and enjoying truth. But if other virtues are not preceded, accompanied and followed by humility, pride will find an opening*

¹⁰ *Expositions on the Psalms*, 75, 17.

¹¹ *Confessions* XII, 25, 34.

¹² *Sermon* 242, 1.

and infiltrate them and, sooner or later, finish up destroying good intentions. All other vices are recognized when we are doing wrong; but pride is to be feared even when we do right. Test those things which are done in a praiseworthy manner lest they be spoiled by the desire for praise itself.¹³ Or, as he says in another place, *To reach a high spot you need a ladder. To get to the height of greatness, use the ladder of humility.*¹⁴

We, as Augustinian Educators practicing humility in Augustinian Learning Communities, must guard against pride in our learning. Augustine cautions, *The more they think they are learned, the more unteachable they have become. They have become ashamed to learn, because that would mean admitting ignorance. They have none of the necessary humility, which is the one right thing God came to teach.*¹⁵ In humility we must model being teachable so we and our students can advance in understanding and wisdom. With Augustine we should humbly say, *The love of knowledge and truth should invite us to continue learning. The love of others should compel us to teach.*¹⁶

Love and will are important concepts for Augustine. I believe he had a Passionate Curiosity as part of his nature. He learned over time that this part of his nature needed to be redeemed. His concept of two cities and two loves come from his struggle to tame his loves that were not rightly ordered. We and our students need to have our desires align with right directions. Our teaching needs to help learners and ourselves to harmonize conflicting directions in learning. This harmonizing involves aligning mind and heart to work together for the good.

We need to take heart in our love for teaching and our care for students. In teaching by writing books for and letters to others, Augustine worked at taking heart in right directions when he prayed, *May God grant that even I should make continuing progress when I provide others*

¹³ Letter 118, 3, 22.

¹⁴ Sermon 96, 3.

¹⁵ Sermon 198, 13.

¹⁶ Answers to the Eight Questions of Dulcinius, 3.

*with books to read. Even I find what I am seeking when I try to answer the questions of others.*¹⁷

Augustine found success in his own progress as he taught others. As he reports, *In our writing we make progress. We are learning every day. We are engaged in research while we dictate, i.e., knocking at the door as we speak. When I can be useful to the fellowship, both by writing and by speaking, I certainly will not keep quiet, if I can help it.*¹⁸

As we teach our students to take heart we need not only to instruct but to support them in their learning struggles. In Augustine's words, *Love empowers us to support one another in carrying our burdens. When deer need to cross a river, each one carries on its rear the head of the one behind it while it rests its head on the rear of the one in front of it. Supporting and helping each other, they are thus able to cross wide rivers safely, until they reach the firmness of the land together.*¹⁹ This support may come in direct ways, or simply in the amazing power of a Cheerful Attitude that Augustine describes for Deogratias in *De Catechizandus Rudibus*.²⁰

In overcoming their unbridled passionate curiosity we need to assist student to learn to *Search as people who are going to discover, and discover as people who are going to go on searching.*²¹ In searching and discovering we need to assist learners to develop a balance and maturity. Augustine tells us, *To achieve maturity, a human being needs a certain balance among three things: talent, education and experience.*²² So, while we as Augustinian Educators need pedagogies of alignment connecting our teaching to the lives of learners, we also need to help them align their talents, education and experience.

In helping others take heart, we need to support those with broken lives and those excluded in our educational settings. Augustine sees himself as well as teachers and learners as

¹⁷ *The Trinity*, I, 8.

¹⁸ *Sermon 162C*, 15 (Dolbeau 10).

¹⁹ *Eighty-three Diverse Questions*, 71, 1.

²⁰ "Developing a cheerful attitude" is Canning's translation of Augustine's expression *de hilaritate comparanda* in *De catechizandis rudibus*. See R. Canning. "Introduction" in *Instructing Beginners in Faith*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006, 16.

²¹ *The Trinity* 9, 1, 1.

²² *The City of God*, 11, 25.

“cracked pots.” In interpreting the Psalmist, he notes, *Many people promise themselves that they will live a holy life. But, they fail because they go into the furnace and come out cracked.*²³ Our own brokenness and that of our students are important entry points for connecting teaching to the lives of our students. We and our students, as “cracked pots,” need encouragement. Augustine counsels, *Educate all in your family, counsel them, encourage them, correct them with love and authority.*²⁴ Encouragement is teaching and ministering to God. Augustine in a riff on “the least of mine” in Matthew 25 has God saying to us, *When one of the least of mine learns, I [God] learn.*²⁵

As one “cracked pot” to another, I would ask while this gathering progresses, we encourage one another guided by Augustine’s counsel for overcoming stumbling blocks in learning.²⁶ In my riff on Augustine’s counsel I encourage you

When learners are tired, encourage them with a cheerful attitude.
When learners are discouraged, encourage them with consideration and patience.
When learners are bored, encourage them with care to find new and exciting things.
When learners are sad, encourage them with love and joy.
When learners are apathetic, encourage them with compassion and energetic exhortation.
When learners are tense and fearful, encourage them with kindness and tact in building trust.

My hope is that this time together, will be a time for new insights into and growth in your identity as an Augustinian Educator and that the progress on your journey we lead to progress for your students on their learning journeys. Again, thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you from my learning journey as an Augustinian Educator.

²³ *Expositions on the Psalms* 99, 11. The use of the concept “cracked” extends work on Augustine and the cracked self in Donald X. Burt, “*Let Me Know Myself...*” *Reflections on the Prayer of Saint Augustine*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002.

²⁴ *Tractate on the Gospel of Jon*, 51, 13.

²⁵ *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 21, 7, 2.

²⁶ *Instructing Beginner’s in the Faith* 10,14-13,19.