SAINT AUGUSTINE

STUDENT AND TEACHER

How can anyone do justice to such a man as Saint Augustine of Hippo in giving a working profile of his thoughts and activities as a student and later as a teacher? So much has been written about him, and from so many different points of view, that one can easily wonder if there is anything new to report. But even if there were nothing new, it will be of great help to synthesize the values, style, methodology and many other elements which guided Augustine in his great contribution to the field of education. Hopefully such a synthesis will be of real benefit to the countless thousands of students and teachers who still wish to follow his teaching philosophy today.

Much of what we know about Augustine as a student and teacher comes from his Confessions, though certainly other sources among his numerous writings can also enlighten us about some of the aspects of his educational philosophy. This opening chapter, however, will take most of its material from his Confessions [Conf. hereafter]. Subsequent chapters of this Compendium will necessarily deal with many of his other writings.

One thing, however, must be clear from the start: Augustinian education is not a matter of the mind alone. The heart must play an important role in this process or we will not be true to Augustine, for whom the heart is so important at every moment of our existence. It is, after all, our hearts, not our minds, that are restless as we go through life, and they will remain so until they find their complete rest in God [Conf.1,1]. While the mind must be properly enlightened by the truth, love, which has its root in the heart, must be the guiding light and dynamic impulse for any knowledge we acquire or share with others. As Augustine put it: "*Love and do what you will…Let love's root be within you, and from that root nothing but good can spring*" [Homily on 1 John 7,8]. Where there is true love—*agape*—knowledge will never be misused.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of educating the heart, because such an education means helping students realize more profoundly their relationship with the One who created them. It follows that in order to teach well, Catholic teachers themselves—and especially those in an Augustinian educational environment—must have a personal and important relationship with God. How we see ourselves and our talents and how we put these at the service of others will also greatly influence how we affect students, peers and parents.

It took Augustine a long time to come to the understanding that before we can know God, we must first of all know ourselves. He was amazed at the fact that he and others could not fully understand all that they were. He reflected on the fact that peo-

ple go in all directions to marvel at the high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of the rivers, the ocean and the stars, but "*they pay no attention to themselves*" [Conf. 10, 8]. Augustine looked for God outside himself and failed to discover him in the depths of his own heart, where, as he finally concluded, God was closer to him than he was to himself [Conf. 3, 6]. And so Augustine would remark: "*Where was I when I looked for you? You were there before my eyes, but I had deserted my very own self. I could not find myself, much less could I find you*" [Conf. 5,2].

Because Augustinian education has such an important connection with the human heart, it also has a lot to do with relationships: with God, one's teachers, fellow students, and with oneself. Without having ever studied Freud, Jung or other more modern psychologists, Augustine penetrated behind a lot of human relationships to see what makes them tick, what obstacles human nature often throws up against them, and how these obstacles can be overcome. I will not be reflecting on these relationships here because they are not the purpose of this chapter. But I do believe a study of these relationships can be very valuable to those who are called to be administrators or teachers in an Augustinian setting.

One of my former students, after his graduation from high school, gave me a decorated pillow on which were inscribed these words: "*To teach is to touch a life forever*". How very insightful! If we have really taught our students, opened their minds and their hearts, that is, to the great realities around them and within them, then they will never forget our influence in one way or another. As Augustine puts it: "*Let us adapt ourselves to our students with a love which is at once the love of a brother, a sister, a father, and a mother. When once our hearts are joined, the old familiar things will seem new to us*" [Catechizing the Uninstructed 12, 17].

Augustine the Student

When we speak of students we often have in mind those who are at some stage of formal education from elementary through post-graduate studies. But to be quite honest, Augustine was not only a student as he grew up in Thagaste [present day Souk Ahras, Algeria] and Carthage [in present day Tunisia]: he was a student throughout his entire life. He was always open to learning new things. This is brought out to us rather clearly in his Revisions [*Retractationes*], written in the last years of his life, where he lets us know that, in some instances, more recently acquired knowledge would have given him a different perspective on some matters and made him approach things differently if he were to write about them now.

From what he tells us, Augustine began his education in the lap of his mother Monica, and what she taught him about Jesus created a thirst in him for our Savior that

never left him, not even when he strayed so far away from the faith in his ten years with the Manichees.

> From the time when my mother fed me at the breast my infant heart had been suckled dutifully on his name, the name of your Son, my Savior. Deep inside my heart his name remained, and nothing could entirely captivate me, however learned, however neatly expressed, however true it might be, unless his name were in it [Conf. 3,4].

Apparently Augustine never read the Scriptures as a young boy, because when he came upon them during his time at the university in Carthage, he was very disappointed by their style, so much so that he could not get through to their content [Conf. 3,5].

His formal education began in his home town of Thagaste, where he studied the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. That these were probably the most valuable of all his lessons, he himself tells us: "*For these elementary lessons were far more valuable than those which followed, because the subjects were practical. They gave me the power, which I still have, of reading whatever is set before me and writing whatever I wish to write*" [Conf. 1,13]. Still, at the time, he found these lessons irksome and an imposition on his mind. Is there anyone who cannot agree with his basic reflection about the great importance of these early studies? None of us could have made any progress at all without those basic skills which were the first we learned.

Interestingly enough, there was one subject which Augustine did not like at all, and this is just one example of how his experiences can say something to today's youth, who are not necessarily enamored about all their classes. That subject was Greek, but he could never seem to figure out why it was so distasteful to him. As a child he was required to learn this language, and though he apparently was able to read some of Homer, still "*as a boy I found him little to my taste*" [Conf. 1,14]. One of the reasons Augustine gives us for not liking this language was that it was forced on him: "*I was constantly subjected to violent threats and cruel punishments to make me learn [Greek]*" [ibid]. However, being forced to learn Greek and other subjects brings him to give us a very important norm of education, namely "*that we learn better in a free spirit of curiosity than under fear and compulsion*" [ibid.]. True as this statement may be, it could hardly be used as a guide in forming a curriculum in our schools. There are some things which our students just have to know, at least through their years of secondary education, whether they like them or not, or see any reason for studying them or not.

As a young boy in Thagaste, Augustine had great reason to fear being beaten by his teachers, because beating the students was a well established custom in the elementary schools of the time. And the worst of it was that parents not only allowed teachers to do this, but laughed at their boys when it happened, because they felt it was a proper punishment for those who did not study properly. Augustine tells us that his prayer to God in those days was one continual plea to not let him be beaten at school:

> For we feared the whip just as much as others fear the rack, and we, no less than they, begged you to preserve us from it. But we sinned by reading and writing and studying less than was expected of us…But we enjoyed playing games and were punished for them by men who played games themselves. However, grown-up games are known as 'business'… [Conf. 1, 9].

What those "grown-up games" might have been in Augustine's time is left to our imagination. But it is not hard to imagine some such games that are played by adults at times in our own society: like insider trading, bribery, corporate cheating of the government and of stockholders, embezzlement, price wars forcing the little guy out of business, industrial dumping, and many others. Things haven't really changed too much, have they?

As Augustine progressed in his studies, he began to be introduced to some of the more famous Roman authors, such as Cicero, Virgil and Terence, as well as to learn the art of rhetoric, or public speaking [Conf. 2,3]. On one occasion he and his classmates studied one of Terence's plays, which deeply impressed Augustine for the hypocrisy it portrayed:

> Terence brings on to the stage a dissolute youth who excuses his own fornication by pointing to the example of Jupiter…"What a god he is! His mighty thunder rocks the sky from end to end. You may say that I am only a man, and thundering is beyond my power. But I played the rest of the part well enough, and willingly too [Conf. 1, 16].

Here is a god, Jupiter, who punishes evil-doers and then commits evil himself, adultery. Pure hypocrisy! But even today we have our own 'gods', whom we place on pedestals and look up to. We find them in all walks of life: in politics, in sports, in business, in the courts and elsewhere. They are frequently heroes to our children, and even to ourselves. Sometimes, however, they are a scandal to all: what they say and what they do are entirely different things. It's just as Jesus reminds us in the gospel about the followers of Moses: *Do what they say, but do not follow their example* [Mt. 23: 3]!

To continue his education, Augustine was sent to Madaura, some 30 kms. distant from Thagaste. He was apparently not there too long—a year or two perhaps—when he was called home by his father, Patritius. Although Madaura had a university of its own, Patritius had greater things in mind for his highly intelligent and very promising young son. He wanted to give him the very best education possible, which was then available only in Carthage, the capital of Roman North Africa and the seat of the best university in that region. And to do this, Patritius had a difficult task ahead of him, that is, to raise sufficient funds for such a venture, for as Augustine tells us, "*his determination was greater than his means*" [Conf. 2, 3].

Augustine was 15 years old when he was called back to Thagaste and it was at this time that puberty hit him head on. His studies were interrupted, he had nothing to keep his mind seriously occupied, and strangely enough, his parents apparently gave him a freedom to do what he wanted, "*to amuse myself beyond the strict limits of discipline*" [Conf. 2,3]. This latter phrase sounds almost like the situation that developed in North America and in several Western European countries in the late 60s and early 70s, when society in these areas was undergoing radical changes, especially as a result of rioting by students in the universities. One other result of this year of forced idleness in Augustine's life was the famous theft of a nearby pear orchard, which bothered him so much that he would give this adolescent prank an unusual amount of attention in his Confessions [2, 4-9], which he wrote 27 years after the incident. One thing he did learn from this situation was the power of peer pressure, which has pursued adolescents—and perhaps many adults—down through the ages: "*This was friendship of a most unfriendly sort…And all because we are ashamed to hold back when others say: 'Come on! Let's do it*!' [Conf. 2, 9]. Maybe it was learning this lesson that helped him have a different approach to his peers when he went off to the university in Carthage.

It would appear that Patritius died shortly before he was able to gather all the funds he needed to send his son to Carthage. However, with what he had saved and left to Monica, and with the help of a dear friend of the family, Romanianus, Augustine went off to Carthage in the autumn of the year 371, when he was nearly 17 years old. His life in Carthage, both at the university and apart from it, was to make a deep impression on him. Within a year's time he took a young girl to his home as his mistress or common law wife and together they had a son; he joined the Manichees and stayed with them for about ten years; he studied law and became a top student in the school of rhetoric; and he was tempted once again by peer pressure, but did not give in completely as we will see. But probably the greatest thing that happened to him was his discovery of a book by Cicero, the *Hortensius*, which enticed him to love wisdom itself, "*whatever it might be, and to search for it, pursue it, hold it, and embrace it firmly*" [Conf. 3,4].

But there was one thing about this book that did not please him: it made no mention of the name of Jesus, which holy name had been deeply embedded in his heart from his earliest days, as we have seen. And this is what set him to taking up the book of the Scriptures to see what they were like. He was sure he could find the name of Jesus there, but before he could get too far in the text, pride raised its ugly head. Augustine had been deeply immersed in classical Latin for many years, but what he found in these sacred books was a style totally unworthy of comparison with Ciceronian Latin. His conclusion: how could these books, written in such a poor style, possibly contain anything worthwhile? For this very reason he could not get beyond their appearance to find their substance. He made the same mistake that is frequently repeated in our own times: the wrapper, the cover—in this case the Scriptural language—kept the gift from being discovered.

While at the University of Carthage, Augustine made some good friends with a group of very unsavory characters, who had a terrible reputation for setting upon timid newcomers, insulting and spiting them for their own amusement. These people called themselves the "Wreckers", a name which inspired fear among both teachers and young students. What is interesting is to note the progress Augustine had apparently made in just a few short years from being a follower, who gave into peer pressure in the pear tree incident, to one who, while wanting the friendship of these Wreckers, would not take part in their evil deeds:

> I had nothing to do with their outbursts of violence, but I lived among them, feeling a perverse sense of shame because I was not like them… There were times when I found their friendship a pleasure, but I was always horrified at what they did when they lived up to their name [Conf. 3,3].

During his university years he fell in with the Manichees, who enticed him to their way of thinking because of their insistence that they could solve all his youthful intellectual problems by reason alone. These Manichees were a Gnostic group, believing essentially that there were two powers in the universe in constant conflict with one another: a god of light and one of darkness. Their teachings were principally a mixture of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. He listened to them because he was rebelling against authority and also because he was very disturbed by the difficult questions they asked about the origin of evil, the true nature of God, and the truth about the Sacred Scriptures, which they said were frequently self-contradictory. Unfortunately he never found the answers to these problems until after he had left this sect.

Augustine the Teacher

After finishing his studies at the university, Augustine returned to his home town of Thagaste and set up his own school of rhetoric. And of course he returned home full of Manichean teaching, so much so that he became an ardent proselytizer, converting to this belief anyone who would listen to him—anyone, that is, except his mother, who was strongly opposed to this sect. He tried to convert her, but failed completely [Conf. 3, 11].

In his school of rhetoric he only wanted good, honest students, that is, those who would use their knowledge of public speaking not only to save the innocent, but also to save the lives of those who were guilty. Augustine was very much opposed to the death penalty, not only then, but also later in life. In fact, it may be said that Augustine preceded Gandhi in his nonviolent resistance to unjust laws [Sermon 302, 11-19]. He taught his students the tricks of pleading, and though he foresaw that many would not use these skills properly, he did his best to teach them honestly [Conf. 4,2].

During a wonderful first year of teaching, he renewed a special childhood friendship with a young man whom he easily converted to his Manichean ways. He was so close to this young man that he felt that their two souls were but one, living in two bodies. But just when things seemed to be going so well, the bottom dropped out. This intimate friend died quite suddenly, just after being baptized, leaving Augustine almost to despair of life itself. He could no longer face the prospect of continuing to teach in Thagaste, where he was reminded through so many familiar places of the wonderful times he had spent with his friend. And so he went back to Carthage, where he began teaching in the university.

While teaching at Carthage he wrote his first book, Beauty and Proportion [*De pulchro et apto*]. Although it was not a best-seller, as we can easily gather from Augustine's remarks, he enjoyed giving his full attention to this topic. In fact it would appear that only one copy of the book had been written, and when this book was lost, he had no other copies. He was about 26 or 27 years old when he wrote this book, but fifteen years later, as he wrote his Confessions, he could not even recall whether he had written two or three volumes [Conf. 4, 13].

One of the most important things that happened during his seven years teaching in Carthage was his meeting with Faustus, a Manichean bishop who, he had been assured, would be able to answer all the difficult questions he had about Manichean teachings. Augustine was teaching literature at the time and since Faustus enjoyed great enthusiasm for this subject, the two of them spent some pleasant moments together discussing various aspects of classical authors. However, Faustus failed miserably in helping Augustine resolve the problems he had waited so long to have answered: "*So it was that, unwittingly and without intent, Faustus who had been a deadly snare to many now began to release me from the trap in which I had been caught*" [Conf. 5, 7].

Augustine was already in his 29th year when several things came together that encouraged him to leave Carthage for Rome. His friends were telling him that in Rome the fees were higher and the honors were greater. But while these things appealed to him, probably the most important matter that influenced his departure was what he had heard about the students in Rome: they were much quieter and the discipline was stricter than what he experienced in Carthage. When he himself had been a student in Carthage he had fallen in on the fringes of the Wreckers. But now as a teacher, he had an entirely different view of them:

> At Carthage the students are beyond control and their behavior is disgraceful. They come blustering into the lecture-rooms like a troop of maniacs and upset the orderly arrangements which the master has made in the interest of his pupils. Their recklessness is unbelievable and they often commit outrages which ought to be punished by law, were it not that custom protects them [Conf. 5,8].

If there is irony in the fact that Augustine the teacher had to put up with these "Wreckers", whom Augustine the youth had sympathized with while refusing to participate in their shenanigans, even more ironic is what happened when he left Carthage in order to go and teach in Rome. While it is quite true that he got away from the unruly students in Carthage, what he found in Rome could not have made him very happy.

> True enough, I found that there was no rioting by young hooligans, but I was told that at any moment a number of students would plot together to avoid paying their master his fees and would transfer in a body to another. They were quite unscrupulous, and justice meant nothing to them compared with the love of money [Conf. 5,12].

The grass, which often seems greener in the other fellow's meadow, can have an entirely different feel when we walk on it ourselves. Disappointments of one kind or another will invariably follow us.

When he had arrived in Rome, Augustine had become quite ill and had been cared for by the Manichees in that city as one of their own. Even though he had abandoned them intellectually, he still had a true affection for them. Moreover, they were the only ones he knew he could turn to when he first arrived.

After regaining his health he acquired a house of his own and began to teach literature and public speaking there. It was while he was engaged in teaching students in Rome that an important position came open in Milan, which was the seat of government at the time. The city needed a teacher of literature and speech, and Augustine applied for the job. The mayor of Rome, Symmachus, gave him a test to ascertain his abilities, and probably also due to his connections with the Manichees, the mayor approved of his qualifications and sent him on to Milan. While Augustine was very pleased with this promotion, intellectually he remained very undecided about what philosophy or faith he should follow: he did not want to get burned twice! He finally left the Manichees for good, dabbled in the Academics who treated everything as a matter of doubt, and finally became more interested in the Catholics, thanks to Bishop Ambrose of Milan.

Without Augustine's being aware of it, Ambrose's homilies were beginning to get through to him. Ambrose helped him understand the spiritual meaning of many Scriptural texts, whose literal rendition had previously and for many years presented him with what seemed impossible teachings of the Church. But Augustine's mind still ruled him, so that he could not accept anything that was not as clear as what was provided by mathematical precision. His heart longed for the truth, but his fear of stumbling again as he had with the Manichees kept him from making any firm decisions [Conf. 6, 4].

One of the duties of his new position was to give a public speech, praising the boy emperor of the time. One day, when he was terribly upset because he would have to tell a lot of lies as he made some flattering remarks about this youthful Ruler in his speech, he went for a walk with some friends. While on their walk they came across a beggar who was having a grand time laughing and joking; apparently the man had just been able to buy himself some good food and drink with what he had earned begging. Augustine couldn't help but contrast his own situation with that of the beggar: "*he was cheerful, while I was unhappy; he had no worries, but I was full of apprehension*" [Conf. 6, 6]. This chance encounter made Augustine realize all the more how "*there is a world of difference between the joy of hope that comes from faith and the shallow happiness that I was looking for*" [ibid.].

While in Milan and even while preparing himself for marriage, Augustine pondered, together with his friends, the idea of forming a kind of philosophical community. In this community they would be free to sit around and discuss the problems of the times without being overburdened with work. To accomplish this they were going to limit the number of members to about ten, pool their possessions and create a common fund, and give the day to day duties of the community to two men each year. There was absolutely no religious element in this proposal, but the ideas it contained evidently influenced Augustine later on when, after his conversion, he did form a monastic community on his return to Africa. The formation of this proposed community never saw the light of day because they knew their wives and mistresses would never agree to it.

Even though this community ideal in Milan collapsed, it did not stop Augustine from continuing his search for the truth. And in this he was seriously challenged by the Neoplatonists. He read their books in Latin translations, books which gave him a new understanding of how a purely spiritual being—God—could exist. What he read also reminded him of his need to return within himself. However, he could not find in these books many things which he found in the Scriptures: love, humility, the virgin birth, the life and death of Jesus, and his resurrection. For owing to Ambrose's preaching, he had begun once more to look at the Bible and to see it with a new set of eyes. Inspired by the Holy Spirit he eagerly began to read these sacred books, especially those attributed to St. Paul, and he discovered in them whatever he had read in the Platonists, but in addition praise for God's grace [Conf. 7, 21].

> I believe that it was by your will that I came across those [Platonist] books before I studied the Scriptures, because you wished me always to remember the impression they had made on me, so that later on, when I had been chastened by your Holy Writ and my wounds had been touched by your healing hand, I should be able to see and understand the difference between presumption and confession, between those who see the goal that they must reach, but cannot see the road by which they are to reach it, and those who see the road to that blessed country which is meant to be no mere vision but our home [Conf. 7, 20].

By the time he finished with this first study of the Scriptures—once again the student!—he was intellectually converted to the Catholic faith, but he did not yet have the strength of will or the courage to accept and embrace membership in the Church. Without realizing it, he was probably still held back by a Gnostic attitude he had grown to accept during his years with the Manichees and even in his reading of the Neoplatonists. Very succinctly this teaching was: "*Knowledge is virtue*", that is, the more a person knows, the holier that person must be. So knowledge alone is what is necessary to attain salvation. Just before his conversion he heard of some court officers there in Milan who had even left their high positions at court to go off and become monks themselves. This caused him to cry out to his friend Alypius, almost in despair:

> What is the matter with us?… These men have not had our schooling, yet they stand up and storm the gates of heaven while we, for all our learning, lie here groveling in this world of flesh and blood! Is it because they have led the way that we are ashamed to follow? [Conf. 8,8].

How clear from this passage that Augustine was still equating learning with virtue or faith. Maybe too he was beginning to see that learning, or pride in learning, was not the key to the happiness he was seeking.

Who of us has not marveled at the simple faith of so many people who, though uneducated as the world sees them, still know a happiness that surpasses that of many others who are highly trained? They are living examples of the fact that knowledge is simply not synonymous with virtue or goodness. Nor is happiness a product of knowing things, but rather of appreciating life and the mystery of God's love. It is just as Augustine says: "*A man who has faith in you owns all the wealth of the world, for if he clings to you, whom all things serve, though he has nothing, yet he owns them all*" [Conf.5,4]. It is once again a question of the human heart, which is educated, as Augustine grew to learn, much more by goodness and love than by knowledge. While teachers strive to get their students to learn many facts, rules, and manners of speaking, the most important thing they can teach them is to appreciate better the mystery of themselves and their call to greatness in God's kingdom.

After Augustine's conversion to the faith he was delighted to be able to give up teaching rhetoric. In no way did he want those students, "*who gave no thought to your law or your peace, but only to lies and the insane warfare of the courts",* to buy from him any more the power to carry out their goals [Conf. 9, 2]. After the autumn vacation, which he passed in intellectual discussion and writing in a vacation house in Cassiciacum [about 50 kms. north of Milan], Augustine made it known to the people of Milan that they would have to find someone else to "sell words" to their students, not only because he had chosen to be a "servant of God", but also because of a problem he had with breathing and speaking, which had come upon him just prior to that vacation time. What might have been the cause of this health problem we can only speculate. But I

don't think it is out of the question to think that Augustine might have been subject to a malaise which has hit a lot of people in our own times: burn-out. The tensions of his conversion, along with an excessive amount of work in teaching and research with little time for rest, may very well have caused such problems for him.

However, it would not be right to think that Augustine had, all of a sudden, given up his role as teacher. What he really did was to limit himself to a very few, well chosen pupils. While he was at Cassiciacum for about six months [October 386 to March 387] he had managed to tutor two cousins—Lastidianus and Rusticus—and two young students—Trigentius and Licentius, this latter being the son of his great benefactor from Thagaste, Romanianus. Others who joined him at this country house, which had been loaned to him by Verecundus [whom Nebridius had been helping with legal problems in Milan], were his mother Monica, his brother Navigius, his son Adeodatus, and his intimate friend Alypius [The Happy Life I, 6]. During his time here Augustine seriously began his writing career. Many of his first books were in the form of dialogues with some of those who were then living with him. The first books which came from his pen were: Against the Academics, The Happy Life, and On Order [*Contra academicos, De beata vita, De ordine]*, and his dialogue with himself, the Solliloquies [*Soliloquia*]. After his return to North Africa in 388 he wrote his work The Teacher [*De Magistro*], which is a dialogue with his son Adeodatus, whom he praises highly for his intellectual ability in these words:

> You know that all the ideas expressed by the second speaker in the discussion are his, although he was only sixteen when it took place, and I learned for myself that he had many other talents even more remarkable than this. His intelligence left me spell-bound [Conf. 9,6].

Back in Thagaste, Augustine turned his parental home—which was now his own—into a kind of religious house. He lived together with some friends and a few of his fellow townsmen who, like himself, desired a life of service to God. As his good friend St. Possidius notes in his biography of Augustine, written shortly after his death:

> …with those who had joined him, [he] lived for God in fasting, prayer, and good works and in meditating day and night on the law of the Lord. The truths which God revealed to his mind in meditation and prayer he communicated to present and absent alike, instructing them in sermons and books [The Life 3, 2].

What Possidius mentions here could be taken as a model for the rest of Augustine's life, for his writings and homilies continued to instruct the people of his diocese and many others about the Christian faith, practically till he was on his death bed.

After his visit to Hippo in the year 391, when he was ordained to the priesthood, he began once again to be a student. He felt terribly unprepared to preach and teach the Sacred Scriptures, so he pleaded with his bishop Valerius in a beautiful letter that he allow him to be free for a few months to completely dedicate himself to this study. He

was not without sufficient knowledge for his own salvation, as he mentions, but he felt himself woefully unprepared as to how to best minister to others through preaching:

> I would dare to say that I know and hold with complete faith what pertains to our salvation. But how am I to exercise this ministry for the salvation of others?...I implore your love and affection that you may be merciful to me and grant me as much time as I have requested for the purpose for which I requested it and help me by your prayers that my desire may not be unfulfilled and that my absence may not be without fruit for the church of Christ and for the benefit of my brothers and fellow servants [Letter 21: 4; 6].

How Valerius responded to this letter, we do not know, but we can reasonably presume that he gave his permission so that Augustine could carry out these studies till Easter, which was his request.

Augustine: Bishop and Teacher

For four or five years Augustine carried out his ministry as Bishop Valerius' priest, his right hand man so to speak, preaching and teaching as the situation demanded, sometimes in the presence of his bishop, at other times apart from him, but always as the bishop's representative. During these years he must have quickly acquired a feel for his audience, the people of Hippo, most of whom were not nearly as well educated as himself. While the books he continued to write displayed the more classical style he had learned and taught for so many years in the universities and in his own school, what he gave to the people in his homilies was adapted especially for them. As a result he was well prepared for the teaching office of bishop when this burden was placed on his shoulders sometime in 395 or 396. As a bishop he did most of his teaching of the people through his homilies, but he reached a far greater audience through many of his books, including the Confessions and the City of God, both of which are available even today in fine translations in almost every major language.

Augustine did not write out his homilies. Thankfully, however, there were secretaries located throughout the church who took notes of what he said and put it all together for posterity. However in no way could these summaries have expressed the reality that it was to hear him preach. What Frederick van der Meer writes of his sermons is well worth quoting:

> [T]hrough his genius for the right word he surpasses all the Church Fathers. Never once does he fail to make an idea unforgettable…Everyone who reads a number of his sermons will carry away the same impression as the men of his day, for no words from the pulpit have ever so fully come from the heart… [Augustine 412].

Once again we see the importance of the heart for Augustine. What he said came from the heart and was intended to touch the heart. Through his long life Augustine grew more and more convinced of the need for the grace of God to work through his words on the hearts of his hearers. He was convinced that the sound of his words could only reach the outer ears of his hearers. Unless Christ were within the person to give life to his words in the heart, his words, or those of any other preacher, would remain sterile:

> We have our teacher within, Christ. If you cannot grasp something through your ear and my mouth, turn to him in your hearts, for it is he who teaches me what to say and gives to you as he wishes [On the Gospel of John, tr.20,3]. Let him then speak to you within, in that place where no human teacher can enter [Homily on 1 John 3,13].

In the year 396 he began a work known as Christian Teaching [*De doctrina christiana*]. But he did not complete it until around 426, when he added the last part, Book IV. Quite frankly this is probably the most important section of the entire treatise, as it summarizes what Augustine himself used as a basis for his preaching and teaching. Listen again to Frederick van der Meer as he comments on how Augustine really had synthesized in this book the way he himself taught his people over the many years he led them as bishop:

> Augustine follows his own precept. He preaches in truly popular fashion and is always clear, he is careful not to be solemn for too long or to sound perpetual notes of triumph, and…he ignores all difficulties with a contemptuous eagle eye. With a facility that is quite inimitable he masters his three categories and mingles them one with another; improvises sudden transitions, or neglects to make any transition at all. [Augustine 413].

The three categories which are spoken of here and in *Christian Teaching* are: the simple, the ornate, and the affective, which Augustine frequently combined in one and the same homily.

Augustine's influence in teaching the Christian faith and in answering difficult questions posed against the faith lifted up the Church in North Africa, but also spread far beyond the confines of this region, even in his own time. What he did for Africa itself, however, deserves to be underlined, for when he took over as bishop of Hippo, there were probably as many Donatist bishops in Roman North Africa as there were Catholic bishops. Here is what Possidius has to say about all this:

> In private and in public, at home and in the church, Augustine was preaching and teaching the word of salvation with complete freedom against all the African heretics, especially the Donatists, the Manicheans, and the pagans. He did so in carefully wrought books and in extemporaneous addresses and to the utter admiration and praise of Christians, who did not remain silent about all this but

> noised it abroad wherever they could…Even the heretics joined the Catholics in listening to him with great enthusiasm [Life 7, 1; 3].

Possidius also makes clear that Augustine's writings were heard by the Church overseas, which rejoiced in his successes in North Africa, "*for just as all the members suffer when one of them is hurt, so all the members rejoice when one of them is honored*" [Life of Augustine 7,4].

> The Church's teaching on saving faith, hope, and love thus became known through many and among many, not only in all parts of Africa, but also in regions overseas. By means of published books, which were translated into Greek, all this teaching was able, with God's help, to make its way from this one man and through him to many [Life 11, 4].

A Reflection

Much more could be written about Augustine's influence as a teacher in spreading the Catholic faith and making it easier for the faithful to understand their beliefs. But this will be the task for future chapters of this Compendium. Right now maybe we can reflect a bit on what Augustine's life as student and teacher has to say to us today.

Just prior to his conversion Augustine pointed out how terribly painful it was for him when God was finally able to break through his pride and open his eyes so that he could see his real self, the self he had been hiding from for so many years. Is it any different nowadays? People—some of them perhaps our students—are often hiding from themselves, running away from a confrontation with their real selves, terribly fearful of what they will discover if they are left alone too long with their thoughts. No wonder we find so many today absorbed by TV, by electronic games, many of which glorify violence, by their iPods firmly glued to their ears, or by the rock music blaring from their car stereos that fill their ears and perhaps those of many others also, unwilling though they be to hear all this noise. There can hardly be any painful self-confrontation in such circumstances. In fact there can scarcely be any thinking going on at all.

In such situations, how can people ever give close attention to the important things in their lives? Or how can they even hear what other people are trying to say to them. People were extremely important for Augustine—even more so as he began to realize how God was often using some of them to get through to him. How could it have been otherwise for one who loved to be among people, who deeply appreciated friendship from his earliest youth, who found strength and comfort in those who walked and talked and joked with him, who shared his inmost thoughts, joys, and frustrations?

It is very true that God often speaks to us through others. But to really hear what they are saying, we must be listening. God shows his providence, his loving care for each of us, through ever so many people whom he sends into our lives or whom he allows us to meet as we journey through life. And since that is true, it is also true that we ourselves, especially in our role as teachers, imitating Augustine, are often called upon to be instruments of God's loving care towards others.

What better grace to pray for then than the grace of an open, humble mind for our students and indeed for all those we serve or who are close to us. God can always work wonders with those who really want to go on learning. It is those who think they already have all the answers whom not even God can help.

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