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St. Augustine's *Confessions* and the Call to be a Professor of Literature and Rhetoric

Nancy Enright

After St. Augustine's famous conversion experience in the garden, in which he "took and read" St. Paul's letter to the Romans and was transformed forever through that experience, he felt called upon to give up what he referred to as his "chair of deception" as professor of rhetoric in Milan.¹ In fact, throughout *The Confessions*, Augustine refers to the profession of teaching either literature or rhetoric in the most disparaging terms. Whether he is referring to his own experience as a student, the conduct of his masters, or his own teaching of the difficult students of Carthage, Rome, and, finally, Milan, in each instance, human pride and hypocrisy were mingled with the study of literature and rhetoric to such an extent that, to Augustine it seemed the only course left after conversion was to abandon the whole profession, and go on to a life dedicated to single-minded service of God in full-time ministry and communal living.

In light of these facts, how can *The Confessions* speak to a professor of either literature or rhetoric meaningfully about her career? Is it possible for St. Augustine to offer guidance to an English professor who views her calling as, in fact, a "vocation" in connection with the overall Christian calling to love God and to love one's neighbor?

In order to explore these questions, I recall my own personal conversion and developing sense of "vocation." At sixteen, I attended a youth-oriented concert at a local protestant church, where a Christian folk group offered the gathered young people the opportunity "to receive Christ as Savior." I, among many others, went up to the front of the room and invited Christ into my life. The date was March 5, 1972, and I found that I was different from that point on. My priorities gradually changed – not in a legalistic attempt to adhere to church laws, but as a result of now feeling somehow "free" to live a new kind of life. If I were as honest as Augustine, I could list those things I gave up, but anyone who lived through the 70s as a teenager or knows anything about them can easily imagine the kind of transformation I underwent. There were many of us converting to Jesus at that time, "Jesus freaks" as we were called, who had found in Christ the answer to all that the hippy movement of the 60s promised and all that seemed missing in the hedonism and lack of direction that characterized the 70s. Though my conversion changed me only gradually, by the time I went to college in 1975 (after a year and a half of working at various jobs and dabbling for a semester in painting), I was a deeply committed Christian, though not yet having returned to the Catholic faith.

As a college student, I found that my conversion had awakened my love of knowledge in general and of literature in particular. No longer trying to be either cool or hip, as I did in high school where cutting classes and heading to the smoking area were regular activities for me, I found that I was free to enjoy learning in a way that recovered my childhood identity as a "good student." Even math, I found, once I prayed about it, was not only do-able (I got an A!) but even somewhat enjoyable. I loved my literature class so much that I actually "fasted" a class once (not attending one time and offering the sacrifice to God) – so different from my earlier habit of ditching classes for pleasure. I liked writing and, at that time, saw myself as a potential journalist, who would write Christian articles or other more general features, with a Christian slant. I continued to attend a protestant, evangelical and Pentecostal church, though I occasionally visited the Catholic Church and Catholic charismatic prayer meetings. Eventually, in my late twenties, I would return to the Catholic Church, after some graduate study in historical theology and a longing for a more sacramental experience.

Meanwhile, in the latter part of my college career, I got a job as a writing tutor, working one-on-one with students and assisting professors in the classroom. I began to realize that I loved teaching and could see myself in the role of a professor. Two role models, wonderful teachers – Dr. Dan O’Day and Prof. Mary Scotto (both of Kean College, now University, in Union, NJ) -- inspired me with the joy possible to this profession. As I look at Augustine and his academic experience in comparison with mine, I see a large difference resulting from the fact that he converted after years of serving as an academic in his pre-converted state and dealing with almost all pagan role models. For me, the discovery of my vocation as an academic was linked to my conversion, and in fact, was made possible by that conversion. Augustine’s criticism of the professors of his day, though sadly relevant to much of the academic world today, was not applicable to my initial experience of the vocation of being a professor, neither personally nor in those professors I was lucky enough to have as role models. Therefore, I was able to develop a vision of myself as a professor of English that was not informed by the selfishness and ambition that Augustine recalls as characterizing his own career. However, as I have taught in the field for over twenty-five years, I have seen, at times, nearly all the things criticized by Augustine, in myself as well as in others. Acknowledging this reality does not negate my early idealism or my sense of my career as a vocation. Instead, Augustine’s critique of the professors of his time serves as a chastening and enlightening reminder that even very good things, like teaching young people the joy of great literature and writing about it, can be corrupted by selfish motivations and misguided practices.

What things specifically does Augustine criticize? Well, first and most important is the sin of pride. His masters and he himself, once he joined their number, indulged in a false sense of self-importance based simply on the fact that they were better educated than their peers and excelled in the field of their expertise. Augustine specifically talks about this arrogance and inverted value system in *The Confessions*. He recalls, “It is not surprising that I was swept along in folly away from you, my God, and wandered abroad, when the role models I was given were ashamed if they were caught describing their own good behavior in ungraceful or ungrammatical terms, but luxuriated in men’s praise if they could describe their vicious acts in choice words well fitted together, flowing with easy and elegant phrases” (Book One, V, section 25). There was no sense of serving others in Augustine’s goals nor, apparently, in the practice of any of his teachers or colleagues. A brilliant young man, aware of his own potential, Augustine sought to outshine others in his field and make a name for himself. “Let me say, my God,” he confesses, “something of the talent, your gift, that I dissipated on various forms of nonsense,” referring specifically to a literary contest he won involving a translation from a passage from *The Aeneid* (Book One, V, section 27). Coming from a proud but not a rich family, he was sent to school at great expense by a father who could ill afford it, and who had to remove his son from school in Carthage for a year because he could not pay the tuition (Book Two, I, section 5). As a professor himself, though he enjoyed the comradery and perhaps even the adulation of brilliant students who became close friends, he was quite impatient with the typical students of his time, an apparently unruly and hard to handle group of young men. When the students at Carthage proved difficult to manage, Augustine moved to Rome, and then – when these students disappointed him by their practice of dropping their professors before having to pay them – he moved on to Milan (Book Five, VI and VII, sections 22-23). Overall, in Augustine’s references to his interactions with his students there is almost no sense of loving service.

So, the first lesson to be learned from Augustine’s negative experience as a professor is to replace (not once, but over and over again) any tendency toward pride with an attitude of loving service. This attitude must be reinforced continually, as the years can jade one’s original infatuation with being able to teach the subjects one loved in college, leading to a sense of frustration with students who don’t seem to “get” it. As students seem younger and we get older, a distance can develop, unless we are careful always to bridge the developing age gap with an active sense of empathy and compassion. Our students are

human beings first, students second. This statement may seem to be pointing out something terribly obvious, but it is worth making, for remembering it is at the heart of keeping our interactions with our students loving and humble.

A second lesson involves another danger: we must avoid focusing on the trivial at the expense of the meaningful. Augustine would most likely consider this fault yet another aspect or symptom of pride, but he mentions it so specifically that it is worth looking at as a separate phenomenon. One example of this fault that he recounts involves the rhetoricians' function in the realm of law. In Augustine's time professors of rhetoric also served as lawyers, and many used their rhetorical competence to gain a verdict of guilty for an innocent person. He rails against those masters who, while condemning a human being in this way, unjustly and without any concern, at the same moment express great distress at having mispronounced the "h" sound in the word "human." The irony of this upside down value system horrifies the converted Augustine (Book One, V, section 29).

While Augustine's critique of this kind of extreme emphasis on the trivial at the expense of the truly important may seem irrelevant in today's academic world, I find a lesson in it that applies to anyone grading a stack of papers, feeling increasingly tired and impatient, and all too ready to write a cryptic, cutting remark, or – worse – merely slap on a low grade with no explanation, with no thought about the person receiving the remark. As a writing program administrator as well as a teacher, I try to cultivate in faculty a deep awareness of the fact that any communication with a student, whether verbal or written, should always be informed by a sense of that student's humanity and a deep respect for him or her as a person, no matter what the grade turns out to be, nor should there be grade inflation out of false kindness either. True respect for a student involves an honest appraisal of his or her work, conveyed with a deep sense that there is something more at stake than that student's performance. Though a student may forget the grade she receives in a class, she may always remember the look or voice of a teacher in conversation, or the tone of a written comment for the rest of her life. We must be careful never to sacrifice the human for what is relatively trivial.

Furthermore, Augustine warns against an emphasis on learning as opposed to wisdom, with education seen as an end to itself or merely a means to lesser, selfish and empty goals. As part of this danger, he criticizes the false following of the "famous" among fellow academics, as in the case of the orator to whom the unconverted Augustine dedicated his book *Beauty and Decorum*, hoping by doing this that the man "should notice me and my book." In words that ring true in today's world of academic scholarship, Augustine remembers that he "admired him because men praised him and not because of the qualities they were praising." He admits, "I would have glowed had he praised [my book], but his disapproval would have struck me to my heart, empty as it was..." (Book Four, V, section 23). The world of Augustine's profession was filled with status-seeking, arrogance, and hypocrisy. And speaking honestly, we have to admit that these qualities, while perhaps not dominating, are all prevalent in today's academy. Competitiveness, an empty emphasis on external credentials to the detriment of less easily defined but more important qualities (like compassion, insight, wisdom), and a false desire to impress others, all join together as temptations for an academic. A constant turning of the heart toward love, toward God and others, in humility and honesty is essential if one is to avoid these pitfalls. The contemporary English professor (and, in a sense, any academic) has much to learn from Augustine's critique of the professors of literature and rhetoric of the third and fourth centuries. In fact, his criticism of himself and his peers can help one view the teaching of either of these subjects, or possibly any academic subject, as a potential vehicle for the working of God's grace.

Along with the cautions offered through Augustine's negative experiences in the academic world, *The Confessions* also offers positive guidelines for anyone seeking to serve God and others through teaching on the college level. Clearly, for Augustine, a key consideration for any activity is motivation. What honestly motivates the professor of literature or rhetoric? This is the question we must continually ask ourselves. Augustine criticizes his own faulty motivation as an unconverted professor when he recounts an encounter with a drunken beggar: "I had no real ground for putting myself above him. Was it because I was better educated? My education gave me no joy. I was using it to flatter others, not to instruct them, just to flatter" (Book Six, III, section 9). Augustine, like his earlier masters, lacked the necessary motivation that makes any activity valuable. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux once said, pride or curiosity or desire for money does not qualify as an acceptable motive for any teacher:

There are many... who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may themselves be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonorable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love [caritas].... 2

The only appropriate motivation for the Christian teacher of any subject, and certainly of literature or rhetoric, is love. Love of God and of neighbor will enable a teacher in this field, fraught as it is with inherent spiritual dangers, to tread a path that is safe and ordained by the Creator of all beauty, including that of words. Augustine himself, though he abandoned literature and rhetoric as a profession, was deeply influenced by his study of both and used his knowledge of them to help others, as Robert J. Forman argues in *Augustine and the Making of a Christian Literature*.³ However, this skill, like all others for Augustine, has value only as it is seen to be both given and used by God. Clearly, for Augustine, the grace of God working through him is what enables him to do *anything* worth while. If *The Confessions* has anything to say to the academic of the twenty-first century, it is an encouragement toward humility and reliance upon God's grace for both insight and guidance and, ultimately, for salvation. These defining characteristics, explored deeply in *The Confessions*, are crucial for the redemption of the teaching of literature or rhetoric and can make this calling a true vocation if one pursues it in light of them.

English professors are called to the service of the word in all its beauty, as expressed in great works of literature and in rhetorical excellence. However, unless the service of the word reflects the deeper and higher service to the Word of God, Augustine would consider the teaching of literature or rhetoric a dangerous and probably foolish pursuit. Yet when the study of words is used as a means to love God and to serve him through our neighbor, then all the high beauty of language and literature can be enjoyed and explored. Words then become an expression of the dialogue that is at the heart of community. Through the study of literature, the words of others can be examined for their reflection of truth and of God, and, through the study of rhetoric, our own words can be used not to dominate but to serve and to empower others. In light of this pursuit, which only God's grace can enable, a professor of literature or rhetoric can truly fulfill his or her vocation in the spirit of St. Augustine.

For me, having moved from an early conversion, which led me through a growing academic interest and eventually to a tenured position and directorship of first year writing at Seton Hall, Augustine's experiences as an unconverted academic and, later, as a converted teacher in the church have much to offer in the way of guidance. His rejection of being a professor of rhetoric does not necessitate my doing the same, if I am to benefit from his insights, and if I am careful to follow the guiding principles that inform his Christian vocation as a priest and teacher. As believers, we are all called to serve God in one way or another. My academic career is only one part of my vocation, which also involves marriage and motherhood. In fact, I am certain that my academic vocation *must* come second to my family relation-

ships because any other approach would be, in Augustine's thought, a love that is *out of order*. Those professors in my field whom I most admire are those who have these priorities in order. Those most inclined to fall into the dangers of pride, selfishness, and wrong emphases are professors who somehow put their academic position ahead of their families, their souls, their personhood.

To keep these priorities in order, one must rely completely on God's help. Prayer, particularly at the beginning of the day, and reading at least a small portion of Scripture, are extremely helpful for me in this regard. Also, at least once a week and, if possible, more often, I attend Mass in the chapel at Seton Hall. While there, I am surrounded by other believers – some professors, more students and staff, and an occasional visitor. A priest, often someone I know, says Mass, and I witness a colleague transformed into something else in his vocation representing Christ and being a conduit of his grace on the altar. We in the congregation are similarly transformed. We are no longer faculty or students or staff. We are united as the Body of Christ, joined together in something so powerful and transformative that we cannot return to our various roles on campus the same afterward, if we allow ourselves to be truly touched by it. I admit that there are times when I rush off to my next meeting, not having fully experienced the mystery the Eucharist offers. But I never leave the celebration of Mass on campus untouched. There are days when I feel that I have nothing to offer, that my resources are depleted through my increasing busy-ness and sometimes intensely demanding family obligations, but I can always invite Christ into my heart anew, asking him to “love through me.” He will always do this for us, imperfect and unworthy as we are, and this great lesson, key to Augustine's spirituality, is essential to me in my vocation as a Christian academic.

1. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills (Penguin: New York, 2007), Book Nine, II, Section 4, 187; all further references to *The Confessions* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

2. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted by Pieper, *Scholasticism*, 89; quoted by Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1993), 60.

3. Robert J. Forman, *Augustine and the Making of a Christian Literature* (Lewiston/Qweenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellon Press, Text and Studies in Religion, #65, 1995).