



**EXPLORING THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE AUGUSTINIAN
EDUCATOR IN THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP
(LK.15:4-7)**



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Abstract

At the centre of every educational program is the teaching and learning exercise; an activity that is essentially for the transfer of relevant skills, knowledge, habits and information from the educator to the learner. For the Augustinians, it is a significant apostolic activity through which we live out our identity in service to the mission of the universal church. This paper sets out to unveil the spirituality of the Augustinian educator; it demonstrates how the parable of the lost sheep in Lk.15:4-7 is a vital resource for a deeper reflection on the primacy of love that should guide the pedagogical services of the Augustinian educator. It challenges the educator to situate oneself in the reality that is ours today to address effectively the chief concerns of the modern learner.

Keywords: Augustinian, Educator, Pedagogy, Discipline, Spirituality, Augustine

Introduction

Education is integral to the mission of the Catholic Church. It is a noble platform to proclaim the good news of Christ and to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth. In the *Gravissimum educationis*, the fathers of the 2nd Vatican Council observed that education, as the formation of the human person is a universal right; “an inalienable right that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex and the culture and tradition of their country, and also in harmony with their fraternal association with the peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth”¹. As a veritable platform for the propagation of the faith, Pope John Paul II observed the “Catholic Education aims not only to communicate facts but to also transmit a coherent, comprehensive vision of life, with the conviction that the truths contained in that vision liberates students in the most profound meaning of freedom”.

The Augustinian order has played and continues to play significant roles by contributing tremendously to fulfilling this important missionary activity through an educational apostolate that is essentially driven by the love of God and neighbour. To effectively live out this

¹Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1

call, Augustinian pedagogy is weaved with a sense that places the human person at the centre of the apostolate as a seed that is capable of germinating and growing into something significant. St. Augustine observed that God would like to sow in every soul the seeds of intelligence and wisdom², thus challenging the Augustinian educators to serve as a firm but healthy channel motivated by God to unveil the enormous potential hidden in every learner that seeks to pass through the educational formation process in our facility.

A thorough reflection on the contemporary world enjoins us to situate ourselves in a reality that is ours and to realize the pedagogical approach that is possible through the divine call to announce the gospel to all peoples in the modern world. Reflecting on the premium concern of the modern student, this paper hopes to advance key ideas of the spirituality of Augustinian pedagogical practice, inspired by the parable of the lost sheep in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The Vocation to Teach

Teaching is a vocation that occupies a vital position in education and in the life and operations of every school or college. Before his conversion, St Augustine was a teacher who engaged himself in teaching as a profession. In his confessions, he revealed that

²Augustine, *Sermon*. 117, 11

teaching was his livelihood but was overcome by his desire for gain³. After his conversion, St. Augustine's practically-inspired reflections taught that teaching and learning should be ordered to love – without compromising the observance of both the tough love and the soft love; and this should begin in the classroom. Teaching is therefore a call, a function that is driven by love; the unconditional desire to lay down one's life and comfort so as to ensure that each learner in the classroom receives an honest direction for his/her academic success appropriately blended for a meaningful and flourishing life in the future. While addressing participants at the plenary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Pope Francis noted that Catholic Education is a peculiar kind of movement, with characteristics that make it a dynamism of growth, oriented to the full development of the person in their individual and social dimension⁴. This is a delicate activity that is required of educators inspired by the bountiful wellspring of St Augustine. They ought to be capable of resetting the pedagogical itineraries such that they effectively help towards a growth in solidarity, responsibility and care-based compassion⁵.

The parable of the lost sheep is a scriptural context that captures the spirituality of a Catholic Augustinian

³St Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, 2

⁴Pope Francis, *The power of Education for a more fraternal humanity*, p.1

⁵Ibid, Pg.1

educator, revealing the qualities that signal the role of Christ in Augustinian Pedagogical practice. It challenges the individual educator to take up and nurture the desire to, at all times, pursue the success of every child in his/her classroom as a pastoral activity without leaving/neglecting even the lowest performing student in the classroom. Each student, irrespective of their status and background should be tutored with love, well enough to cause a transformative transition from an at-risk position to the academic success level. This principle reveals the fundamental character of the Catholic educator as one who is adopting an approach that concretely propagates the gospel of Christ as one who loves his own to the end (Jn. 13:1).

Augustine the Teacher

Right from the early days of his post university period, Augustine practiced as a professional teacher up until the year of his conversion. At Thagaste, he taught rhetoric in a school he established by himself and among his students was Alypius who in turn became a great friend of Augustine and a companion of his throughout his life. Augustine embraced the vocation to teach with a very sublime mission to give his best and to see his learners using their knowledge not only to save the innocent but to also save the lives of those who were guilty. From Thagaste, Augustine moved to Carthage and Rome where he taught grammar and rhetoric. He taught for seven years in Carthage during which he wrote his first book, *Beauty and proportion*

(De Pulchro et apto). Augustine taught in a world that was charged with competition and challenged by certain disciplinary issues among students at the time. While in Carthage, so many factors influenced him to live Carthage for Rome, which appeared to be due to his desire for a greener pasture and a conducive working atmosphere that is befitting a teacher. Arriving in Rome in 383.AD, Augustine continued his professional practice as a teacher and proprietor by establishing another school of Rhetoric where he taught literature and public speaking. It was there that his reputation as a teacher of rhetoric led to his appointment to an important position as a teacher of rhetoric in the city of Milan with the approval of the mayor of Rome, Symmachus.

For Augustine, to be a teacher ought to be simply inspired by love and sustained by love because the process of humanization - the core and vital duty of the educator, operates through love - the most profound power of human nature. This explains why in his response to the questions of Dulcitius, Augustine admonished educators and learners when he said: 'The love of knowledge and truth should invite us to continue learning; the love of others should compel us to teach'. This love rests not on asceticism or methods of religious observance, not on meditation or ritual practice of the teacher, instead it rests on every

6 St. Augustine, *Answers to the eight questions of Dulcitius*, 3

teacher's relationship with the learner in the classroom guided in the ways of divine love, a gift that should be directed towards perfecting our capacity to love God and neighbour. It was on account of this that he enjoined all educators to “imitate the good, bear with the evil, love all” in order to be good teachers⁷. By so doing, the teacher is responding to the call and cooperating with the grace to bear fruit, fruit that will last (Jn. 15:16).

Augustine was so passionate about his profession as a teacher that he remained in some way, in the field of education throughout his life as revealed through his writings in *De Magistro*, *De Catechizandis Rudibus* and *De Doctrina Christiana*. Cardinal Henry Newman described him as “the teacher who has formed the intellect of Christian Europe” because of the prominent place he occupies among the Church fathers, having completed the doctrinal works and handing it over to the schools of Christendom⁸.

The Scriptural Foundation

The parable of the lost sheep in LK 15:4-7, reveals that Jesus is the shepherd of the 100 sheep and not just for the 99. He is the good shepherd, not just for the strong and intelligent alone, or that of the weak alone, but he is

⁷ Cf. <https://hyattractions.wordpress.com/2016/08/16/discuss-the-contributions-of-st-augustine-to-education/>.

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (New York: Longmans, 1908), p. 264

for all because it his ultimate purpose to ensure; “that all may have life and have it to the full”. (Jn. 10:10). The divine sheepfold is composed of the lost sheep and the sheep within the confines of the sheepfold. While acknowledging this reality, Jesus did not see anyone or any type as a failure. Instead, gazing through all of them he saw great potential, strength and a bright future in every sheep that belongs to him. To demonstrate that he saw the potential in them, he went out of his way in search of those outside the fold to bring them back to the fold where the achievement of their potential is assured. Therefore, as the Good Teacher he goes out in search of the lost to bring them back into the fold so as to guarantee their chances for salvation – in keeping to the will of the father that I shall lose none of all that he has given to me but raise them up on the last day (Jn.6:39).

The spirituality of Augustinian pedagogy considers that the art of teaching is ultimately a participation in the divine; in all their ramifications, they are simply sacred activities containing within themselves the seed of transcendence⁹. According to Augustine's view on teaching, the art of teaching is a spiritual discipline that imposes an ethical responsibility on the individual, on behalf of Christ, to train and serve others for the purpose of Christian formation¹⁰. Thus at the core of this spirituality is Augustine's submission that the chief

⁹Joseph Kelly, *The Theological foundations for Augustinian education* (Merrimack College) p. 2

end of teaching and learning is to grow in one's love towards God since the commandment to love God is the central commandment that must permeate all plans and activities of everyone created in the image and likeness of God. It is therefore not theologically out of place that while it remains true and noble that Augustinian pedagogy is ordered on the primacy of love, each particular type or category of learner requires that "although we owe the same love to all, we should not treat all with the same remedy. Because for its part, this very love is in pain giving birth to some (Cf. Gal.4:19), makes itself weak with others (cf. 1 Cor. 9:22), devotes itself to edifying some (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1), greatly fears giving offence to others; bends down to some, raises itself before others. To some this love is gentle, to others stern, to no one hostile, to everyone a mother"¹¹.

Towards an Application

The pedagogical spirituality of the Augustinian educator places a premium on the educator to pay adequate attention to the whole student population in the classroom. Most importantly too, it encourages educators to also pay special attention to students who exhibit certain weakness, learning disabilities or issues, either as slow learners, at risk of attrition or manifesting active resistance to learning. For there is a whole world

¹⁰ Campbell Jr, R. P, *Ever Learning, Ever Loving: Augustine on Teaching as Ministry*. (Eleutheria), p.18

¹¹ Raymond Canning, *Teaching and learning: An Augustinian perspective*. p.8

of holy angels or noble flock that are as much as ninety-nine, yet God sent his Son to seek and save the few that was lost (Lk. 19:10). Augustine understands that the structure of every classroom is composed of this reality; different categories of students with different nuances and peculiarities are inevitable in a normal classroom. Hence he taught that a normal classroom is not homogenous in nature, rather it is mixture of “some learners who are ready and eager to learn with other learners who need rousing to learn¹²”. In his response to the Deacon Deogratias on the question of instructing beginners in the faith (*De Catechizandis rudibus*), Augustine admonished teachers to adapt their teaching to the peculiarities evident in their students whom he distinguished into three kinds: the uneducated, moderately educated, and well educated¹³. In all these three peculiarities, teaching is to be done using an approach or method that Augustine called the restrained style. This is in contrast to the directive pedagogy which would foster passivity and dependence while frustrating the critical thinking abilities of the student¹⁴. It suffices to say that the restrained style prescribes that the teacher should by all possible means, avoid overloading the students with too much materials, but stay on one theme at a time, to reveal to the student what is hidden from him/her, to solve difficulties and to anticipate other questions that

¹² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, IV, 4.6.

¹³ Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*

¹⁴ Miguel Orcasitas, *The Augustinian School and the New Evangelization* , pg. 2

may arise, all of which must be to ignite the release of the hidden potential of the student.

Exploring the Modern Reality

This spirituality in modern times conveys a sense that students can be categorized as High performers (HP) Average Performers (AP) or Low performers (LP). All these categories of persons constitute the entire flock entrusted to the shepherd who in this case is the modern day educator; a growing Augustinian insight that reveals Augustine's sensitivity to the different kinds of audience in the pedagogical space urging us to gear our instructions to the polished and the cultured, on the one hand and those with a run-of-the-mill education in grammar and rhetoric on the other (8,12-9,13). With this, Augustine offers not a recipe or a set of instructions of what to do, but an approach; a unique approach that involves being at the service of others because it relates to what it means to be human. In this practice the students are kept on track toward their goal (which is academic success) through a mechanism that is used to explain the reality of the success level and academic health of the student with concrete data, and in the same way, the blind spots of the subject teacher. The spirituality of the Augustinian educator thus calls on the educator to accompany the student along the journey, providing him/her the requisite assistance in order to enable the student to attain a holistic academic success. Just as a woman in labour needs the help of a midwife to give birth to her child

successfully, so does a student need the stimulus and assistance of an educator to discover the strength, potentials and truth within him or her. This explains why Augustine upheld that the distinct character of an educator is to be a traveling companion and fellow seeker of the student (cf. Sermon 292,1; Cat. Rud. X, 14; 12,17).

In addition, the role of the educator is not that of distributing information, but formation in understanding and wisdom; not the transmission of ideas as givens but the offer and promotion of ideals as values and attitudes¹⁵. Simply put, it is the role of the educator to form rather than to inform the student, and this formation can be achieved with the willing cooperation of the student. His effort must be focused on facilitating the process of discovering the passage of the light of truth so as to enable the student to discover the truth and have his soul enlightened by the truth.

Discipline in Augustinian Pedagogy

Discipline is at the centre of Augustinian pedagogical practice. Augustine observed that God loves discipline; it is perverse and misguided innocence that accepts the shortcomings of those being educated¹⁶. Augustine taught in a society that was challenged by disciplinary issues; in Carthage, the student world was unruly, in Rome the students were better behaved and calmer but were somewhat dubious, as they always

¹⁵Bardon & Morahan, *Education; An Augustinian Approach*

disappeared whenever it is time to pay their fees¹⁷. As a father and teacher, Augustine provoked and stimulated the capacity for initiative in his son Adeodatus instead of satisfying his curiosity. While respecting his son's originality, Augustine subjected him to the discipline of good order¹⁸. Sadly, however, the concerns around discipline constitute one of the greatest challenges facing educators today. The display of unprofessional approaches and practices by some educators and the consequent excessive hostilities towards the educators and Catholic schools by some parents today has brought about the need for a re-examination of the outcome and the re-evaluation of our practices. Educators may have crossed the red line by adopting excessive and perhaps wicked practices as disciplinary measures on the learners, but parents' inordinate interference on punishment of learners and open confrontation on educators and school authorities have only succeeded in brewing lack of discipline to a frightening level that seems like a bone in the throat.

The place of Authority in education should not be undermined, as Augustine observed; authority is like a door to education¹⁹ and when we decide to learn something, often what stimulates us is the authority and enthusiasm of those who teach the subject.²⁰

¹⁶Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 50*, 24,

¹⁷Bardon & Morahan, *Education, an Augustinian Approach*, p.8-9

¹⁸Ibid, p. 10

Therefore, all learning in the Augustinian academy is guided by authority and reason²¹. The disciplinary role of the Augustinian educator therefore rests on his ability to do the following:

1. **Teach what is right:** Discipline in the school environment and classroom is a vital factor that helps students to stay focused on the academic programs as it enables a smooth and meaningful academic engagement for the benefit of everyone. One of the reasons why parents make the choice of Catholic schools for their children is discipline. The Augustinian educator therefore must not fail to offer to the society the values and features of the Augustinian academy notable by ensuring that the child is taught what is right and noble. This requires the ability to discern, recognize and distinguish the truth from error and be ready to defend it since it is not enough to just proclaim the truth²². This disciplinary element is very important because among its numerous benefits, it helps to build the foundation of the students' success and prepares them for life after school; it helps students to achieve good performance in both academic and non-academic dimensions and it is responsible for maintaining orderliness within

¹⁹Augustine, *Order*, 2, 26.

²⁰Augustine, *Trinity*, 10, 1

²¹Augustine, *Order*, 2, 9

²²Campbell Jr, R. P, p. 24

the system.

2. **Refute what is wrong:** while it is the overriding duty of the Augustinian educator to lead students towards the true assessment of what is right, the educator must also be on a perpetual warfare against the wrong teachings. Note that the skillful rhetoric and dialectics that are used to promote the truth can also be used to promote falsehood. Falsehood entangles one in errors. Hence those who give eloquent expression to falsehood are more to be pitied than those who give it a deformed expression.²³ With the primacy of love set before you as a measuring standard, go on and practice the noble culture of discipline that refutes the wrong and falsehood so that the innocent person may not be taught the wrong thing or lured into falsehood²⁴.
3. **Abhor/Challenge bad behaviours:** In our modern world that shows itself to be oblivious of the questions of meaning and value, the need for discipline cannot be underestimated. With discipline, moulding and learning the correct or right behavior is inevitable, else they will

²³George Howie, *St Augustine on Education*, (Henry Regnery Company, Chicago), p. 340

²⁴Ibid,

continue with the bad behavior which may escalate overtime. Augustine admonished parents, and by extension the schools and educators that “at a time when there is so much variation in moral standards and appalling decadence, keep strict control over your homes...in such a way that you will give a good account of those under you²⁵”. Abhorring bad behavior is a form of discipline that can come in the form of punishment. Does God discipline his own? Scripture says that “God disciplines those whom he loves and he punishes each one he accepts as his child”. God therefore disciplines everyone just as he disciplined His only Son who is consubstantial with the father; the Word through whom all things were made. Thus, if God punishes His only Son who is without sin, does he then leave unpunished an adopted son (Eph. 1:5) who is burdened with sin?

Punishment is a vital approach when it is meted out to correct a bad behavior and in a commensurate proportion with the enormity of the bad behavior. It is the responsibility of educators to guard against excesses and abuses in meting out punishments and against shortcomings in our readiness to pardon. Since virtue of punishment is simply to correct not to condemn, the educator is encouraged to refrain from punishment if it is not for the sake of correction and

²⁵Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 50*, 24

improvement, so as to avoid all indulgences that may lead to worsening behavior²⁶. Acknowledging that there is a mercy that chastises, Augustine observed that it is cruel to leave a child that obstinately continues to play near the nest of vipers but it is merciful not allowing him to continue to do so even if you have to resort to punishment; for it is better to love with severity than to deceive gently²⁷.

4. Affirm/Support good behavior: Positive behavior support is at the centre of teaching and learning in an Augustinian academy. This is important because it impacts significantly on the learners as it contributes to enhancing their self-esteem boost their confidence and encourages good character development among learners. Affirming good behavior also reduces toxic/bad energy in the learning environment and equips learners with life skills beyond the classroom. This can be carried out in different ways which includes but is not limited to giving thumbs up, a smile, an award or even words of affirmation in public and in person. The Augustinian educational values support this not to please anyone or to play to the gallery but guided by the Love that seeks to control negative influences²⁸. Besides, when you love says St Augustine, it is you who profit by it. It will make a deposit for you where it cannot get lost²⁹.

²⁶Augustine, *Order*, 2, 8, 25

²⁷Augustine, *Letter* 93, 2, 4

It is pertinent to note that discipline rightly administered leaves evidence that he who is being disciplined is loved. Out of his unwavering love, God rebukes but also encourages, he brings fear but also brings consolation, he strikes and he also heals. Inspired by the principle of divine love, educators are to administer discipline with a love that is an enemy to no one, and a mother to all³⁰.

Conclusion

The key ingredient in every learner's education and achievement is the proficient educator, and the success of a proficient educator is achieved when the learners are all able to gain understanding of the knowledge in theory and apply them in their concrete experiences. Inspired by this sentiment, educators must summon the courage to put the human person at the centre of their pedagogical practices; motivated by the love for God and neighbor, they should approach this call as a pastoral activity to seek and save the learners at risk. Love is an indispensable factor for having been initiated by love, "our instruction is completed by love" (*Instructio amore perficitur*)³¹.

²⁸Eze, Kenneth, *The Role of Augustinian educational values as elements of Social Transformation in the Church's mission of evangelization in Africa*. p.8

²⁹Augustine, *Sermon 34*, 8.

³⁰Augustine, *Catechizandus Rudibus*, 15, 23.

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³¹George Howie, *St Augustine on Education*, (Henry Regnery Company, Chicago), p. 16.

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