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Augustine on Heart and Life

Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

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5. Vocation, Discernment, and the Human Heart in Augustine

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Abstract

Augustine’s theological insights into the human heart provide a resource for vocational discernment, which is a response to the calling of God through the integration of one’s unique talents, desires, limitations, and circumstances. In the period between 387 and 391 CE – Augustine’s baptism and his ordination to the priesthood – Augustine experienced serious losses of career, home, beloved family members, and even his ideal of a good life. Yet, in his own uncertainty he remained open to a radical change in vocation, leading to his ordination by the church at Hippo. In his theology and preaching, Augustine exhorted his audience to turn inward to the mystery of the human heart to find God. This interior journey is guided by participation in liturgical and community practices that heal the heart’s unruly affections and deepen love for God and neighbor. With this formation in charity, one can discern freely about matters of choice: whether or not to marry, to keep or give up wealth, or to change one’s social, religious, economic, or political practices. Augustine’s insights shed light on

contemporary vocational discernment programs at universities regarding love, the value of unknowing, the importance of community, and the nature of freedom.

Keywords: discernment, vocation, heart, love, charity, freedom, Ignatius, Jesuit, Ignatian

Introduction

In fall 2015, a colleague came to my office. He was seeking to acquaint himself more deeply with the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola in order to better adapt his classes to Regis University's Jesuit mission. Knowing of my work in Augustinian studies, he remarked, "Augustine and Ignatius are so different!" While such an evaluation is commonplace and understandable – it dates back at least to the late 16th century *de auxiliis* controversy between Jesuits and Dominicans over the nature of grace – it gave me pause. As I reflected on my longstanding interest in Augustine as well as my interest in Ignatian spirituality, I realized that the same dynamics drew me to both: each identifies affective experience as a main locus in finding God in one's own life, while also articulating how reason might temper and guide the interpretation of affective experiences. Their integration of heart and head offers a depth of spiritual guidance and corrects misleading impulses while honoring distinctive human affective ways of knowing.

William Harmless's Ignatian spirituality and Augustinian scholarship bridge these two great spiritual figures. Harmless was a remarkable and generous Augustinian scholar – insightful, rigorous, and versatile in his grasp of Augustine's thought. In particular, Harmless's final writings illuminate Augustine's insights on the heart, when healed and ordered rightly, as the path to God. Harmless beautifully describes the great possibilities and difficulties presented by the human heart and why, for Augustine, the spiritual journey to God must involve an interior journey shaped by both affectivity and reason.

Inspired by Harmless's work, I will explore in this article Augustinian insights into the human heart as a resource for discernment in the ongoing life of Christian discipleship. My interest lies less in the initial experience of conversion and more in the typically slow work of discerning how best to love God and neighbor over the unfolding course of one's life as a response to the call to discipleship received in baptism. In this context, the goal of discernment is vocation, which is a way of life responding to the call of God through integrating one's unique talents, desires, and circumstances. Often this will involve major decisions about career, marriage, or religious vows. Yet, a theological understanding of vocational discernment will also integrate everyday decisions about how to live faithfully with regard to such matters as money, citizenship, spirituality, leisure, and community engagement. I am also keenly interested in how such insights might enrich current vocational discernment projects on college campuses. Offering vocational discernment is one of the best ways that religiously-affiliated colleges can help their graduates to lead lives of faith and purpose, and also to engage a world in need of healing and transformation. As the late Jesuit Dean Brackley argued, such higher education "should help students discover their vocation in life – above all, their vocation to love and serve" (2006). To explore these themes, I will turn first to Augustine's own life; second, to the theological framework operative in his preaching; and finally, to parallels between Augustine's insights and contemporary literature on vocational discernment.

Vocational Change in Augustine's life

The period between Augustine's baptism (spring 387 CE) and his ordination as bishop (395) was marked by enormous changes: his career, his geographic home, and the deaths of his mother and son. These changes, which involved both deep loss and unanticipated opportunities, illustrate Augustine's attempts to live into an uncertain future after his conversion. In one of the most compelling chapters of his biography of Augustine, Peter Brown explores Augustine's sense of a "lost future," tracing Augustine's changing ideal of a good human life (139-50). Amid his multiple vocational changes, from rhetor to "*servus Dei*" to priest to bishop, Augustine began to question, not the value of pursuing wisdom, but rather the possibility of truly achieving wisdom in this life (Brown: 141). In other words, as his outer circumstances and work changed, his interior vision of what it means to live well also changed. Replacing his ideals of perfection in wisdom, Augustine instead learned to accept the imperfection and incompleteness of human virtue in this life (Brown: 150). Brown describes the change *within* Augustine over this ten-year period: "What begins, perhaps, as the dangerous disillusionment of a perfectionist, emerges in the *Confessions* as a new view of man, a *reassessment of his potentialities*, an exciting and profound discovery of the true sources of his motivation" (141, emphasis added). While the loss of a particular vision for one's life can be a painful process, Brown highlights the concomitant excitement of new discovery: of potential, of motivation, of desire for something better. As Brown quotes Augustine, "It is yearning that makes the heart deep" (150 n. 2; Augustine's *desiderium sinus cordis*, in *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 40.10). What is it about this particular kind of moment – losing a future and experiencing deep, unfulfilled yearning – that, while seemingly an exercise in frustration, actually provides the occasion for profound growth and transformation?

In one of Augustine's later sermons, he describes this period of external and internal change while looking back on his fateful trip to Hippo in 391. Preaching to his congregation in late 425 or early 426 (*S.* 355; Hill: 171, n.1), he describes his mindset at that time: "I . . . came to this city as a young man; many of you know that. I was looking for a place to establish a monastery and live there with my brothers. I had in fact left behind all worldly hopes, and *I did not wish to be what I could have been; nor, however, was I seeking to be what I am now*" (*S.* 355.2; Hill: 166, emphasis added). By his own account, Augustine was in a liminal space: having closed the door on his rhetorical career, he had adapted his communal philosophical style of life to a monastic community, but he had not yet taken up ordained ministry. As Harmless describes Augustine's resignation as city orator in Milan in 386, so one could also say of Augustine's inadvertent path to ordination in 391: as he turned his back on a door that had closed behind him, he encountered "an ending that was a beginning, a change of career, a change of venue, a change of heart" (23). While Augustine may not have been looking for an open door during his early trip to Hippo, he nevertheless found one after receiving a rather firm nudge through that doorway from the church there. As Augustine describes the community's pressure on him to be ordained, he is clear that the initiative did not come from him: "I was caught, I was made a priest, and by this grade I eventually came to the episcopate" (*S.* 355.2; Hill: 166). Nonetheless, he allowed the needs of the community to alter his vision for his future, and Augustine's subsequent pastoral ministry ultimately provided him and others with greater scriptural, sacramental, and liturgical pathways for spiritual growth.

Augustine's life at this time shows a remarkable amount of loss – resigning his rhetorical post in Milan due to declining health, moving back to his homeland notably less successful than a few years earlier, ending a 14-year relationship with the mother of his son, and suffering the deaths of his mother, Monica, and son, Adeodatus. Yet, amid these losses he also found new, unsought possibilities, undergirded by the primacy and mystery of grace. Notably, Augustine did not have a clear vision of his future at this time. Rather, he remained open to discerning the movements of grace amid loss, grief, and even unwanted intrusion. And just as notably, Augustine faced not only personal turbulence but also societal, political, and ecclesial upheaval throughout the rest of his life: from the Donatist controversy to the sack of Rome in 410, from the Pelagian controversy to the Vandal invasion of North Africa at the end of his life in 430. As Kevin Coyle noted, Augustine's life was “spent entirely in a society lurching drunkenly from one disaster to the next” (18). If Augustine found that openness to grace amid great loss helpful in his path to ordained ministry, no less would it benefit him in dealing with one controversy after another over the last 39 years of his life.

Augustine's Theology and Preaching

Given Augustine's own experience of openness to a new vocation amid loss and change, it is worth considering how Augustine offered guidance to others in discerning their own callings – that is, their responses to Christ's call to discipleship – in his theological writings and sermons to popular audiences. For Augustine, discernment of how best to live out one's faith in God involves a turn inward to the mystery of the human heart.

In the introduction to the book that he was writing at the time of his death, Harmless pinpoints the unknown landscape of the human heart as a “meta-theme” in Augustine's works (3). He argues that for Augustine, “the mystery of who we are and who God is . . . comes into view only at history's end” (5). And yet, Harmless claims, “the mystery of the human heart is one doorway into the mystery of God” (5), and a mystery that can “define how we see ourselves and our world” (7). Thus, exploring the mystery of the human heart – its complex and often contradictory nature, marked by unruly affections and competing desires – presents the way to a fuller life in God.

However, this exploration of the human heart is a delicate business, providing pathways not only to divine encounter but also to human self-deception. Augustine claims that “the primary cause of error is that the human person himself is unknown to himself” (*Ord.* 1.1.3; translated in Harmless: 26). Compounding this lack of self-understanding is the profound damage caused by sin and the subsequent need for healing, a process that for Augustine occupies the whole of the Christian life and is completed only eschatologically (Kolbet: 135). Such healing occurs through various means – receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, participating in the sacraments and liturgy, and especially hearing the words of scripture (Kolbet: 186ff.). As Paul Kolbet has argued, in his sermons Augustine exhorts his audience to join him in a “reflective process” of examining their emotions, motivations, thoughts, and behavior (182) in order to provide both guidance and critical skills for healing the human affections. Kolbet says, “Through the regular liturgical discipline, sacramental ‘words’ are taken up again and again as an *ongoing training of perception* that shapes actions as it re-awakens and re-orders love. This is a therapeutic process that begins to heal the affections by elevating the soul's occluded vision and *persuading it gradually to move toward integration* in a stable love” (193; emphasis added).

Healing, in this consideration, relates specifically to love and its role in re-ordering the disordered affections (*affectus* in Harmless: 6). Emotion and desire play a primary role because of their power to draw one close to God or to push one away from God. This works with both positive and negative emotions. For Augustine, fear and pain have the potential to reveal finitude and weakness. They expose our illusions of self-reliance, and thereby enhance our receptivity to grace (Kolbet: 196). But as useful as they can be, negative emotions are not sufficient. Instead, these interior explorations need to be complemented by growth in love. In *Sermon* 350A, delivered in 399 CE, Augustine tells his audience that charity, as it grows, makes the soul secure and drives out fear (*S.* 350A.2). Further, in *Sermon* 346B from 410, Augustine exhorts his congregation to encourage each other on their journey, in which steps of progress are made through loving God and loving one's neighbor (*S.* 346B.2). Thus, to travel through life is to love God and neighbor – at least, to make progress toward one's destination, which is God. Augustine urges his audience on this “highway” to “run along it with love and charity,” and thereby to help each other become strong and courageous in the face of adversity (*S.* 346B.4; Hill: 82). Thus, the affections are important for Christians' understanding of who they are, where they want to go, and how to get there. But they also need the security and integration that come from mutual love, which spurs people on to love all the more.

What does this framework of healing love have to do with discernment amid the challenges of daily life after baptism? Surely Augustine had a remarkable degree of social mobility in his life. He could choose to change with remarkable ease, parental pressure notwithstanding, his career, his geographic location, his relationships, and his religious affiliation. Just as surely, many of the people listening to his sermons in Hippo would not have as much freedom to make choices about education, paid work, marriage and childbearing, or where to live. Yet even within their more limited parameters, how might they make decisions about how to respond to the call of discipleship, that is, the call to love God and neighbor to the best of their talents, desires, circumstances, and resources?

In a sermon from December 399, Augustine responds to anxious questions about the journey of discipleship: Does it require one to refuse marriage? to change eating and drinking patterns? to give up wealth or refrain from buying and selling? (*Sermon* 346A.4). These are deeply vocational questions about how to live daily in a way that is responsive to the calling of God, especially for those with limited social mobility. Augustine urges, before considering how to answer these questions, that people first enter the “ark” of the church for safe travel amid life's storms (*S.* 346A.6). He further praises acts of humility, generosity, and sharing; they prevent panic and worries of insecurity at the last day (*S.* 346A.6). In other words, formation in charity and community provides the secure context for discerning freely about matters of choice: how to decide whether to marry; how to use resources well; how to engage economic, social and political structures; and how to practice particular spiritual disciplines. Vocation here may not involve one's career; but the daily stuff of life – eating and drinking, buying and selling, marrying or not marrying – is the means for traveling the journey of discipleship step by step by asking how to love God and neighbor amid one's particular relationships, resources, and insights into community needs. For Augustine, formation in charity is the means and the goal of the Christian life.

Vocational Discernment in Higher Education Today

What insights can be gleaned from Augustine for vocational discernment today? How might we understand our own affectivity and liminality – our deep desires and our unknown futures – as doorways for encountering divine mystery? A university setting is one fitting place to explore these questions. Students, staff, faculty, and administrators alike know all too well how we change, losing youthful visions of what we had expected to become while not yet confident of what we will be. As with Augustine’s experience at school in Carthage (see *Confessions*, Book 3), higher education regularly fosters opportunities for thinking about the deepest desires for our lives.

I teach several courses on the theology of vocation, and currently direct a grant project that studies how to use Ignatian practices of discernment in student advising and mentoring. In reading contemporary literature on vocation and Ignatian discernment, I am drawn repeatedly to key insights from Augustine’s life and work.

First, discernment of vocation in a Christian context begins and ends with love. Dean Brackley states that “faith and reason point to a deeper human calling that we all share – namely, to spend ourselves in love” (2006). But such love does not always come easily, primarily due to our attachments to comfort, wealth, and status. Brackley argues that living well requires developing the interior “freedom to choose, habitually, the most loving thing” (2004: 11), especially among competing desires for prestige or wealth or security. Developing this freedom requires openness to whichever path leads to deepening one’s love for God. For if we prefer ease or wealth or a good reputation more than loving God among the poor, for example, we are not truly free to love.

Could there be a more Augustinian view? The bishop of Hippo describes his anthropology rooted in love in Book 1 of *Teaching Christianity (De doctrina christiana)*, arguing that human beings are created to love, or enjoy, God for God’s own sake (1.5.5), and to love others in God (1.34.37). All other things are to be used properly to build up love for God and love for others in God. To enjoy money or comfort or anything at all apart from the calling to love God and neighbor is to divide and distort love. Further, Augustine claims that the whole purpose of understanding the scriptures is to build up the dual love of God and neighbor (1.36.40). Scriptural interpretations that lead away from this dual love do not understand the scriptures (1.36.40).

Second, discernment involves unknowing as well as knowing, and often there is more to be learned in the former. Parker Palmer’s book on vocation, *Let Your Life Speak*, presents the idea of “way closing” as crucial for discernment. Palmer argues that while people hope for paths that open clearly before them as a sign of what they should do, we can actually learn as much from a way being closed, as when one loses a job, fails to get into a program, or undergoes the end of a relationship (39). These experiences are common, especially in the lives of young adults. All these experiences are painful, and yet they can be the most liberating, transformative moments in our own discernment. They may reveal what our abilities are – by revealing what they are not – and also may reveal where to find, to use the Ignatian terms, deep consolation or deep desolation. When Augustine came to Hippo in 391, he knew what he did not want to be, but did not know yet what he would become or even *desired* to become.

That moment of calling, and his receptivity to it, came only after experiencing much loss during the previous five years.

Third, community matters. Indeed, Augustine's path to priesthood and episcopacy opened only after insistent calling by the community. Augustine went to Hippo seeking to persuade someone to join his monastic community, but instead encountered a larger community's claim on him. If today vocational discernment is not to be merely individual, but rooted in and for community, community calling and awareness of community needs are necessary. In 2000, the Jesuit Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach asked American Jesuit university faculty to consider the question, "Where and with whom is my heart?" (13). This is not only a suggestion to find inspiration, but a question of claim. What communities have a claim on my heart? Who reveals to me my own desires and gifts? Where am I bound to serve? For Augustine, his heart was ultimately with the church at Hippo, and that changed his entire life.

Along with community, practices matter. Augustine stresses over and over that a life of discipleship will have difficulties. Endurance requires mutual support, shared liturgical and sacramental life, and examination of one's life with the guidance of a scriptural interpreter/preacher. No doubt such practices were sustaining for him amid the more mundane aspects of his work as bishop, such as resolving community disputes. Today, when it is easy to identify spirituality and discernment with individual experience, it is worth identifying the kinds of practices and disciplines that provide frequent opportunities for reflection, openness, and critical inquiry. For example, the College of the Holy Cross, using a grant from the Lilly Endowment that funded the Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation, developed a vocational discernment program called "Cultivating Habits of Discernment." This program yielded the insight that vocational discernment emerges from repeated opportunities woven into the fabric of college experience, from first-year orientation to a senior showcase for scholarship and creative work. If we want to create a culture of discernment, we need to offer a range of intellectual and spiritual practices that support disciplined reflection.

Fourth, we may not be as free as we think we are. As the saying goes, "freedom isn't free," although I do not use this expression in the way that people often do. What I mean is that freedom, in an Ignatian sense, requires both grace and hard spiritual work. For Augustine, we are unfree to the extent that our disordered affections keep us from loving God and loving others in God, and are all the more unfree when we do not even realize the hold of these affections on us. Becoming free to love requires the gradual healing of grace, accompanied by spiritual growth, over a lifetime. It is helpful, then, to realize the ways in which our choices are influenced by limited vision and fears as much as by desires and hopes. The Jesuit David Fleming paraphrases the "principle and foundation" of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* in this way:

We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me (23).

By cultivating openness to deeper paths to God, we can grow in freedom to resist our attachments and to make, habitually, more loving choices.

Finally, there is no greater evidence for the value of discernment than a life well-lived. I find a fitting tribute in the words of Creighton Jesuit Greg O'Meara, who reflected on what Bill Harmless meant to him:

I am convinced that God placed him in each of our lives to show us how to be heart whole and heart free in this world. Bill ran the race well and found his treasure, which filled him with joy. Perhaps the lacuna left by his passing will help us recall the treasure he was, as we continue our journey, accompanied by Bill, to the kingdom of heaven.

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