

JOURNEYING TOWARDS THE HEART IN THE SPIRIT OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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Abstract: Theology often takes the form of analysis, proofs and thematisations. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* remind us that this need not always be so. It teaches us that reflections on our feelings and life are sacred ways to communicate with God. It is strange that theologians at times seem to avoid the personal world of sharing in favour of ontological proofs and judgments. We seem to be too interested in theory rather than the spiritual and biblical journey towards faith, hope and love. In this article I want to try to make theology more accessible, and therefore seek to find resonance in the heart. In this regard, St. Augustine’s *Confessions* are exemplary as they teach us that theology can be both analytical and pastoral. Hence, my aim is to show that theology can open up a style of thinking that leads to personal growth and the integration of faith. Following St. Augustine’s example, I will set out to create a space and time for the affectivity of the heart to have a voice.

Augustine’s *Confessions* demonstrates the resignation, humility and passivity of a heart participating in the mysteries of the faith. Giving meaning to his experience of glimpsing the “eternal light”, he anguishes over those who cannot see it.¹ Whilst Augustine is fretting over those whose hearts have not been pierced with divine love,² he evidences his willingness to participate in the greater mystery of the Cross. This is conceivable by the very way Augustine laments over those who have lost their way. Augustine’s desire to testify to the lost (“How I wish that my cries could have been heard by those who still set their hearts on shadows and follow lies!”),³ displays a likeness to Christ’s paschal experience. Augustine, showing signs of the Spirit’s guidance, explores the depths of his paschal identity:

¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin Books, 1974), 188.

² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 182, 188.

³ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 187.

Who am I? What kind of man am I? What evil have I not done? Or if there is evil that I have not done, what evil is there that I have not spoken? If there is any that I have not spoken, what evil is there that I have not willed to do? But you, O Lord, are good. You are merciful. You saw how deep I was sunk in death, and it was your power that drained dry the well of corruption in the depths of my heart. And all that you asked of me was to deny my own will and accept yours. (Book IX, #4).⁴

Augustine reflects where and when his heart was made: in the locus of confession and in time of God's mercy. It is not an easy thing to ask such questions in the hope of developing a contrite and emotional heart. Augustine feels a prison within himself, a dark horror of existence that tempts and tests him as he takes on the Christian life. We are all tempted and tested by withdrawing from our feelings as we seek to judge and understand. However, Augustine emotively travels into his darkness with the great light of faith and the experience of divine mercy.

We all may have habits that overwhelm us or thoughts that dance with vanity and pride. To disturb these habits and thoughts with an emotional outpouring of faith, obedience and self-denial would necessarily take a radical turnabout and conversion of heart. Our habits and thoughts can overwhelm and overpower us. But God acts in the same way to individuate our heart, mind, soul strength in an impossible manner of that stretches us beyond our limits and the horror of the anonymous self. Augustine's heart, encountering the very horror of sin, finds that love remains in a sinful world. The *Confessions* bear forth an adventure of the heart towards the discovery of God's gift of eternal peace and love.

Augustine teaches us the power of letting our feelings and ideas flow forth out of our faith, heart and theological imagination. Like Augustine, we want to savour a moment of imagining "the happiness of the life of the saints".⁵ Given that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, no human heart conceived" (1 Cor 2:9) of God's eternal presence, we might wonder whether it is indeed worthwhile to give fantasy to such divine glory, beauty, truth and goodness. However, St. Paul informs us that,

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 181.

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 197.

“... these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10). Here, we have some direction to inform us that the greater the depth of God pervades our being, the greater we have the opportunity for our hearts to be nurtured by words of the Spirit. We can begin to glimpse here an opening for the language of God to groan, lament and rejoice from our hearts. Yet, in order that we might glimpse more, we need further direction.

Augustine’s *Confessions* employs a great many feelings like melancholy, joy, contrition and sorrow to help to animate thoughts and ideas of God, the world and humanity. Today, we can be caught in movies or virtual, “second life” worlds that express and do all our feelings for us. However, if we develop a spirituality to do the impossible, for example, of longing for “eternal Wisdom” (*Confessions*, Book IX, #10), like Augustine, we may, for a moment, find ourselves encountering and hearing the Word of God in our heart despite the horror of our sin. This may well inform us that spirituality lies besides confessions and openness towards God. In the spirit of Augustine’s *Confessions*, I now begin to try to reflect like the affective heart of Augustine. In this way I hope to show how theological reflection can take on a pastoral and spiritual context of hope.

Confessing like Augustine

We are living in troubled times. People are crying out in loneliness for friendship. Our neighbours do not see our faces or hear our joys and woes. We seem so lost in a forest of shadows and tangled lives. We can wonder why we bother to wake up in the morning when the sun does not seem to warm our minds or dance upon our hearts. We worry and embody depression whilst occupying our desires with greed and consuming passions. Even our hearts harden to the point of knocking a few blows against the flow of kindness and goodness. The heart, the centre of emotions and feelings that make us human and true, is now like a rock enduring the stifling pain of existence. We have now come to a point where existence is without feeling, without a face and without the basic generosity we naturally want to extend towards others. We may pretend to be kind and greet one another with

a smile that however fades as soon as it is produced. Why then do we become so unnatural, so unfeeling, if not so inhuman.

I cannot listen to what has never been known. I lament and confess “like those forsaken among the dead” (Ps 88:5):

I am guilty and I have no conscience, for I am the wealth that I create and spend in the smog of those meeting places we shadows take pleasure to visit and remain. I cannot see what has never been unveiled: I am guilty for I never see the tear of loneliness and the emerging fear of despair upon your face. Moreover, I cannot make contact with your heart because again: *I ... am ... guilty!*

To deny or not to deny, this is the question or perhaps the lie of our fate and even vocation. We lie and we deny so that we can be good and find our image in one another within our family and society and neighbour. Our system urges us not to reflect lest we find peace in the midst of our tragedies and sorrows.

I remember how my grandmother would ignore my father, because he had married, and my mother because, she was of another culture. My grandmother was wealthy and enjoyed her friends, her life of playing bridge and the cold self-love that seemed to make her so addictive to feeling miserable. Yes, it was a paradox. Somewhere deep inside, there was a pumping, loving heart that had been transformed into a hardened formality of hidden anger and foaming traces of prejudice. When my mother became a Catholic, my grandmother found another avenue to unleash her misery upon us and tell us how bad she feels. When my mother placed a picture of Christ upon the wall, my grandmother found another opportunity to lie to her heart and deny her secretly weeping love. Yes, I do think her love was somewhere there amidst her rejection of us. She seemed to appear so estranged from us, but desperately desired to make contact. Pain and misery, pride and ungenerosity, take joy and laughter away from one another. I must reflect ... I must seek to have a heart. My heart did harden against my grandmother and I felt nothing when she died. I did not miss

her. I could not remember any smile or hug or feeling of generosity. I felt a little numb and her death passed by without pain, without tears, as a little stone began to form in my heart.

I do not know how many stones have grown in my heart. I bear the misery of sorrows and a hardened, broken heart, but also I bear the hope that my heart can be transformed every time I dare to make the journey towards the mystery and wonder of another's heart, life and story. Up to this point, I have been intent to bring out an Augustinian-like reflection and confession of the ideas and feelings that swell within the heart, conscience and imagination. From this example, we can begin to appreciate that the craft of doing pastoral theological reflection is like writing a Psalm, expressing one's lament and hope for God. Perhaps, it is like a little of glimpsing the paschal mystery. Or perhaps, it is as if God writes a Psalm within our hearts and sings with us as we delight in God's Word and love in spite of our sinful condition. Let us take a step back to Scripture, particularly the Psalms and the New Testament, as a means to jump farther into the mystery of the heart and the world of St. Augustine.

The Stirrings of the Word of God in the Heart

We are all like catechumens before God. St. Augustine, reflecting on the time he was a catechumen, writes in the *Confessions*: "How I cried out to you, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those hymns of faith, those songs of a pious heart in which the spirit of pride can find no place! I was new to your true love"⁶ (*Confessions*, Book IX, #4). The Psalms initiate a response of the heart wherein we might become free to allow God to work in us, as the Psalmist proclaims: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18). This suggests that when we have some awareness of our broken hearts and crushed spirits, that is, to the catastrophes, breakdowns and traumas of our lives, we can possibly find a time for the gift of God's presence to

⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 196.

heal us. Our wounds are not useless and for nothing; they carry the meaning of hope in hopelessness and the truth of genuine faithfulness.

When we love our brother or our sister even when they may break our hearts or betray us, do we not hope somehow, somewhere, for reconciliation despite our long suffering. If our hearts are full of hardened stones, frustration and even revenge, we might never know that they are indeed broken and that our spirit may be crushed or even cursed. However, the more we allow the blessing of the Lord to bring us happiness and gladness in our hearts (Psalm 4:7), the more we might find the strategy and courage to recognise our wounds. When our journey with God hears Christ uttering God's Word in us, we may respond, "Here I am!" and find the faith to recognise that healing is taking place.

We know the Word of God refers to both Scripture and to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. Our Scriptures contain the very breath and the Word of God that fills our senses and spirit with faith, hope and love. The temptation to harden our hearts is one that plagues all of us no matter if we are searching for the land of milk and honey (Psalm 95:8), a religious authority figure (Mark 3:5; 10:5) or are people doubting belief in God (Eph 4:18). Scripture, then, is not just a panacea or even a mere antiseptic towards suffering. The Word of God is a living reality that gives vitality to the heart even when we are tempted and tested by our hardness of heart. But, as St. Paul, imprisoned in Rome and addressing the Ephesian Christian community, suggests, we have a choice between the old life and the new:

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned in Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:17-24).

Our choices are often governed by our habit formed during our family life and adaptation in society. However, when our choices are infused by the possibility of grace, we have some help as we struggle to deal with the moods and difficulties of our lives. Given that our feelings modify, animate and also influence our perception of choices, we may do well to inquire how we are feeling when we are plagued by the temptation to harden our hearts. The “futility of our minds” is a home we seem to look after very carefully, attending to it throughout the day at certain times. We feed our mind with enjoyment in search for rest, pleasure and an escape from the lack of love and concern we often experience or encounter from others. Futility draws us in like the pull of a wave receding back to the ocean. We feel taken by its overwhelming pull and promise of delight and freedom. Drawn by such a reality of fantasy, we not only are taking on an impersonal and anonymous existence, but we are also fed and led surreptitiously to sharpen and harden our hearts. What is kept secret from us is proclaimed, sung and lamented by the Psalms: “How long, you people, shall my honour suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?” (Ps 4:2).

In more poetic translation, the Catholic breviary (for night prayer) translates Psalm 4:2 as follows: “O men, how long will your hearts be closed, will you love what is futile and seek what is false”. When our hearts are hardened or even sharpened by fears and hates, they are no doubt closed. In response, when we might come to a time to understand the illusionary and seductive nature of futility, we may for a moment envisage a time of re-habituating our old life for the new. This signifies a hope for transformation, self-transcendence or a radical conversion. The heart naturally follows our choices and is influenced by our desires. But it has within it a certain spiritual flame in which the Word of God may be translated and heard. Here, with God and with the help of St. Augustine, for example, the heart may feel free and not too afraid to confess and tell God intimately what lies within the heart.

Conclusion

The engagement of Augustine's world exemplifies a way to do pastoral theology. Taking up the opportunity to engage Augustine's writings in a more heartfelt way, reminds theology of the need to have spiritual and pastoral concerns. It remains always a challenge for theology to find a way to speak about God. Augustine's autobiography is exemplary. In the article, I have at times set out to imitate his style of spiritual and theological writing. In a sense, I desired to discover how Augustine's writings can lead to personal growth and the integration of the heart into everyday life. Augustine's *Confessions* represent a prayerful, introspective style of theological writing and reflection on Scripture. His openness teaches us that Scripture and the desire to encounter the person of Christ lead us on towards the quest for Jesus the Christ – a journey, among other things, of personal growth and the integration of faith in our lives. In this sense, theology needs to be stirred by the encounter with the Word of God, namely Jesus the Christ.

Augustine's *Confessions* exemplify also the need for our spiritual, moral and psychological well-being. It teaches us that personal growth depends upon integrating the heart in our relations with self, the world and God. Augustine's sense of the heart overflows with sacred feelings, inspired ideas and a logic of faith that gives a new testimony to revelation: that for so long we do not know how our hearts have been hardened. We have set out hearts on shadows and have followed lies. We fall into frightening ways believing they are true and good. Augustine teaches us that knowledge without having a heart may not help the eternal progress of the soul towards union with God. The *Confessions* are filled with sacred scripture, heartfelt cries, laments, stories and expressions of joy and ecstasy. In conclusion, Augustine exemplifies how systematic theology, pastoral theology and spirituality can come together in an exemplary way. Accordingly, where there is the movement of God in our hearts, we could very well encounter a desire to confess, to serve and to love God and others with all one's heart.

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