Teaching Theology and Religion, ISSN 1368-4868, 1999, vol. 2 no. 2, pp 137–142.

Confessions from the Classroom Teaching with Augustinian Eyes

Mary T. Stimming
Dominican University

Abstract. *Through an analysis of Augustine's* Confessions, *this essay aims to identify the sources, tenets, and implications of the theological anthropology that grounds the author's pedagogy. The author describes classroom dynamics and teaching strategies in terms of the concepts of creation, sin, and redemption found in the* Confessions. *In relation to Augustine's doctrine of creation, the author argues that a theological anthropology that posits an ineradicable relationship of the human person to God justifies optimism about student response to the study of theology. It also supports a sacramental understanding of the effectiveness of the teacher. In relation to Augustine's theology of sin, the author reflects on the effects of pride on both teacher and student. The section on redemption acknowledges that although the teacher cannot eradicate sin in the classroom, he or she can counter such effects through the responsible and sensitive exercise of authority. Throughout the essay, the virtues of humility and gratitude in the classroom are highlighted, and concrete pedagogical issues are examined in a theological light.*

When I began teaching, it was suggested that I visit my classroom in advance. Promised a resulting reduction in new teacher anxiety, I dutifully toured my assigned classroom. No doubt there is wisdom in this practice. Numerous psychological studies attest to the power of "imaging" and such imaging flows readily from knowledge of the setting, which awaits your "performance." But with respect to teaching, this technique provided minimal assurance. Yes, on that first day, I was familiar with the layout and equipment of the room. But I still lacked foreknowledge of the most integral and awesome element of the class: the students. I wanted a preview of the students, not the classroom.

Over the years, I have come to realize, however, that I do enter the classroom with a pre-view of my students — a pre-view framed in terms of a particular Christian anthropology; a pre-view that provides a vision of my role as teacher as well. For the most part, this manner of seeing my students and myself has remained an unexamined factor in my teaching. Most likely, this would have remained the case had a summer teaching consultation not prompted me to reflect on the sources, the tenets, and the implications of the theological anthropology that grounds my pedagogy. As I began to discern the points of intersection between my theological anthropology and my pedagogy, I soon realized that there is one principal source of my thinking: Augustine's *Confessions*. In many respects, this is not surprising. Not only is this text a classic of Christian anthropology; it also explicitly addresses the dynamics of teaching and being taught. Re-reading the *Confessions* in light of this realization afforded me valuable insights into the rationale behind my teaching style and the theological commitments that, unbidden, pervade my classroom.

"[Y]ou have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you"

The famous statement, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (I.i.1), encapsulates the cardinal conviction of Augustine's anthropology: humanity is ineradicably rooted in God. Despite the ravages of sin, we exist from, in, and towards God. Throughout the *Confessions,* Augustine argues that we would not seek God unless God were somehow already present to us: "When at least we remember ourselves to have forgotten [that the happy life is with God], we have not totally forgotten" (X.xix.28); "You [God] alone are always present even to those who have taken

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1999
Published by Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.

themselves far from you" (V.ii.2). This prior and constant presence of God to the human person is the defining feature of our humanity. It is an abiding gift of our nature.

Augustine's confidence that "You [God] never abandon what you have begun" (X.iv.5) encourages me to assume that my students enter the classroom with a predisposition, however occluded, to seek God. This entitles me to a somber optimism. I see my students as ones journeying (one of Augustine's favorite metaphors for the Christian life) towards God. The Platonic *exitus-reditus* scheme which undergirds Augustine's theological anthropology assures me that in their depths, perhaps even unrecognized by them, my students, like all children of God, yearn for the divine.

Hence, I do not approach my courses, even the required ones, depressed by the latest market research on the unpopularity of theology among university students. Rather, I greet my students buoyed by a knowledge of the inherent appeal of my subject matter. This knowledge is based not so much on experience (which at times tempts me to think otherwise), but on the theological conviction that humanity is made for God and is searching for re-union. Consequently, I assume that in many, if not most, cases the invitation to wrestle with theological questions will strike a chord within my students. Although they may enter the classroom jaded by a negative catechetical experience, bored by the prospect of religion, or suspicious of my or my institution's intentions, they may, according to Augustine's analysis, find themselves strangely drawn to the subject. If Augustine is correct, if we are made for God and our hearts are restless until they rest in God, then the theological pursuit will engage students as this is the very marrow of human existence. In theology classrooms, students may embark on a journey they never realized they always wanted to take.

Other theologians might protest, on theological not experiential grounds, that this is an overly optimistic reading of my students. Teachers of a Barthian bent come to mind. I suspect that they would reject my presumption of a universal prior orientation to God as one more variation on the "point of contact" theme. Barth's resounding *Nein!* against all attempts to identify an innate receptivity to the Gospel raises serious questions about how I understand my students. In response to these challenges, I turn to the thought of Karl Rahner, a thinker who, in my estimation, is deeply Augustinian. In particular, I appeal to his concept of the "supernatural existential" which, I believe, provides theological precision to Augustine's claim "our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Writing in the midst of controversies in the Catholic world concerning the relationship between nature and grace, Rahner argues that "the capacity for the God of self-bestowing personal Love is the central and abiding existential of man" (1982a, 312). Repeatedly Rahner insists that the "supernatural existential" does not belong to human nature *per se*. It is always a gift from a God who creates a creature capable of receiving grace, the love of God, God's very self, for what it is — pure gift itself. Were it a constitutive existential of our nature and not a gratuitous but abiding one, it would be an "exacted" part of our nature, a necessity that restricts the freedom of God's creative will (cf. 1982a, 310 and 1982b, 183, 186). Universal human possession of the supernatural existential does not diminish its gratuitous character.

Rahner's theory of a supernatural existential, a God-given receptivity for God's self-communication, expands on Augustine's conviction that humans are beings made by, for, and toward God. My embrace of an Augustinian anthropology demands that I see my students in this light — even when they resist my best efforts to engage their minds with matters of faith.

At such moments, when it is difficult to discern empirical support for the presumption of an inherent predisposition for theology, I find it helpful to remind myself of Augustine's understanding of the teacher, for it places my efforts in proper perspective. According to the anthropology of the *Confessions,* humans may serve as instruments of God's workings in the world. And teachers hold a potentially privileged, even sacramental, position in relation to their students' movement towards God. (Interestingly, a similar principle holds true in relation to texts; see, e.g., III.iv.7; IV.xvi.28–29; and VII.x.16.) Augustine professes Christ to be the true Teacher of all who seek God ("For the good which came to me from them was a good for them; yet it was not from them but through them" [I.vi.7]), but the human teacher's role is not insignificant.

Augustine's view of the teacher places the question of my effectiveness as a teacher in a theological light. What effectiveness I have must, with humility and gratitude, be attributed primarily to the working of God through me. To borrow the language of sacramental theology, although my effectiveness as a teacher is not *ex opere operato,* as teacher I am a possible channel of divine operations. The sacramental model at work is more Calvinist than Catholic — but it is not Zwinglian. That is, God works through teachers (and texts), not parallel to them.

Even when I am ineffective, Augustine assures me that this may serve a greater good for it is not only the "good" teachers he considers to be divine instruments — Faustus makes the list as well as Ambrose. They are both considered instruments of God because what reaches Augustine through them is more important than they themselves are. This is not to say that Augustine ignores the effect of a teacher's pedagogical

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1999

Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.

and personal style on students. He recalls how threats of corporal punishment by his childhood Greek master produced fear, anxiety, and humiliation and how, partially as a consequence, he hated the study of Greek. Although Augustine is later appreciative of the disciplined habits he developed and the mastery of Greek he attained, his reflections remind me that the teacher's approach to the task at hand has momentous influence on students' initial reception of the subject matter.

Nevertheless, given Augustine's sacramental vision of teaching, style is not the ''matter'' of teaching. Although the personal qualities of Ambrose initially draw Augustine, over time he begins to appreciate *what* Ambrose teaches (''I began to like him, at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth for I had absolutely no confidence in your Church, but as a human being who was kind to me'' [V.xiii.23]; see also, V.xiv.24). In comparison, the personal appeal of Faustus cannot compensate for the intellectual shortcomings of the Manichee position. Ultimately, it is (T)ruth that matters, not the teacher's abundance or dearth of personal charisma. (The capital T is to convey Augustine's understanding of the divine source of truth.) Personal charm may pack the classrooms, but it is no substitute for sustained engagement with difficult intellectual questions. In an age of increasing academic emphasis on teacher popularity, Augustine reminds us that there is a more complex relationship among teacher, (T)ruth, and student than such trendy talk suggests.

Sharing Augustine's sacramental theology of teachers (and students) prompts me, I hope, to foster an atmosphere of humility and gratitude in my classrooms. Rather than providing a cause for inflated egos, intellectual skills are reckoned tokens of grace. Seen as gifts of God, such qualities demand respect and responsible use by my students and myself. The understanding that intellectual endowments flow from God gives me theological grounds for demanding careful and conscientious work from my students and myself. To fail to do so is, in my Augustinian world, to denigrate the gifts God has given.

''I love(d) my own ways, not yours''

As even the most casual reader of the *Confessions* knows, Augustine's vision of humanity as ineradicably rooted and oriented towards God is inseparable from his penetrating doctrine of sin. For present purposes, it is significant that Augustine knew that the classroom presents its own version of the Garden. All the foibles, follies, and failures of the human pervade the classroom. The sinfulness, which leads each to privilege him- or herself at the expense of others, is amply evident in the teaching sphere. In the final analysis, sin leads teachers and students to cling to their personal, usually petty, interests and hence to abandon their responsibility to the subject matter at hand and the ultimate goods which intellectual knowledge can serve. Teaching and learning become self-centered, not (T)ruth-centered.

Upon hearing the word ''sin'' in relation to teaching, I venture that most professors will be quick to catalog the manifest vices of their students: they are lazy, they pursue every imaginable pleasure except the intellectual life, they cheat, they are disrespectful to their classmates and teacher, some are conceited, etc. None of these would surprise Augustine. He admits that he was often more interested in play than in his schooling (''I was disobedient not because I had chosen higher things, but from love of sport'' [I.ix.15]), and that steady pressure from his teachers was required to force him to study (I.xii.19). He numbered among his childhood vices lying, stealing, gluttony, and cheating (I.xix.30 and I.xx.31). As a top rhetoric student, he was ''inflated with conceit'' (III.iii.6). His pursuit of sensual pleasures is well documented and he comments on how this devotion to the flesh interfered with his pursuit of intellectual achievements. He did not find his own students to be a worthier lot: students in Carthage were rude and those in Rome devious. (Augustine admits that he ''cordially detested'' the Roman students because of their propensity to switch teachers just before payments were due [V.xii.22].)

But Augustine's theological anthropology applies to everyone in the classroom — including the teacher. So I cannot reflect on the influence of sin in the classroom without considering the impact of my own diseased self. Augustine certainly did. In fact, in the *Confessions,* he provides a far more expansive treatment of the sins of the teacher than those of the student.

Augustine's own experience as a teacher leads him to denounce vanity as the cardinal sin of the professor. Early in his career, he acknowledges that ''I wanted to distinguish myself as an orator for a damnable and conceited purpose, namely delight in human vanity'' (III.iv.7). Not that he lacked all integrity in his teaching (IV.ii.2), but his overriding concern was to accumulate glory and acclaim. He recognized the same affliction in other teachers (e.g., IV.i.1). Yes, wealth was a common motive for teachers of his day. (He too admits to a willingness to sell his superior skills out of greed [IV.ii.2].) But ambition and a desire for fame were his driving forces (e.g., VII.i.2). Even late in life when he is ''more delighted to have declared the truth than to be praised for it'' (X.xxxvii.60), he confesses that public acclaim increases his pleasure and criticism diminishes it. Presumably, he continues to struggle against the lure of admiration and the ''kind of private superiority'' it engenders (X.xxxviii.63) throughout his life.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1999

Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.

Although the possibility of "hitting it big" with a book is alluring to most contemporary professors, the majority entered teaching not because of, but in spite of financial recompense. There is a living to be made in academia, but it is not lush. So, to my regret, I find that Augustine's diagnosis of vanity as the primary sin of teachers remains accurate today. I see it in the jockeying for the most prestigious panels at conferences, in the pursuit of the most impressive journals in publishing. I see it infect the classroom. I know of a variety of manipulative acts teachers have employed to win campus popularity contests and to boost their standings in annual student evaluations: some lower their grading standards, others water down the difficulty of their assignments, and others misrepresent their years of experience on evaluation forms. Even such flagrant offenses aside, vanity in its more subtle forms seeps into teaching. The challenge of Augustine is to confront my own attempts to lead students to an appreciation of me, and not of the (T)ruth.

To some extent, submitting myself to student evaluation is a means of checking my impulses towards "private superiority." I am not referring here to the standardized course evaluations that border on exhaustive analysis of the teacher and minimal scrutiny of what was actually taught. I am referring to student evaluations that I have designed that focus the majority of attention on the substance of the course and the manner of its presentation. Naturally, gaps between my goals and their comprehension serve the practical purpose of goading me to greater effectiveness. But, in this Augustinian framework, they also serve as a sort of spiritual discipline, a hedge on professorial pretensions.

"Let us return now to you that we may not be overturned"

Given the potential instrumental status of the teacher in the Augustinian perspective, I believe it incumbent upon myself, *qua* teacher, to model and instill the habits of (T)ruth seeking. This is a tall order — especially in light of Augustine's portrait of the corrosive effects of sin in my students and myself. It is Pelagian to suggest that teachers can eradicate the weight of sin in themselves and their students. It is Augustinian to suggest that teachers can participate in the workings of grace to counter such effects.

Augustine comments that "you use human authorities set over us to do something for the health of our souls" (IX.viii.18). Contrary to contemporary attempts to downplay or eliminate hierarchical arrangements, Augustine presumes that there are inherent, and rightful, discrepancies in power in some relations. He would consider the teacher-student relationship among them. In some respects, the academy shares this recognition (e.g., contemporary awareness of various forms of harassment presumes a power differential between the involved parties). However, dominant in our culture is a suspicion of authority. In this climate, teachers may be lulled into denying the reality of the power they exercise over their students. Many teachers find themselves disoriented by the grading process because it forces into consciousness the unequal nature of their relationship vis à vis their students. Of course, this is a reality students rarely forget.

The anthropology of the *Confessions* challenges me to wield such power with authority and discretion. Authority is not the equivalent of coercion. As Augustine notes, coercion is rarely, if ever, an effective inducement to genuine education (I.xiv.23). It may, at best, produce feigned learning, but this is not my goal. Authority requires a willingness to acknowledge and act out of the special responsibilities intrinsic to my role as teacher, responsibilities that extend to myself, to all my students, and to the pursuit of (T)ruth.

The example of responsible use of authority which comes most readily to mind is the setting of and the enforcement of fundamental course "rules of engagement." Rules governing such areas as attendance, promptness, completion of assignments, etc. are, for this Augustinian teacher, not products of convention but rather the structures required to counter, albeit imperfectly, the effects of sin. It is not the case that particular rules correspond to a specific face of sin, e.g., rules regarding completion of assignments to oppose sloth, rules concerning proper citation to combat deceit. Rather, the entire nexus of rules addresses the various and complex forms that pride adopts in students. For Augustine reminds us that the problem with human nature is not so much this or that specific instantiation of sin (which varies by individual), but the pride which fuels and presents itself in them all. The perverse self-aggrandizement of pride shows itself in many ways in the classroom. The best response a teacher can offer is to enforce certain standards that reign in its pernicious effects. We cannot hope to uproot pride in ourselves or our students. But we can use the authority vested in us to hedge its influence.

Accompanying the exercise of authority must be the wisdom to use power judiciously. That is, I must remain sensitive to the particularity of the students before me. Although Augustine insists that certain human qualities are universal, his keen sense of embodiment thwarts any attempts to reduce individuals to inconsequential expressions of an abstract human nature. The *Confessions* is striking in its nuanced portraits of Augustine, his family, friends, and associates. In it, Augustine demonstrates a keen

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1999

Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.

eye for the distinctive features of each person he encounters and an astounding grasp of the particularities of his own existence. Granted, he sees universal truths in the details of his experience, but he never collapses all humanity into a single undifferentiated archetype. Nor should teachers. Although as a Christian theologian, I presume certain realities hold true of all individuals, Augustine reminds me that I must take care to respect and respond to my students as the unique persons they are. Hence, there are times when my authority is most effective when used lightly. Overly scrupulous students need gentle reminders of their own limitations, not thundering demands. Such students require reassurance that human imperfection is a given of our existence. Moreover, Augustinian anthropology insists that to pretend otherwise or to strive fruitlessly to transcend the limits of being creature is itself the result of pride. Hence, I am on solid theological ground when I warn perfectionists (myself included) about "the error of their ways."

Prior to the summer teaching consultation pushing me to reflect on the theological commitments that shape my teaching, I had associated being on "solid theological ground" only with the content of my courses. Now I relate it to all aspects of my pedagogy — course goals and requirements, syllabus preparation, textbook selection, evaluations of students, evaluations by students, method and manner of classroom presentation and engagement, etc. I do not think that holding specific theological principles necessarily translates into a particular style of teaching. Indeed, my syllabus and my performance in the classroom may be identical in form to professors down the hall who share none of my theological vision. Perhaps they are even hostile to it. The difference is not apparent to the classroom observer. The difference is evident, I hope, to the eyes of faith which see in my enthusiasm, the conviction that "[Y]ou have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you;" in my acceptance of obstacles in this process, the uncomfortable knowledge that "I love(d) my own ways, not yours;" and in my demands on myself and my students, the hope that we will "return now to you that we may not be overturned."

Note on the Implications for Pedagogical Method

In a discussion with colleagues about the first section of this paper, the issue of pedagogical method became central. These colleagues argued that understanding humanity as receptive to revelation is a prelude to Socratic and not Christian pedagogy. If I understood my colleagues correctly, what they mean by Socratic is a sort of natural theology/Schleiermacherian theology of experience approach to teaching. (A good example of this, to my mind erroneous, way of thinking about Schleiermacher can be found in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [1984].) The principle concern was that such an approach transforms theology into reflection on the self, not reflection upon God. Immediately suspect were exercises which encourage students to discern theological concepts in their experience.

In this connection, it is interesting to consider Augustine's embrace of the Platonic theory of recollection alongside Kierkegaard's championing of Christ the Teacher over Socrates. Kierkegaard argues that "in the Socratic view each individual is his own center, and the entire world centers in him, because his self-knowledge is a knowledge of God" ([1936] 1962, 14). Therefore, the "Truth in which I rest was within me, and came to light through myself, and not even Socrates could have given it to me" ([1936] 1962, 15). This captures the heart of my colleagues' anxieties: that the existence of any universal human receptivity to the Gospel amounts to Idealism and anthropocentrism. Who needs a Savior if we can come to knowledge of the Gospel simply through disciplined self-reflection?

If it were the case that Augustine considered a preexisting propensity for God part of the natural endowments of humanity, then I think my colleagues' point would be valid. However, Augustine makes no such claim. Augustine, and later Rahner, specify that any degree of human receptivity to the Gospel is itself a gift of God. It is, in this sense, a super-natural endowment. Hence, Augustine's appeal to the theory of recollection includes the premise that God is the ultimate source of that which we recollect. Self-reflection in this context is a method for becoming conscious of the operations of God. Similarly, for Rahner, self-reflection is an exercise in transcendental analysis which points beyond the self to God, the horizon of being and knowing. Even Kierkegaard admits that "in so far as the learner exists he is already created, and hence God must have endowed him with the condition for understanding the Truth" ([1936] 1962, 18).

All three authors agree that self-reflection can, theoretically, lead to divine truths. Where I part ways with Kierkegaard, and my colleagues who favor his position, is over the question whether, given the pernicious and pervasive effects of sin, such a possibility exists today. Kierkegaard affirms the original capacity of the "the learner" to understand "the Truth," but he immediately adds that in the current state "[he] is destitute of this condition." While acknowledging the destructive power of sin, Augustine (at least in the *Confessions)* and Rahner would dispute this conclusion.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1999

Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.

When I employ self-reflection exercises in my classes, I am conscious of a variety of psychological and theological pitfalls. But I am not substituting the human for God as the object of theological reflection. Rather, like Rahner or Augustine, I am reaching towards the divine *through* the human to whom and in whom God's self-revelation occurs.

References

Augustine. 1991. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, Soren. [1936] 1962. *Philosophical Fragments*. Originally translated by David Swenson, revised translation by Howard V. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Lindbeck, George A. 1984. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Rahner, Karl. 1982a. "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace." In *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I. Translated by Cornelius Ernst. New York: Crossroad.

Rahner, Karl. 1982b. "Nature and Grace." In *Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV. Translated by Kevin Smyth. New York: Crossroad.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1999

Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.