

Augustinian Interiority

I have learnt to love You late,
beauty at once so ancient and so new!
I have learnt to love You Late!
You were within me,
and I was in the world outside myself.
I searched for You outside myself and,
disfigured as I was,
I fell upon the lovely things of Your creation,
You were with me,
but I was not with You.
The beautiful things of this world kept me far from You and yet,
if they had not been in You,
they would have no being at all.
You called me;
You cried aloud to me
You broke my barrier of deafness.
You shone upon me;
Your radiance enveloped me;
You put my blindness to flight.
You shed Your fragrance about me;
I drew breath and now I gasp for Your sweet odour.
I tasted You,
and now I hunger and thirst for You.
You touched me,
and I am inflamed with love of Your peace.
Confessions 10.27

For St Augustine it was clear that not everyone was yet aware of the fact that every human being is capable of God (Capax Dei) and thus can reach God. In order to overcome this unawareness, Augustine proposed the way of interiority, that is the turning away from the physical to the spiritual world, from the outer world to the inner self (Confessions 10,6),

Interiority holds that truth may be found through a self-exploration of the inner life of an individual person. Interiority refers to the interior life, a particular lived reality of a spiritual tradition. It is a spiritual withdrawing inwards in order to come to a better knowledge of both oneself and God. This is our "resting in God." As the opening paragraph of the Confessions of Augustine acknowledges, "because You have made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you." (Confessions, I,1.) Only in God is found the final happiness of any person.

Following the thoughts of Plotinus, the second-century pagan Roman philosopher, Augustine in his *On True Religion* urged his readers, "Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward person dwells truth." (*On True Religion* 39,72)

In his *Confessions* St Augustine became the first recorded Western writer to define the sense of personal identity as intimately interior, seeking and anxious. He describes his search for himself as a search for God. St Augustine became fascinated by the question of knowledge of oneself: A person must first be restored to himself, that making of himself as it were a stepping stone. He may then rise to God. (Augustine, *Retractions* I viii)

The confessions are a manifesto for the inner self:

- a) Yet men go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of the rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But they do not marvel at themselves. (Conf. X, viii)
- b) A man cannot hope to find God unless he first finds himself: for this God is 'deeper than my inmost understanding'. (Conf III vi)
- c) 'And yet when I love Him.... It is of the kind that I love in my inner self'. (Conf X, vi)

In Augustine's perception, this requires our going into ourselves, making a perfect heart so that with uninterrupted desire we may arrive at God.

Thus Augustine could include in his Confessions the prayerful words, "Lord, let me know myself, and let me know You."

Augustine regarded interiority as a human effort with God's assistance.

"Do not look outside; return to yourself. In our interior the truth resides.. Go inside, where the light of reason is illumined." (Augustine, *The True Religion* 39,72)

Thus self-knowledge is the crucial first step toward knowledge of God (*Soliloquies* 1,9,16).

For Augustine the encounter with God is an interior process. It is a method of introversion that is preceded by a time of clearing the mind of all sensual images in order that it may see itself and know itself.

This does not mean a brief examination of self, but that the whole self becomes the subject of reflection.

The purpose of this searching within one's self is not an interior exercise of the psychological examination of self. It is undertaken as a movement, which opens up the individual.

Interiority denoted a search of the heart, of the interior of self, of the very consciousness of a person.

One goes inward as a sure way of going where God can be met. This leads to a deeper awareness of consciousness, a stronger consideration of the basic tenets of morality, and a more realistic understanding of the ignorance of an individual person in relation to the infinite realm of the mysteries of God and of all that God created. Interiority was so important for Augustine, therefore, because it was where a person made contact with God.

In order to hear and understand Him, we need to develop an atmosphere of attentive inner silence when we seek to go deeper into ourselves along the way of interior prayer.

Through this retiring into oneself, Augustine came to a deeper awareness or consciousness both of himself and of the mystery of God.

For Augustine spirituality implied the entering into the depths of oneself; "I entered into the depths of my soul and this I was able to do it because Your aid befriended me" (*Confessions* 7, 10) where one comes to terms with his soul, which "is created in the image and likeness of God." (*On the Trinity* 14,4,6).

Augustine considered that, since people were created in the image of God and with an immediate tendency toward Him, our dignity consists in being the more like God (*On the Trinity* 12,11,16).

"The more the mind is an image of God, the more it is capable of God, (Capax Dei) and the more able to participate in (Him)". (*De Trinitate* XIV:11)

St Augustine advised, "Enter, then, into your heart (*Isaiah* 46:8) and if you have faith, you will find Christ there. There Christ speaks to you. I must use my voice, but he instructs you more effectively in silence."

The Teacher Within:

In *De Magistro* ("About the Teacher") Augustine wrote that no teacher on earth except Christ could instruct in the eternal truth, which came directly through divine illumination.

In a pair of beautiful images, Augustine said that we must develop the eyes and ears of our heart so as to see and hear what Christ wishes to communicate to us.

To achieve this, we must also purify the eyes of the heart so that we will be able to see God.

Christ is the Master of the Interior Life:

a) Interiority is a privileged category through which one encounters the most intimate dimension of self by which Augustine, 'led by Christ', travelled to the mysterious reality of God. For Augustine, now, this was not just a privileged category for the few, for him it became a 'Christian' way, common, possible, applicable to all and necessary for all. (*De vera religio* 9). According to the saying of St Paul: "We have the mind of Christ". (*1 Cor* 2, 16). This process is realised through the grace of Christ and his teaching of the truth in one's interior self. He is the Word who speaks within, he is the Truth; for all truth is but a participation in divine knowledge – the Truth that is reached by interior light. He is the Life.

b) The capacity for transcendence, (in religion, transcendence is defined as a condition or state of being that surpasses physical existence and in one form is also independent of it. It can be attributed to the divine not only in its being, but also in its knowledge. Thus, God transcends the universe, but also transcends knowledge {is beyond the grasp of the human mind}). Such transcendence, such passing beyond self, like the Master of the interior life, is no longer a thing to be pursued by option, a dimension that is "religious", belonging to the created, the redeemed, one who is saved in Christ. "There is only one true Teacher, incorruptible Truth, the only Master of the interior life, who became man, so that he might recall us from outer things to those that are within."

Sources: *Confessions of St Augustine*, www.augnet.org, *Searching for God, Western Mysticism, Augustine of Hippo, a biography*. Jesus, the Teacher Within - Laurence Freeman OSB.

A compilation of quotes from St Augustine, and from various Augustinian authors used for a talk on Augustinian Interiority given by Ian Harding at the Friends of Augustine, Clare Group monthly meeting March 2010.