

An Exploration of Elements in Augustine's Spiritual Journey that Led him to the Point of Conversion

di Tran Van Hung, O.Carm

Introduction

If the life of human on earth is a pilgrimage of seeking happiness and the meaning of his life, he ought to ponder, discern, and act on values he chooses in order to progress the pilgrimage. The ultimate destination of the pilgrimage is God who is the true happiness for human being. "The biblical notion of conversion denotes a 'returning'. This reversal manifests as a fundamental re-direction in one's life, and not simply a change in notions, opinions, or sentiments".¹ Christian conversion is seen as a turning to God through Christ, through which the human being is given newness of life. And 'turning to God' is also a turning to self, since, in the inner self of his heart, the human being finds God's image: "return to your heart; for in it is the image of God. In the inner man dwells Christ, in the inner man are you renewed after the image of God, in His own image recognize its Author".²

Augustine explained his long journey to Christian faith, of which his struggle with the relation of faith and understanding was an integral part, through at least two models, the story of the prodigal son and his belief in divine providence.³ For Augustine, the notion of 'the journey' connotes not only the actual travelling to a desired destination, but all of the preparations and concerns necessary for its accomplishment.⁴ And Augustine's heart was ever on a restless journey. Heart symbolizes for him that the God-inspired journey is a graced and ongoing journey that takes us inward, to the interior self, away from what he calls the exterior self. Sin disconnects us from that real self, the *imago Dei*, and so we must undertake to return.⁵

The journey of conversion is, first of all, a call from God, and then the response of the one called. God's calling is not only the inner voice animating Augustine in his heart, but it is also manifested in his life-circumstances. Accepting that Augustine's journey of conversion is 'the story of the prodigal son and his belief in divine providence' (Douglas E. Brown) and the 'returning to God's image of a restless heart' (Thomas F. Martin), I will explore the elements in Augustine's conversion as: (1) God's call; (2) external events and circumstances in his journey; and (3) Augustine's desire for truth and his response to the

¹ James E. Royster, "Conversion as Turning, Conversion as Deepening," *Studies in Spirituality* 6 (1996): 239.

² St. Augustine, "Tractate 18 on the Gospel of John," ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb, *Christian Literature Publishing Co.*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 7 (1888): n.10.

³ Douglas E. Brown, "Augustine's Journey to Conversion: A Case Study in the Relation of Faith and Reason," *Restoration Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1988): 220.

⁴ Thomas F. Martin, *Our Restless Heart: The Augustinian Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2003), 25-27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27. 41.



call. And these three main elements will be seen as the integration of God's divine providence with human conversion. The section on the elements in Augustine's conversion will be more widely discussed than the others.

1. The Conversion of Saint Augustine

As narrated in his *Confessions*, Augustine's turning takes place in both the intellectual and the moral dimensions. After his education in the fundamentals of Christianity, he turned away from the religion of his pious mother and toward philosophy, with its emphasis on reason rather than faith, and finally moved to a more serious intellectual consideration of Christianity. Also, during that time in which Augustine's mind was committed to the search for truth, his heart sought pleasure, not the least of which was sensual pleasure. He admitted to 'fornications', to 'carnal concupiscence', to 'sensual folly', to 'an insatiable sexual desire' (Conf 2.2.2; 6.7.12)⁶, lived seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, in diverse lusts... hunting after the emptiness of popular praise (Conf 4.1.1). For fifteen years, from the age of 17, he kept a concubine, who eventually bore him a son. He experienced multiple wills or selves at war with each other. The inner split was reducible to spirit against flesh, good against evil, the law of God against the lawlessness of man. And with the experience of being deeply moved after reading Romans 13 (Conf 8.12.29), he 'turned' to Christianity. The long dilemma that had marked his life, the split between the world and Christianity, now came to an end.⁷

In his journey of conversion, Augustine saw himself as a pilgrim and seeker, called, stimulated and guided by the Word.⁸ And that is the pilgrimage urged by the restless heart which prompted a searching, a commitment to truth and love, an unrelenting desire to engage the mystery of God that unfolded before him, both overwhelming and beckoning him.⁹ When reaching the experience of conversion, his 'restless heart' is made to 'rest': "I had no desire for earthly goods to be multiplied, nor to devour time and to be devoured by it. For in the simplicity of eternity I had another kind of 'corn and wine and oil'" (Conf 9.4.10). Since then, he puts on the newness of life dedicated to God in renewed relationship with Him, which is expressed through love: "Love and do what you will. Let love be rooted in you, and from this root nothing but good can grow".¹⁰ And to him, the conversion is that which moves the turning of both soul and flesh, as he wrote in *The Rule*, "do not say that your hearts are pure if there is immodesty of the eye, because the unchaste eye carries the message of an impure heart".¹¹

2. Elements Leading to Augustine's Conversion.

2.1 The Call of God, Who is the Source of Human Fulfilment.

To Augustine, if his spiritual journey is a pilgrimage, his conversion is a result of the turning to God who is the destination of such a pilgrimage. So, the first element that leads to Augustine's conversion is God Himself, who is the reason for the conversion.

2.1.1. *God is the Source of Goodness to which Augustine is Inherently Drawn.*

⁶ Unless indicated otherwise quotations from Augustine's *Confessions* are from St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

⁷ See Royster, "Conversion as Turning, Conversion as Deepening," 242-44.

⁸ Martin, *Our Restless Heart*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, "Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John," in *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. Mary Clark, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), §8.

¹¹ St. Augustine, "The Rule of St. Augustine," in *Augustine's Rule: A Commentary*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Pennsylvania: Augustinian Press, 1987), chap. IV, §27.



Human nature always has an inner motion toward the good. Is this a natural human inclination or initiated and oriented by divine agency? The response to this question is found at the beginning of Augustine's *Confessions*: "You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Conf 1.1.1). In the Latin version, *fecisti nos ad te*,¹² the preposition 'ad' could be translated as 'toward'. So, I prefer to read Augustine's statement as "you have made us *toward* you" in order to express a motion in which the human being as creature is drawn to God by the Creator, God Himself. Conversion is not initiated by the human on his own, but fundamentally it is God who animates an inclination toward Him in the human person. And throughout his *Confessions*, Augustine narrates of God's accompanying unto the point of his conversion.

If the human person is naturally oriented toward God, it is because he bears within himself a 'trace' of God, i.e., the likeness of God, who created him in His image (Gen 1:26). "According to Augustine the formula that man was created "in the image and after the likeness of God" was meant with regard to man's rational soul".¹³ To Augustine, 'the image of God' is not merely a speculative conception, but he experiences it profoundly through his seeking experience: "I was seeking for you outside myself, and I failed to find 'the God of my heart'" (Conf 6.1.1); "Late have I loved you. You were within and I was in the external world and sought you there. You were with me, and I was not with you" (Conf 10.27.38).

Being created in the image and after the likeness of God, the human person is naturally drawn to the source from which he is originated. And this motion is initiated by God in His will: "Consider how the Lord wants us to come closer to him and begins by making us like him, so that we may". Since, "the closer you come to his likeness, the more progress you make in charity, and the more sensitive to God you become".¹⁴

2.1.2. *God is the One Who Takes the Initiative in Seeking the Human Person.*

Further than animating a natural inclination toward the divine in the human person, God also initially reaches out to seek for the human person. Along the history of the encounter between God and humanity, God is the One who takes the initiative, as God speaks to the people of Israel through the prophet Hosea: "Therefore, I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:14). Israel is the people of God, or human beings in general; and Augustine is an individual in particular who, like a prodigal son, is called back by his Father of mercy. In Augustine's experience, the pilgrimage is a human act; but first of all, it is a response to God's call. "You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness" (Conf 10.27.38).

In the story of the prodigal son, after falling into a miserable situation, he tells himself "I will arise and go to my father" (Lk 15:18). It sounds like the son takes the initiative in returning to his father, but, internally, God the Father has inspired his heart toward the disposition of conversion to tell himself "I will arise". Placing himself in the similar situation of the prodigal son, Augustine confesses: "Indeed, I wandered far away, separated from you, not even granted to share in the husks of the pigs, whom I was feeding with husks. But you were more inward than my most inward part" (Conf 3.6.11). It is the Father ever inward in the son's inward part who inspires him to return.

¹² St. Augustine, *Confessiones*, ed. Ryan Grant (Mediatrix Press, 2014), 1.1.1.

¹³ Cornelia W Wolfskeel, "Some Remarks with Regard to Augustine's Conception of Man as the Image of God," *Vigiliae Christiana* 30 (1976): 69.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 99," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Maria Boulding (Hype Park, New York: New City Press, 1990), v.2, §5.



God's initiative in seeking the human person is also clearer in the parable of the lost sheep, in which God the shepherd goes after the lost sheep until he finds it (Lk 15:4). "He seeks nothing from us: yet He sought us, when we sought not Him. One sheep had strayed; He found it, He brought it back on His shoulders rejoicing. And was the sheep necessary for the Shepherd, and not rather the Shepherd necessary for the sheep?"¹⁵

2.1.3. *The Divine Grace at Work in Augustine's Conversion.*

God inspires Augustine's heart to be restless for rest in God (Conf 1.1.1); initially reaching out to seek for him in calling him into a pilgrimage (Conf 10.27.38); and being with him inwardly along the journey (Conf 3.6.11). Augustine honestly confesses in his *Confessions* regarding his human limitations, frailty, and weakness which cause in him struggles and conflicts of moving up and being dragged down, "I was caught up to You by your beauty and quickly torn away from You by my weight" (Conf 7.17.23). Since "our corruptible body weighs down the soul. Under the weight of our weakness we fall back into familiar things, and slide down again into our ordinary way of life".¹⁶ Can he, human in its nature, transcend himself to be converted radically to God once he takes up that pilgrimage journey?

The human person, in his own limitations of the human condition (as Augustine shares of his conflicts and weaknesses), cannot reach God by himself. "What will wretched man do? 'Who will deliver him from this body of death' except Your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 7:24)?" (Conf 7.21.27). As Augustine so affirms, God sustains human beings with His divine grace: "Your right hand had regard to the depth of my dead condition, and from the bottom of my heart had drawn out a trough of corruption" (Conf 9.1.1). From Augustine's experience, without God's grace he cannot progress the journey on his own, as he shares: "Yes, you have received free will, but it looks as if you are overconfident in your walking ability. Do not trust yourself. If God abandons you, you will stumble on the road".¹⁷ The grace of God transforms Augustine in both renewing his sinful past, "I attribute to your grace and mercy that you have melted my sin away like ice" (Conf 2.7.15) and illuminating him to commit himself to a transformed state of new life, "the effect of your converting me to yourself was that I did not now seek a wife and had no ambition for success in this world" (Conf 8.12.30).

2.2 External Events and Circumstances in Augustine's Life.

2.2.1. *People and Good Examples.*

There are other people who contribute to Augustine's conversion, as he states, "then those [converted] who are known to many are to many a personal influence towards salvation. Where they lead, many will follow" (Conf 8.4.9). And it could be said that among those people his mother Monica contributes the most. To Augustine, Monica first of all is an exemplar of a pious Christian's patience and gentleness (Conf 9.9.20); showing herself to be a great peacemaker (Conf 9.9.21); and a 'servant of Your servants' for those who felt God's presence in her heart, witnessed by the fruits of her holy way of life (Conf 9.9.22). When realizing that Augustine was not ready for conversion, she turned to prayer, fasting, and vigils.¹⁸ "By her flood of tears," Augustine wrote, "was she begging of you, my God...in

¹⁵ St. Augustine, "Homily 8 on the First Epistle of John," ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne, *Christian Literature Publishing Co.*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 7 (1888): on 4:16, §14.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 41," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding (Hype Park, New York: New City Press, 1990), v.6, §10.

¹⁷ St. Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 26," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 1990), v.9, §17.

¹⁸ Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa*, 1st ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 347.



your deep counsel you heard the central point of her longing” (Conf 5.8.15). God did not answer Monica’s prayer—that Augustine not go to Rome—so that he could answer her prayer that her son would come to Christ.¹⁹ Monica’s prayers were answered. It was her “faith, hope, and love” that served “as signs and instruments by which God guided Augustine to his destiny.”²⁰

After Monica, Ambrose plays a significant role to Augustine’s conversion. Augustine speaks of Ambrose with admiration and gratitude: “Every Lord’s day I heard him ‘rightly preaching the word of truth’ (2 Tim. 2: 15) among the people. More and more my conviction grew that all the knotty problems and clever calumnies which those deceivers of ours had devised against the divine books could be dissolved” (Conf 6.3.4). “Ambrose helped Augustine toward not only conversion to Christianity, but to a deep moral conversion as well. Ambrose’s eloquent sermons captivated Augustine, first for their style and then for their theological content, and influenced Augustine’s decision to become a Christian.”²¹

Augustine is also inspired through conversations with pious people and good examples. Of Victorinus, a friend of his, he writes, “yet he was not ashamed to become the servant of your Christ, and an infant born at your font, to bow his head to the yoke of humility and to submit his forehead to the reproach of the cross [on the forehead in baptism]” (Conf 8.2.3). “As soon as your servant Simplicianus told me this story about Victorinus, I was ardent to follow his example” (Conf 8.5.10). After a long interior conflict, he abandoned Manichaeism, turned his attention to stories of monks and nuns, and was particularly affected by the *Life of Antony*.²²

2.2.2. Sacred pages

As a seeker of intellectual desire, Augustine went through various philosophical schools and sects, and then came to the Scriptures, “I therefore decided to give attention to the holy scriptures and to find out what they were like” (Conf 3.5.9), “since we were too weak to discover the truth by pure reasoning and therefore needed the authority of the sacred writings” (Conf 6.5.8). And what did he find in the Scriptures? A new horizon that astonishes him: “With avid intensity I seized the sacred writings of your Spirit and especially the apostle Paul. I began reading and found that all the truth I had read in the Platonists was stated here together with the commendation of your grace” (Conf 7.21.27). The sacred pages not merely touch his intellect like any philosophy does, but they move deeply in his heart. “My God, how I cried out to you in those Psalms, and how they kindled my love for you! I was fired by an enthusiasm to recite them” (Conf 9.4.8). And in the Scriptures, he found the most precious truth that none of his previous pursuits could compare with. “Those pages do not contain the face of this devotion, tears of confession, your sacrifice, a troubled spirit, a contrite and humble spirit (Ps. 50: 19), the salvation of your people, the espoused city (Rev. 21:5), the guarantee of your Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5: 5), the cup of our redemption. In the Platonic books no one sings: ‘surely my soul will be submissive to God? From him is my salvation’” (Conf 7.21.27).

The Scriptures then lead him to the high point of conversion when, inspired by Antony who was immediately ‘converted to God’ through a Gospel reading, he reads the passage from Rom 13:13-14: ‘Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in

¹⁹ David B. Calhoun, “Profile in Faith: ‘Servant of the Servants of God’ Monica,” *Knowing & Doing* (2012): 2.

²⁰ Kin Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy, eds., *A Reader’s Companion to Augustine’s Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 94.

²¹ McBrien, *Lives of the Saints*, 348.

²² *Ibid.*, 350.



its lusts'. From that high point of conversion then, he decides to be prepared for receiving the grace of baptism, since his conviction now becomes firm: "I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled" (Conf 8.12.29). To Augustine, the Scriptures clearly influence his conversion, for it is God Himself who acts through His word, "You have stricken my heart with Your word and I have loved You" (Conf 10.6.8).

2.2.3. *Life-Events.*

In addition to individuals and the sacred pages, circumstances in Augustine's life also help him move from his birth in nature to his rebirth in grace — that is, to his conversion to Catholic Christianity. In writing the *Confessions*, some ten years after he had become a Christian, Augustine selected from his life just those things which seemed to him to be necessary to provide a sufficient account of the circumstances and reasons that moved him to prefer Catholic Christianity to every other position.²³

From his nineteenth to twenty-eighth year, he recounts that his life was being seduced and seducing, being deceived and deceiving, by a variety of desires. Later on, he recognizes that such a life made him arrogant and superstitious, and everything in vain. Eventually, he admits that he pursued the empty glory of popularity (Conf 4.1.1). He says that he had no hope that truth could be found in the Church, from which the Manichees had turned him away, and recognizes that it is his inevitable error (Conf 5.10.19). Since he afterwards confesses that "Manichee superstition was a mad and seductive ploy which 'captured precious souls' (Prov. 6: 26). It was only a shadow and simulation of virtue" (Conf 6.7.12).

Another significant event that brings about a turning point in his life is the loss of his beloved friend. The friendship had been sweet to him beyond all the sweetnesses of life that he had experienced (Conf 4.4.7). He hated everything because they did not have his friend (Conf 4.4.9). Since he had felt that the two souls were 'one soul in two bodies', he did not wish to live with only half of himself (Conf 4.6.11). "The lost life of those who die becomes the death of those still living" (Conf 4.9.14). Nonetheless, although the very dear friend he had lost was a better and more real person than the [Manichee] phantom in which he would have been telling his soul to trust (Conf 4.4.9), and their friendship had been sweet to him beyond all the sweetnesses of life, that loss renders him a greater gain: "Though left alone, he loses none dear to him; for all are dear in the one who cannot be lost. Who is that but our God?" (Conf 4.9.14). He comes to the realization that in things (even precious things like friendship) there is no point of rest: they lack permanence (Conf 4.10.15), but in God he will find permanence and lose nothing.

2.3 The Response of Augustine

Augustine describes his struggles and conflicts, and he asks himself many crucial questions concerning his conviction, choices, and the meaning of life. Those are processes of responding of the one who is the central agent of the conversion.

2.3.1. *The Experience of Restlessness*

Augustine begins his *Confessions* expressing his restless heart, a restless heart will be searching unceasingly until it rests. And in his conviction, what brings him rest is the happy life. He says, "I longed for the happy life, but was afraid of the place where it has its seat, and fled from it at the same time as I was seeking for it" (Conf 6.11.20), raising question: "If we were immortal and lived in unending bodily pleasure, with no fear of losing it, why should we not be happy? What else should we be seeking for?" (Conf 6.16.26). Through his

²³ Colin Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), xi in "Preface".



experience of seeking, he comes to the answer that “the person who is truly happy is not so much the one who has what he or she loves, but the one who loves what is worthy of love; for there are many who are made unhappy by loving harmful things, and more unhappy still by possessing them. ‘God has delivered them to the lusts of their hearts’ (Rm 1:24)”.²⁴

Being restless in his quest for a happy life, Augustine has experienced various achievements (as a man of intellect, he is considered successful compared with his contemporaries) and various kinds of knowledge as well as pleasures, but he still feels his heart thirsting for a true happiness rather than for worldly pleasures. “The restlessness of the heart is thus the relentless undertow of the image of God not allowing us to be satisfied by anything less than God. He employs a rich vocabulary: the heart intent upon God”.²⁵

2.3.2. *the Discernment of His Spiritual Journey*

Augustine’s restless heart leads him into a journey of seeking. That is his spiritual journey in leads him into the serious concerns for his quest of happiness. “In the course of his comparison of Platonic books with Christian writings and his discussions with others who were Christians, Augustine began to recognize the deficiencies of philosophy as an independent path to wisdom”.²⁶ After going through various intellectual achievements with the hope that they will bring him to the truth, he comes to the point of realizing that “suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardor in my heart. I began to rise up to return to You” (Conf 3.4.7). Discerning what he had been obtaining up to then as having now become empty, Augustine laments to himself, saying “I was in misery, and misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things” (Conf 4.6.11).

As a serious seeker on the question of happiness, he comes to realize the contradiction between happiness and attachment to mortal things. “Lord God of truth, the person who knows all those matters but is ignorant of you is unhappy. The person who knows you, even if ignorant of natural science, is happy” (Conf 5.4.7). And from such a discernment, he resolved with great hope “to be a catechumen in the Catholic Church commended to me by my parents, until something settled showed itself, by which I might direct my path” (Conf 5.14.25). Now his path is orientated, for he is sure where the true wisdom is: “Since the nineteenth year of my life, when I began to burn with a zeal for wisdom, planning that when I had found it, I would abandon all the empty hopes and lying follies of hollow ambitions” (Conf 6.11.18).

Augustine appreciates that “secular successes are pleasant. They have no small sweetness of their own. Our motivation is not to be deflected from them by a superficial decision” (Conf 6.11.19). Therefore, his decision on God and the Church is by no means a superficial one, but a wholehearted concern of the scale of values, for the “beauty seen not by the eye of the flesh, but only by inward discernment” (Conf 6.16.26). From now on, the discernment makes him certain of what his life should be seeking: “Now I had discovered the good pearl. To buy it I had to sell all that I had (Matt. 13: 46)” (Conf 8.1.2). Since “it should be preferred even to the discovery of treasures and to ruling over nations and to the physical delights available to me at a nod” (Conf 8.7.17).

3. The Integration of All the Elements as God’s Divine Providence in Relation to Human Conversion

If Augustine’s conversion is a cooperation of the response to the call through listening, scrutinizing circumstances, and discernment; these elements are altogether interwoven into

²⁴ St. Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 26,” v.4, §7

²⁵ Martin, *Our Restless Heart*, 42.

²⁶ Brown, “Augustine’s Journey to Conversion: A Case Study in the Relation of Faith and Reason,” 228.



an integration as God's divine providence. "From God's initial free act of creation...to his very own graced conversion, Augustine exclaimed with Paul: 'What do we have that we have not received?' (1 Cor 4:7)".²⁷ Since to him everything that leads to his conversion is not outside of God's hand, "you alone are repose. You are present, liberating us from miserable errors, and you put us on your way, bringing comfort and saying: 'Run, I will carry you, and I will see you through to the end, and there I will carry you' (Isa. 46: 4)" (Conf 6.16.26).

God's providence manifests itself first of all in His initial call that stirs up in Augustine's restless heart a desire truth and true happiness, and results in him turning to God. In other words, conversion appears to be a human journey, yet God in His providence seeks the human person first, "You persuaded me, Lord, and I was persuaded; You overpowered me and prevailed (Jer. 20:7)". Beginning with His call, God draws Augustine to Himself with His sustaining grace that accompanies him on the pilgrimage through conflicts and distractions. "What will wretched man do? 'Who will deliver him from this body of death' except your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 7: 24)" (Conf 7.21.27). God's providence is at work not only through 'internal grace', which affects the soul and its powers intrinsically, and operates physically on it, but also through 'external grace' which is external to man, for example: Revelation; Christ's teaching and example; sermons; the Liturgy; the Sacraments; the example of the saints. Outward graces dispose men for the reception of inner graces.²⁸

In the parable of the prodigal son in which Augustine places himself (Conf 3.6.11), I believe that if the son were not in that miserable situation, he would not discern the need for returning to his father. So, if the circumstance helps awaken one's mind, it is not without God's will. "Over [the] prodigal model, which by itself concentrated attention on the son and accentuated his responsibility, Augustine placed his emphasis on God's overruling and paternal providence".²⁹ To Augustine, his lengthy journey before being converted to the truth is like God's pedagogy, "I was full of my punishment, but I shed no tears of penitence. Worse still, I was puffed up with knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1). When would the Platonist books have taught me that? I believe that You wanted me to encounter them before I came to study your scriptures (Conf 7.20.26)". And God's providence is also external to Augustine through other people, good examples, conversations, sermons, as well as through experiences of achievement and loss that put before him the scale of values and choices (especially the loss of his friend that put him in serious discernment on permanence (Conf 4.10.15). God speaks to Augustine through his mother Monica as he realizes that "I thought You were silent and that it was she who spoke; by whom You were not silent unto me (Conf 2.3.7)". And his respect for Christianity came largely through the mentoring and preaching of Ambrose, as he was delighted to hear (Conf 6.4.6).

God's providence manifests itself internally through His call, and externally through circumstances, and Augustine's response is also not without the grace of God. "I sighed and you heard me. I wavered and you steadied me. I travelled along the broad way of the world, but you did not desert me (Conf 6.5.8)". If God initiates the conversion in calling the human person, He also sustains him to make the response, "the good intention of the will itself is identified as a direct result of divine providence in human hearts".³⁰ Our acceptance

²⁷ Martin, *Our Restless Heart*, 37.

²⁸ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James C. Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (CO: Roman Catholic Books, 1954), 221.

²⁹ Brown, "Augustine's Journey to Conversion: A Case Study in the Relation of Faith and Reason," 221.

³⁰ Tianyue Wu, "Augustine on Initium Fidei a Case Study of the Coexistence of Operative Grace and Free Decision of the Will," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 79, no. 1 (2012): 23.



of faith occurs as a voluntary response to the divine calling in the manner that had been predetermined by God's mercy. We ascribe our inclinations to divine providence simply because of our belief in the divine omnipotence and the gratuity of divine grace.³¹

Conclusion

Augustine's conversion is a cooperation of his response to the call of God through listening, scrutinizing circumstances, and discernment with the restless heart of a pilgrim on his journey who is seeking for truth and happiness, and who is called, stimulated, and guided by God. God manifests His divine providence in His initial call that inspires Augustine's heart to be restless in seeking a rest in God (Conf 1.1.1), who is reaching out to seek for him in calling him into a pilgrimage (Conf 10.27.38) and who is with him inwardly along the journey (Conf 3.6.11). God's grace is at work both internally when He stirs and animates Augustine's soul for a thirst of seeking and desire of perfection, and externally through other people, good examples, conversations, sacred pages, sermons, as well as through experiences of achievement and loss that place the scale of values and choices before him. These external circumstances are not outside God's providence, as He comes to humans through processes and mediators: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1). On the part of the one called, his response is also within the divine providence, since, once God calls, he will also sustain the one called with his grace to respond, as Augustine says: "With You as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because You had become my helper" (Conf 7.10.16). So, all the elements in Augustine's conversion are altogether interwoven into an integration as God's providence.

If conversion is the turning point for Augustine's spiritual life, it is the victory of divine grace over his misleading state of life. "Late in life he sums up his position on grace while commenting on a work written shortly after his episcopal ordination: 'In trying to come to a solution I was in favor of the freedom of choice of the human will- but grace won!' (*retr.* II.1)".³² Augustine's conversion illustrates God's mercy for the human person no matter how his past has been, for "where sins bound, graces abound more" (Rom 5:20). And that turning leads him to newness of life: "The conversation led us towards the conclusion that the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering" (Conf 9.10.25). Through conversion he experiences the state of grace, to live "in a spirit of charity as lovers of spiritual beauty, not as slaves living under the law but as men living in freedom under grace".³³

Through his conversion experience, Augustine wishes he "could have been heard by those who even now still love vanity and seek after a lie. Perhaps they would have been disturbed and vomited it up" (Conf 9.4.9). The beautiful story of grace and divine providence in his conversion has had a great impact on Christian piety. Teresa of Avila wrote that "When I began to read the *Confessions* I seemed to see myself portrayed there, and I began to commend myself to that glorious saint".³⁴ And his conversion inspires also non-Christians. There was a Hindu guru, Bhramachari, who once said to Thomas Merton: 'There are many beautiful mystical books written by the Christians. You should read *St.*

³¹ Ibid., 37-38.

³² Martin, *Our Restless Heart*, 37.

³³ St. Augustine, "The Rule of St. Augustine," chap. VIII, § 48.

³⁴ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life in The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. I, trans. Kierran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976), chap. 9, n. 8.



Augustine's Confessions, and *The Imitation of Christ*.³⁵ Any seeker of spiritual pilgrimage can find himself in Augustine's story through such elements as: a call toward goodness, circumstances that help change life, and a restless heart drawn to scrutinize and discern. So, "why then do we hesitate to abandon secular hopes and to dedicate ourselves wholly to God and the happy life (Conf 6.11.19)", if we believe that God's grace can elevate our weakness and heal our past as He did to Augustine? Since even those who do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God through the dictates of conscience, are also moved by grace.³⁶

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³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1948), 198.

³⁶ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, "Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," November 21, 1964, n.16.



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