

*Amor et Artes:  
Augustine, Love, and Learning*

Fall 2006 Augustine School Convocation Address

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Welcome to another year of learning to the glory of God. As the year begins, we are thankful for many good things at Augustine School—new and returning students, new and returning faculty and staff, and the opportunity to try to form wise and virtuous young men and women who are learning to submit all things to the universal lordship of Christ. Over the last several years, we have developed a tradition of a yearly convocation address, in order to address an important theme or opportunity for Augustine School.

*Difficulties with Holding God, Love, and Learning Together*

Since our time is short, let us jump in, and allow me to be frank: Christian education in our day is in trouble, and for a variety of reasons. Christian schools often speak in glowing terms about “academic excellence,” “first-rate academics,” etc., but often the reality falls woefully short of the ideal. Something has gone wrong, and any Christian school that seeks to be true to its mission—if indeed its mission calls for excellence, as Augustine School’s mission does—will need to think long and hard about why we are doing what we are doing. As an aside, this is exactly what Ken Myers will speak about at “An Augustine Evening” on September 22, here at Augustine School.

A dissertation could be written on the nature of the challenges that face Christian schools in 2006. Recognizing the risk of over-simplification, let me outline briefly my understanding of one of the central problems, and at least an outline of a possible solution, or a way ahead.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the great commandment given by Jesus—to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Matthew 22:34-40 reads:

<sup>34</sup> But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. <sup>35</sup> And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the many things taught in this text is: we are to love God with all of who we are—all of who we are—heart, soul, and mind. It is virtually cliché in Christian schools and colleges to quote this text. So be it, it is still a great text. And my suggestion today is that in many ways Christians have a difficulty loving God. When we have difficulty loving God, all sorts of other problems follow. Could we not even say that our

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : English standard version.* 2001 . Standard Bible Society: Wheaton, Illinois.

failure to love God is the heart of *all* of our problems? My suggestion is simply this: contemporary Christians have often reduce loving God to a particular checklist: going to Church, having a quiet time, being “good,” doing one’s “duty,” etc. These are *all* good things, and properly practiced, are an *essential* component of one’s walk with the Lord. They certainly are.

But the problem seems to be this: we often have no idea of how to connect “learning” or “schooling” or “education” with the love of God. We are, as moderns, often neurotic. That is, we have split-personalities (what is often—although mistakenly—called schizophrenia). Our “faith” is on one side, and “reason” is on the other. Or, “faith” is on one side, and our “thinking,” or “learning,” or “schooling” is on the other. Or, “sacred” is our “Sunday life” while “secular” is the other six days of the week.

We can probably err in at least two main ways. First, we emphasize “learning” *over* or *against* “faith.” We say: “we want a good *education*,” we’ll get the religious stuff on Sunday (or somewhere). But this move makes the mistaken assumption that “learning” can somehow be severed from the reality of God, and—ultimately—rips apart “learning” from its proper context—something done as a part of the life of discipleship, as a part of the life of following Christ.

The second error emphasizes “faith” *over* or *against* “learning.” This view says something like, “well, all that matters is that my child knows God,” and the “learning” *really* does not matter all that much. And do not we feel a bit unprepared as to how to respond to this—even if we intuitively feel that something might be amiss. I think the problem parallels the first error: to emphasize “faith” *over* or *against* “learning” *also* severs “learning” from the reality of God, and ultimately denies the lordship and sovereignty of God over all of his world. That is, it says that “faith” in God has nothing (really) to do with the created order, the cosmos, and all that God has done and is doing in history. In short, to favor “faith” over “learning” is both to affirm a truncated (and ugly and impoverished) faith, and to rob God of his lordship over the learning enterprise. So sadly, while masquerading under the guise of piety (“we love God—isn’t that what really matters?”), this second error ultimately is a ugly and sloppy denial of the Christian faith, most fully understood.

So, Jesus—our Lord—says to love God with our minds. What might this look like? As in so many areas, Augustine (A.D. 354-430) himself is helpful.

### ***Augustine, Love, and the Liberal Arts***

Augustine brings something to the intellectual endeavor which can help us think about an explicitly Christian understanding of the intellectual life. Augustine, in *De Trinitate* and elsewhere, can argue that one must *love* what one *knows*. That is, the intellectual endeavor, the quest for knowledge, is not simply about the downloading of data, or accumulation of a storehouse of facts. Rather, the intellectual endeavor is always—and without fail—related to one’s “loves,” or to the state of one’s heart. Thus, for Augustine the act of knowing is related to loving in that we really cannot *know* what we do not *love*. And Augustine, following Paul, links the idea that one cannot *know* what one does not *love*, for it is only when we *love* something can we begin to grasp what something is *really* like. That is, while this world is good, it is a world that is *headed* somewhere. It is headed towards its ultimate purpose, a purpose that we see hints of

Genesis 1-2, and that we see more fully in the final chapters of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> It is only when we *love* something that we can begin to see what something or someone might be like in the future. Put differently, it is only when we love something or someone that we can begin to get a glimpse of who or what someone *really* is. Like the parent listening to a child clunk out notes on the piano, while the stranger hears only a discordant combination of notes, the parent hears—even within the combination of wrong notes, bad rhythm, and off-timing—what the child is *really* capable of. That is, the parent—in a sense—has a vision or hope (we might say an eschatological vision) of what might be, and in some cases, what might *really* be the case one day. And Augustine might be interpreted to mean that the reason we can only *know* what we *love* is because only in *love* are we able to see—and hence *know*—what something is *really* like, since only in love can we see what someone or something is ultimately capable of being—or becoming. This kind of love, which loves—in a sense—someone for what they *will* be, is surely what Augustine has mind in *De Trinitate*, when speaking of God’s love for us: “It is through this faith that we come at last to sight, so that he may love us for actually being what he now loves us to that we might be; and that we may no more be what he now hates us for being, and what he urges and helps us not to want to be for ever.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in speaking of someone’s love for another person, Augustine can write: “True love then is that we should live justly by cleaving to the truth, and so for the love of men by which we wish them to live justly we should despise all mortal things.”<sup>4</sup>

But Augustine’s emphasis on love means that a truly Christian education can have an integrating and life-giving impetus often sorely lacking in the many schools. That is, truly Christian education can be a means of persons fulfilling their ultimate and true destiny. Again, some things (i.e., God) are to be “loved,” while all other things are to be viewed and related to in relation to that ultimate love. As Augustine writes, “Not all things, however, which are to be used are also to be loved, but only those which can be related to God together with ourselves in a kind of social companionship.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than education being construed as having simply a pragmatic or utilitarian end, Augustine can construe the intellectual life—the practice of the liberal arts—as a means by which man fulfills his ultimate destiny—to love. Perhaps this is why reading an Augustine is so much more *joyous* (at least for me) than reading so much of modern thought. Augustine is construing the educational endeavor in explicitly love-drenched and love-driven terms. In reading an author closely, I am *loving* an author (even if deceased). Indeed, if I do *not* in some sense *love* the author of the book I am reading, I will perhaps not care what they said, and hence I will not understand the book. Thus, interpreting a book rightly requires the Christian virtue of love. In teaching well I am *loving* my students, for God might just see fit to use a phrase well-turned, or well-timed criticism as a means by which the student is shaped that much more into becoming all that they are destined to be under God.

In short, to know God means we must love Him. Likewise, as we truly learn to love God, we learn to relate fittingly to—and to *know*—God’s world. To put it more boldly—truly loving God means paying attention to the world he has made, and not just twiddling our thumbs until the end of the world. And loving God means that Christians should have minds that are alive and engaged. God has placed us in *this* world and has chosen not to simply rush us to heaven. We are *here* not *there* (at least yet). We must

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<sup>2</sup> My thinking along these lines was originally prompted, I believe, by A.J. Conyers.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, I.3.21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.5.10.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.23.

apply ourselves (including our minds) to the task of knowing and making sense of God and his world in the light of who God is, and what He has spoken to us.

Students, for several years you have heard me say—and heard me say often, the following: “Go and love God by working as to the Lord.” I have done this because for years I have tried to plant the seed that *in every thing you do at Augustine School, in everything you study, every book you read, every math problem you work, every Latin passage you translate, in every scientific problem you engage, you have the opportunity to love God.* That is, in every single thing you do at Augustine, if you do it from the right heart, you have the opportunity to love God through your studies. We may worship God in a special way on Sundays when gathered for formal worship, but you should be worshipping God every day, in all that you do. And not worshipping God *in spite of* your studies, or *in place of* your studies, but *in and through* your studies.

So, let us go worship God, by doing all that we do to the glory of God. Have a great year, and worship God.