

Essay

Augustine's *Confessions*: Interiority at the Core of the Core Curriculum ¹

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Abstract: When St. Bonaventure University decided to redesign its core curriculum, we turned to Bonaventure's account of the mind's journey to God in the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* as a paradigm by which to give coherence to the undergraduate experience consistent with our mission and tradition. Bonaventure was himself an Augustinian philosopher and thus Augustine's *Confessions* holds a place of great significance in our first year seminar where it is studied in conjunction with Bonaventure's inward turn to find God imprinted on his soul. This paper is an account of the original rationale for including Augustine's *Confessions* in our curriculum and a report of continuing faculty and student attitudes towards that text nearly two decades later.

Keywords: Augustine; Bonaventure; core curriculum

When I learned that the conference theme was "Augustine Across the Curriculum", I saw an opportunity to contribute to this discussion from my experience developing, teaching, and administering our university's core curriculum. My remarks are directed to the place of the *Confessions* within the curriculum rather than the substance of Augustine's thought or writings. I decided to write from the point of view of academic leadership, wanting to share whatever lessons from my experience might serve those who commit to a similar process of change and curricular development. But I also want to use the opportunity to discuss the importance of curriculum development in institutions whose mission includes teaching the Christian intellectual tradition and,

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further, I want to put this work of curriculum-building within an even more global area of concern: the assault on liberal learning and the fragmentation of our common intellectual life.

Here is the role Augustine plays in our curriculum. Our freshmen take a first-year seminar in which they are required to read several excerpts from St. Augustine's *Confessions* ([1], pp. 157–76). The selections comprise Book I, chapter 1 where Augustine expresses the paradox of faith and knowledge—"who can invoke thee knowing thee not?"—and a more extended selection from Chapter 9 wherein he discusses the difficulties he encounters, and the punishment he receives, as a student. Moreover, in Book VII, chapters 7–13, we trace his intellectual formation, particularly his rejection of Manichaeism with his treatment of the problem of evil, his study of the Platonists, and his rejection of materialism. Finally, in Book VIII, we explore his conversion process and his struggle to overcome his sexual appetites, as well as his theory of free will and of the possibility of sin.

Although I regularly teach this freshman seminar, I was not party to the writing of the original common syllabus. Thus, I was most curious to see whether the inspiration for choosing Augustine's *Confessions* in the first place had survived almost two decades since its implementation. Having played an early role in the curriculum's genesis, I was interested in the question of continuity as new faculty joined the program and early participants moved on. In order to compare what had originally inspired our choice of the *Confessions* with the understanding of the faculty who currently teach in the core, I conducted an informal inquiry into the reasoning behind the selection. Unfortunately, I was not satisfied with the information I had collected, feeling that it was fragmentary and anecdotal rather than sufficiently representative and unbiased. Although I will share some observations related to my informal inquiry, I will focus instead on a more global hypothesis regarding the condition of higher education today and the special intellectual responsibility borne by institutions whose mission encompasses teaching the Christian intellectual tradition.

But first I want to tell the more local story regarding the development of St. Bonaventure University's core curriculum. In the mid-nineteen-nineties, we undertook a thorough review of our core, or general education curriculum, requirements. The then-current curriculum was a set of required courses in philosophy and theology, with distribution requirements in the humanities, as well as the natural and social sciences—in other words, a conventional Catholic undergraduate program. One of the challenges to the review process was to provide "coherence" to the curriculum. This mandate was taken loosely to mean that the curriculum should have a rationale justifying the set of required courses. That rationale, in turn, was to serve as the basis for ongoing curricular assessment, while maintaining a consistency with our institution's mission.

The key to meeting this challenge involved the retrieval of a medieval metaphysical framework to provide an organizing schema for a new curriculum. The consequence of this move was radical, suggesting an academic counter-culture of sorts, while rejecting both the positivism and post-modernism of our current intellectual culture. Moreover, borrowing such a framework meant deemphasizing academic specialization while stressing the unity and interdisciplinary nature of knowledge. This shift in emphasis away from specialization was not, however, consciously advanced by the creators of the curriculum. Still, the pursuit of coherence was real, even if the metaphysical turn was the result of a coincidental process.

This metaphysical turn was fostered by a fortuitous movement among a group of lay faculty who had taken up the study of the classics of the Franciscan intellectual tradition. What resulted was a new

interest in the thought of our patron and namesake, St. Bonaventure, and his classic work, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, or *The Mind's Journey to God* [2]. This work describes a spiritual and philosophical journey to God through three stages of reflection, preceded by a stage of mental and spiritual preparation, and followed by a concluding account of the soul's union with God. The stages comprise: (1) reflection on the natural world without, or what we might call "the external world"; (2) reflection on the human world within, *i.e.*, the mind, the soul, or the person; and (3) reflection "upward" to the 2.

Each of these stages of reflection divides into two steps. In the first step, the mind reflects simply by use of its natural powers or reason, and finds God through his "traces" or the marks of His creative encounter in the world outside, inside and above. In the second step, the power of reason is enhanced by divine illumination through faith, grace and God's word. What unfolds is a progressive schema, literally an itinerary of the mind's journey to God, which follows the six steps thereby formed. Many will recognize in Bonaventure's schema the monumental achievement of Augustine synthesizing Athens and Jerusalem, philosophy and theology, faith and reason. We adopted Bonaventure's account of the mind's six-step journey to God as a paradigm by which to give coherence to the undergraduate experience at an institution with our specific mission and tradition.

Using this Bonaventuran framework to shape our entire core curriculum was never seen as a feasible option, but we adopted this model to create a syllabus and textbook for a required freshman seminar entitled "The Intellectual Journey" [1]. Each of these steps suggested an area of study and a wide range of related texts and themes. This yielded a course with widely diverse readings encompassing classic and contemporary writers, prominently including the *Confessions*, and addressing questions suggested by Bonaventure's steps (see Appendix). For instance, selections from the *Confessions* are incorporated into the textbook chapter corresponding to Bonaventure's third step, which is described by Bonaventure in the *Itinerarium* chapter entitled "Of the reflection of God in his Image stamped upon our natural powers" ([1], p. 153). The unit of the course was designated by the title "The Nature of the Person", and here we find Augustine preceded by Francis of Assisi's "Fifth Admonition", and followed by Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Montaigne's "*Why I paint my own portrait*", Maxine Hong Kingston's "A song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", and Sartre's "Existentialism as a Humanism" ([1], pp. 153–208).

Currently there is a review of the curriculum and newer faculty are unfamiliar with the wide-ranging discussions that preceded its adoption twenty years past, and therefore less aware of its rationale. Many are unconvinced that we need a common core of required courses at all. Most will recognize this last point as part of a familiar trend away from liberal education. Addressing this trend, I believe that a curriculum committed to the transmission of the Christian intellectual tradition has a special rationale for liberal education, and that Augustine has a role to play in this effort.

In my attempt to understand Augustine's place in our curriculum, I asked a member of the original curriculum committee, "why Augustine?" His answer was the latter's initiation of what he referred to as the "method of interiority", which he characterized as "an attempt to experience God in the very depths of the conscious mind". He cited a portion of Book VII, chapter x, "And being admonished by these books to return to myself, as I entered into my own inward soul, guided by thee..." ([1], p. 163). I wondered whether this view was well understood by faculty currently teaching the course, so I solicited comments from them in an open-ended way. Although none mentioned "interiority", my earliest respondents were positive regarding this text, with several claiming that the *Confessions* was

among the most important readings of the course and at least one claiming that it is their students' favorite as well. Many saw this reading, or Augustine generally, as key to understanding Bonaventure, and at least one respondent, with good reason, considered the readings by Plato, Augustine and Bonaventure as a set.

However, I was somewhat skeptical that this response was more widely shared. I knew from casual conversations that more than a few colleagues skip this reading altogether or give it limited time and somewhat less enthusiastic response. One respondent admitted that he only taught Augustine because it was designated as required. He added his preference, Descartes, as a supplemental reading. (Several colleagues were quick to point out that Descartes was himself an Augustinian!) Others were happy to teach Augustine, but found the editing of the textbook selection less than helpful. For example, the textbook passages do not include the story of Augustine's theft of his neighbor's pears, or the earliest accounts of language acquisition. The former is seen as a way to have undergraduates more readily see the relevance of this text in the accounts of his troubled youth. The latter is for those who are familiar with Augustine only through the famous reference in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* ([3], pp. 2–4).

Regarding student reactions to Augustine, information was very scant. I might generalize that I found that faculty who considered *the Confessions* among the most important readings in the course tended, understandably, to spend the most time on it. They also were the most concerned with students' sometime negative reception of this text, in terms of both understanding and appreciation. As one colleague commented, "The more I stress its importance, the less they read it!" Some made an effort to show students that Augustine's struggles to "find himself" were not unlike their own youthful concerns. Another colleague went so far as to read much of the selections aloud during class time. He explained that it was important to make his students cover the text, whether or not they had read it themselves, adding "this triggers pretty good response..."

Part of the current review of the curriculum is an assessment of the Intellectual Journey course, and I expect there will be proposals to change the "canon" of this class. It is unclear how the *Confessions* will fare. I found two evenly divided sectors within the community of Intellectual Journey instructors. One treats the Bonaventurian framework as part of the substance of the course and therefore privileges those authors, such as Augustine, who directly illuminate Bonaventure's thought. For others, Bonaventure suggests the framework that organizes a collection of texts, a mere editorial strategy, while the independence of the separate texts, including the *Confessions*, is stressed. This polarity raises the question: is the text canonical, privileged and required, or do we promote the autonomy of texts, faculty and students in our curriculum design?

Most telling of all was the remark of one colleague who covered the text reluctantly and admitted, without elaboration, that his approach "now differs significantly from the views of those who originally shaped the course". I suspect that this drift of understanding is unavoidable unless provision is made, through continuous dialogue, to assess the aim and goals of the course. For this to be fully realized, a core curriculum must be seen as the ongoing work of a living community of colleagues, rather than a mere list of course descriptions and sections to be staffed.

We may be tempted to expand on a waggish remark often attributed to Bismarck, and compare the creation of a curriculum to the making of laws and sausages. No doubt the give and take among disparate disciplines in this process may seem more like a political negotiation. Yet what I have

reported is a more positive idealization of the process, but no less correct. Disciplines are not political parties, but rather modes of inquiry to which academics commit. What might appear to be horse-trading or turf-protecting in the collective shaping of a common core is better viewed as the pursuit of academic goals to which our colleagues are committed, sometimes passionately and almost always for good and respect-worthy reasons. So rather than succumb to this somewhat cynical sausage-making analogy, it is most important to see the curriculum as a living institution fostered by an ongoing faculty conversation of ideas rather than interests.

Perhaps a more apt political analogy for the process of curriculum building is a revolution, or a successful democratic movement for large-scale reform. How do we maintain a continuity of ideals through succeeding generations? The discouraging reality is that change is easier to effect than to maintain. While making a curricular revolution may depend on the enthusiasm of volunteers, maintaining it requires consistent support from senior administration for the institutionalization of such a change through hiring, promotion, and resources for faculty development.

A core curriculum, particularly one that stands in contrast to normal academic compartmentalization, needs to cultivate its own community of support, including a core cadre of dedicated and self-renewing faculty and an independent internal administration. Where such change entails crossing disciplinary boundaries in course content and faculty training, many colleagues will be understandably cautious. Advocates who are committed to such a contrary vision of the academy need to address questions regarding the quality of programs and the qualifications of faculty. Indeed, in my experience many colleagues simply assumed that courses and faculty that transgress disciplinary boundaries are substandard and resist the hiring of committed generalists. Younger faculty, in particular, see teaching general education as a professional risk. The consequence, in many institutions, is staffing by the involuntary assignment of regular faculty and/or the widespread use of adjunct faculty. Of course, this not only fulfills the suspicions of many faculty skeptics, but it also invites discontinuity and drift in the transmission of the core's originating vision.

To avoid this sort of breakdown, institutional leadership's whole-hearted commitment is needed. This is practically axiomatic: passive or half-hearted support not only dooms efforts at reform, it signals the failure of such efforts to express clearly the institution's mission.

Finally, I suggest that we must address a much larger context in curriculum development, particularly in schools whose mission includes teaching the Christian intellectual tradition. A crucial, but unacknowledged, element of this work addresses what I see as an ongoing crisis: the increasing incoherence of our academic and intellectual culture. The outlines are well known: (1) Higher education has become increasingly professionalized, challenging the significance of the liberal arts, particularly regarding traditional requirements, among both students and administrators; and (2) Knowledge has become increasingly fragmented among disparate disciplines, with positivist rejection of metaphysics and post-modern skepticism regarding meta-narratives. How should a curriculum address this situation? Or, more to the point, how should a curriculum which conveys the Christian intellectual tradition, or in the case of my university, the Catholic and Franciscan intellectual tradition, address this post-modern condition?

The privileging of liberal education, by requiring it of our students, is a step forward. Through the collaborative development and delivery of a liberal arts core of the sort I have in mind, students see masters of different disciplines in dialogue, respecting the diversity of intellectual life, and most

importantly, seeking a sense of a coherent whole intellectually, personally, and for our institution and others like it, spiritually. The fact that this precedes the inevitable move into their specialized major fields and non-liberal areas of professional preparation is most important. What we have to offer is an education that gives our students much more than either a collection of unrelated choices, or a too highly specialized, and thus incomplete, instrumental education.

I believe that institutions responsible for the transmission of the Christian intellectual tradition serve a purpose that runs counter to the prevailing intellectual culture, perhaps as a corrective, or simply to preserve the possibility of an alternative. And there is no doubt that institutions of other faith traditions, or with some other coherent set of values and worldview, may also serve that purpose. Such mission-focused institutions provide a rationale, perhaps an imperative, for liberal education and the values it embodies.

But for institutions with a specific commitment to teaching the Christian intellectual tradition, the retrieval and transmission of Augustine’s project, the quest for personal, intellectual and spiritual integrity for himself and for a unified theological/philosophical foundation for Christian civilization is of immeasurable value, and indeed, unavoidable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix

1. The Structure of Bonaventure’s Itinerarium

Prologue – preparation of the mind/nature of learning

	natural knowledge THROUGH	aided by grace/revelation IN
Outward: natural world Vestiges of God	Step 1 sense	Step 2 imagination
Inward: human mind Image of God	Step 3 mind	Step 4 will
Upward: God’s names Names of God	Step 5 Being	Step 6 Goodness

Repose: Completion of the Journey; Mystical Union w/ God

2. Common Texts for the Freshman Seminar, The Intellectual Journey

The Intellectual Journey, John Apczynski, Editor

Prologue. The Life of Learning

Bonaventure, “The Prologue” from *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*.

Cicero, *Pro Archia poeta (In Defense of Archias)*.

Annie Dillard, “Library Card Incident”.

J. H. Newman, “Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Professional Skill”.
Richard Rodriguez, *The Hunger of Memory*.
Thomas Wolfe, “Young Faustus”.
Richard Wright, “The Library Card”.

Step 1. Inquiry and the Universe

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium I*.
Bonaventure, *Life of Francis*.
Genesis, “The Story of Creation”.
Paul Colinvaux, “The Succession Affair”.
Paul Davies, “Did God Create the Universe?”
June Goodfield, “A Diversion and a Failure”.
Aldo Leopold, “Reading the Forest Landscape”.

Step 2. Imaginative Perspectives on the Natural World

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium. II*.
St. Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Sun*.
Matthew Arnold, “In Harmony with Nature”.
Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”.
Barbara Novak, “The Nationalist Garden and the Holy Book”.
H. D. Thoreau, “Up the West Branch”.
William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”.

Step 3. The Nature of the Person

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium, III*.
St. Francis of Assisi, “The Fifth Admonition”.
Augustine, *Confessions*.
Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*.
Maxine Hong Kingston, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”.
Michel de Montaigne, “Why I Paint My Own Portrait”.
Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism as a Humanism”.

Step 4. The Person in Society: Reconciliation and Transformation

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium, IV*.
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.
Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.
Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”.
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.
Vatican Council II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Step 5. Images of Ultimate Reality

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium V*.

Chandogya Upanishad.

John Donne, *Sermon 23. Holy Sonnets 4 & 10.*

Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is.*

Ursula K. Le Guin, “Schrödinger’s Cat”.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Book 3).

Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”.

Huston Smith, “The Beyond Within”.

Step 6. The Search for Value and Meaning

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*, VI.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.

Clare of Assisi, *Testament.*

Don DeLillo, “Waves and Radiation”.

Emily Dickinson, “Apparently with No Surprise”, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”, and “I Heard a Fly Buzz”.

T.S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”.

Homer, *Iliad*, Book XXIV.

Matthew, “The Sermon on the Mount”.

Step 7. “Let Us Begin Again”: The Joy of Discovery

Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*. VII.

Dante Aleghieri, *The Divine Comedy* [*Inferno* canto 1 and *Paradiso*, canto 33].

Euripides, *Bacchae.*

John Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”.

Luke, “Paul’s speech at the Areopagus”.

Thomas Merton, “The Sleeping Volcano”.

Francesco Petrarca, “The Ascent of Mont Ventoux”.

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3. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958.

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