

AUGUSTINE'S RELIGIO-EDUCATIONAL PRAXIS AS A STUDENT

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Abstract

This work has studied Augustine's experiences as a student, beginning from the time of his rudimentary education at home, under the tutelage of his mother, through the periods of his basic education in Thagaste and his studies at the University of Carthage. However, by 373, Augustine had completed his studies at Carthage and thus marked the end of his student years, not minding that his quest for wisdom and knowledge continued until his death. The purpose of engaging in this study is to help students drink from the experiences of Augustine as a student. Augustine had his share of difficulties, distractions, likes and dislikes; and these are for the leadership of every student who aspires for greatness. For the purpose of this study, the historical method of inquiry was adopted.

Keywords: Augustine, Student, Educational, Praxis, Thagaste, Carthage, Madaura.

Introduction

Augustine of Hippo was the object of innumerable studies, from Africa to Europe, and by 'educational praxis as a student' it is meant the corpus of these student experiences. The period of consideration would, therefore, be from 359 when he started his basic education in Thagaste from the age of five to 373 when he completed his university education at Carthage. He had his elementary studies in Carthage from 359-364, from the age of five to ten years, making it a period of five years. He had his intermediate studies in Madaura from 364-369, from the age of ten to the age of fifteen, making it a period of five years. He had one year of interruption in his studies from 369-370, from age fifteen to age sixteen. His university education took him from 370-373, from the ages of sixteen to nineteen, making it a period of three years. These periods in the student years of Augustine would determine the structure of our study of his student years. This is necessary so as to avoid chronological difficulties that might emerge¹¹ in the course of this work.

¹¹ Zaa, E. E. *Augustine as a student*. A paper presented at the Augustinian Week at the Augustinian Institute, Makurdi, Benue State, 23-28 June. p. 2014, p. 2.

The Phases of Augustine's Student Experiences

1. Augustine between the Ages of 1-5

During these years, Augustine had his initial learning experience as a student, however, in an informal setting, the home. Just like anyone else, he learnt how to speak and express himself from the home. As a child, he tried to express himself through cries and inarticulate sounds and gestures. As he grew older, he learnt how to express himself through words, the words he learnt through observations and imitation. He listened to the people around him and tried to make the sounds they made even without getting a clear grasp of its grammatical structure, and with time learnt what they mean.

At this time, between the ages of 1 and 5, the education that Augustine received was given majorly by his mother. And it was a Christian education which was based on the Christian Scripture and the tradition of the Catholic faith. He said:

From the time my mother fed me at the breast, my infant heart had been suckled dutifully on his name, the name of your Son, my Saviour. Deep inside my heart his name remained, and nothing could entirely captivate me, however, learned, however, neatly expressed, however, true it might be, unless his name were in it¹².

Trape (1986) observes that the concern of his Mother Monica was to raise her children as Christians, backing up her Christian teachings with the example of her life of faith, dedication and piety¹³. Bourke (1945) avers that, although Monica was not educated in the formal sense, she gave Augustine rudimentary instructions in Christian doctrine¹⁴. These instructions, although rudimentary, would remain with Augustine for the rest of his life.

2. Augustine's Elementary Studies in Thagaste

At the age of five, Augustine most probably enrolled for his elementary education, which usually began in October and ended in June. He describes his elementary days thus:

For these elementary lessons were far more valuable than those which followed, because the subjects were practical. They gave me the power,

¹²Augustine, St. *Confessiones* are translated in *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 1991. 3. 5.

¹³ Trape, A. (1986). *Augustine, Man, Pastor, Mystic*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing

¹⁴ Bourke V. J. (1945). *Augustine's quest of wisdom*. Bruce Publishing, USA.

which I still have, of reading whatever is set before me and writing whatever I wish to write¹⁵.

Augustine, therefore, valued his elementary education on the basis that he could not have made any progress afterwards without the basic skills which were the first he learned.

In the then system of education, students between the ages of 5 and 10 were placed under the care of the *literator* or *ludi magister* who taught them how to read, write and engage in rudimentary mathematical operations. From the ages of eleven to sixteen, students were placed under the care of the Grammaticus who taught them grammar. It is at this stage of their education that they encounter classical authors like Homer, Cicero, Horace, Ovidius, Sallust, etc. From the age of sixteen, the students were placed under the tutorship of a Rhetor who would teach them rhetoric, music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, etc. Most of these were taught in Greek, and this posed a very serious challenge to Augustine. According to Tack (2006), Augustine disliked Greek because it was imposed on him, and not because he was not good at languages¹⁶. He wrote: "I was constantly subjected to violent threats and cruel punishments to make me learn... We learn better in a free spirit of curiosity than under fear and compulsion"¹⁷.

He hated Greek which affected his disposition to learn. It caused laziness to learn and thus attracted punishment from his teachers. He wrote: "I would be beaten whenever I was lazy about learning. This punishment was taken for granted by grownup people"¹⁸. He observes that the more he was beaten to learn, the more his distaste for learning increased¹⁹, he however, learnt anyway. He compares two ways that were used to make him learn: the cheerful, playful and pressure-less technique through which he learnt Latin, on the one hand, and the forced,

¹⁵Augustine, St. *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 1991. 1.13

¹⁶ Tack, T. E. (2006). Saint Augustine, Student and Teacher. In Eusebio B. Berdon (Ed.). *Basic elements of Augustinian pedagogy* (pp. 15-32). Augustinian publications, Rome

¹⁷ Augustine, St. *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 1.14

¹⁸ Augustine, St. *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 1.9.14

¹⁹ Augustine, St. *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 1.14.23

terrifying and painful way through which he learnt Greek, on the other hand²⁰. According to Bourke (1945), this period that Augustine spent during his elementary education had two effects on his life, which were both positive and negative²¹. On the negative side, his mind was imbued with pseudo ideas and corrupt practices, occasioned by his distance from his mother who provided him the necessary ethical precepts he needed for a Christian life. On the positive side, his experience at Madaura created the foundation for a broad grasp of classical literature which instilled in him a disposition for the study of philosophy.

3. Augustine and one year of Interruption in his studies

After Augustine's elementary studies, his parents lacked the finance to sponsor his studies further, so he had to stay at home for one full year in idleness. His father wanted him to study at Carthage, which was at the time one of the greatest cities in the Roman Empire and a centre for learning. To have this opportunity, the parents had to save money for one full year. He writes that: "The reason for this was that my father was saving up to send me further afield"²². He describes his father as "a man who was prepared to go beyond his means in spending as much money as was needed to send his son away to study"²³. Augustine, therefore, returned from Madaura where he was lodging for instruction in literature and rhetoric. At the age of seventeen, his Father sent him to Carthage.

4. Augustine at Carthage

At the age of seventeen, Augustine was sent to Carthage to study rhetoric with the intention of preparing him for a career in the courts of law. Tack (2006) would think that Patricius his Father had died shortly before he was able to gather the money needed to send him to the university in Carthage²⁴. However, with what was saved combined with the generosity of Romanianus, he went to Carthage for his University Education. He did very well academically and was the leading student in the School of Rhetoric. Thus he writes: "I was the ablest

²⁰Augustine, *St. Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 1.14.23

²¹ Bourke V. J. (1945). *Augustine's quest of wisdom*. Bruce Publishing, USA.

²²Augustine, *St. Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 2.3.5

²³Augustine, *St. Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 2.3.5

²⁴ Tack, T. E. (2006). Saint Augustine, Student and Teacher. In Eusebio B. Berdon (Ed.). *Basic elements of Augustinian pedagogy* (pp. 15-32). Augustinian publications, Rome

student in the school of rhetoric”²⁵. During this period, he read widely Latin authors and committed himself to polishing his style of speaking and writing. It was in Carthage that he encountered Hortensius, the work of Cicero whose language and style he admired so much. At this point in his life, he was already nineteen years old, his second year of the three years of his studies in Carthage as a student, two years after the death of his father.

This notwithstanding, Zaa (2014) observes that Augustine’s stay in Carthage as a student of Rhetoric was characterized by scandalous love affairs and debauchery²⁶. He writes that his “motive was the damnable proud desire to gratify my human vanity”²⁷. He suffered an intellectual, spiritual and moral crisis at Carthage. His recourse to Christian Scripture and philosophy left him dissatisfied, as he was not pleased with their style of writing. Augustine writes that: “when I studied the Bible and compared it with Cicero’s dignified prose, it seemed to me unworthy. My swollen pride recoiled from its style and my intelligence failed to penetrate to its inner meaning”²⁸.

This displeasure made him turn to the Manichaean sect for happiness and meaning. They were a Gnostic group, with a blend of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, believing essentially that there are two eternal principles in the world: the principle of light and the principle of darkness, responsible for good and evil respectively. He remained with them from the age of nineteen to twenty eight, a period of nine years (373-382). They enticed him to their way of thinking because he thought that they could solve all his youthful intellectual problems through reasoning.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied Augustine’s experiences as a student, beginning from the time of his rudimentary education at home, under the tutelage of his mother, through the periods of his basic education in Thagaste and his studies at the University of Carthage. However, by 373, Augustine had completed his studies at Carthage and thus marked the end of his student years, not minding that his

²⁵Augustine, *St. Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 3.3.4

²⁶ Zaa, E. *Augustine as a student*. A paper presented at the Augustinian Week at the Augustinian Institute, Makurdi, Benue State, 23-28 June. p. 2014, p. 2.

²⁷ Augustine, *St. Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 3.36-4.7

²⁸ Augustine, *St. Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 3.5.6

quest for wisdom and knowledge continued until his death. As a student, Augustine had his share of difficulties, distractions, likes and dislikes; and these are for the leadership of every student who aspires for greatness. This notwithstanding, his academic formation was humanistic in character.

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