

## AUGUSTINE'S RELIGIO-EDUCATIONAL PRAXIS AS A TEACHER

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### Abstract

*This piece has studied Augustine's educational praxis as a teacher, beginning from his teaching experience in Thagaste, through his experiences in Carthage, Rome, Milan and later as a father to Adeodatus. The generality of his experiences as a teacher reveals that he was a great teacher. He was a teacher's teacher; his life was permeated with education; he drastically influenced much of subsequent education structures. This work investigates his wealth of experience in the classroom and his reflections on teaching with the aim of seeing its implications for the climate we should expect in a teacher-student relationship for better educational outcomes. For the purpose of this work, the historical method of inquiry is employed.*

**Keywords:** Augustine, Educational, Praxis, Teacher, Thagaste, Milan, Carthage, Rome.

### Introduction

Augustine's completion of his university education in 373 marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new season in the historical development of his life. His role as a teacher begins a new history, stretching from 373-386, covering a period of fourteen years of his life. This did not in any way mean that he stopped teaching entirely after these years. Off course, as a priest and bishop he was also teaching. Available literature reveals that Saint Augustine was a skilled teacher. Although he did not teach in a modern school, his wealth of experience in the classroom and his reflections on teaching are extensive and give some pointers to the climate we could come to expect in a teacher-student relationship for better educational outcomes. However, formally and in its technical sense, this work considers his teaching career from which he retired in 386.

### Augustine's Teaching Experiences

#### 1. Augustine's teaching experience in Thagaste

After Augustine's graduation from Carthage, he returned back to his home town Thagaste where he established a school of rhetoric and taught for a while. He

loved good and honest students who were disposed to use their knowledge of public speaking not only to save the innocent, but also to save those who were guilty, especially those guilty of capital punishment. At this time, he was close to one of his students. He saw the friend's soul and his as one soul but living in two bodies. As their friendship grew stronger, the friend died after his baptism, leaving Augustine in despair. The love of friends is good, but friends must be loved in God, not for themselves alone, for only God does not perish or change. People look for rest in the physical world and fix their hearts on things that pass away, not moving through them to recognition of the God who made them. True life and true love are found in Christ alone. At this point, Augustine decided to return to Carthage to continue with his teaching career.

His movement from Thagaste to Carthage was not only informed by the grief he was going through over the death of his friend, Thagaste was only a small town and to really advance in his academic career, he needed to move over to a bigger city, and Carthage was the most familiar, and in fact, a leading city at the time and with the leading university in Africa<sup>1</sup>. More so, going to Carthage implied the possibility of greater opportunities of going outside Africa, precisely for a chair of rhetoric in Italy. Another possible attraction for Augustine's movement from Thagaste to Carthage was the possibility of promotion. At Thagaste, he was only teaching in a high school where he taught grammar. However, when he arrived Carthage, he moved from the position of a Grammaticus to that of a Rhetor- a university teacher teaching rhetoric<sup>2</sup>. This was more attractive than being a Grammaticus- a teacher of grammar.

## **2. Augustine's teaching experience in Carthage**

In 374, Augustine arrived Carthage, which was at the time a Roman Colony, and in fact, the capital of the Province of Africa Proconsularis. It was a metropolitan city that collected people from all over the world: the Greeks, Jews, Berbers, etc. The city provided a conducive environment for Augustine not only to further his academic career, but also to feed his lust in the Carthaginian immoral amusements. He writes: "I came to Carthage where a cauldron of illicit loves

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<sup>1</sup> Bonner, G. (1986). *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and controversies*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.

<sup>2</sup> Zaa, E. (2014b). *Augustine as a Teacher*. A paper presented at the Augustinian Week at the Augustinian Institute, Makurdi, Benue State, 23-28 June

leaped and boiled within me”<sup>3</sup>. As a teacher, he taught with all honesty and discouraged them from using rhetoric to their own personal ends. It was here in Carthage that he met Faustus the Manichaean bishop, whom he was assured would answer all the questions bordering him. He, therefore, joined the Manichees with enthusiasm spending much time with Faustus in discussions and, question and answer sessions.

In Carthage, he was close to information coming from Italy which promised the possibility of better working conditions and income. This came at a time when his students began to be unruly, thus, deepening his thought of going to Italy. Augustine left Carthage for Italy when he was about 29 years old. Giving a reason for his movement from Carthage to Italy, he writes: “The principal and almost the sole reason was that I heard that young men there study more quietly and are controlled by a more systematic regime”<sup>4</sup>. He had also looked forward to a place where the students would be more behaved than Carthage, for he said: “At Carthage the students are beyond control and their behaviour is disgraceful. They come blustering into the lecture rooms like a troop of maniacs and upset the orderly arrangements which the teacher has made in the interest of his pupils. Their recklessness is unbelievable”<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Augustine’s teaching experience in Rome

Augustine arrived Rome in 382, and would remain in Rome until 384. His movement from Carthage to Rome connected him again with the Manichees. On arriving Rome he took ill and the Manichees were the ones that took care of him as one of their own. At this point, he had abandoned them intellectually, but again they were the only ones that he could run to having arrived Rome the first time. Gradually he got his own house and moved away from them, however, only to fall into the hands of another sect called the Academics who treated everything as a matter of doubt. The Academics<sup>6</sup> were a group of philosophers

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, St. *Confessiones* are translated in *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 1991. 3.1.1

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, St. *Confessiones*, translated by Henry Chadwick, 5.8.14

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, St. *Confessiones*, translated by Henry Chadwick. 5.8

<sup>6</sup> They attempted to deny knowledge, including epistemology and metaphysics. Arcesilaus, the sixth head or *scholarch* of the Platonic Academy. Under him, the Academy returned to the Socratic method and engaged in negative dialectics that denied the possibility of knowledge (*akatalêpsia*). Arcesilaus realized that he could not say that he knows nothing without making a knowledge claim. This mitigated absolute

who were skeptics- they doubted everything aimed at refuting the Stoic claim of scientific certainty of sense experience. While associating with the Academics, Augustine began to teach rhetoric. He gathered a group of students in his house and taught them. However, while running away from the hooliganism of Carthage, he met a group of students who would not pay their teacher, but at the time of payment would conspire to move to another teacher. Obviously, Augustine's teaching career in Rome was not a success.

#### **4. Augustine's teaching experience in Milan**

Augustine moved to Milan. It was in 384 that a message was sent from Milan to the Prefect of the city of Rome, asking for a master of municipal teacher in rhetoric whose job description was to deliver eulogies to the emperor and other distinct personages, and also teach rhetoric in the city. Augustine applied for the job and was given. This was, however, not without the recommendation of his Manichaeian friends. He taught rhetoric in Milan from 384 to 386 when he retired from teaching. As he taught in Milan, he met Bishop Ambrose of Milan. Listening to his preaching, gradually he lost interest in worldly things. His gradual conversion would obviously affect his teaching career since it was anchored on the worldly ambition of being known and honored. His baptism in 387 marked the end of his teaching career. By the summer of 388, he returned to Africa to fulfill his dream of organizing a common philosophical life with his friends in his home town Thagaste. From Thagaste, providence brought him to Hippo where he was ordained a priest and later a bishop.

#### **5. Augustine's teaching experience as a Father**

While at Carthage, Augustine had a son called Adeodatus who was born between 371-372, around the same period when his Father Patricius died. His son was very bright and gifted intellectually like his father Augustine. Together with

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skepticism. The Academic Skeptics refused to accept any philosophical arguments that claimed to justify knowledge. Whatever reasons are used to justify something must themselves be justified, leading to an infinite regress. The Skeptics recommended that their followers therefore suspend (*epochê*) all judgments. Most of his best known arguments were dialectical attacks on the Stoics. His major Stoic opponent was Chrysippus, whose philosophy of "assent" was more or less the opposite of Arcesilaus' epochê. Stoic epistemology was more empirical than the logical and rational approach of the Skeptics, which allowed them to generate several dialectical puzzles and paradoxes from the Stoic premises or first principles.

Augustine, he was baptized at Milan at the Easter of 378, the same year that Monica, the mother of Augustine died. Adeodatus, however, died at the age of seventeen, between 389-390 in Thagaste where Augustine had established a religious community. As a father and teacher to Adeodatus, he loved him so much and gave ample time to teaching him. It was to Adeodatus that he devoted his work on *De Magistro*<sup>7</sup>. For Augustine, it was not enough to be a father to a child; the father must live out his responsibility as a teacher to the child. As a father, he did not impose his thoughts on Adeodatus, but respected his originality and through questions led him to more questions and gradually to the truth- thus stimulating and provoking the appetite for initiative and sense of duty. In Augustine's relationship with his son, it is obvious that he believed that learning should begin with exploration and appreciation, and it should culminate in the discovery and joy of understanding and knowing the truth about something<sup>8</sup>.

## Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the Augustine's educational praxis as a teacher, beginning from his teaching experience in Thagaste, through his experiences in Carthage, Rome, Milan and later as a father to Adeodatus. The generality of his experiences as a teacher reveals that he was a great teacher. In fact, a year after the death of Saint Augustine, Pope Celestine I pronounced him "one of the best

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<sup>7</sup> This was one of the early works of Augustine's. He wrote it at the age of 35 after his conversion, one year after he returned to Thagaste, Africa with his son Adeodatus. The work is a dialogue between a father (Augustine) and his son (Adeodatus), a son who is talented, beloved, and around eighteen who was 16 years at the time and died shortly before the work was completed. While other works better introduce Augustine's theological thought or his public life as priest and bishop or his personal life, *in the Teacher* reveals Augustine the philosopher. The major theme in the work is communication: between the student, the Interior Teacher and the external teacher. In this piece, Augustine Christianizes Greek pedagogy, and employed the method of questions and answers which was used in schools at the time. Augustine, *St. De Magistro* is translated in *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, translated by Peter King, Hackett Publishing Company, 1995

<sup>8</sup>Morahan, M. (2006). Climate in the Augustinian school. In Eusebio B. Berdon (Ed.). *Basic elements of Augustinian pedagogy* (pp. 170-182). Augustinian publications, Rome

teachers of the church.”<sup>9</sup> This assessment, according to Pope John Paul II, “has been present ever since in the life of the church and in the mind and culture of the whole Western world.”<sup>10</sup> This appraisal is very evident in the abundant works he wrote, as well as the works he engendered. He was a teacher’s teacher; his life was permeated with education; he drastically influenced much of subsequent education structures.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert T. Sandin, *One of the Best Teachers of the Church: Augustine on Teachers and Teaching: Augustine on Teachers and Teaching*. Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2018 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-15/one-of-best-teachers-of-church-augustine-on-teachers-and.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert T. Sandin, *One of the Best Teachers of the Church: Augustine on Teachers and Teaching: Augustine on Teachers and Teaching*.

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