St. Augustine teaches us to join wisdom and eloquence

It was the year AD 430, Augustine lay dying.

"Please bishop, just one more visitor today," the voice pleaded as the door gently pushed forward.

"My son, don’t you see my condition?" the tired man replied. "If I had any power over illness I should have healed myself."

The visitor would not be so easily dissuaded. "I had a dream that I should come to you, and that my health would be restored." Weary as he was in these final days, the preacher raised his hands in benediction, and the sick man left healed.

Augustine’s last years had been given over not only to the defence of besieged North African Christian towns. He also had just finished a review of his life’s work, especially his books. Only months before the invading Vandals poured through the straights of Gibraltar, 80,000 strong, Augustine had stumbled over a little book he had begun some 30 years earlier, On Christian Teaching.

Much had intervened between then and now during the years of Augustine’s energetic episcopacy. In these last months of his life, Augustine picked up the unfinished book of his younger self and completed what would become the West’s most enduring sketch of a Christian teacher’s vocation.

Augustine had been a teacher from his earliest days. Prior to his baptism he had climbed from the relative obscurity of a small provincial town to be appointed as one of the Roman Empire’s official professors of rhetoric. He had also fathered a child during these years with a woman who was not his wife, fallen in with a Gnostic sect from the East, and often ridiculed Catholics.
During his 20s, there was the long and honest struggle with doubt over his professed skepticism. A little later, there was his meeting with Ambrose and a circle of philosophical Christians in Milan, and of course, all through these wanderings his mother’s tear-stained prayers.

Augustine’s conversion in 387 marked a turning point for his own soul and the beginning of a long career of writing and of Christian teaching. We have more words from Augustine than any other ancient author, some five million. For his achievement, St. Jerome would even call the African bishop the “second founder of the faith”.

Over the next 30 years, Augustine would compose the equivalent of a 300-page tome each year, pages which formed the Church’s thinking on nearly every doctrine, every heresy, every philosophical position, every pastoral work, including the Church’s work in education.

Shortly after Augustine’s ordination as bishop, he began two books that would in time shape the mind of the West. His Confessions tell the story of his soul; On Christian Teaching tells how to understand the story of Scripture.

Augustine opens his work with a reflection on the role of the teacher within Christian culture. Then, as now, there lurked a temptation to conceive of human achievement as an essentially solitary project guided, perhaps, by the Holy Spirit, or as the Romantics were later to say, by individual genius.

Augustine would have none of it. Augustine is one of the originators of the notion of divine illumination—an epistemological theory describing how truth finds a resonance only after the mind has been acted upon by some external confirming inspiration.
At the same time, though, Augustine insists that such inspirations are carried to us, almost without exception, by the agency of human mediators. Rationality is, we might say, tradition dependent. Reason reaches out for universal truths, but it only draws them into the full light of day with the help of other lifting hands. He invites his readers only to consider the mastery of the alphabet. The potency for language is an innate gift, but its realization requires the words of others.

Augustine saw God’s wisdom in such dependency. Our need for human teachers checks our pride. Man can know things of God. But God nearly always uses others to prompt and inspire such knowledge, a knowledge given to us pre-eminently through Holy Scripture.

He uses the case of Cornelius the Roman centurion as an exemplar (Acts 9:3-8). Though Cornelius was given instruction directly by an angel, the new believer “was nevertheless put under the tuition of Peter”. (Augustine, On Christian Teaching, trans. Green, Oxford: OUP, 1995, preface 12)

In the opening prologue, Augustine considers the benefits of human dependency.

Had wisdom been accessible merely through a solitary quest, had a lonely ascent to the good been achievable without the aid of friends and mentors, had happiness been within our own grasp in the manner that many 18th-century philosophers later dreamed, had the epistemic conditions for deep learning been simplified, had we no need for the Church, friendship, happiness, human nature itself would be impoverished.

He continues: Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans. (Augustine, On Christian Teaching, preface 14)

God is the source of all true insight. But His gifts will always, in some measure, be granted to us through the hand of human teachers, and this is above all for our growth in mutual love.

Another theme Augustine early develops is the relationship between signs and things.

“All teaching is of either things or signs,” he declares, and then proposes further, “but things are learnt from signs.” (Augustine, On Christian Teaching, 1.4)

I have spent several years teaching this book to different students. What Augustine means by this opening division between signs and things is not immediately clear. What unfolds for the attentive reader, though, eventually
pays rich rewards.

One of the 20th-century founders of linguistic philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein, drew deeply from this text as a source for his own reflections, as have other contemporary philosophers interested in meditating on the nature and limits and wonders of language.

Continuing along the lines above, one of the plain implications that Augustine will draw is that “signs” cement friendships.

None of us live within a closed linguistic world. In other words, though we can experience some things privately, there is no way to communicate these sensations or thoughts with others, no good way to share insight, apart from some common bond through the language of words.

This is not to deny the efficacy of a nod, a wink, or a hug.

Surely these non-verbal signs also communicate, just as miracles can tell us something about God; but without words we would never be able to share an articulate account of the nature of things, nor of God for that matter, the one of whom we need to know most of all. It is this need of ours to know God which turns Augustine’s attention to the study of Scripture.

Augustine completed the first three books of On Christian Teaching when he was still a young Christian and a new bishop. Like the Confessions, the first books already give some sense of the dazzling power of Augustine’s intellect and his vision for a Christianized theory of culture.

Although these pages expound a theory of language, describe the Christian use of music, arithmetic, history, logic, and the other liberal arts, and although they propose a novel structure for ethics, and much more besides, at their heart, these pages are really about learning to read the Bible.

It is instructive that Augustine should turn our attention here. All advanced civilizations have their founding texts. The Indian subcontinent had the Upanishads, Asia had the sayings of the Buddha and the Analects of Confucius, and the Greeks and Romans had the Iliad and the Aeneid. The Christians, Augustine now proposed, had Scripture.

The Bible, not warrior epics, not philosophical musings, was to serve as the basis for a new Christian culture, a culture Augustine both anticipated and helped to form.

One of the lasting achievements of On Christian Teaching has been to show how God’s Word could both admit multiple layers of interpretation while at the same time serving to draw all people into the common worship of the one true God.

Over the years, Augustine would turn his mind to other books. The bishop continued to write other weighty treatises, On the Trinity, The City of God,
works against heretics, commentaries on Scripture.

Now, 30 years on, he saw the Christian towns whose freedom he had so long fought to preserve, and indeed the empire that had made such freedom possible, begin to crumble. It was perhaps this new situation that impelled Augustine to complete the work he had so long ago begun.

Picking up seamlessly from where he had left off decades earlier, somewhere around AD 425, he concluded the fourth book of On Christian Teaching, not with a further reflection on Biblical truths, but rather on the qualities of the teacher himself. In these his last sustained meditations on education, Augustine turned now from doctrine to evangelization, from exegesis to the Christian art of communication.

What lessons does he impart? There are too many to enumerate here. In the span of only a few pages Augustine recapitulates the fundamental truths of rhetoric as systematized by the Greeks through the mouthpiece of Cicero, and as illustrated in the Bible and through other Christian teachers.

We must teach, please and move. Our rhetorical style may be low, mixed, or “high,” that is, complex. The good teacher must know what constitutes an attractive introduction, how to draw his conclusion to a close, and use illustrations to amplify precepts, etc. We must never bore. We must pray too, and seek humility.

Despite the dazzling array of lessons provided, and the sumptuous summing up of hundreds of years of rhetorical and psychological insights into what moves others to learn, Augustine’s basic counsel is simple: Join wisdom to eloquence.

Knowing the good is not good enough, for the good is always diffusive. The contemplation of truth ever calls us out of ourselves in charity towards others. And for that end we Christian teachers must marshal all the skill at our command.

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