

Augustine of Hippo: Two Fundamental Directions of Life

Augustine of Hippo was born in 354 in Tagaste, Algeria, to a pagan father and a Christian mother. After completing his elementary education in Tagaste, he continued his studies in Carthage. Although raised as a (un-baptized) Christian, he soon left the church and became a follower of Manichaeism.¹ He took a concubine and for a number of years lived as a pagan intellectual. In 383 he moved to Rome, but soon moved to Milan, where he became professor of rhetoric at the imperial court. At Milan he was greatly influenced by its brilliant bishop, Ambrose. In 387 he became a Christian and soon returned to Africa. In 391, he was ordained priest in Hippo, Algeria, and four years later became the bishop of Hippo and remained in this position until his death in 430. He was a prolific writer and is considered one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity.

Perhaps the book for which Augustine is best known is his *Confessions* in which he tells the story of his sinful youth and his eventual conversion to Christianity. What we wish to consider here are the complex interior movements in Augustine's heart which immediately precede the moment of his conversion.

As an adolescent, Augustine began to adopt an increasingly self-indulgent life-style. He rather soberly writes: "In my youth I burned to fill myself with evil things... I dared to run wild in different and dark ways of passion." A powerful movement toward unrestrained self-indulgence stirs in Augustine's heart and will shape the course of his life for years to come.

Augustine yearns for a profound spiritual renewal, yet he finds himself held captive by his unrestrained self-indulgence. St. Paul captured the sense of this when he confessed: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want" (Romans 7:19). Years pass, yet Augustine remains unable to act. One day he meets with Ponticianus, a royal official, and Alypius, his close friend. They have read Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony* and have decided to dedicate themselves to God. Their story awakens a profound anguish in Augustine: "I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain. I hoped my chain might be broken once and for all... In my heart I kept saying, 'Let it be now, let it be now!', and merely by saying this I was on the point of making the resolution... but I did not succeed... I was held back by mere trifles...; they whispered, 'Are you going to dismiss us?'" But now a new movement enters this swirl of interior movements: "But by now... I had turned my eyes elsewhere and while I stood at the barrier on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continenence in all her serene unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross over and hesitate no more." But Augustine realizes that she is not alone: "With her were countless boys and girls, great numbers of the young and people of all ages." He can contain himself no longer. He flings himself under a fig tree as tears begin to fall. He hears the voice of a child calling "Take and read." He opens the Bible and reads "The night is far gone; the day is at hand. Let us, then, cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light..." (Romans 13:12ff). In that instant Augustine's life is remade. Years later he writes: "Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you."

Augustine's story recalls the lines with which Francis Thompson (1897-1907) begins his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

1 Manichaeism is an Iranian Gnostic religion that grew out of the teaching of the prophet Mani (c. 216-276 AD). It denied the omnipotence of God by postulating two opposite powers, the powers of Light and Darkness. It taught an elaborate cosmology describing the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness. The human person was understood as the battleground for these powers.

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped; and shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after...

Two Fundamental Directions in the Spiritual Life:

Augustine's story reveals that there are two fundamental directions in the spiritual life:

- spiritual regression: movement away from God toward a self-indulgent life in which moral boundaries were ignored
- spiritual progression: movement toward God that arose out of the growing weariness of heart which this lifestyle engendered in him

In a time of spiritual regression, that is to say, when a person is going from bad to worse:

- evil spirit: tempts the person with apparent pleasures, thus enslaving her in disordered affections (e.g., sinful tendencies, attitudes, behaviors, gratifications, compulsions, addictions, etc.) for the sole purpose of leading her away from God ²
- good spirit: uses a contrary method: disquieting the person in her complacency, appealing to right reason (conscience) to help the person experience the purifying grace of God which will lead her toward God

In a time of spiritual progression, that is to say, when a person is going from good to better:

- evil spirit: tempts the person by...
 - saddening her: diminishes her spiritual energy
 - placing obstacles: "How can you continue a life of such great penance...?"
 - disquieting her with false reasons: Lucia

Lucia had just completed a very grace-filled 8-day retreat and was now traveling home. During her retreat, she felt close to a loving God. In the following account she tells her retreat director what took place in her heart as she traveled: "That experience I had as I was leaving my retreat a month ago made quite an impression on me. It certainly took me by surprise! My mind was in such confusion that I couldn't understand what was happening to me. I couldn't understand how I could feel so bad so fast after feeling so good for so long. On my way home I was second-guessing my entire retreat and felt that due to my failure it had been a complete waste of time. I figured that I must have some serious problem and that maybe I had been dishonest by not bringing it up during the retreat. "And since I didn't even know what the 'problem' was, I concluded that I was probably incapable of making a 'good' retreat because I was incapable of being honest and open. The thought came to me that I should not waste your time and mine with these retreats. When I thought of calling you about it, I ran into still more obstacles. I felt that I really had no right to bother you – after all, my retreat was over. If things weren't resolved during the retreat, then it was my own fault."

- Is Lucia progressing or regressing spiritually?

2 In the writings of Ignatius Loyola, 'evil spirit,' 'the enemy,' 'the enemy of our human nature,' and the 'Evil One' are synonymous. To this list we may add 'the counter-spirit.' The evil spirit, however, is understood to be not only Satan and his demons, but also all the tendencies in our own psyches which spring from (1) our self-centeredness and sensuality, and (2) other persons and society insofar as these are an influence for evil in our lives ("the world, the flesh and the devil" – *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662)

- What is Lucia experiencing?
- If you were Lucia's retreat director, how would you counsel her?
- good spirit:
 - gives courage and strength: "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want." (Psalm 23:1)
 - gives consolations and tears: the heartfelt experiences of God's love energize and uplift her (and more frequently touches her heart than her head)
 - eases and removes obstacles: "for God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)
 - inspires: clarity about how to go forward: Carlo

Carlo goes to the college chapel for noon Mass. The reading for the day is from Galatians 5: 16-24. The homilist focuses on verse 22: "The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness." Peace and joy, he says, are signs of the Holy Spirit. He then develops this by quoting from noted spiritual writers, and relates it to the teaching of Ignatius Loyola on the discernment of spirits. Carlo has for some time now felt dry when he prays. He is saddened because God seems absent from his life. What the homilist said convinces him that the Holy Spirit cannot be present and active in his life. He feels that he must have turned away from God. He feels discouraged about ever becoming a really good Christian. In this state of mind, Carlo goes to one of his teachers whom he has grown to trust for her learning, experience and good judgment. He opens up to her and asks for help.

- Is Carlo progressing or regressing spiritually?
- Is he experiencing spiritual or non-spiritual movements? Explain.
- If you were the teacher with whom Carlo met, how would you counsel him?

Note: For the purposes of this paper, I am indebted to Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: Crossroad, 2005)