

Catechetical approaches of Augustine

For my reflection paper, I chose to reflect on the catechetical approach of Augustine, a highly intellectual and influential Catechist, Doctor and Father of the Early Church. Augustine played a significant role in shaping the catechetical methods in the Early Church and his writings on evangelization and catechesis, particularly “Instructing Beginners in Faith” and “Enchiridion”, provide valuable insights into his approach. Augustine's catechetical methods were influenced by the cultural context of his time, as well as his deep understanding of the Christian faith. I have chosen several sources for this reflection paper including lecture notes from Dr. Osman’s video lecture “Augustine: the Father of Catechesis”. “Augustine’s Catechizing Beginners” by Paul Turner, and “The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love”, translated by Bruce Harbert.

Gathering Data

In “*De catechizandis rudibus*” or “Instructing Beginners in Faith”, Augustine responds to a letter from Deogratias, a deacon and catechist seeking advice on teaching the faith. Deogratias asks Augustine to guide him on catechizing the uninstructed. Deogratias explains that he often faces challenges in articulating Christian doctrine, determining where to start and end his explanations, and whether to include exhortations or focus solely on essential precepts. He also expresses frustration over lengthy speeches that he feels are ineffective to his learners. In response, Augustine agrees to help, out of love for the Church and sees it as his duty to assist his fellow-servants in spreading the teachings of the Lord. Regarding oral catechesis, Augustine

describes three catechetical genres: *Neuratio*, *Cohortatio*, and *Hilaritatis Comparatio*. *Neuratio* is a short narrative that tells the story of salvation from the creation to the present day of the Church. It aims to convey God's revelation and saving acts of the salvation story through the narrations of the stories in the Old Testament, moving through to the story of Christ in the New Testament. Augustine associates this genre to dissemination of the basics of faith. *Cohortatio* is an exhortation that emphasizes the differences between good and evil, life and death, today and the end times, and the hope that lies in the good. *Hilaritatis Comparatio*, is a style more than genre of joy that addresses the discouragement and weariness faced by catechists. It conveys a sense of personal joy in proclaiming the Gospel, which the catechist should possess before attempting to teach others. Augustine promotes laughter and encourages catechists to approach their listeners with joy, love, and a sense of delight in the Gospel, as it is the first time the beginners are hearing the message. One important aspect of Augustine's catechetical approach is his emphasis on knowing the listener and adapting the story based on their understanding. He recognizes that one size doesn't fit all and stresses the importance of biblical stories as the core content of catechesis. Throughout his teachings, love should remain the driving force, as Augustine prioritizes the great commandment of loving God and neighbor over the ten commandments. Love becomes the ultimate aim of the Christian life. In the following paragraphs I have listed out key aspects and guidelines from *De catechizandis rudibus* that I believe will be helpful to me as well as others in the ministry of catechesis, specifically when this task becomes monotonous and weariness sets in.

According to Augustine, one source of weariness in instructing others is the difficulty of conveying our thoughts to someone who may not fully understand our intended meaning. This

requires us to meet them where they are, and not expect them to rise up to our level of comprehension. Sometimes our verbal discourse may not align with our mental comprehension, and this may make speaking feel unpleasant, and at those times we need to simplify our ideas and use words even though it falls short of adequately expressing our thoughts. Augustine suggests reflecting on the example set by Christ (the first and greatest Catechist), who, despite the vast difference between His divine nature and human limitations, humbled Himself and took the form of a servant. Christ made Himself weak for the sake of the weak, demonstrating love and compassion. Further, Augustine uses the example of a mother who gladly provides nourishment to her child or a hen that embraces her young ones, even if it requires using simplified speech or gestures. Catechists similarly should not be reluctant to adjust themselves to the understanding of those they teach. Love should be the motivating factor, as speaking in broken words becomes a joyous act when driven by love.

A source of weariness may arise from exhaustion to articulate our own speech and prefer to read or hear pre-prepared material expressed in a superior style. Augustine advises that as long as our mind remains focused on the truth of the subject matter, any imperfections in our literal expressions should be overlooked. However, if we deviate from the truth itself and we notice our own mistakes or are made aware of them, we should correct them with humility. Augustine suggests approaching the situation with patience and pity, understanding that the patience of God can lead others to repentance. There may also be instances where even when we speak correctly and truthfully, certain statements may be misunderstood or appear harsh. If we become anxious over the uncertainty of our discourse and the reactions of our hearers, Augustine suggests trusting in God and His ultimate plan. By focusing on charity and seeking not our own glory, the

endurance of difficulties in the ministry of catechesis becomes a source of joy. Augustine emphasizes that a good work is one driven by charity and ultimately rests in charity. Finally, Augustine says that Catechists should pray that God may help us to speak while willingly allowing Him to speak through us in our own capacity. This perspective leads to the understanding that all things work together for good for those who love God.

Weariness may also arise when we have to repeat familiar and basic matters, particularly suited for children. Augustine compares this to the experience of showing someone a familiar place or sight that we have grown accustomed to. Augustine suggests that in such situations, we should approach them with a loving and sympathetic disposition, treating them as brothers, fathers, and mothers. When we witness their joy and appreciation, our own enjoyment is renewed, and the bond of love makes routine tasks exciting to us. Augustine emphasizes that when individuals approach us with a desire to know God, we should feel renewed in their newness of experience. Their eagerness should invigorate our preaching, which may have become repetitive or monotonous.

Another source of weariness occurs when we are uncertain if our words are having any effect on the listener. They may be hesitant to show their understanding due to religious awe, personal modesty, lack of comprehension, or because they consider our words unimportant. In such cases, Augustine suggests that we should employ various methods to engage and draw out the listener. We can dispel excessive fear and encourage their participation through kind exhortation. By reminding them of our weak human nature, we can lessen their awe or intimidation of us. We could also occasionally question them to ensure their understanding and

create an atmosphere of confidence where they can feel free to express any objections. If the listener is extremely apathetic, lacking the capacity to appreciate any of our efforts to motivate them, we should approach them with compassion. In such cases, it may be more effective to direct our prayers and supplications to God on their behalf, rather than focusing extensively on addressing them about God.

Yet another source of weariness arises when we are emotionally affected by offenses or personal failures. In situations where we feel offended, our love for those for whom Christ died should outweigh our personal grievances. The prospects of someone seeking to become a Christian should uplift us and dispel our sadness, just as the joy of gain softens the pain of losses. We should not be oppressed by the offenses of individuals unless we perceive them as perishing or causing harm to others. When burdened by our own mistakes or sins, we should remember that a contrite spirit is pleasing to God. Therefore, if we are troubled by our own failings, we should view opportunities for acts of mercy as a means to extinguish the flames of sin within us. We should be grateful for such opportunities and be willing to share the Word of God with others.

In the “Enchiridion”, Augustine provides a more mature exposition of the faith. It focuses on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Augustine structures the Enchiridion based on an oral tradition, using creeds as a foundation for further elaboration. These creeds, including the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, served as the first catechisms, summarizing the faith in a simple and memorizable format. Augustine's use of the creed as a basis for further explanation becomes a foundational approach in catechesis that continues throughout history. Augustine's

emphasis on faith, hope, and love in the Enchiridion reflects their importance as core content in catechesis.

Analyzing the Data

Augustine's "De catechizandis rudibus" provides valuable insights that I can use in my ministry of catechesis. Meeting High School students where they are and adapting to their understanding is a key ingredient in effective catechesis. Just as Christ humbled Himself and accommodated human limitations, catechists should adjust their teaching to the level of their audience. Something I have noticed over the years of teaching are that students tend to forget what they are taught. This came to my notice especially during the pandemic when Catechism classes were held online. I was given the task to teach the same students during the pandemic and the year after that (when they had moved on to the next grade) and classes were transitioned back to being in-person. I noticed that these students that I taught on Zoom and later, in-person, did not recall many things that were taught to them via Zoom. One likely reason for this in my opinion is that they were not paying attention during online classes, likely because they were distracted by their ambience or disinterested because of the lack of socialization, or on their phone texting their friends (something that could not be controlled via Zoom). I wonder if Augustine's catechetical methods would still hold water in today's world. When catechists find that they are repeating themselves over and over again, Augustine encourages them to approach the situation with a loving and sympathetic disposition. When uncertainty arises about the effectiveness of words, Augustine advises employing various methods to engage and draw out the listener. Kind exhortation and occasional questioning can help create an atmosphere of

confidence and encourage participation. I have noticed that doing fun activities such as Kahoot quizzes or even playing simple games like charades, perks up the mood of the students and brings them out of the monotony of the class. Augustine also encourages catechists to prioritize their love for others over personal grievances. As catechists, we should not take offenses personally, and offenses should not oppress us. Our mistakes or weaknesses can be opportunities rather than stumbling blocks. These insights from Augustine can guide catechists in approaching their ministry with love, adaptability, truthfulness, and a focus on the theological virtues.

Acting on the Data

As I reflect on Augustine's catechetical methods, I am struck by the need for patience and to step back and conduct a self-evaluation to analyze why we do what we do. The tripod of faith, hope, and love serves as a guide for catechists and in their journey of faith and the ministry of catechesis. In the face of weariness how can we love? I believe love can be expressed by being patient with students. Another way to show our love and charity is to lift our students up in prayer. This, I believe is a great act of mercy where we spend time interceding for our students that they may be filled with wisdom and an eagerness to know and love Christ. Augustine's teachings highlight the importance of joy, adaptability, and love in catechesis. It reminds me of the need to approach catechesis with love, mercy and charity. He prioritizes the two great commandments of loving God and neighbor over the ten commandments. Love becomes the ultimate goal and measure of a person's goodness. Augustine's quote, "We are not asking what he believes or what he hopes for, but what he loves," summarizes his conviction that love defines the essence of a Christian's life.