

# On the Commencement of Study at Augustine College

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This week, in cities across this country, more than 100,000 young people will be commencing study in the first year of a university or college program. The seventeen students of the inaugural class of Augustine College are but a tiny fraction of that huge number, almost invisible in the great academic marketplace. Yet in this sanctuary, to those of us parents, teachers, and friends, these students have an importance unique and unrivalled by any others. This is all the more true for us, because what binds us together with them in our exciting adventure in learning and discipleship is the conviction that we share a higher obligation. Accordingly, we are in possession of the basis for a genuine unity of spirit in our pursuit of Wisdom and Truth. It is not some appetite for information, or bits and bytes of specialized knowledge, that has brought us together to this place; no student has enrolled in Augustine College thinking of this year as offering a narrow professional training or an extended practicum in specialized technique. No, in this era of education dominated by technology and narrow specialization we have been drawn not by the allure of *techné* but because of our desire to encounter and more deeply to understand the logos, that integrative source of all Knowledge, Wisdom, Truth, and Love.

Thoughtful onlookers and friends have asked us a searching question: 'What will Augustine College offer students that they could not get in the public universities?' There are in fact quite a few things to say about that, and you will have found some of them printed in our brochure. But since some people still ask this question anyway, I thought it perhaps appropriate to essay

a modest outline of our answer this morning.

What will the students of Augustine College get that they would not likely get in a public university?

Well, an apprenticeship to Wisdom.

## WISDOM

Now, one danger in a cryptic response is that it can, as in a conversation I had earlier this week, lead to supplementary questions. "So what is wisdom?" I was asked. Part of the answer I gave is that 'Wisdom is the capacity to distinguish between what is of abiding value and that which is merely trivial.' There is, of course, much more to it than that.

I suspect I am far from the only one here today who, when still a child, memorized the words attributed to Solomon, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). But the Scriptures abound in such counsel. The psalmist writes, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding" (Ps. 111:10). It is in fact this capacity to combine knowledge in principle with practical intelligence which is the real hallmark of biblical wisdom (Hebrew: *chokma*). In the biblical view, knowledge is Wisdom's servant, and not the other way round. In the commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas,

a wise man in any branch of knowledge is one who knows the highest cause of that kind of knowledge, and is able to judge of all matters by that cause; and a wise man absolutely is one who knows that cause which is absolutely highest, namely God.

Hence, the knowledge of eternal things is called wisdom, while the knowledge of human things is called knowledge.

(*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 9)

Four centuries later, John Bunyan in his *Pilgrim's Progress* will adapt this biblical point with a characteristically practical emphasis. His character Faith observes that:

There is ... knowledge and knowledge. Knowledge that resteth in the bare speculation of things, and knowledge that is accompanied with the grace of faith and love, which puts a man upon doing even the will of God from the heart.

(*Pilgrim's Progress*, 1)

This is not quite to say, as does the philosopher Descartes, that “the sciences taken all together are identical with human wisdom” (*Rules for Direction of the Mind*, 1), though the identification of human wisdom with the sum of scientific knowledge has become more or less the ‘conventional wisdom’ of the secular university. It is rather to say that the intellectual disciplines, each of them, flow forth from the Wisdom of God, and best make sense when referred to their Ultimate Cause.

Knowledge of that Cause is therefore indispensable to the pursuit of all other knowledge, and all other knowledge, when rightly referred to Him, enriches that primary knowledge which the Scriptures call Wisdom. In the words of St. Anselm of Canterbury, “He is the intelligence of intelligence, the knowledge of knowledge, the wisdom of wisdom, and the truth of truth” (*Monologium*, 47). It is for this reason, according to St. Augustine, that the scholar will speak “with more or less wisdom to the degree that he has made progress in the knowledge of the Scriptures.” Neither, Augustine adds, “do I mean simply by reading them often and committing them to memory, but by

understanding them aright and carefully searching their meaning” (*On Christian Doctrine*, 4.5.7). At Augustine College, Scripture is not a light subject. It is central to our whole program of study. We begin with God’s Word and in the light of his Wisdom proceed to explore his Works and the words and works of men. These stories in their turn will furbish our minds with the means to carefulness and discerning insight, and thus advance us in our searching of the Scriptures.

Augustine, the great African bishop and teacher of the universal Church for whom our college is named, was among the early Christian writers who identified the Wisdom spoken of by the Book of Proverbs (especially the personification of Wisdom in chapter 8) with the *Logos*, the Word, from the beginning of John’s gospel (*Soliloquies, Tractates on John*). Augustine’s conviction was that Reason possessed of Truth will ultimately reveal the source of all Wisdom to be Christ (*Sermon 117.3*; cf. Col. 1:17). Moreover, Augustine says, unless God’s Wisdom in Jesus had condescended to adapt himself to our weakness we could not properly differentiate between the high wisdom of God and the low cunning of men. Consistently with the Apostle James in his Epistle, Augustine distinguishes between a wisdom which comes “down from above” and that which is “earthly, unspiritual,” even “devilish.” It is the Wisdom incarnate for us in Jesus – his example – which shows us the way to approach that which we try to understand in the world. He quotes the book of James:

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

(James 3:16–17)

“And thus,” as St. Augustine put it, “Though Wisdom himself was our home, he made himself the way by which we should reach our home” (*On Christian Doctrine*, 1.11.14).

## COLLEGIUM

This sense of ‘home’ along the way, of a consecrated place of learning for the family of faith, en route as we are through an often alien world, has been the heart’s desire of those of us who began the work to bring Augustine College into being. Most of us, as you will realize, are not only products of secular universities but have given the bulk of our lives to the service of public education. In that calling – for we all have felt it until now to be our primary vocation – we have endeavoured in various ways to bear witness to our true home, and to our own ultimate source of wisdom. Yet it has become increasingly difficult for many of us to feel that for our students the public university of the 1990s could be as it still was in some measure for us, a place for gathering much of that true Wisdom’s nourishment.

We became concerned. As we joined together to study and pray – faculty, graduate students, medical practitioners and pastors from the community – we ourselves were greatly nourished and renewed. Our Tuesday-morning breakfast studies, collegial lunches, and times of prayer soon became more plausibly our alma mater than the offices and classrooms to which we returned or, indeed, than the ivy-covered halls afar from which we had come. At the same time, we recognized that our fellowship of common purpose was, in various but evident ways, increasing that vitality and the resourcefulness of our witness to the secular university. Our students and even our colleagues began to see a difference. These mutually enforcing recognitions led us forward another step – to our commitment to expand our little collegium so as to put to

work the talents and the blessings entrusted to us, especially for the sake of these young people who have been wanting to make a serious exercise of their own intellectual gifts.

The Latin word *collegium*, from which we get the English word ‘college’, is thus appropriate to our school in several ways. Originally it signified a partnership or a body of associates engaged in a common enterprise: this could be a guild, a fellowship, or any kind of civic association. But in the time of the early church it came especially to apply to Christian religious foundations.

The 14th-century English translator of the Bible John Wyclif refers to “Christ and his colage, the Apostles” (1380). This much older idea of an original apostolic college composed of Jesus and his disciples gives rise also to the name of the college of Cardinals in the Roman Church. But the firm connection with Christ’s teaching as foundation is definitive for the common use of ‘college’ to signify, in the earliest days of university history, a society of scholars incorporated within or without a university.

Such a college was dedicated especially to Christ-centered learning. The College of the Sorbonne of the ancient University of Paris and the ancient colleges of Oxford and Cambridge began in precisely this way. Such a college, in John Henry (Cardinal) Newman’s words, was to respond to the desire of the churches that “their people should be taught a wisdom, safe from the excesses and vagaries of individuals, embodied in institutions which have stood the trial and received the sanction of the ages” (*The Idea of a University*, xxii).

In Scotland and in the United States and Canada a large number of denominational Christian colleges were founded on similar principles. And though many of these have sadly lost their original identity and been absorbed into the secular public university, their names and mottos

still bear muted testimony to a once lively commitment to apostolic obedience and evangelical witness. And a few colleges, let us be grateful for it, have not forgotten their apostolic roots; it is among these admirable few that Augustine College would seek to take its place and make its distinctive contribution.

What our new college has purposed is not merely to critique secular university education, nor to try to 'prove' its inadequacies to our secular counterparts in their own current terms. Nor do we intend to compete with the work of Bible schools, convent schools, or seminaries. Rather, we want to offer a type of *rich and foundational education* which, in the earliest days of the university, characterized Christian higher learning, and yet to do so in such a way as to fit out graduates to be *singularly productive in the life of the Church and in their work in the world now*. Our desire is for fit training for the mind and the heart, a rigorous and profitable diet for maturing young minds which want – and can already see that they need – a dimension of richness, integration, and unshyness about matters of truth. That these are matters to which most forms of higher education in North America today no longer afford much access is, of course, a material factor in the design of our curriculum and our proposed mode of study.

#### FOUNDATION & SUBSTANCE

Our curriculum is *foundational disciplines, historically and pedagogically integrated, grounded in the Apostolic faith that gave rise to the first universities and the formation of those disciplines*. Further, we propose to teach these disciplines by *intensive shared reading and direct intellectual engagement in seminar and discussion*, not by mass lectures or lectures on video. Our faculty-student ratio this year is better than 1:2 – 9 faculty and 17 students, not to mention our librarian, chaplains, visiting faculty, and artist-in-residence, all of

whom will have their role in keeping the spiritual priorities of our learning together before us. We will be reading from the works of the great thinkers of the ages, considering their scientific discoveries, learning to understand the complex beauty of their paintings, and singing their music of praise to God until these things become, in the end, our own. It will be a magnificent feast of both beauty and truth.

If on many other campuses this autumn the intellectual and spiritual fare is not always so rich, that too can be a subject for our thoughtful reflection. Perhaps we can, with sympathy and as a warning to ourselves, try to imagine why it is that universities and colleges once founded upon principles like our own departed from them so far as to be thoroughly opposed not only to Christ and the Church, but even to cultural remembrance of the witness to Christ and, at last, to the very idea of truth itself.

First of all, it is important for the sake of truth and for health in our own perspective that we see that the impulses which oppose witness to Christ today are not at all a peculiar feature of modern or postmodern culture. More than a century and a half before Jesus was born the Roman slave and playwright Terence alluded to the anarchic subjectivist character of human nature when he wrote (more succinctly than I can match in translation), *Quot homines, tot sententiae* – There are as many notions of wisdom as there are people with opinions. Or, as the Book of Proverbs has it, centuries earlier, “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes” (Prov. 21:2; cf. 16:2). But the biblical wisdom writer adds, as the cynical Terence does not, a stiff corollary: “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord pondereth the hearts.” That is, for the biblical writer there is a perspective of truth which judges mere opinion. On the biblical view

we are therefore deceived when we pretend to be relativists.

But the Roman poet still has something to contribute. He knew how much even the suggestion of objective truth can infuriate those whose central motive, even in what they call the pursuit of knowledge, is actually self-justification. *Veritas otium parit*, observes Terence – Truth engenders hatred. It is the first reflex of self-interest to deny that there is a universal fact which might oblige us to the interest of others, or worse, to acknowledge that we are not our own creators. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Few cultures, perhaps not even that of imperial Rome, could outdo ours in our idolatry of the 'self-made' man (or woman) – our pursuit of self interest at the expense of all other interests.

In his *Christian Critique of the University*, Charles Habib Malik reminds us that, as important as what is taught in secular universities is, what is presupposed by them may be moreso.

Because what is presupposed is often far more subtle and potent than what is explicitly taught, what you are silent about will pass as something so much taken for granted that you do not need to say a word about it, while what you explicitly put forward may be arguable.

“Therefore,” he sagely adds, “seek first what the university is silent about, and then you know the secret of the university” (70).

Well, let us think about this for a moment. It used to be, during the middle decades of this century, that the university was silent about its post-Christian presupposition that there was no such thing as objective truth. Now it is no longer silent on this point, because justifying relativistic lifestyles has become finally a more burdensome institutional concern than mollifying the mathematicians and hard scientists, most of

whose work, needless to say, absolutely depends upon the working postulate of objective truth. But there remains another related and possibly deeper silence in the university that has not been justified. This is because, for the very institutional survival of publicly funded universities, it cannot be. I refer to the cherished modern idea that higher education would solve most of our problems, that the right sort of 'liberated' education would usher in Utopia. One of the chief apostles of this view, a man once widely celebrated in the university for his educational philosophy and perhaps especially for his book, *Why I am Not a Christian* (1957), was Lord Bertrand Russell. In his *Aims of Education* (1926) Russell argued that:

A community of men and women possessing vitality, courage, sensitiveness, and intelligence, in the highest degree that education can produce, would be very different from anything that has hitherto existed. Very few people would be unhappy. The main causes of unhappiness at present are: ill health, poverty, and an unsatisfying sex life. All of these would become very rare. Good health could be almost universal, and even old age could be postponed. Poverty, since the industrial revolution, is only due to collective stupidity....

Russell's book became a humanist credo for many in the post-Christian university, a credo upon which many based their curriculum, wrote their books, and staked their institutional futures. But in the intervening years, despite a twenty-fold increase in the percentage of our young people receiving more or less the kind of education Russell envisioned, it has not turned out to be the case that “very few people” are unhappy. Sexual liberation has created its own dystopia, the gap between the rich and poor widens world-wide, and in the richest culture the

world has ever seen most of the resources of medical advance goes into trying to control (or mask) the wages of sin, which is still death.

And never has there been less empirical evidence to suggest that education qua education, even amongst those vital, sensitive, and intelligent “in the highest degree that education can produce,” has produced adequate resistance to human degradation and palpable evil. Arguably the best educated generation in the history of the modern world was that which came to maturity during the Third Reich. Yet they could march men, women, and children into the gas chambers and ovens and within hours attend concerts with music by Mahler, Mozart, and Brahms. Afterward they could discuss Goethe and Nietzsche with a critical competence that many a professor might envy. Nor has it been evident, of late, that Rhodes scholarships or higher degrees from Oxford, Harvard, or Cambridge have prevented political leaders in our time from approaching almost surreal levels of ignominy, tyranny, betrayal, and disgrace. That there is little value in analytical intelligence without the cultivation of moral intelligence is perfectly apparent to the cobbler, the bus driver, or the farmer in his combine bumping along in the frosty night. But it is not admissible to say so, at least officially, among the disciples of Bertrand Russell, or by those whose heavy burden includes maintaining his myths in the public university.

We, who are setting out on a different foundation ought not to look on this state of affairs so much in judgment as in compassion, and with much self-scrutiny lest we also should be tempted by whatever gradualism to forget what the post-Christian university has learned, perhaps too late. We all need a Truth which is bigger than ourselves. We need to remember, with the faithful saints of all the ages, the wise counsel of Scripture, that it is folly to claim to be wiser than

we are (Rom. 12:16), to be, even for a moment, “wise in our own eyes” (Prov. 3:7).

In Shakespeare’s comic play *As You Like It* the witty character named Touchstone echoes both Socrates and St. Paul when he says, “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool” (5.1.34). Well, dear friends, let Touchstone be our touchstone too, for in his own way he also points us to the Rock.

#### FAITH

Augustine, who so magnificently championed the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of Christ’s kingdom, warned that

because of the liability of the human mind to fall into mistakes, this very pursuit of knowledge may be a snare to [us] unless [we] have a divine Master, whom we may obey without misgiving, and who may at the same time give us such help as to preserve our own freedom.

*(City of God, 19:14)*

Freedom itself, we need to realize, depends upon the perdurability of authority, of objective Truth. One of the most productive things we can do to keep from being conformed to this world is to distance ourselves from its own licentious notion of freedom. If from that selfish individualism we are to be, as the Apostle urges, transformed by the renewing of our minds, it will be precisely so that we “may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). A key measure of our acquisition of Christian wisdom will be that we understand how to “freely obey” our sovereign Lord.

Let us remember, in short, to keep things in perspective – God’s perspective. Because it is his world, his Church, his wisdom at the fount of all knowledge, let us apprentice ourselves to learning in humility and with the utmost diligence of an

obedient heart. Yet even as we do so, let us remember that at best the “wisdom of this world is foolishness to God” and that what might be imagined as the foolishness of God is a higher wisdom than any of us can master. In this candour, as St. Ambrose puts it, resides the unmatched freedom of the truly wise, the seeker after truth (*Letter to Simplicianus*).

Dear students, junior colleagues in our little collegium, brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ who would be wise: what we call you to this day is that to which we find ourselves to have been called: a pursuit of wisdom, the wisdom of Christ, and its celebration through the centuries. We invite you to development of a dedicated life, focused not on the self but on the community of faith around the world and across the ages, so as the more richly to live and serve the Wisdom of the Ages, the Author and Finisher of our Faith. You are not here to be ‘clients’ or ‘consumers of an educational product’. You are to be members of a body, a body whose work it is to be equipped

for ministry to others, building up the larger body of Christ, until, as the Apostle concludes, we all of us together come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:12–13). Ours is not an individualistic but a common community goal.

There is no division here between faith and intellect. Belief is not for us a barrier to knowledge but its very port of entry. In his trenchant summary of the philosophy of Christian education propounded by St. Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury said what we too would say this day:

*credo ut intelligam* – I believe, in order that I may come to understanding.

This is our scholars’ motto, the motto of Augustine College. We invite you to make it yours as well.

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