

Valedictory Address | Class of 2002

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Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Genesis 3:1-7, RSV

This passage, from the third chapter of Genesis, may seem simple enough to many; just a straightforward narrative, or, as many would say, nothing but a primitive myth, of interest only to those still burdened with such antiquated concepts as sin and evil. But this year we, as Augustine College students, have learned that this passage, like the many other Scripture passages we have examined, is not simple. It is both true and deep, speaking the truth about the human condition and explaining the way things are while still leaving many questions to ask, as we attempt to discover the passage’s full meaning.

Why did Eve eat the fruit? Why did Adam? Whose fault was it? What sin did they commit by

eating: disobedience, pride, ingratitude, gluttony, or all of the above? Was the cause of sin simply ignorance? Were they bound to sin because they possessed free will? Why do we even have evil?

What does the Fall show about our present human nature, our desire to be our own masters, to do what is right in our own eyes, our desire to rebel against God’s laws and escape the truth?

How much knowledge can we desire? Are the discussions and courses we undertake at Augustine College mere sophistry, classes without true meaning, usefulness, or Christian value, concerned with knowledge we are not meant to have?

Such questions were discussed and debated throughout this year, not just in class but while cooking lunch, playing ping-pong, and trying to write essays at three in the morning. Perhaps that gives some idea of what Augustine College is like, although it is, to be sure, a place rather impossible to describe.

In talking to friends, family, and others we met the same question would be asked again and again: “What is Augustine College?” It was always difficult to come up with a satisfactory answer. We would give a range of responses, describing it as a Liberal Arts program, as a history of the West, as a foundational year, as a year studying great books, or sometimes simply describing the courses. But whatever answer was given we never felt that the true essence of Augustine College was being conveyed.

Expressing what this essence truly is can be a very difficult thing but even a cursory examination of the College suggests that there is something quite unique about Augustine. To begin with, it is in a

house. There is an attached classroom, to be sure, but it is still a house, not an ivory tower, nor a factory of learning. It is a community, where students eat their meals and do their laundry, as well as their essays, together. The students themselves are an odd bunch, similar and dissimilar, all with a love of learning, but also possessing many other likes and dislikes. Some are enamoured of mountains, others with juice, karaoke, *Reader's Digest*, or kittens. The professors, too, are a curious lot, each teaching in their own way with their own quirks. Moreover, these professors do not teach for the pittance of a salary that they receive but for the joy of teaching, the joy of engaging with eager (though sometimes sleep-deprived) young minds, a joy often missing from the secular university.

The greatest sign of the unique nature of Augustine College, however, is the influence it has had on all its students. I think every person in this year's class will be able to say, along with all the alumni, that our year at Augustine has profoundly changed us.

It has changed our entire outlook on life. From the way we read the Scriptures to our conception of math to our understanding of Latin to our knowledge of music to our love of philosophy and literature to our grasping the compatibility of science, medicine, and faith to our appreciation of art, Augustine has changed us in every way.

In our Art and Theology in the Christian West course we have seen the force of Giotto's *Lamentation*, the deep, gruesome sorrow and the radiant joy of Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, the silliness of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*, the humour and great relief in Jan Van Eyck's *Jonah and the Whale*, and the deep forgiveness expressed by Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*.

Our course in Science, Medicine, and Faith has revealed to us the complexity of lobster's eyes and

of the Aristotelian universe, offered an examination of the Sermon on the Mount, and showed us the many ways in which we are all illiterate, innumerate barbarians.

In Philosophical and Literary Classics we have pondered Descartes and his dreams, marvelled at how Leibniz and his followers fail to convince anyone (this speaker excepted) that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and wondered why the word tragedy means goat-song in the original Greek.

Music and Culture in the Christian West has introduced us to the music of Gregorian chant, Palestrina, Purcell, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and the compositions of Messiaen, which may or may not be music. In Latin class we have memorized multitudes of cases and declensions, or at least tried to – nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, vocative – and heard Cicero denounce Catiline *ad nauseam*.

The History of Math course, meanwhile, has taught us about Egyptian surveying, the Fibonacci series, the golden mean, the loss of certainty in mathematics, spiders, castles, and false dichotomies.

And we have read the Scriptures, thematically, through the concepts of creation, visitation, and recreation and alongside commentators from Augustine and Chrysostom to Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, and Barth. They, along with our teachers and fellow students, have served as interlocutors and debaters in our discussions about the Fall, sin, evil, goodness, man, woman, heaven, and God.

Augustine College has, through all this, helped us to begin what David Jeffrey, in the commencement address of Augustine's first year, called an "apprenticeship to wisdom." We have learned many facts concerning Western culture and in each of the various disciplines, but we

have also, hopefully, been given wisdom as well.

We have seen how the various disciplines fit with each other and we have also explored their foundations, the bedrock of each area not just the contours of their surfaces. We have also started to acquire the skill of discerning the trivial from the abiding, though we all certainly have a long way to go.

Moreover, as well as learning what we do know, we have learnt what we don't know. It is impossible to come anywhere near to a full or deep understanding of the West in one year. Instead, we have just taken the first tentative steps along the path leading to such an understanding. We now have a better idea of how much is left to learn and, our appetites whetted, we will continue on our journey.

Augustine College's ultimate purpose, however, is not merely to give us some knowledge or a few scraps of wisdom but to point us to the source of all wisdom. Being taught from a Christian perspective with Christ as the centre of all things, we know that our courses have not been mere sophistry, because they have had, as their end, the ultimate end: knowledge of God.

Augustine College has helped us to fulfill the admonishment of Colossians 2:7 to "live in [Christ Jesus], rooted and built up in him and established in the faith." Augustine has aided us in developing our roots by giving us firm ground in which to put them, both the Rock that is Christ and the deep, though not always solid, soil of our Western Christian tradition.

It has helped us to establish ourselves in our faith by examining what our faith is, and how it, and its sources – Christ and His Word – have been understood throughout the history of the West. It has also shown the transforming power of Christ on all of our lives and on entire cultures.

This power is seen, for example, in the conversion of Ireland where the savage tribes who carried men's skulls on their belts as trophies became a Christian people who built monasteries, created breathtaking manuscripts, preserved knowledge, and sent out missionaries to Scotland, England, Germany, and much of the rest of Europe.

For the aid Augustine College has given us, as we work to transform our lives and renew our minds in conformity to Christ, we, as students, have many parties to thank. First of all we thank our professors for their constant efforts and attention, their patience at our sometimes tardy assignments, and their readiness to respond to all our frequent queries. Then there is the entire Augustine College community: all the alumni, the board members, and other supporting persons and families in Ottawa who have made us feel welcome in this city and aided us through their hospitality, wisdom, and prayers. We also thank our own families for their support through encouragement, prayer, visits, and counsel. Our greatest thanks must, however, go to God, who helped guide those who founded this institution and helped guide each of us here to Augustine this year. He sustains Augustine College as He sustains each of us.

As we thank God for what we have received at Augustine College, it is important to remember that He is also active in the larger world, that He has not abandoned His creation. We have heard much this year of how our Western culture has lost its heritage, its knowledge, its ability to think, and its faith. Yet, despite the many problems we face, it is important to remember that we are not left without hope or without a Comforter. We have the Holy Spirit, who will help lead us into all truth, and we know that history is, in the end, a divine comedy in which God's Providence brings good out of what was meant for evil and

will make all things new. Our contemporary situation may often appear dark and gloomy but sometimes, as Ian Hunter pointed out in a lecture earlier this year, it is merely the last darkness because of the radiance of dawn. Arise, shine, for thy light is come.

Augustine College, regardless of whether dawn will clearly burst forth in our lifetimes or whether we must wait for the light of heaven, serves as a beacon of that Light, the light which enlightens all men. It has helped us, as students, to find our way and it has served to proclaim the Word of God, the word of truth. And, in being faithful to its mandate to speak God's truth, Augustine College is promised that God's word once spoken will bring forth an effect in keeping with God's purpose. As Isaiah 55:10-11 states:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

RSV

As long as Augustine College continues to speak truly and proclaims the Gospel we know that it will accomplish something, even if we are not always sure how or in what way. This year there were only five students. Perhaps none of us will go on to what the world considers to be great things, but, wherever we are, we will remember and share what we have learned at Augustine and we will, of course, encourage others to attend the College.

So, as students, our challenge is to take the knowledge and wisdom we have been given and use it. We are to go forth, proclaiming and defending the Gospel and the truth which we

have been given, knowing that although we may feel alone at times, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses standing, as we do, both at the end of two thousand years of Christian tradition and alongside thousands of other defenders of the faith. Augustine College has helped us prepare for the war we are called to wage, and now, as we leave here, we must prepare to do battle apart from this institution, as warriors in the faith.

We know, however, that we have not been cut loose from the Augustine College community. We will now be alumni, able to pass on any advice we have acquired to the next class, and help them as we have been helped.

I would like to end with a poem offering hope amidst the bleakness, disease, and death we see so often in our modern world. This poem, by Gerard Manley Hopkins and entitled "God's Grandeur" reminds us that the world is ultimately God's, not our's, not the devil's, and that He has not forsaken it, nor us.

God's Grandeur

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the
soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings.*

In the end all our questions will be answered and we will return to something even better than the garden we lost: to the holy city of Jerusalem

where we will have the tree of life and true knowledge, where we will know as we are known, and where we will see God face to face.