

Lonergan and St. Augustine: What Lonergan owes to St. Augustine

by Br. Dunstan Robidoux OSB

Four points of inspiration. First, the importance, the centrality of our self-understanding and self-knowledge. Augustine's *Confessions* emphasize the importance of self-examination (adverting to our experience of self: how we have proceeded through life and how we have responded to the temptations that have come our way). Desires, decisions, and motives are considered and pondered. Augustine's *On the Trinity* emphasizes the priority of working toward self-understanding: early in Book 5 or Book 8, he speaks about how persons will dedicate their lives to understanding things that exist outside of themselves but who would prefer not to try to move toward any growth in self-understanding. Adequate self-knowledge is the most difficult kind of understanding to achieve but it is most necessary. In Lonergan's understanding of human bias, the worst kind of bias or prejudice is a deficiency in our emotional or cognitive life that we could be totally unaware of. We refer to a scotosis or blindspot.

Second: Augustine's understanding of consciousness (our inner experience of self). Although Augustine does not speak about consciousness in the language that we use, he speaks about memory in a way which refers to an awareness or a knowledge of self that is somehow already given and which refers to everything which has served to make us the kind of human being that we happen to be. Two notions of presence or two notions of object are referred to: external presence (the presence of external objects which we sense); and internal presence (the presence of internal objects which refer to inner events that we experience as they exist within our souls, within our subjectivity).

Third: the priority of love where who we are as human beings or how or what we become as human beings depends on what we love. What we love determines how we think and act: what we want or intend creates an orientation in our souls and, by this orientation, all other things are governed. The different things that we love determine different orientations and, from these different orientations, different patternings of our consciousness. Love of art grounds the formation of an artistic consciousness; love of understanding and truth grounds the formation of an inquiring consciousness. The priority of love points to a higher level of conscious activity which transcends concerns that are solely determined by a love of understanding and truth for its own sake. Our lives are ultimately orientated to the living of some kind of moral life which relies on understandings of truth and knowledge but which is concerned with questions of union and communion: being with other persons which includes being with God.

Fourth: human history as a dialectic between contrary, contrasting loves which is expressed in the ups and downs of human history in a history that reveals not only what human beings are able to do but which also reveals the extent of human impotence and the need for a resolution of human difficulties that relies on a solution that comes from God. The inadequacy of our created acts of human understanding is revealed. We cannot move another person from one point of view to another point of view by simply engaging in rational argumentations of one kind or another. As valuable and as necessary as is the existence of rational argumentation and the development of a rational culture, rationality can operate in a manner which acts against itself if its context is a truncated understanding of our human cognition. A truncated understanding of human cognition leads to a truncated understanding of the human subject: we cannot understand how a large number of variables interact with each other. Hence, if an understanding of human cognition acknowledges the self-transcendence of the human spirit, this self-transcendence acknowledges the need for our human understanding to go beyond itself. We move from experiences of understanding and truth toward an acknowledge of mystery as a key dimension of life and meaning. As persons, we become more open to realizing that a

higher order of meaning exists: a higher order which does not exist as a product of our human actions but which has somehow been given to us as a gift: a gift that we can participate in and enjoy. We can attend here to Lonergan's philosophy/theology of history: progress, decline, and redemption and see how it jives with Augustine's understanding of human history.