

LENSES OF SELFHOOD IN THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION: A PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL ANALYSIS

By

Emmanuel U. Oramah, O.S.A., Ph.D

Augustinian Institute,

Makurdi, Benue State

emmaoramah@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Augustine gives us a rich foundation on which others have taken off on issues that promote the quality of the human person (life) in relation to the society and to God. He equally provided a psycho-spiritual base that facilitates a robust consideration of selfhood in the context and spirit of humanism. Our discussion here in trying to unbundle the topic in discussion begin with the conceptual understanding of selfhood/personhood and finally extricate those Augustinian themes that shed light on the attainment of selfhood with particular reference to the confessions, Rule of St. Augustine and related works available. The lenses through which an individual could attain selfhood or distinctive character include but not limited to the interiority path, friendship dimension, community dimension, and intellectual dimension.

Keywords: Lenses, Selfhood, Augustine, Augustinian, Humanism, Psycho-Spiritual

Introduction

The human person occupies the central position in the field of humanism. In consequence, humanists and social commentators pursue relentlessly those issues, thoughts, or policies that advance and promote the personal and collective development of people in every culture and epoch. The activism so to say is a constant pointer to or an obvious reminder of the fact that humanism or actions that add to a better quality of life of each individual tend to transcend every culture, race, religion, and philosophy. In other words, the human person and those things that help to shore up or uplift the same person are seemingly universal and invaluable and consequently need to be pursued with all vigour and tenacity. In effect, no system can reduce the human person to mere object and still remain relevant to humanity as well.

The human person was no less commented upon in the writings and output of St. Augustine. Thus, Augustine was a humanist per excellence due to the seismic effects of his thoughts and the prominence he gave the human person in the 4th century has remained and continues to remain relevant and influential in all ages.

Being considered among the forbearers of humanistic thoughts and consideration, Augustine gives us a rich foundation on which others have taken off on issues that promote the quality of the human person (life) in

relation to the society and to God. Thus, Augustine equally provided a psycho-spiritual base that facilitates a robust consideration of selfhood in the context and spirit of humanism. Our discussion here in trying to unbundle the topic above begins with the conceptual understanding of selfhood/personhood and finally extricate those Augustinian themes that shed light on the attainment of selfhood with particular reference to the confessions, Rule of St. Augustine and related works available. The lenses through which an individual could attain selfhood or distinctive character include but not limited to the interiority path, friendship dimension, community dimension, and intellectual dimension.

Concept of Selfhood

Selfhood is conceptualized as a state of having attained a somewhat distinct identity aided by some therapeutic factors or indices. Thus, the person possesses an individuality/character that permeates every action and conduct. What is involved is a progressive and a purposive movement toward personal and individual differentiation which must not be impeded but allowed to become a reality or actualized. The therapeutic factors or indices that are expected to aid the attainment of selfhood are myriad but our attention is drawn to some that are particularly Augustinian-oriented and also universally tenable.

The Interior Dimension

The human person is prone to hold tenaciously on the external reality outside of himself/herself. But the futility of finding satisfaction and completion from the external reality has been acknowledged and put forward by many philosophers and theologians alike. The ephemeral nature of the external world seems to put pressure on the human person to redirect his/her attention to the internal sphere here the individual is expected to encounter himself/herself. The Socratic appeal “man know thyself” thus become the threshold for that constant invitation to engage in a journey of interiority that will ultimately lead to genuine self-discovery (Oramah, 2014).

Interiority which is a proper Augustinian heritage thus become a veritable psycho-spiritual exercise and route for attainment of distinct identity or character that should animate one's action or behaviour in all contexts. Its effects are seen in the resultant self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-discovery that seem to suggest that one has come home to his/her true self which is distinct and different from others. This may underscore Augustine's insistence on the need for individuals to constantly go within themselves. He wrote thus:

Do not go outside of yourself, but turn back within; truth dwells in the inner man; and if you find your nature given to frequent change, go beyond yourself (The Rule, pp 2-3)

Such exercise could lead to character identity formation. Invariably when an individual character is supported by the power and reality of self-transcendence, a positive dimension has been mobilized or activated. This actually supports the idea that restlessness, even when we have won our worldly triumphs, is proof that we were in fact made for something more than the world (Sheen, 1998).

Friendship Dimension

It is acknowledged that however much Augustine wanted to find rest in God, he could not live without his friends (McGuire, 1988). Trading the path of friendship as a royal path to human completeness was original to Augustine. It is, therefore, interesting that but not entirely out of his nature because after his whole-hearted dedication to Christianity, Augustine made reference with approval of Cicero's own definition of friendship as "agreement about matters human and divine together with benevolence and affection" (White, 1992). The word "agreement" does preclude the desire and tendency to act and behave unilaterally on issues that affect the generality of the people. Such action is always a failure to accord existence to others that should be seen as friends indeed. Therefore, it remains a sad commentary on the supposedly collectiveness of minds and hearts that should animate the human existence and connectedness. It is a failure to recognize our individual and collective incompleteness as well. Reasoning along the same line, McFadyen (1990, p.14) notes that "human being is distorted unless there is recognition of individual and communal incompleteness and inadequacy...".

Friendship has a distinctive effect on the human person. Friendship allows the extension of the human person. The elasticity of the human nature is endlessly manifested or made visible in friendship that genuinely develops among individuals. All is invited to participate in it without let because an individual discovers himself/herself in relationship which friendship helps to make concrete. In discovering himself in friendship, the individual equally discovers his dialogic nature. One fact that cannot be denied is that while relating to others as subject of communication with particular identities, one commits to engage in a permanent dialogue which, in principle, has no limits (McFadyen, 1990). The limitless of the dialogue finds expression in the community milieu. The pre-eminence of friendship lie in the fact that it predates community existence. Friendship must be formed for community to begin to exist.

Community Dimension

The limitless nature of the human spirit in dialogue finds a home in the community of persons. The uniqueness and irreducibility of ones' personal identity finds a forceful expression in community experience. Community life here is not blind conformism or collectivism if the distinct and personal identity of each person should have a meaning. The ideal of Augustinian community is the constant union of hearts and minds with intent upon God (De San Martin, 2012). It does seem to appear that Augustinian-oriented community life spiritualises friendship that exists among diverse members of the community.

The experience of community life attests forcefully to the fact that we need one another, in the first place, because we are not self-sufficient (Mary, 1992). Therefore, a therapeutic community is desirable whereby elements of interiority, friendship and intellectual quest receive adequate consideration. These are sine qua non for the attainment of some appreciable level of growth and personhood for all and sundry.

In effect, the type of community atmosphere that is being canvassed would be one that is an admixture of the traditional and the liberal elements of community life. What could become the result would be a community that helps an individual express his/her dialogic nature and also grow holistically and distinctively as well (Oramah, 2014).

Intellectual Dimension

Ardent fidelity to our origins cannot be limited solely to community life and experience as a path for selfhood or distinct character formation. We must keep alive and not underestimate Augustine's genius as an intellectual colossus (Choi, 2013). Toward becoming effective persons in the context of evangelization, we must necessarily follow the example of Augustine and our forbearers as the Rule of the Augustinian Order admonishes thus:

We should have the greatest concern about the study of all arts and disciplines, both human and sacred, by which we may contribute to the good of the church, ourselves, and human society (Rule, n. 124).

And

If anyone in our Order is endowed with proven ability in a certain technical or scientific skill and is able to apply that ability effectively, his undertakings should be encouraged as far as possible (Rule, n. 131)

The intellectual apostolate is distinctively Augustinian. As such, the flowery of individuals through the intellectual path should attract the support and encouragement of all. Paying lip service or playing the ostrich to the intellectual development of each person would seem to negate the urgency and priority which Augustinian heritage gave to education and scientific skill development. Education is inherently good and necessary to provide the path to acquiring distinctive character and formation. In view of the fact that everybody is required to follow those paths that lead to development and attainment of personal identity, the Augustinian Rule admonishes that “all the brothers, according to each one's ability, should acquire and perfect at least that degree of education that becomes men of their state in each country” (Rule, n. 126).

Concluding Remarks

The futility of the human quest arising from the incessant human desires has to be acknowledged always. There is always tension resulting from one's inability to satisfy or realize these desires. It must be acknowledged that feelings of tension and boredom are also the products of man's desire which comes from the realization that he has not achieved those desires. Therefore, the quest for personhood/selfhood remains alive despite all the ennui and boredom that may crop up.

The attendant restlessness of the human person following Augustine life's example portray eloquently that man is condemned to endless search for meaning and personal distinctive identity. The elusiveness of finding answers in the created order was attested to by Augustine's seemingly endless search for the Truth. The search or the quest is also the lot of modern person. It continues and remains a constant reality. But the humanistic belief in the ability of the human person to become, to grow, or to actualize one's potentials is more enliven and less gloomy to consider. On this note, the lenses or pathways (interiority, friendship, community and intellectual life) for attaining some elevation of the personhood (selfhood) have to be accepted and deployed or utilized always.

References

- Author, (1991). *Rule and constitutions of the Order of Saint Augustine*. Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press.
- Choi, J. (2013). *The core of Augustine's ideal in religious life*. Newsangle, 36, (13), 4.
- De San Martin, L. M. (2012). *The Augustinians: Origins and spirituality*. Rome: Augustinian Historical Institute.
- Mary, A. (1992). *The Rule of Saint Augustine: An essay in understanding*. Villanova, PA: Augustinian press.
- McFadyen, A. I. (1990). *The call to personhood: A Christian theory of the individual in social relationships*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oraham, E.U. (2014). *Community life and human personality: A psychological vision of integration and growth*. Benin City: Mindex Publishers.
- Sheen, F. J. (1998). *Lift up your heart: A guide to spiritual peace*. Bangalore: Asian trading corporation.