

In secret you will be repaid

St. Augustine was a “seller of words.” Prior to his conversion, St. Augustine was a professor of rhetoric in Rome, making money teaching students how to speak well and persuade audiences. When the great saint found his way to Christianity, he realized that he had to abandon his “chair of lies.”

Is it possible that speech and rhetoric, the gift of human communication, can be an obstacle to the life of faith? St. Augustine’s conversion appears to be one from rhetoric to Christianity. What’s behind this shift?

In the age of 500 million tweets per day, there are a lot of words proffered online to persuade, amuse and antagonize. A useful experiment might be to read the last three things you posted on social media and to ask what they are professing.

St. Augustine’s conversion from rhetoric to Christianity stemmed from his awareness that talkativeness, lots of arguing and professing, is akin to silence. Lots of noise or no noise at all contributes very little because it suggests an absence of love. Like St. Paul said, “If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1).

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words” (6:7)

But St. Augustine is a doctor of the church and without “The City of God,” the “Confessions” and his beautiful sermons, the church would be impoverished! True enough.

St. Augustine’s prolific output after his conversion represents a new understanding about how our style of communication says something very important about our relationship to God.

The dispersed self, the self that is present everywhere at once online, is in need of recollection. Far-flung photographs on Instagram and random thoughts on Twitter are slivers of the self in need of being gathered together again to make the picture whole. Who am I? What am I trying to say? To whom?

Recollection is the practice of gathering those things together again to see the self in full.

To read St. Augustine's "Confessions" is to hear the voice of a saint who has discovered how to be present to himself, and to God, once again. He is no longer dispersed, casting words for money in the marketplace of speech as a rhetoric professor.

He has discovered the humbling act of confession where God and self enter into an intimate exchange. No longer dispersed in the world, racing to publish the clever or intellectual quip for likes, the self is most at home in quiet conversation with God.

"When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt 6:5-6).

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