

Augustinian Passion for Justice and Peace: Love for Others

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First I want to express my sincere thanks to the organizers of this Augustinian Education Congress for the invitation to speak with you all today. It is a privilege to be in a space filled with so many men and women who are committed to the education and formation of students, within the Augustinian tradition. What I offer for your consideration this morning are reflections based on the peace and justice work we do here at Villanova and how we see this work connecting to our Augustinian identity.

I know you all have been winding your way around construction here on campus. If you were to take the normal route to Tolentine Hall, you would see a statue of the university's namesake, St. Thomas of Villanova.¹ You can still see it now, tucked beside a metal fence along the back of the monastery. The sculpture depicts this Augustinian saint as "father of the poor" a title bestowed to him for his tireless efforts to support the needy and vulnerable. In the sculpture, two impoverished youth are there in front of him, hopeful but guarded. One holds an empty plate. We expect that the saint will offer them something – food, medicine, money, a key to a room? St. Thomas's hand is outstretched but there is nothing in it to tell us what he plans to give. In his other arm, however, is a young child, Christ-like, with nothing, not even clothes, except he holds up the crucifix that is hanging around St. Thomas's neck. What the saint has to offer is the story of the cross: Human suffering is met with unimaginable love. But make no mistake, it matters what goes into that empty plate of the two youths. Even more, it matters that the injustice of their poverty is dismantled. We here on the campus need to figure out what that looks like, concretely in our context. St. Thomas is not giving us the easy answers. We will have to do the hard intellectual and moral work to fill plates and dismantle injustice. But what this Augustinian saint gives us is a reminder that at the root of this work is love, the love we see in the embrace of that child and the lifting up of the cross.

It is an inspiring and demanding example. I share this campus with that statue, and have the audacity to try to direct a Center for Peace and Justice Education. We try to teach a lot about empty plates and dismantling injustices, and about love. This Center for Peace and Justice Education has always taken very seriously that last word in our name, "Education." The concerns of justice and peace in our world require an intellectual engagement in order to be adequately addressed. Many of our students come to us with an unrefined notion of wanting to "help people." It is a good start but it needs development.

It needs training in the classroom. *Why are there such inequalities in our society and our world? How do they relate to political structures, to historic patterns of racial oppression? What institutions and social movements provide constructive solutions?*

1 "St. Thomas of Villanova, Father of the Poor." Sculpture by Anthony Visco.

The simple instinct to “help people” also needs training from real relationships – from the young girl who is struggling in the midst of her family’s economic upheaval, from the immigrant trying to provide for his family in the midst of a divided community.

A student’s instinct to “help people” is usually clearer about wanting to be a “helper.” It is less clear who the “people” are or even how we ourselves are implicated in systems that create their need for help. And so our Center for Peace and Justice Education works to complexify, contextualize, and humanize.

We do this in three main ways: through Peace and Justice classes, through co-curricular student opportunities for advocacy and service, and through public lectures and other events that deepen ideas and present models of lives committed to peace and justice. I will talk a bit more about each of these three, and in so doing will explore key ideas grounding an Augustinian passion for justice and peace.

1) Peace and Justice classes: the common good and the relationship between love and justice.

A central Augustinian insight with regard to peace and justice is the role of love. In his work, *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Augustine speaks of justice as one of the four ways to love God.² Justice is simply not possible without love. On one hand, it is a jarring claim. So often we associate justice with what is obligated as a matter of rights and duties. Such justice does not require affection; in fact, many times we fear that affection will undermine the pursuit of equity and fairness. While it has some merit, this account of justice is not adequate to the task. For Augustine and the Christian tradition in general, justice is profoundly rooted in the notion of right relationships. And with relationships inevitably comes affection. Justice describes our right relating to God, our loving of God . . . and justice describes our right relating to one another, our loving of neighbor. What difference does it make for an educator to teach about a justice that is so closely tied to love?

The classes offered by the Center for Peace and Justice Education are wide-ranging. Each year our Center offers around 18 classes, among them are course titles such as Race, Class, & Gender; Peacemakers & Peacemaking; Education & Social Justice; Nature of Genocide; History of Homelessness; and so forth. In addition to these, each year there are over 60 courses that carry the Peace and Justice attribute offered by other departments. Some you might guess: Political Science, Sociology, History, Philosophy, Theology. But others might be more surprising: Engineering, Nursing, Marketing. Combining courses from our Center and these other designated courses from across the University, students at Villanova can earn a minor or even major in Peace and Justice.

We work to keep our courses small enough for shared discussion, and more importantly, small enough to be a safe space. Safe to have misconceptions challenged, safe to hear the voices of those too often silenced, safe to find hope even as we confront tragedy. To the extent we can with 2-3 meetings a week for 14 weeks, we try to cultivate a community. One of my colleagues begins every class with time for 1-on-1 sharing between students. She tells them what a sacred thing it is to have such a space carved out to be together to think, question, and imagine. Her goal is not only for the students to learn the material, but for the students to learn what it is to be

² Augustine, *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Chap. 15, Sect. 25. Trans. Richard Stothert. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 4. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm>>.

present to one another, to learn something about each member of that class. And that makes a great deal of sense at an Augustinian university, where justice is not possible without love.

If individuals do not have the capacity to be in right relationship with one another on a small scale, it is absurd to expect that such persons can comprise a society where justice prevails. Augustine is clear and compelling: the duties of human society proceed from the principle of neighbor love.³ In her essay considering Augustine on justice, Mary Clark puts it beautifully: “Devotion to the common good is the sacred obligation flowing most immediately from God’s command to love one’s neighbor.”⁴ Understanding the common good is an essential piece of a Catholic, Augustinian education. It reminds us that the good of the community is inseparable from the good of every one of its members. In other words, humans only achieve their full dignity and flourishing in community. Given this, it is a matter of justice that all persons are able to participate, contribute, and receive the benefits of life in society. Thus, we speak of the common good as the sum total of those social conditions needed so that all persons can achieve their fulfillment. Justice demands these conditions – food, housing, healthcare, education and so much more. Augustine reminds us that our commitment to establishing these just conditions stems from the love of one another.

In my own doctoral studies, this lesson about love was key. With prior scientific training, I was poised to pursue my studies in theology with a focus on bioethics. But soon my passion waned. I realized that I had “no faces” in mind. There were interesting concepts in bioethics, but I was not connected to the issue through people, through real lives and struggles. I looked at the volunteer ministry work I was doing on the side, and I realized how profoundly I was being shaped by the men and women in the detention centers of Boston; I upended my research trajectory so that these faces could help steer me to do more authentic academic work in the pursuit of justice. This same lesson is crucial for the pedagogy in the Center for Peace and Justice Education.

I teach an undergraduate Peace and Justice course entitled, “Theology, Ethics, and Criminal Justice in America.” The course begins by engaging Scripture and theology in an attempt to reconcile divine justice with punishment, atonement, and salvation. We consider key ethical theories of justice and punishment, and then we move to examine the realities of criminal justice in the U.S., with special attention to racial and economic injustices. Students begin to understand the systemic crisis that is mass incarceration and they start to articulate how mass incarceration both illustrates and perpetuates social injustice in our country.

The success of the course hinges on the crucial role of love in the pursuit of justice. The statistics and theoretical material are important but were the course limited to these, students would leave unchanged, with knowledge soon to fade from memory. But the students in my course encounter people, faces, the stories of individual lives – and that makes all the difference.

A guest speaker explains the frustration and humiliation of re-entering society, in many ways a greater challenge than his twenty years in prison. We watch victims describe that they will never be whole again and bristle at the burden of being asked to forgive. We read from a man who today sits in prison on a life sentence; he recalls the selfless act of a fellow inmate which restored for him a sense of dignity and hope.

3 Augustine, *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Ch. 26, Sect. 49.

4 Mary Clark, “Augustine on Justice” in *Augustine and Social Justice*, ed. Teresa Delgado, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 4. Clark’s essay is also available online at: http://www.patristique.org/sites/patristique.org/IMG/pdf/63_ix_1_2_05.pdf

Most significantly, the course includes an optional service-learning component through which students tutor weekly at the nearby state prison. This experience transforms students in a way that nothing else can. What does the love of neighbor mean when we walk into a maximum security prison? On their initial visits to the prison as they meet the incarcerated men, my students come quickly to two realizations. First, they realize that these men are human beings. Next, the students realize that they were not actually expecting to find human beings there. In a paper for the class reflecting on this tutoring experience, one student wrote the following: “The vastness of the issues surrounding criminal justice in America is so overwhelming – who am I to think I could do anything about it in one semester? But then I think about how I felt during my Thursday mornings spent at [the prison]... Relationships. That’s what it comes down to. Relationships foster compassion and empathy... Compassion comes from recognizing the humanity in another person...I am leaving this semester with an entirely different view of the criminal justice system, prisons, and most importantly, of prisoners... I don’t think anyone would expect to walk into prison and leave with more hope in their eyes, love in their heart, and a better understanding of what it means to be human . . . , but that’s what this experience does. “

The reality and urgency of social injustice transforms students when it is grounded in the opportunity to encounter the neighbor. Justice indeed depends on love. They are not at odds with one another. It is the love of others - faces and stories known concretely - that compels us to seek the social conditions necessary for the human flourishing of all, that is, to seek the common good.

Augustine observed that we are better at seeking our own rights and needs – what is due to ourselves - than what is due to others. Thus, we need love to be able to identify with others and so seek their rights and needs as well as our own.⁵ Love is the basis for realizing justice, and justice is the basis for realizing peace.

2) Opportunities for service and advocacy: solidarity and the pursuit of structural solutions to injustice

As I noted, St. Thomas of Villanova was known for his extraordinary acts of charity. He opened his bishop’s palace up to the poor and hungry, offering a place to sleep to those without a home and serving meals for those without enough food. His generosity was so far-reaching and his example so compelling, that it has been said that by the time he died, he was the only poor person in his diocese. But the story of St. Thomas of Villanova is not simply one of generous giving. He is also praised for seeing the systemic problems that led to poverty and seeking to establish structural solutions to them. In addition to feeding and sheltering, he founded schools and created work opportunities.

At Villanova, our students have a multitude of opportunities to engage in service. Campus ministry offers weeklong immersion trips each semester – for example, working with Habit for Humanity or traveling to a house of hospitality for migrants along the US/Mexico border. There are also weekly campus ministry opportunities in our local region to serve in soup kitchens, shelters, and after-school programs. Our Office of Service-Learning, among other things, runs a sophomore service-learning community. These students live together in a common dorm, travel to their assigned service site each week, and enroll in related academic coursework. These community partnerships work with children in under-resourced schools or serve at a shelter for women impacted by domestic violence.

⁵ Clark, 8.

The formation that students receive before and during their engagement with these opportunities is meant to draw the students into serious reflection about the underlying causes for the poverty and vulnerability that they are encountering. How public schools and their funding suffer when we live in segregated communities with rich and poor far removed from one another. How international trade relationships contribute to dire economic conditions that many immigrants are fleeing. Many of our students find the parable of children in the river to be helpful. Probably some of you have heard it.

In short, if we are along the riverbank and we see a child floating down the river, we would jump in and try to rescue that child from drowning. And the next day, when we see that two more children are floating down, we would do the same. If every day we find that more and more children are floating down that river, it is not enough to respond with rescue efforts. We must also ask the question of why this is happening, where are they coming from . . . and we must send a party upstream to address the crisis there. This is the wisdom of St. Thomas of Villanova as well. He worked tirelessly to rescue his brothers and sisters from hunger, from homelessness, but he also attended to the social structures that generated such misery.

The Center for Peace and Justice Education supports a number of student organizations that are devoted to education and advocacy around specific social justice issues. For example, we have a Villanova chapter of Back on My Feet, an organization which uses running and accompaniment to empower those experiencing homelessness, to affirm their dignity, and to provide employment and housing resources. Students leave campus at 5:00 a.m. each Friday to travel to area homeless shelters and run side by side with participants in the program. During our annual Hunger and Homelessness Awareness week in November, we host a special Hunger Run on campus and invite Back on My Feet participants to join us for a jog here at Villanova.

The love of neighbor upon which justice is based is a love grounded in solidarity. It is not an act of generous condescension, with the giver standing above and apart from the recipient who is at the giver's discretion. Justice is concerned with empowering the other, while a condescending giver retains her power. She is the one who continues to hold the resources for social improvement – a kind of tyranny of generosity. But the love of neighbor is a process of standing alongside, as equals, being open to one another's stories, and searching together for ways to struggle against the social failures that generate poverty and suffering. This is the solidarity of Catholic Social Teaching and it is also crucial for an Augustinian approach to peace and justice.

That solidarity is never easy, but it can be especially challenging when the men, women, and children we must stand alongside are half a world away. They may speak a different language and have different beliefs and practices. And yet, because of the human dignity that we share, because of the sacred commitment we have to love as neighbor, we must make their causes our own.

At Villanova we have partnered with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) which is a part of Caritas International. Our CRS student ambassadors focus on different issues – fair trade, immigration, food security – and call our Villanova community to learn, advocate, and pray, standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the globe. These students have hosted vigils in our church for Syrian and Iraqi refugees – slides are projected on the walls to educate about the reality of the crisis, students are given paper to write letters right there in the pew to their legislators, the basket is passed for donations, we process toward the altar with candles and sign a banner to be sent to refugee camps where CRS is working. Another student group that is striving for justice through solidarity is Villanovans Against Sweatshops. These passionate

students have shared with great concern the conditions in the factories where gear is produced for Villanova and other colleges. Given problems in Nike's supply chain with regard to worker protections, they have called on Villanova administrators to terminate our contract with Nike, in keeping with the recent example of several other universities. Echoing St. Thomas of Villanova, the students are working to alter the structures that make these violations of workers' rights possible.

3) Peace and Justice Programming: the option for the poor and the injustice of omission

In bringing together love and justice, Augustine helps us to recognize the full extent of our obligations to one another. And this is significant because there are those who would view matters of justice and peace as simply being about noninterference, about negative rights. In this view, an injustice occurs only when we actively violate or injure another; we disturb the peace only when we commit an act of violence. But Augustine notes that we can fail the love of neighbor by our *omissions* as well as the by the acts we commit: "a man may sin against another in two ways, either by injuring him or by not helping him when it is in his power."⁶ Commenting on this point, Mary Clark observes that the "failure to love one's neighbor sufficiently, refusal to put oneself to inconvenience, and unwillingness to suffer in order to assist him is called by Augustine 'criminal,' a word generally descriptive of unjust acts of major proportions."⁷ With love of neighbor as the foundation, matters of justice and peace make demands upon us regardless of our level of responsibility in creating them. Augustine is clear: we sin when we do not give the help that is in our power.

So as noted in the previous section, we must search out social structures that create poverty and injustice. But we add to this here: we must also ask ourselves how we are failing to act, how we are failing to use the power we have. Linking justice and love of neighbor, we must especially wonder *who* we are failing to love. Who are we forgetting? Who has no place at the table? Who are the most vulnerable? The preferential option for the poor can serve as an antidote to this omission of neighborly love. This language first came to us from Latin American liberation theology but has since been integrated into the social teaching of the Catholic Church at large. The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable is a rich concept and among its many fruits it gives us a lens for seeing and a criterion for judging. Devotion to the common good, to the flourishing of all, means that we must look first for those who are the marginalized and oppressed. Who is missing? Who is hurting? When we decide how to allocate resources or establish policies, we must ask how they impact those who are most vulnerable. These questions are always within our power to ask and so we fail neighbor love, we fail justice and peace, when we fail to ask and attend to them.

Exercising the option for the poor takes practice and the support of a community that has integrated this lens into its core identity. It is a skill that can be taught and reinforced. As a Center for Peace and Justice Education, our job is to form students so that this lens becomes second nature. Who is missing? Who is hurting? Who are the most vulnerable? We form students through our classes and the opportunities they have in the community, but we also do so through our programming. Indeed, our programming reaches not only students, but faculty, staff, and members of the local community as well.

⁶ Augustine, *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Ch. 26, Sect. 50.

⁷ Clark, 5.

Bryan Stevenson – lawyer, activist, and visionary – spoke at our annual keynote lecture honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He brought into our community’s circle of concern the faces of the poor and vulnerable. For instance, he spoke of being a young law student, interning to assist poor death row inmates. On his first day, Stevenson’s task was simply to drive to a prison and deliver the message to an inmate named Henry that he would not be executed in the next year. Feeling nervous and unprepared, Stevenson apologized for having so little information to offer, but Henry rejoiced at the message, thanking him profusely. Because now Henry felt he could have his family visit him, knowing that they would not come and find his execution date had been set. It was a worry and reaction Stevenson could never imagined. As their meeting came to an end Stevenson went on to tell how roughly Henry was treated by officers, shackles too tight and shoved along the way; Henry could see how distressed Stevenson was about it – Henry said, “It’s okay, Bryan, just be sure to come back.” And then as they kept on shoving him, Henry just threw his head back and began singing a gospel hymn.⁸ We cannot know what justice truly looks like without getting close and listening to the vulnerable and the condemned. We will hear fears that we could not have anticipated, we will hear hopes that we must take to heart, and perhaps we will even hear a voice burst into song in the darkest of places.

Each year our Center, on behalf of the University, gives a Peace Award. Shortly before she was announced as a Nobel laureate in 2011, Leymah Gbowee of Liberia came to Villanova to receive our award. She knew intimately about the poverty and vulnerability created by war. Gbowee was forced to flee her home to escape the violence of Liberia’s civil war. She was 5 months pregnant with two toddlers in tow. Others who could not escape were brutalized, raped, and murdered. Many of the perpetrators of these atrocities were poor and vulnerable too. Many were children, coerced, even drugged, and incited to unspeakable violence. Out of this horror, Gbowee raised up the voice of suffering women – Christian and Muslim alike – she had the idea to gather together and pray for peace. Women, clothed in all white, sat in the fish market day after day. Hundreds even thousands put their bodies and lives on the line to say “Enough!” They forced the president and rebels to agree to peace talks and to remain in those talks until peace was established.⁹ These women knew the profound pain of war. They proved that there could be no future for Liberia if it failed to heed the voices of the poor and vulnerable who were being devastated by the war from all sides.

It is a privilege to be able to host the likes of Bryan Stevenson and Leymah Gbowee. We have some resources but there was also a good amount of luck and persistence mixed in. Even without hosting luminaries of justice and peace, programming can be thoroughly transformative. Each semester our Center hosts a peace and justice film series, selecting documentaries on various topics and processing with the students afterwards about what they have witnessed. One recent documentary featured the environmental cost of our materialism. Looking at the fashion industry and the manufacturing practices that support it, the film uncovered the stunning pollution that is generated by an industry catering to our endless demands. One scene showed this enormous pile of rejected articles – irregular products, surplus materials. It was mountainous and dumped with little regard for social and environmental consequences. Students saw the desperation of those who picked through that mountain, in the hopes of making a living.

⁸ For a written account of this story and other poignant experiences, see Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).

⁹ For a written account of Leymah Gbowee’s work in Liberia, see Leymah Gbowee (with Carol Mithers), *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* (New York: Beast Books, 2011). Also recommended is the documentary detailing the peace work of Gbowee and other women in Liberia: “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” (Fork Films, 2008).

After the film, the students were shocked and felt called to respond. It was a reality they had never considered, but one they were connected to by the very clothes on their backs. Who are the neighbors that we are failing to bother to love? Poor and marginalized persons and also the earth itself. God's creation made vulnerable by our indifference and inaction.

In lifting up the voices of the condemned, those suffering the atrocity of war, and the common home we have vandalized, we must take care not to paralyze our students with guilt or overwhelm them with the magnitude of the challenges. Augustine reminds us that the justice of the social order is deeply connected to our internal order. We confront the realities of injustice but not to shame us into action. We confront these realities so that we can know how to love better. We confront injustice so that we may enlarge our hearts. And perhaps this is the best measure of the Augustinian passion for justice and peace. Are we enlarging our hearts?

Concluding Remarks and Observations

In reflecting on the work of our Center for Peace and Justice Education at this Augustinian institution, I am reminded about the many ingredients that are crucial to our efforts. I say efforts, not accomplishments, because we have much yet to learn. We endeavor to serve the students and community well, but we are still experimenting, making mistakes, and trying to develop. Even so, here are four things that I think we might be getting right in terms of our approach.

- 1) *Our peace and justice education takes multiple forms.* It is curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular. It would not work if it were only in the classroom, nor would it work if it were only outside the classroom. This is intellectual work and it is work of experience, presence, and affection.
- 2) *Our peace and justice education is interdisciplinary.* Students from all the undergraduate colleges – Arts & Sciences, Business, Engineering, Nursing – can and do earn minors in Peace and Justice. Courses in all these colleges can and do carry the Peace and Justice designation. There is no knowledge untouched by the demands of the common good and the option for the poor. (For example, this fall the Math Department will offer its first Peace and Justice course.)
- 3) *Our peace and justice education is relational.* Our faculty and staff devote considerable time to getting to know our students. We talk about our Center as a family and each year we have a meal to connect current students with alumni. Our students are asked to know one another and to know members of our larger community. We honor our relationships with moments to console, celebrate, and encourage.
- 4) *Our peace and justice education is reinforced or undermined by institutional example.* Is the Center using its own resources responsibly? Are we being mindful of the marginalized in our own campus community? What food choices do we make for our events? And what of Villanova itself? Institutions must strive to embody the commitments of justice and peace if they seek to educate about it. Villanova has taken on significant sustainability initiatives; it has become a Fair Trade University; it supports a degree program for incarcerated men. But it is a work in progress. What is the way forward in terms of our contracts and the reality of sweatshop labor? How will our institution continue to respond to the concerns of minority students who do not feel the curriculum or campus culture is sufficiently welcoming or inclusive?

The title of this talk –“The Augustinian Passion for Justice and Peace” - was suggested to me and I find it so fitting. Passion connotes yearning – a seeking for something that we have not yet arrived at. Augustine himself, in talking about the virtue of justice, uses language of striving. I am thankful for that. When I tell people I direct a Center for Peace and Justice, they look at the world and say I have a lot more work to do. I do. We do.

The Augustinian passion for justice and peace must be realized in our educational institutions by faculty and staff who are striving to live this out, by students who are continually being invited to enlarge their hearts, and by the institutions themselves which must consider their own power to embody these commitments. The Augustinian insight about love and justice is as profound as it is timeless. Indeed, the scholar and activist, Cornel West, has said it succinctly: “Justice is what love looks like in public.” So we must work to figure out what it looks like to love the inmate, the survivor of domestic abuse, the child soldier, the exploited factory worker, the family without enough food. We must investigate the structures that make their suffering and marginalization possible and we must admit the ways we are complicit in those structures. We must listen carefully to the voice of the most vulnerable and discover who we have forgotten and the actions within our power that we failed to take. If we are not to despair in these challenges, we might take our cue from a statue of St. Thomas of Villanova. He will work to fill the empty plate and to dismantle the poverty by embracing and lifting up the *love* that sustains us in seeking justice and peace.

Discussion Questions:

What practices at your own educational institution serve to enlarge the hearts of your students?

As you consider the curriculum and the co-curricular opportunities, what voices and faces are missing?

How do the policies or choices of *the institution itself* embody an Augustinian commitment to justice and peace? In what ways might it do better?