


Sean Innerst
Augustine Institute in Denver, USA

DOI: 10.15290/rtk.2019.18.09

 0000-0001-6581-7300

Telling the Catholic Story Today: the GDC and its Augustinian Narrational Imperative¹ Augustine's *cor* Issue: *cor inquietum* to *cor requietum*

General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) number 39 requires catechists to narrate the events of salvation history, in order “to make clear the profound mysteries that they contain.” A positive response to this commendation of the Augustinian catechetical form by the universal Church and the imperative it carries with it, requires that we understand the narratio described in his work *De Catechizandis Rudibus*. In that work Augustine makes use of the famous theme from his *Confessions*, the *cor inquietum*, a fundamental element of his anthropology and a methodological principle for his evangelization and catechesis. That anthropological and catechetical principle of the restless heart serves as the foundation for an intensely personal form of catechesis, one attuned to the particular needs of the heart of each inquirer, as well as a universal norm for presenting the Gospel to all men and women, as the GDC makes clear.

Key words: Narratio, Catholic catechesis, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, salvation history, kerygmatic catechesis, Augustine of Hippo.

In his work *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (Instructing Beginners in Faith) Augustine raises the critical issue in every human life, how to move from the restlessness of life without God toward the complete fulfillment that comes from life in Christ.

¹ Small portions of this article first appeared under the titles “Augustine’s Christ-centered Catechetical Narration” and “The Christ-centered Plan in the *Catechism* and the Modern Malady of Meaninglessness” in *The Sower*, July 2011, Vol. 32, No. 1.

In the longer paper I submitted for this conference I chronicle the theological forces and schools of catechetical theory that seem to have impeded a more fulsome embrace by catechists of the wonderful revival of the Augustinian catechetical narration proposed by the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) of 1997. While that is a story worth telling, I thought that in the limited time I have with you that I would rather focus on the positive, on the reasons for embracing the narrational imperative issued by the GDC, on the benefits to be gained by following Augustine's example of narrative catechesis.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* at number 39 says, "Catechesis, for its part, transmits the words and deeds of Revelation; it is *obliged* to proclaim and *narrate* them and, at the same time, to make clear the profound mysteries that they contain" (emphases added). That is only the first of several references in the GDC to a form of catechesis, the *narratio* or narration of salvation history, that was a standard part of the initiatory practices of the fourth and fifth century Church.² His work ought to be of great interest to us because it represents a singular example from the ancient Church of what we call today in the RCIA the Period of Evangelization or Precatechumenate. As such, it serves as a model for a Christocentric new evangelization in our own day.

We are all (too) familiar with the famous phrase from (Book I, Chapter 1 of) Augustine's *Confessions*: "*quia fescisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*" (For you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless, until it rests in you). For Augustine, that phrase is not merely a "toss off," a fine sentiment, but a fundamental element of his anthropology and a methodological principle for his evangelization and catechesis. And that anthropological and catechetical principle serves as the foundation for an intensely personal form of catechesis, one attuned to the particular needs of the heart of each inquirer, as well as a universal norm for all men and women. And he shows this in his famous work on the first catechetical instruction *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (DCR), addressed to Deogratias, a Carthaginian Deacon who had asked for Augustine's advice on how to catechize those who are first approaching the Church for instruction in the faith. And he exhibits this in a particular way in the first part of the sample catechetical address he supplies to Deogratias, called in the classical rhetorical scheme, the *exordium*, the appeal for a hearing by a speaker, as well as in the first portions of his movement to the historical exposition or *narratio* of salvation history.

² See GDC 89, 107, 108, 115, 128, 129, 130 and 240.

In his transition from his introductory material in Part I of DCR to the two model catechetical addresses that he supplies to Deogratias, Augustine highlights the importance of the personal nature of the full catechetical address that the catechist is to offer to a first inquirer. In the context of a kind of apology to Deogratias for the ways in which the written work which he is presenting will depart from the greater vitality of the actual spoken address that he would normally offer,³ Augustine notes that the spoken catechesis will vary based on the type of setting, formal or informal; the person or persons to whom it will be delivered, few or many, educated or uneducated, city or country people, or a mixed crowd. Augustine admits that

I can testify from my own experience that I am swayed, now in one way, now in another, according [to] the person I see before me.... And it is in keeping with these various influences that my actual address opens and moves forward and comes to a close.

Although we owe the same love to all, we should not treat all with the same remedy. And so for its part, this very love is in pain giving birth to some, makes itself weak with others; devotes itself to edifying some, greatly fears giving offense to others; bends down to some, raises itself up to others. To some it is gentle, to others stern, to no one hostile, to everyone a mother.⁴

This final word – just before he begins his sample address – is a remarkable summary of just how important an issue this is for him. Here Augustine gives testimony to the importance of a methodological personalism, what we could call a pedagogy of condescending love. For Augustine this kind of nimble pedagogical response to the person in need of instruction, a complete willingness to respond to the particular place and needs of individuals, is intended to imitate the divine condescension. God comes down to share our humanity and to draw us up to Himself in the Incarnation, and so His accommodation to our human need must be imitated by the catechist in his accommodation to the needs of the one to be catechized.

This element of condescension or accommodation to the individual person is also one of the key features in the *General Directory for Catechesis*' description of the divine pedagogy. At number 36 the *GDC* echoes *Dei Verbum* in describing Revelation as “that act by which God manifests himself personally to man,” and at number 139 the *GDC*

³ “The basic orientation of someone dictating an address with a future reader in mind is quite different from that of someone speaking when the listener is actually present before his eyes.” *DCR* 15,23.

⁴ *Ibid.*

returns over and over to the term “person” to show that the divine pedagogy is an accommodation to the needs of human persons in order to invite them to a personal relationship with God, such that God “assumes the character of the person,” “liberates the person,” “causes the person to grow.” “To this end,” the *GDC* states, “as a creative and insightful teacher, God transforms events in the life of his people into lessons of wisdom, adapting himself to the diverse ages and life situations.” This adaptation to “diverse ages and life situations” seems to be just what Augustine is getting at in his own methodological advice to Deogratias, just quoted above.⁵

As Augustine begins his sample address he demonstrates just that kind of personal adaptation to the hearer in a playful, creative, and even endearing way. He imports Deogratias’ name into the first line of the *exordium* of the long model address: “Thanks be to God, brother.” (*Deo gratias, frater*, in the Latin.) In so doing, he puts a dramatic exclamation point behind his insistence on the personal quality of this catechesis as he describes it in Part I of *DCR* and again in the transition to the first sample catechesis.⁶

Catechetics

He then enters into a relatively long *exordium* which adds to this first personal touch a reference to the general anthropological principle of the **restlessness of the human heart**. So important to Augustine is this first portion of the address that, as William Harmless puts it, he “displays little hurry in getting on to the narrative [*narratio*],”⁷ which is the central portion of the this first catechetical address. As I have already noted, the first part of the catechesis, the *exordium*, is intended to prepare the inquirer to give the address a proper hearing. As I’ve just indicated, that involves knowing the personal needs of the individual hearer, but, as Augustine goes on to show, that also requires that the catechist understand and respond to the universal need of every human heart, the desire for **rest**.

⁵ For Augustine as mentor in ministry to Deogratias, see Edward Smither’s *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2008).

⁶ In using this phrase Augustine seems also to be giving a mirror image echo of the first words of *DCR*: “*Petisti me, frater Deogratias,...*” One is moved to wonder whether Augustine may have used this same sort of play on the name of other students in this first catechesis. See also Canning’s recounting of Christopher’s suggestion that this phrase is an ellipsis for a common liturgical formula and a common early Christian greeting in *Instructing*, 115, n. 157.

⁷ William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 140.

Augustine makes that clear to Deogratius (in his sample catechesis) by, in a sense, posing to his imaginary seeker the same question that Jesus poses in the Gospel of John: “What do you seek?”⁸ And he assumes the answer of his presumed inquirer: he seeks rest (*requies*), security (*securitas*), and happiness or blessedness (*felicitas*). He congratulates his fictional inquirer that he has chosen to seek things that will last, rather than those things that “one tiny fever can sweep... away”⁹ and which present only “illusory prospects of happiness.”¹⁰ Rather than pursuing riches or honors or the pleasures of the tavern, brothel, or theater

You, however, [Augustine says,] are seeking the true rest which is promised to Christians after this life, and therefore it will be for you to taste its sweetness and delight even here amid the most bitter troubles of this life, if you love the commandments of him who promised it.¹¹

This “true rest” (which represents a conflation of the three elements: *requies*, *securitas*, and *felicitas*) is the primary theme of Augustine’s address. It supplies the motive for the journey of faith that Augustine is inviting his hearer to embark upon. It will also serve as a segue into the *narratio* by way of the seventh day rest of the creation narrative. At 17,28 Augustine says, “It is this rest that is meant by scripture when it expressly mentions that, from the beginning of the world when God made heaven and earth and everything that is in them, he worked for six days and on the seventh day he rested.”

It is interesting to note, that with reference to the presence of the same important theme of rest in Augustine’s *The City of God*, Jean Danielou tells us that “we have here the two central axes of the thought of St. Augustine, – the progress of history toward the future world of glory and the progress of the soul toward the interior world of peace – the result is that the theme of the Sabbath is at the center of Augustinian thought.”¹²

⁸ John 1:38.

⁹ See Augustine’s treatment of *libido*, “the love of those things which a man can loose against his will” in his *De libero arbitrio* I, 3-4 where he uses the same figure of speech, explaining *libido* as the love for things that a mere fever can take away.

¹⁰ DCR 16,24.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956) 276. See Christopher (1946) *The First Catechetical Instruction*, 120, n. 152 where he notes that the same figure of oxymoron in the Latin of “For they wish to be at rest amid things that are neither stable nor lasting”

This suggests the Augustinian anthropology or psychology undergirding the Augustinian pedagogy. The famous *cor inquietum* (restless heart) of the human person which serves as the very impetus or purpose for Augustine's personal journey, as described in the very first words of the *Confessions*, is here called upon to introduce the inquirer to the *narratio*, which will speak to and answer the restlessness of his own heart. And so Augustine is suggesting (although the pedagogical design at play here wouldn't yet be evident to his fictional student) that the personal history of the inquirer – that search for the rest of ultimate happiness in the possession of the thing that ultimately satisfies every human longing – is paralleled by a sacred history which points the human heart toward the rest (or Sabbath) it seeks by showing how the whole of history is also a movement toward the final rest of the Saints in heaven (the eternal Sabbath). In short, Augustine is telling his inquirer that sacred history is the answer to the quest that is his or her personal history.

Catechetics

In this way, the two great Augustinian axes that Danielou refers to, the rest that each person desires and the rest that will be granted to the world at the end of time – which is an echo of the seventh day rest at the end of the creational week -- all converge. The whole purpose of the catechesis he is describing, then, is to draw the desire of the inquirer (for rest) into accord with the whole course of the world and its sacred history.

Further, by suggesting a litany of the possible contenders for human happiness: riches, honors, worldly pleasures, and even that Christian mediocrity which seeks worldly advancement by way of human (or even the divine) favor,¹³ Augustine reminds his inquirer of human

(*volunt...requiescere in rebus inquietis*) in 16, 24 can also be found in the famous phrase from the *Confessions* I, I, 1: *quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.*

This again suggests the second part of Danielou's "center of Augustinian thought," the progress of the individual soul toward the internal rest, and serves to corroborate his insight with reference to the *Confessions*, as well as the *City of God*. What this also suggests is that *DCR*, although a catechetical work, is very much a vital expression of the spirit that animates the whole Augustinian corpus. On this point, see also *Jerusalem and Babylon: A Study into Augustine's City of God and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities* by Johannes van Oort (Leiden: Brill, 1991) in which he boldly asserts that the *City of God* can best be understood with reference to the catechetical rubric supplied by *DCR*. In the same vein, Van der Meer says of the *narrationes* in *DCR* that they "represent the best thought of a great spirit in its simplest form." *Bishop*, 467.

¹³ He cautions against being one of those Christians who "look to find blessedness in this life, aiming to be more blessed in earthly affairs than those who do not honor God." *DCR* 17,26.

transcendence, that man is made for more than all these things which the realm of profane history provides.

This is not a mere moralism which aims at “scaring the hell” out of the seeker (although that will be evident enough in his final *exhortatio*), but a basic anthropology which asserts the nobility of the human spirit (even in its fallen state), which has important moral implications. It works to inform the inquirer about the deep things of his own heart, while framing his desire in a way that will make him attentive to the fact that his story is a microcosm of the macro-story, that God has arranged history to be the answer to his personal search for happiness. That happiness in its highest, graced form is blessedness or beatitude or what Genesis just calls “rest.”

The one who doesn’t just fear hell but loves God and becomes a Christian, Augustine says, “because of the everlasting bliss and perpetual rest,” “in this one alone [he says,] is the rest that *eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it come up into the human heart*, the rest, which God has prepared for those who love him.”¹⁴ And in this last phrase from 17,27 of DCR Augustine is saying that the eschatological *telos* or goal of Christian life will inform or color even our temporal journey. If we seek eternal rest, we will have that rest in our hearts not just hereafter but here, even in this life.

This pedagogical movement to arouse a desire for God and the eternal rest he can provide resembles what is called in Augustinianism the *victrix delectatio*, the ardor of love, which is that grace that enables us to overcome concupiscence and to win the victory of eternal life.¹⁵ It ought not to surprise us that this primary Augustinian theme should figure pedagogically in his *exordium* to the *narratio*. His *Confessions* is full of this kind of ardor, and his own conversion turned on just this sort of grace as it is expressed in that phrase from Romans 13 which he took up in response to the *tolle lege*:

not in reveling and in drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.¹⁶

¹⁴ DCR 17,27. The italics here, which are original to Canning’s translation, indicate that Augustine has inserted “rest” into St. Paul’s famous discourse on the “hidden wisdom of God” and the secret thoughts locked within the “spirit of the man,” which meet in the Beatific Vision, in 1 Cor 2:7-13.

¹⁵ See Winfried Bocxe, “Introduction to the Teaching of the Italian Augustinians of the 18th Century on the Nature of Actual Grace,” especially Chapter IV, “*Gratia Efficax* is a ‘*Victrix Delectatio*’ or an Ardour of Love by Which the Opposite Concupiscence is Conquered,” *Augustiniana*, Vol. VIII (1958): 356-396.

¹⁶ Romans 13: 13-14; see *Confessions* VIII, 12, See also Romans 7.

The whole episode of titanic struggle in Book VIII of the *Confessions* is hinged upon the fact that, as he says, “I was at odds with myself.”¹⁷ His desire for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, the whole pursuit of the philosophical life which had gripped him from that time in his late teens when he had first discovered Cicero’s *Hortensius*, and which had finally matured into a realization of the truth of the Christian faith under the tutelage of Ambrose, had been obstructed by his passions. His natural desire for the highest human goods, those sought by the philosophers, was insufficient to overcome his passions.¹⁸ And so Augustine finds himself in the *Confessions* in just the place of the fictional inquirer that he now addresses in DCR. His discovery of philosophy (as well as, we may assume, a whole flood of actual grace) had cured him of his own desire for riches or honors or the pleasures of the tavern, brothel, or theater, but He still needed the saving grace of a new ardor, one sufficient to enable him to “make no provision for the flesh,” and instead to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Catechetics

That is the same graced desire that Augustine now aims at inciting in his inquirer, an ardor, a love for God and the perfect “rest” that will enable him to successfully leave the world and all its false promises of happiness behind. As William Harmless aptly says of this important theme of God’s love, which is the source of the graced transformation that Augustine seeks in his hearer, “This message shaped the pedagogy.”¹⁹ [And, as an aside, this “new ardor,” a new *victrix delectatio*, a victorious love, is just the thing that Saint John Paul II had called for in the New Evangelization that we are called to join and serve, one new, “not in content, but in ardor, methods, and means of expression.”]

That Augustine’s *exordium* in DCR is the first part of a love-shaped pedagogy ordered toward ultimate happiness or rest is made the more evident by a glance at the short form of the *exordium* he supplies at 26,52 of DCR which consists of only two sentences, which I’ll quote in full:

Truly, brother, the great and true blessedness is that which is promised to the saints in the world to come. All visible things, however, pass from

¹⁷ *Confessions*, VIII, 10.

¹⁸ For a very different accounting of the events described in Book VIII, “true in the details, if quite false in impact” (61), see O’Donnell’s *Augustine: A New Biography*, 59 ff. See also Gary Wills, *St. Augustine’s Memory* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002).

¹⁹ Harmless, *Catechumenate*, 154. “Augustine stressed the affective dynamic within evangelization because he believed that no voice reached the ears save the emotion of the heart.” Of course, love is a thing of the will and not just the emotions, but the affective powers when rightly ordered will serve the will.

existence, and the ostentatious display of this world and its allurements and its excessive eagerness for knowledge will all come to nothing, and they will drag their lovers down with them in ruins.

This shows us again that Augustine's *exordium* is an appeal to rightly ordered love. The "rest" highlighted in the long version of his catechesis is that happiness or "blessedness" (*beatitudo*, the single term used in the short version) which is represented by the complete possession of that which love moves us to desire, but which our natural, fallen love is incapable of desiring articulately or effectively. The lovers of passing things can only end by seeing the things they love, as well as themselves, perish. The very contingency of these things means that they cannot yield rest in the fullest sense. The mere natural happiness we feel in the possession of passing things cannot be compared to the beatitude (or graced happiness) that we feel in the possession of eternal things; only this latter can truly be called rest.

Whereas the *exordium* of *DCR* stresses more the personal axis of the great Augustinian theme of the Sabbath rest, described by Danielou as "the progress of the soul toward the interior world of peace," the *narratio* portion of the full catechetical address stresses more the other historical axis, the "progress of history toward the future world of glory."²⁰ Augustine already begins the drawing together of those two axes in the *exordium* itself at 17, 28 when he associates the rest we each seek with the eternal rest of heaven, which is "meant by scripture when it expressly mentions that, from the beginning of the world when God made heaven and earth and everything that is in them, he worked for six days and on the seventh day he rested." He goes on to say, that the creation account gives "symbolic expression to the fact that, after the six ages of this world, in the seventh age as on the seventh day, God will rest in his saints."

In so doing, Augustine parallels the three trajectories ordered toward rest: human life spent seeking rest, the six-day creational week which ends in the divine Sabbath rest, and the six ages of the world which will end in a seventh age of rest enjoyed by the Saints of God, or, as Augustine puts it, when "God will rest in his saints." It is to this movement (which will be fundamentally typological) from micro (man's search for rest) to macro (creation and rest), to still "more macro" (sacred history itself and eternal rest) that Augustine invites the inquirer to be attentive and receptive.

Augustine goes on to provide an explanation for the cause of the restless heart of man by way of the brief interpretation he gives of

²⁰ Danielou, *Bible and Liturgy*, 276.

the fall. The original creation, which culminates in the rest of God, promised rest for man. The fall explains why man has not entered into that rest, why his heart is gripped by lesser loves. Sacred history will be the recapitulation of the original creation, in fact, a work of re-creation in Christ in the six ages of the world, which will yield the possibility of a final rest in God, both for each graced soul and for the whole of the new heavens and new earth.

In keeping with the Christocentric character of the catechesis which Augustine insists upon in the first section of Part I on *de modo* [on the methodology of the catechesis],²¹ it is Christ who makes possible the intersection or typological overlap of these three trajectories, the personal search for rest, the creational week ending in the Sabbath rest, and the historical/eschatological ending in the eternal rest.

For Augustine, it is the Word through whom the world was made who would have guaranteed the rest of Eden. This Word “is [Augustine says,] the Christ in whom the angels and all the purest heavenly spirits rest in a holy silence.” But because of the fall, men have “lost the rest that they had in the Word’s divinity.” “In his humanity,” the possibility of rest is regained for us.²² In this way, Augustine puts Christ in the central place in the *narratio* even before it begins. And to remind us of the purpose of its telling – that we might find our way to the rest of heart that we all desire – he ends his *exordium* and introduces his *narratio* with the words,

Thus it is that we should love the God who so loved us that he sent his only Son to be clothed in the lowly condition of our mortal existence and to die at the hands of sinners and on behalf of sinners. Long since [sic], indeed from the beginning of the ages, this profound mystery has been unceasingly prefigured and foretold.²³

The whole pattern of the *narratio* that follows will be aimed at showing that Christ is, in the words of CCC 450, “the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of man’s history.” According to Augustine, the whole of history, from creation to eschaton, is the story of the restlessness of the human heart, of the *cor inquietum*. And the only way that our hearts will find rest is by grace, by a *victrix delectatio*, which only God can provide us as He did for Augustine at that seminal moment of the *tolle lege* (take, read).

²¹ “And all of the divine scripture [and so also the *narratio* which relates it] tells of Christ and calls to love.” *DCR* 4,8.

²² *Ibid.*, 17,28.

²³ *Ibid*

The whole of the catechetical address presented in DCR is an inducement to both “take and read” the story of salvation – here, particularly, in the narrated form that Augustine supplies to Deogratias – and to yield to the grace that Augustine suggests that God has already supplied to the *cor inquietum* of the inquirer he addresses.

Augustine seeks to inform that response to grace by showing his hearer that in the end, only the love of God in Christ can make the *cor inquietum* a *cor requietum*, a heart at rest. And he does so by showing that the three trajectories of rest: of man, of creation, and of history, are to be thought of as one trajectory in the Word who made both man and the universe, and who guides the whole of history towards its culmination in the final rest of the Saints. If we but yield to His Providence and to the *victrix delectatio* which He will no doubt provide, we, too, can bring our restless hearts to rest in Him. For, in the words of the first and lesser known half of that famous phrase: “He has made us for Himself.”

Bibliography:

1. Bocxe W., “Introduction to the Teaching of the Italian Augustinians of the 18th Century on the Nature of Actual Grace”, *Augustiniana*, Vol. VIII (1958): 356-396.
2. Danielou J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956).
3. Harmless W., *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).
4. Smither E., *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2008).
5. Wills G., *St. Augustine’s Memory* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002).