

## NEO-PLATONISM IN THE THOUGHT OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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I chose for my semester project to work on the subject of "Neo-Platonism and the Effects on the Thoughts of St. Augustine", because St. Augustine has been one of those saints whom I have wanted to come to know more about, especially more about his early life, his conversion and his Christian life; and so when I read about the project and saw that he was a possible option I said to myself "this is a great opportunity to come to know the life of St. Augustine more in depth," since I really don't know much about him except the fact that "St. Augustine is known as the *Doctor of Grace*." His life though is so rich and powerful in itself that it wasn't possible for me to come to know everything about him, although I came to know a very important aspect of his life which was the time when he was introduced to Neo-Platonism, which actually helped him grow evermore in his Christian faith.



I learned through this project more about Augustine's interest which was focused on wisdom and happiness. There were, however, three obstacles to his pursuit. First, he could not yet see clearly enough to navigate the waters of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> With youthful exuberance, he ran headlong into the superstition of the Manicheans that masked itself with the promise of truth. As the mist cleared, he removed himself from the company of the Manichees, but became eventually drawn to the doubtful doctrine of the Academics, "one of the setting starts." His goal was not yet in sight and so his "bark tacked" back and forth while he tried desperately to get his bearing.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, he admits that he was temporarily delayed in his pursuit by the charms of a woman and his own lust for bodily satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> Finally the third element that kept him from jumping headlong and completely into the (pagan) philosophies life was the absence of the familiar name of Christ:

*"In so great a blaze only this checked me, that Christ's name was not in it. For this name, O Lord, according to your mercy, this name of my Savior, Your Son, and my tender heart had holily drunken in with my mother's milk and kept deep down within itself. Whatever lacked this name, no matter how learned and polished and veracious it was, could not wholly, capture me."<sup>4</sup>*

Above all, St. Augustine desired to be happy and with the aid of philosophy, he eventually learned that in order to be happy, one needed to be wise, for "No one is wise if he is not happy."<sup>5</sup> Happiness, he also discovered is not found outside oneself, but within for only there does one find the truth-that-lasts. Approximately Augustine not only read the Platonists books around the summer of 386 but also his acceptance of Christianity came about through the striking preaching of St. Ambrose. Later that same fall, as a result of his restful discussions and discernments, he composed in quick succession the treatises *Against the Academics*, *on the Happy life*, *On Order* and finally *Soliloquies*.<sup>6</sup> In both the "*Against the Academics*" and "*The Confessions*" it is shown "that Augustine at this time was deeply impressed by Neo-Platonism, and felt he could make a synthesis between it and the Christian Teaching."<sup>7</sup> As I included in the PowerPoint presentation "To the Church he looked as to an authority which he could always obey, and he accepted the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity. To Neo-Platonism he looked for the rational explanation of everything. He wished not to merely believe, but to understand... Authority was definitely represented by the Catholic Church. Reason seemed to lie with the Neo-Platonists, although he did not subscribe to everything that they said. From the way of authority he would never depart."<sup>8</sup> This last statement of his beautifully shows forth his full recognition and faithfulness to the authority of Holy Mother Church. He was once lost but then by the infinite grace of God he was found. He eventually came not only to know and understand the truth but he chose to live it and give witness to it with his own life.

This opportunity to learn and understand more about the life of St. Augustine will help me in the near future to show forth the greatness of this holy man to others, through both his theological and philosophical understandings. I will encourage them to grow in greater zeal for wisdom and the truth as St. Augustine. It is clear in the Church's canonization of this great man and her heavy reliance on his theology and works that he did not error in any significant form according to truth and Church doctrine. Therefore, holding on simply to the confidence of the Church, one can be quite certain that this great Saint was constant and firm in his principles and teaching throughout his whole life.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, and F. J. Sheed. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943. Print. 10. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *On the Happy Life* (386), 2.14.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, Ludwig Schopp, Denis J. Kavanagh, Robert P. Russell, Thomas F. Gilligan, Augustine, Augustine, Augustine, and Augustine. *The Happy Life ; Answer to Skeptics ; Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil ; Soliloquies*. New York: Cima Pub., 1948. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, and John Joseph O'Meara. *Against the Academics*. Westminster, MD: Newman, 1950. Print. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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