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Leadership and the Love of God

"I have faith in order to understand."
—St. Augustine

As one examines the philosophical foundations of leadership in contemporary Western culture, it is somewhat unusual to find the teachings of St. Augustine included among the considerations of current scholars. Many philosophers would argue that his thought does not merit attention, for, after all, he was more a theologian than he was a philosopher. Certainly, they would be correct in their assertion. Augustine relied more heavily on faith than he did on reason as he drew his conclusions regarding the nature of the universe. Others, on the other hand, would argue that Augustine's works include numerous considerations of a strictly philosophic nature. As political historian Ernest Fortin explains, by extracting these considerations from their context, one can easily discern what could be properly regarded as his political philosophy:

However, since Augustine himself . . . does not look upon philosophy as a self-contained and, in its own realm, independent discipline, or since he does not in fact deal with philosophy and theology as separate sciences, it seems preferable to respect the unity of his thought and to present his views on political matters as a single, coherent whole governed by theological principles.¹

It seems quite appropriate, then, to consider his thoughts concerning the nature of leadership, especially in this election year as candidates are most outspoken regarding the importance of faith within the leadership dyad. More important, not to acknowledge his contributions would be to ignore a body of thought which would serve as a significant stabilizing force for more than a thousand years as Western culture suffered the anguish of intellectual stagnation through the Dark Ages. Without question, Augustine provides an

important transition as we examine the philosophical foundations of leadership within our cultural heritage.

The thought of Augustine was heavily influenced by the teachings of his early Greek ancestors. Yet, the scenery that surrounded Plato and Aristotle bears little resemblance to the world in which we find St. Augustine some seven centuries later. Whereas the Greek philosophers had proposed leadership dyads consisting of small numbers of citizens ruled by philosopher-kings and virtuous men, Augustine was challenged to address the shattered remains of a crumbling Roman Empire. Small aristocratic city-states considered by Hellenistic philosophers to be natural in their origins had given way to an expansive, massive empire. Equally important, by the time of Augustine, the majesty that was Rome had ended. Caesar was no longer proclaimed to be God. The barbaric hordes from the North were in the final stages of destroying what remained of civilized society in Western Europe. This, then, is the political context in which we find Augustine at the beginning of the fifth century.

Two of the prominent philosophies of the period had their origins in Greece: Epicureanism and Stoicism. For Epicurus, the world had come into being quite by chance. There were no unifying principles. Known today as the Father of Hedonism, he taught that men not only *do* seek pleasure, but they *should* seek pleasure. The nature of man was not to pursue an *ideal good*. Rather, it was to avoid pain. Stoicism, however, was markedly different. It taught that divine reason acts on matter to provide order in the universe. Zeno had asserted that although man is *one* with this force, he can do nothing to alter it. The task of humans is to free themselves from their passions and emotions, their desires and wants, and align their wills with the will of the divine plan. If one is born to rule, that is one's fate. If one is born into slavery, so be it. If the empire falls, that is its destiny. Certainly, we can discern elements of Stoicism within the writings of St. Augustine.

Moreover, whereas the Greeks had provided him an understanding of the world based on the supremacy of reason, Augustine's intellectual framework regarding the meaning of law had its origins in Judaism and the Old Testament. At the same time, Christianity and the New Testament informed his teachings regarding the meaning of love within the context of human relationships. Each of these influences shaped his understanding regarding the nature of man.

Accordingly, each helped form what might have been his responses concerning the underlying questions of leadership. *Who should lead? What gives one the right to influence the behavior of others?*

Philosophically, Augustine was a Platonist. He was an *Idealist*, believing that an ideal form transcends our perceptions. It is unchanging. It is universal. It illuminates the shadows of darkness within the cave of human existence. For Plato, this form was the *Ideal*. For Augustine, it was *God*. Accordingly, in his work, *City of God*, Augustine explains that God created man to share in the *oneness* of the universe. In stark opposition to the teachings of Epicurus, Augustine taught that the nature of man was not to seek pleasure but to live in harmonious peace with his creator. He explains,

This is prescribed by the order of nature: it is thus that God has created man. For 'let them,' He says, 'have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every creeping thing which creepeth on the earth.' He did not intend that His rational creature, who was made in His image, should have dominion over anything but the irrational creation—not man over man, but man over the beasts.²

In Paradise, then, there was no leadership dyad among humankind. No person was to have authority over another. All were to share *equally* in His glory. Through original sin, however, Adam rejected God, and in doing so, corrupted the human race. He separated us from our creator. Thus, rather than enjoy a nature of *oneness* with their creator, the sons and daughters of Adam are doomed to suffer the pains of a fallen nature, and their only hope for reunification is through grace and salvation.

All is not lost, however, for according to Augustine, some of God's people have been chosen to share in His glory. They have been predestined to join Him once more in the heavenly kingdom. At the same time, others have been destined to suffer the loss of their original nature throughout eternity. Yet, both must reside on this earth until the day of judgment. Thus, when we are born, we are born to walk in one of two kingdoms. Some walk in the City of Man, a city based on self-love, deceit, and corruption. Others have been selected to walk in the City of God, a city based on the love and glory of the heavenly kingdom. And the lives we live reflect the city in to which we have been born. In *City of God* Augustine explains,

This race we have distributed into two parts, the one consisting of those who live according to man, the other of those who live according to God. And these we also mystically call the two cities, or the two communities of men, of which the one is

predestined to reign eternally with God, and the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil.³

Even though Augustine describes the City of Man as divided against itself, he does not hold that it is, in itself, inherently evil. It possesses the potential for goodness. To be sure, however, its promises are shallow, for its citizens rejoice in the goods of the earthly city rather than delight in the ultimate good of the heavenly kingdom. It is consumed with quarrel, with litigation, with war. Even its victories are life destroying or short-lived. Thus, it is incapable of bringing fulfillment to the soul of man.

Such is the nature of all earthly organizations. Such, too, is the nature of leadership within them. It is based on hostility. It is self-serving. It is destructive. Augustine, thus, does not explain so much who *should* lead. Instead, he more readily answers the question, who *does* lead in the City of Man? His answers are less than inspiring: the selfish, the unjust, the deceitful, the greedy; those who rejoice in the pursuit of trinkets and the pleasures of the flesh. This is the fallen nature of humanity within the City of Man, and those who must walk in this city are incapable of achieving the purposes of their nature.

Augustine believed that the purpose of all humans is to seek happiness, and the path to happiness is through the attainment of peace. Like Plato, he believed that the peace of all things lies in the tranquility of order, even if such order brings misery to our lives:

Peace between man and God is the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law. Peace between man and man is well-ordered concord. Domestic peace is the well-ordered concord between those of the family who rule and those who obey. Civil peace is a similar concord among the citizens. The peace of the celestial city is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God. . . . Order is the distribution which allots things equal and unequal, each to its own place. And hence, though the miserable, in so far as they are such, do certainly not enjoy peace, but are severed from that tranquility of order in which there is no disturbance, nevertheless, inasmuch as they are deservedly and justly miserable, they are by their very misery connected with order.⁴

Nevertheless, those who have been predestined to walk within the City of God while living on earth may still achieve happiness within their leadership positions. Some do. And when they do, they are readily recognizable. They seek justice; they seek goodness, not only for themselves, but for all who might be subject to their authority. Indeed, they lead in accordance with the love and mercy of God.

If, however, earthly peace is the well-ordered concord between those who rule and those who are ruled, what determines one's right to rule another? For Augustine, the answer is quite simple. Those who care for others should rule over those who are dependent upon their care. The emperor should rule his citizens. The master should rule his servants. Husbands should rule their wives. Parents should rule their children. And regardless of one's misery, all who are dependent should joyfully obey, for such obedience provides well-ordered concord within the society of fallen man. Similarly, those who rule should do so as servants. Augustine explains that "even those who rule serve those whom they seem to command, for they rule not from a love of power, but from a sense of the duty they owe to others—not because they are proud of authority, but because they love mercy."⁵

Nevertheless, within the City of Man, justice is rarely served. Good men and women are often forced to obey the commands of the wicked. This condition, however, did not trouble Augustine. No matter how miserable a slave, a wife, or a child might be, injustice is not reflective of the will of God. Instead, it reflects the injustice of a fallen nature. And whereas equality among men exists within the City of God, it does not, it cannot, exist within the City of Man. Besides, Augustine argues, being in bondage to another is not the worst of possibilities within the earthly city. One could be in bondage to lust, a bondage far more severe than being forced to obey the commands of the wicked:

And beyond question it is a happier thing to be the slave of a man than of lust; for even this very lust of ruling, to mention no others, lays waste men's hearts with the most ruthless dominion. Moreover, when men are subjected to one another in a peaceful order, the lowly position does as much good to the servant as the proud position does harm to the master. But by nature, as God first created us, no one is the slave either of man or of sin. This servitude is, however, penal, and is appointed by that law which enjoins the preservation of the natural order and forbids its disturbance; for if nothing had been done in violation of that law, there would have been nothing to restrain by penal servitude. And therefore the apostle admonishes slaves to be subject to their masters, and to serve them heartily and with good-will, so that, if they cannot be freed by their masters, they may themselves make their slavery in some sort free, by serving not in crafty fear, but in faithful love, until all unrighteousness pass away, and all principality and every human power be brought to nothing, and God be all in all.⁶

As can be readily noted, Augustine's approach to leadership is, in many ways, similar to that of the early Greek philosophers. Even though Augustine is most pessimistic concerning those who rise to

positions of leadership within the City of Man, the leader who walks in the City of God resembles Plato's philosopher-king. He is a man of virtue. He is committed to the good of his followers. In terms of justice, he seeks to live in accordance with the code of his soul.

The same is true of his followers. Just as Plato advocates that followers should always obey their philosopher-kings, Augustine proposes that those who are ruled should be joyfully obedient, even if their leaders are wicked and unjust, for such obedience assures the well-ordered concord of the state. It assures peace; it assures justice; it assures happiness.

Thus, Augustine's answers to our questions become more apparent. *Who should lead?* Those who have been predestined by God to lead. At the same time, he does not hold that virtuous men *will* lead, for in the earthly city, deceit and contempt, not goodness and virtue, prevail. Leadership in the City of Man is most often based on corruption and vice, on selfishness and greed. Indeed, Lord Acton would have found little argument with Augustine when he noted the relationship between absolute power and absolute corruption.

Certainly, there are many examples of those who portray Augustine's descriptions of leadership within the City of Man. When we hear leaders speak of a *dog eat dog* world, they are acknowledging life in the earthly city. Rarely do such leaders seek to serve, they seek to be served. They are slow to praise and quick to condemnation. They do not seek the good of their people; they seek only advantages to satisfy their selfish pleasures. Similarly, when leaders admonish others to *know their place*, they are affirming Augustine's understanding of the fallen nature of humanity. When they oppose the efforts of those attempting to alleviate servitude, when they justify slavery, when they participate in the persecution of those less fortunate than themselves, when they deny others the dignity of their humanness, they are acknowledging the observations of St. Augustine.

On a more positive note, when contemporary leaders seek justice for those placed in their care, they are reflecting leadership in accordance with those among our leaders who have been destined to walk in the City of God. Augustine describes them as follows:

But we say that they are happy if they rule justly; if they are not lifted up amid the praises of those who pay them sublime honours, and the obsequiousness of those who salute them with an excessive humility, but remember that they are men; if they make their power the handmaid of His majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship; if they fear, love, worship God; if more than their own they love that

kingdom in which they are not afraid to have partners; if they are slow to punish, ready to pardon; if they apply that punishment as necessary to government and defence of the republic, and not in order to gratify their own enmity; if they grant pardon, not that iniquity may go unpunished, but with the hope that the transgressor may amend his ways; if they compensate with the lenity of mercy and the liberality of benevolence for whatever severity they may be compelled to decree; if their luxury is as much restrained as it might have been unrestrained; if they prefer to govern depraved desires rather than any nation whatever; and if they do all these things, not through ardent desire of empty glory, but through love of eternal felicity, not neglecting to offer to the true God, who is their God, for their sins, the sacrifices of humility, contrition, and prayer. Such of the reality itself, when that which we wait for shall have arrived.⁷

Are there such leaders among us? Of course. Yet, Augustine would suggest that they are few in number. And when we find them, they are often subjected to sneering and ridicule. They are attacked because *kindness* and *patience* and *forgiveness* and *mercy* and *benevolence* are often perceived to be indications of *weakness* by those within the City of Man whose hearts and souls have been decayed by the pursuit of power and pleasure.

These, then, are but a few of Augustine's contributions toward our understanding of leadership in Western culture. Certainly, they are significant, not because they introduce new theories through which we might approach our topic, but because they ask us to consider the dimensions of a fallen nature, the dimensions of good and evil, as we seek to understand the leadership dyad.

More important, perhaps, is the fact that his blending of faith and reason came at a time when humankind was about to discover exactly how far the fallen nature of man could fall. The Dark Ages were beginning to extinguish the lights of intellectual activity within the Western world, and it would be another eight centuries before they would be turned on again. And one of the few candles that would burn throughout this period would be the teachings of St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo.

Notes

1. Ernest L. Fortin, "St. Augustine," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy* 3rd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 178.
2. St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 693.
3. Ibid., 478-479.
4. Ibid., 687-690.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 694.
7. Ibid., 178.