

# Presidential Inauguration Symposium

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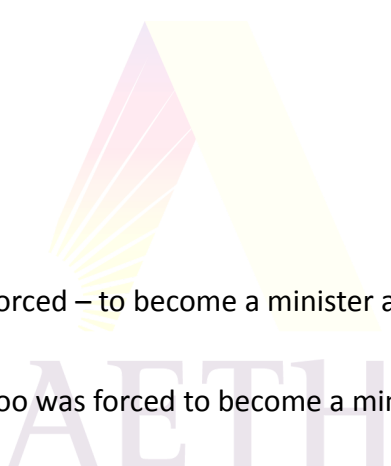
Columbia Theological Seminary  
Decatur, GA  
October 11, 2022

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We have been asked to discuss the matters before us, each one of us from the perspective of her or his own disciplines. I must confess that I find this rather restrictive, for I am not a very disciplined person! But I shall try to be good, and as a historian I shall construct my comments with reference to two great leaders in the history of the church, and their path in theological education and reflection: Augustine and Ambrose, who was instrumental in Augustine's conversion, and baptized him.



Augustine was called – actually, forced – to become a minister after he had devoted years to theological reflection. Ambrose too was forced to become a minister; but he was a civil official, and had not paid much attention to theology. This meant that Augustine suddenly found himself having to shape his intellectual interests, and his theology, to his pastoral task. In contrast, Ambrose, now finding himself a bishop of Milan, turned to Simplician, whom he had long admired for his wisdom and theological acuity, and invited him to be his theological mentor. Two different paths, but one result: theology shaped by the needs of the people of God; ministry shaped by good theology.

These two patterns have persisted throughout history. For a number of reasons, the Augustinian pattern has been the most recognized, the most studied, the most followed. The Ambrosian pattern has often been relegated to the margins. We take Augustine as our paradigm, and not Ambrose.

Roughly at the same time as Ambrose and Augustine, there was in Cappadocia a family deeply committed to its faith. One of the members of that family, Basil, traveled to study law in the best schools of their time. His sister Macrina, being a woman, had to stay at home, and find her own ways to learn. The name of Basil is still revered by theologians and scholars. Macrina is seldom remembered. Yet it was Macrina who opened the eyes of the learned Basil to his responsibilities as a Christian, and turned him into a pastor and a theologian. And it was Macrina, and not Basil, whom their younger brother called “the Teacher.”

One pattern is not necessarily better than the other. And each has its own dangers. The Augustinian pattern often leads to irrelevant theology, to a narcissistic theology whose purpose is theology itself, to a theology where you publish in order not to perish. The Ambrosian pattern

often leads to the canonization of ignorance and bigotry. The Augustinian pattern may lead to a theologian called “the Subtle Doctor,” whose speculations are practically impossible to follow. The Ambrosian pattern may lead to a monk called “the Mellifluous Doctor,” whose honeyed preaching blasted all who did not agree with him, and unleashed bloody violence against Jews and Muslims.

In general, for obvious reasons, the Augustinian pattern – with its values and its perils – has been more available to the privileged, while the Ambrosian pattern – with its perils and its values – has been more common among the marginalized, among women and ethnic minorities, among people in what used to be called “the mission field.” In general, the Augustinian pattern has become the paradigmatic ideal among so-called mainline churches, while the Ambrosian pattern has become typical of ethnic minority and Pentecostal churches.

In mainline churches, the notion often prevails that the Augustinian pattern is “for us” – that is, for those who are “mainline” also with reference to class, culture, and ethnicity – and the Ambrosian pattern is “for them” – pastors and leaders in ethnic minority churches.

As I now look at the issues before our day, I see a great crisis, and an even greater opportunity. For the sake of brevity, I will not take the time to describe the crisis. Suffice it to say, by way of example, that theological institutions built around the Augustinian model, to serve denominations that viewed that model as paradigmatic, can no longer fill their classrooms with students from their own denominations, nor even from similar denominations, and are filling this gap with people who are following the Ambrosian model – pastors who have been leading churches for years, and who do not go to seminary because it is required, but because they feel they need it. This is feasible because there is a crisis also among those traditionally following the Ambrosian model, who are recognizing that they need more of the sort of education that the Augustinian model requires.



To many traditional institutions, this seems to be the answer to their crisis. We can now fill our classrooms again! We can increase tuition income! We can now justify our existence! We may even increase our donor base! We can see a way out of the present crisis! What an opportunity!

But I fear – and I hope – that this will soon lead to a much deeper crisis, and therefore to a greater opportunity. The crisis and the opportunity are not just institutional; not just a matter of recruitment; not just a matter of finances. They are also a matter of pedagogy and of theology. For a while, institutions that were born out of an Augustinian model will be able to provide services for those coming from an Ambrosian model. If people who have been leading churches for years now feel that they need to know more about the New Testament, or about theology, or about church history, let them come take the courses that we offer on those subjects...

But you cannot put new wine in old wineskins. The new wine will break the old wineskins. A different student body, with different needs, and with a different church experience, will force us to develop new courses, new methodologies; even a new theological method – one that is more consonant with the actual life of the church in all levels of society. This will be a difficult task. But it is also a great opportunity!

Who knows? Perhaps Ambrose will once again baptize Augustine!