

Fr. Jude Shang Njegani

The Pedagogy of Love in the *Sermons* of St. Augustine

Abstract

This study explores the pedagogy of love (*caritas*) in the *Sermons* of St. Augustine of Hippo, arguing that love is the unifying principle of his theology, preaching, moral vision, and pastoral practice. For Augustine, love is not a secondary theme, a private emotion, or a mere moral exhortation. It is the deepest force shaping human identity, desire, action, and destiny. To live well, to believe truthfully, to understand Scripture rightly, and to hope faithfully is, in Augustine's thought, fundamentally a matter of learning how to love in the right way.

At the core of Augustine's vision lies the conviction that the human person is defined not primarily by reason or behaviour, but by love. Human beings are moved by what they desire, shaped by what they cling to, and oriented by what they love most. Desire, therefore, is never morally neutral. It directs the will, forms character, structures relationships, and ultimately determines whether a life moves towards unity or fragmentation. Moral disorder arises not simply from ignorance or weakness, but from disordered love. Redemption, by contrast, is the healing and reordering of love through divine grace.

Augustine names this structure the *ordo amoris*, the proper ordering of love. God alone is to be loved as the ultimate end; all other loves of self, neighbour, family, and created goods find their proper place only when they are ordered towards God. This study argues that Augustine's *Sermons* function as a sustained pedagogy designed to form this adequate order of love in believers. Preaching becomes the privileged space in which desire is educated, purified, and redirected, not through coercion or fear, but through persuasion, Scripture, and the attraction of divine charity.

While Augustine's theological and philosophical works have been extensively studied, his *Sermons* offer a distinctive window into how doctrine becomes formation. In preaching, Augustine addresses real communities marked by fear, temptation, conflict, and suffering. His *Sermons* reveal how theological truth is translated into practical instruction aimed at the heart. Scripture is not treated as abstract information but as living speech that confronts, heals, and reshapes desire. Through biblical interpretation, imagery, and rhetoric, Augustine seeks to move his hearers from self-centred love (*cupiditas*) towards self-giving charity (*caritas*).

The study begins by examining Augustine's fundamental understanding of love as the foundation of Christian life. Love is not something human beings generate by their own effort;

it originates in God and is poured into the human heart by the Holy Spirit. Because love is a gift of grace, it transforms rather than merely instructs. It frees the will from bondage to disordered desire and draws the soul towards communion with God. Augustine repeatedly contrasts *caritas*, which unifies and heals, with *cupiditas*, which fragments and enslaves. Sin is thus understood not simply as the breaking of a rule, but as the misdirection of love towards lesser or false goods.

Within this framework, Augustine presents love as inseparable from faith and hope. Faith enables the believer to know God, hope sustains longing for what is not yet fully possessed, and love unites the soul to God and neighbour. These virtues are not isolated moral qualities but interrelated movements of the soul towards God. Love gives life and direction to faith and guards hope from collapsing into fear or despair. Without love, faith becomes empty knowledge, and hope becomes anxious expectation.

Augustine's *Sermons* emphasise that true love is patient, humble, and enduring. Charity is not impulsive or sentimental; it perseveres through suffering, loss, and trial. Augustine frequently uses concrete images drawn from Scripture, fire that warms and purifies, roots hidden beneath the soil, trees bearing fruit in season, bread that nourishes, fish and eggs that sustain life, to show how love works quietly but powerfully within the soul and the Church. Love orders desire, directs moral action, and sustains the Christian community as a living body.

This vision of love is holistic. Love shapes moral behaviour, worship, knowledge, and community life. It manifests concretely in mercy, almsgiving, purity, forgiveness, humility, and self-giving service. Augustine insists that love must take visible form; it cannot remain a private interior feeling. In this way, his theology resists any separation between belief and life, doctrine and practice, interior devotion and social responsibility.

The study then turns more explicitly to Augustine's *Sermons* as a pedagogy of love. God is presented as the supreme and governing object of all rightly ordered affection. Augustine's preaching continually draws believers back to the primacy of God, insisting that love becomes truthful and life-giving only when God is loved above all else. From this primary love flows the proper love of self, neighbour, family, and even enemies.

A key element of this pedagogy is Augustine's treatment of self-love. Augustine recognises that self-love is unavoidable, but he insists that its moral value depends entirely on its orientation. When rooted in God, self-love leads to humility, inner harmony, and moral coherence. When detached from God, it becomes pride, greed, and self-destruction. Loving oneself rightly is therefore not opposed to loving others; rather, it is the foundation that makes

genuine love of neighbour possible. Ethical life, for Augustine, begins with the interior ordering of desire.

Family love is affirmed as a natural and good affection, yet it, too, must be ordered toward God. Augustine acknowledges the deep bonds of kinship but warns against allowing even good human loves to displace God as the ultimate object of desire. When family love is rightly ordered, it becomes a channel of divine charity and moral formation; when it becomes absolute, it risks becoming possessive or idolatrous. The martyrs represent love perfected in God, where even the strongest earthly attachments are surrendered to divine charity without being despised.

One of the most demanding dimensions of Augustine's pedagogy is his teaching on loving enemies and practising forgiveness. These are not presented as optional ideals for spiritual elites, but as the fullest expression of Christian charity. To love one's enemy is to desire their healing and restoration, not their punishment or destruction. He carefully distinguishes between the sinner and the sin, urging believers to oppose evil while preserving love for the person. Forgiveness is depicted as a grace-enabled vocation that frees the heart from bitterness and restores communion.

The figure of St. Stephen plays a central role in Augustine's preaching on this theme. Stephen's prayer for his persecutors becomes a concrete image of love perfected in courage and forgiveness. His martyrdom demonstrates that true love is not weakness, but moral strength shaped by grace. Through such examples, Augustine shows that love unites justice and mercy, integrity and compassion.

The study then explores the transformative power of divine love in shaping the whole human person. Augustine presents love as an active, dynamic force that engages both soul and body, interior intention and outward action. Love is both a gift and a calling freely given by God and yet demanding personal participation. Because love is grace, it fosters humility and dependence on God rather than self-reliance.

Christ stands at the centre of this transformation. In Christ, the invisible God becomes visible, and divine love takes embodied form. Through Christ, the believer learns what it means to love God and neighbour rightly. Augustine insists that love cannot remain abstract; it must overflow into acts of mercy, service, and self-giving. Even the smallest acts of charity, when done in love, carry eternal significance. Divine love reshapes emotional life as well. Fear, anxiety, and restlessness gradually give way to trust, courage, and joy as the will is surrendered to God. Augustine contrasts false courage, rooted in pride or self-protection, with true fortitude,

which arises from humility and charity. The Resurrection becomes the ultimate sign that love transforms fear into hope and suffering into life.

Love is deeply communal in Augustine's thought. Charity binds individuals into a living body, where each member's love contributes to the health of the whole. When love is disordered, both individuals and communities suffer fragmentation and alienation. When love is ordered towards God, it heals relationships, fosters peace, and strengthens unity. Hatred, envy, and pride constrict the soul; charity expands it, creating freedom and joy.

Love also inspires expression and creativity. Augustine frequently associates love with song, praise, and proclamation. A heart filled with love naturally gives voice to thanksgiving and witness. Life's trials are likened to stormy seas, yet love provides inner stability that external circumstances cannot overturn. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are presented not as burdensome obligations, but as integrated expressions of love that nourish both the individual and the community.

The study next examines love as the guiding principle for interpreting Scripture. Augustine insists that Scripture is given not primarily to satisfy curiosity or impose fear-based obedience, but to heal and transform the heart through charity. Scripture is rightly understood only when read in love and for the sake of love. Any interpretation that does not build charity fails its ultimate purpose.

Biblical narratives and symbols are interpreted through this lens. The healing of the paralytic becomes an image of the soul crippled by fear and disordered love, and of Christ's power to restore freedom. Love enables the believer to rise, to carry former burdens without being enslaved by them, and to walk in newness of life. Augustine contrasts servile fear, which paralyses, with filial fear shaped by love, which purifies and strengthens the soul. Parables such as the leaven, the wise virgins, the wedding garment, and Christ's seamless garment reveal love as a hidden but powerful force that transforms individuals and unites the Church. External observance without charity is empty; love alone marks true belonging to God's kingdom.

Sin and redemption are presented as disorder and reordering of love. Adam's fall and the Prodigal Son's departure represent the turning of love inward and away from God. Conversion is therefore not merely moral correction, but a return of love to its proper centre. Through grace, the soul is healed and restored to communion with God.

The maturation of love is traced from attachment to visible realities towards spiritual communion with God. Christ's ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit educate love beyond dependence on physical presence, forming an interior charity sustained by faith. Peter's journey

from fear and denial to courageous witness embodies this growth in love, both personally and ecclesially.

Martyrdom is presented as the consummation of love, not because suffering is valued for its own sake, but because love transforms suffering into participation in Christ. Endurance without love is meaningless; faithful witness flows from charity. This logic extends to ordinary Christian life, where daily sacrifices become genuine acts of love when offered to God.

Eschatologically, love is the “power” that draws the soul towards its final destiny. Eternal life is not primarily a reward or escape from punishment, but the fulfilment of love already begun in faith. To see God, to love Him, and to praise Him forever is the completion of the soul’s deepest desire. Until then, believers are called to sincere, humble, and active charity rather than perfection.

The study situates Augustine’s pedagogy of love within his own life and ministry. Augustine’s journey from youthful restlessness and ambition to conversion and pastoral service illustrates the gradual reordering of love through grace. His mother, Monica, embodies a pedagogy of patient, faithful love that profoundly shaped his spiritual development. His classical education sharpened his intellect but also intensified his inner conflict, leading him to critique education divorced from charity.

Conversion becomes the decisive pedagogical moment in which love is reordered at the level of the will. Influenced by Scripture, Ambrose, and divine grace, Augustine comes to recognise that truth is fully known only when it is loved. This insight reshapes his understanding of education. Christ is the true inner Teacher, while human teachers are collaborators who awaken love rather than impose knowledge.

As bishop of Hippo, Augustine’s preaching, catechesis, and communal life form what may be called a *schola caritatis*, a school of love. His *Sermons* educate desire, guide believers from fear to trust, from *cupiditas* to *caritas*, and from fragmentation to unity in God. Education, in this vision, is holistic, relational, and transformative.

This study demonstrates that for Augustine, love is the beginning, the path, and the fulfilment of the Christian life. Love orders desire, heals fear, binds believers to God and one another, and draws the Church towards its final rest. Augustine’s *Sermons* reveal a pedagogy in which teaching and loving are inseparable, and in which doctrine, Scripture, and moral life are unified by charity. His vision challenges any separation between belief and life, reminding the Church that holiness is not achieved through knowledge, discipline, or suffering alone, but through love continually purified and sustained by grace. Christian existence thus emerges as a pilgrimage of love, patiently moving towards its fulfilment in God, who is Love itself.

