

The Spiritual Transformation in Marriage Relationship From the Perspective of St. Augustine

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1. Introduction

St. Augustine is definitely still so influential to our Christian life today, as numerous famous theologians across different decades have been inspired by him. Such as the relationship between the sincere faith and an intentional life of discipleship for John Wesley, an assumed correlation or reason and revelation for Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich, taking the narrative patterns in the biblical text as the lens to interpret human experience for Emil Brunner, the interaction between biblical text and contemporary experience for Paul Ricoeur etc. [1] There is no doubt for his inspiring reflection and understanding on God

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s words. His struggling for his sexual desire in his young marriage for the procreation of children helped him to reflect deeply on the connection between original sin and lust.

[2]

This intensive struggle enriched his reflection about relationship between people and God. In order to have insight from St. Augustine on the married relationship which is not stable nowadays, the doctrine of humanity, perspectives on Genesis and marriage of Augustine will be explored, then we try to discover the insights on spiritual transformation to deal with the challenges nowadays from the discovery above.

2. The Doctrine of humanity from the work of St. Augustine

2.1 Image of God is the core identity of human person

Based on the understanding on Genesis 1-2 from Augustine, he believes that human person was created with body and soul because of the image of God, which is the core identity of the human person. [3] Body and soul could not be separated during the process of identity

formation. The creation of soul is different from its growth. It is created in the immaterial God, but its development is in material creation. Regardless of this difference, its creation and development could not get rid of God, as it begins with and end in the knowledge of God, it is part of the intellectual creation with the immediacy to God which is the formal order.

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Due to the immediacy of body and soul, the soul and God, the body and soul could not develop without the formal order, that is the immediacy to God.

2.2 Likeness of the human mind as well as the Trinity God

Based on the assumption that human mind is created according to the image of God, our mind will process the structure of the Trinity God, that is the threefold structure. It consists of mind as memory, understanding and will, or immediate self-presence, self-concept, and self-love. [\[5\]](#) Therefore our mind could have self-reflection and self-delight. They are interacting with each other like the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit. The Father gives life to the Son when he offers everything back to the Father, they both exist through the love of each other, the Spirit is like the “Gift” to reinforce the communion between the Father and the Son.

[\[6\]](#)

In this case, everything in our mind is interacting with each other intimately.

2.3 We are created for celestial goal

Augustine believes that we created and designed for the community of God and the angels, a heavenly city of perfect knowledge and love by God, where is our true home to experience homecoming and the ultimate happiness. [\[7\]](#) Therefore, we could never experience the ultimate happiness as long as we have not come back to the true home.

2.4 We are created to love so to live like God

As we are created in the image of the Trinity God, who shares the intimate relationship between the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit, so we are created to love so to manifest the image of the Trinity God. We are able to love our neighbor and brothers to reflect the self-sacrificial concern, and we are able to receive love, it is a mutual relationship. [8] It is based on the teaching of John, “If a man loves his neighbor, it follows that above all he loves love itself. But God is love and whoever abides in love abides in God.” (1 John 4:16) Therefore we could manifest the love for God when we love our neighbor, the way we love each other is like how the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit exists through the love of each other.

2.5 Sinful nature

According to the understanding of Augustine, original sin is the inheritance of Adam since the fall. After the fall, we lost the eternal life and the ability to not sin, but we are free to sin. Our desires have been misdirected to the earthly delights rather than God, it is assumed that love is the fundamental drive of our actions, but the misdirection of desire corrupts our core motivational core. The corruption of sin disrupts the relationship between the mind and will, so do the functions of the soul and body. Therefore, human beings have to live with the struggle against guilt, corruption and concupiscence. [9] The threefold structure of mind is corrupted due to the misdirection.

Because of the original sin, lust exists, we lost the exact obedience from our sexual organs, but the blessing from God to increase and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28) still remains, so we could still enjoy the glory of marriage by begetting of children. [\[10\]](#) In this case, we could still enjoy the blessings from God in this corrupted state.

2.6 A General picture on human nature from the perspective of Augustine

The image of God is the core of the human nature to develop the loving and celestial nature, yet it is argumentative that how the original sin corrupts the image of God in human nature. We have no idea to determine the exact proportion between sinful nature and nature from the image of God, thus spiritual transformation is important to restore the image of God in relationship. The perspective of Augustine on Genesis will be explored more to talk about marriage.

3. The Perspective of St. Augustine on Genesis

3.1 The unique creation process of human from other creations

Based on Genesis 1:6-25;2:8,16-19;3:20,30-32, Augustine names human as intellectual things, the creatures out of human as material things because of the different creation process. He interprets that God created material things with a three-step process, which is “Let there be”(et dixit Deus: Fiat), “and thus it was made”(et sic est factum)and “God made it”(fecit Deus). This creation process is different from the one of intellectual creature, which is created directly

by God with the active relations with God (Genesis 2:8,16). Because of this direct creation from God, he believes that it is related to the intellectual act.

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3.2 Two-source anthropology

Based on the unique creation of intellectual creature above, Augustine elaborated a two-source anthropology. Because of the different accounts of creation on intellect and matter, this lead to the distinct spheres on the soul (intelligence)and the body(matter). [\[12\]](#) Even though the soul (intelligence) and the body (matter) are from different spheres, Augustin rejected the idea about the preexistence of souls prior to the embodiment and the transmigration after death. He claimed that human is the first creature to know about themselves, environment and God from their bodies, this existence is categorized as psychosomatic unity, and understand through empirical experience, knowledge of the created order and toward the vision of God.

[\[13\]](#)

3.3 The image of God reflects the intimate relationship between God and intellectual creature

The image of God offers the direct relation between God and the intellectual creature, the act of God, intellectual act and the acknowledgement of the creator both reflect in the intellectual existence, that is the reason that the intellectual creature could worship God according to the terminology of Augustine. [\[14\]](#) Human being is the only creature having the special relationship between God and soul because of the image of God. [\[15\]](#) This special relationship offers us a chance to worship God and to transform us from sinful natures.

3.4 Loving companion

Based on the multiply blessing from God (Genesis 1:27-28) and the command of God that it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18), Eve was create to be the counterpart of Adam, so they could be the spiritual support of each other, and become one flesh, God took care of all the material wants. [16] Male and female is the first union that male rules female when female obeys male, their spiritual offspring could fill in the earth with the immortal joys and to rule the earth before the fall, but we could still have offspring because of the blessing from God after the fall. [17]

3.5 The order to make a home happy

Since he wife is created for helping the husband, the wife should subject to her husband to make the home happy. [18] Based on 1 Cor 11:2-3, Christ is the head of man, and the man is the head of the woman, it offers the insight on the order between the couple relationship. And Augustine thinks that the punishment on the wife could decline the harmful habit. The pain on giving birth and the longing on the husband could be the reason for the wife to obey the husband diligently because of the spiritual nature of the law. [19]

Besides, he illustrates that the husband should rule the wife in a way that the soul should rule over the body as the animal part.

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The relationship between the husband and wife reflects the relationship between the soul and body to certain extent in the perspective of Augustine, and it is reflecting about the inferior nature of the body to soul, it is echoing to the distinct spheres between the soul and body. Yet it may elaborate a discussion about the inferior nature of wife because the wife is like the body in the metaphor of Augustine when it is not mentioned about the inferiority in the Genesis.

3.6 The Ideal relationship between the wife and the husband in Paradise

Our sinful nature makes us not to control our sexual organs exactly, so not to control our lust and sexual desire after the fall, yet we are created for the celestial goal. Augustine believes that we would have control on every part of our body in the paradise, so the wife and husband would have conceived without the uncontrollable lust, they would not be shameful about their sexual organs anymore. [\[21\]](#)

3.7 The loving companion with the order according to the image of God

Generally, Augustine believes that we are created for having a loving companion with certain order that the wife should subject to the husband, the husband should be ruled by God. And we are the unique intellectual creature reflecting the special relationship with God and the image of God to be the psychosomatic unity that we should worship God based on his interpretation on Genesis. The relationship between the wife and the husband reflects the creation order of God, and the soul and body, they are all correlated in the perspective of Augustine.

4. The perspective of St. Augustine on marriage

4.1 Natural bond

Based on the command of God that it is not good to be alone, God created the wife and husband from the same flesh and to be one flesh, it was the first natural bond in the human society. [\[22\]](#) Marriage is a natural bond to Augustine.

4.2 The sacramental bond in marriage

Besides natural bond, marriage is also a sacramental bond to Augustine. It is more than the procreation and the containment of lust to him, even though he believes that it will be the worst case in marriage. Since it involves in a partnership of faithful spouses, it is a sacramental bond that could not be broken by adultery and separation. [\[23\]](#) Marriage is good that the husband could not dismiss his wife except for fornication, the wife could not marry again even she got dismissed by her husband and it is confirmed in Matthew 19:9. That is the reason that marriage is the bonding that could not be broken.

It is more than the procreation since the husband and wife could not have sexual intercourse as they wished as long as they get old. The order of charity could still remain between them, since the promises of respect and services still remain, their souls rightly joined together because of chastity, it could reinforce the security and purity between them. And based on the sinful nature, we could not exactly control our sexual organs, marital intercourse could make something good out of evil of lust according to Augustine. The role of mother and father could unite them in the marriage act and prevail the dignity. [\[24\]](#)

4.3 The highest spiritual order-one of the forms of unity

Furthermore, marriage represents the highest spiritual order because it points to the relationship between God and human. [\[25\]](#) The husband should love wife as well as how much Christ loves the church, the wife should love the husband as well as how much the church should love Christ

based on the teaching on the Ephesians. Basically there are three forms of unity based on Paul's text, they are Christ and church, husband and wife, spirit and flesh. Augustine further elaborates that the subordinations are not the same in these three forms of unity. The church is the true and caring subordination to Christ, for the spirit and the body, sometimes the body may try to rule over the spirit, but the spirit would put the body in its place, the relationship between the spirit and the body is dynamic in this life. In this case, the spirit and the body could not be the absolute model of subordination to the husband and wife. [\[2\]](#)

[6\]](#)

4.4 The Ideal marriage before and after the Fall

Before the fall, the husband ruled the wife and the wife served him because of love instead of obligation, there were no constraints and duties but love and acceptance according to Gevase Corcoran. [\[27\]](#) Because of Christ, the husband and wife could still be a loving union regardless of the radical differences, since Christ and the church is the model of the relationship of husband and wife. [\[28\]](#) However, the subordination may come from the obligation and duties after the fall due to the sinful nature.

4.5 The element in marriage

4.5.1 Love Christ more

Augustine thinks that the husband and wife should love Christ more. They should love each other in a way that Christ in them and hate each other in a way to hate the obstacles of the

presence of God. And they should love each other as a human being, including the body and soul through the union and affection which may be expressed in physical ways. It is possible to have total love which was left to us after the fall to enjoy the divinely sanctioned delights. [29] Therefore, if we could love Christ more, also love our spouses in a way to love the presence of Christ, it is possible for us to enjoy the total love which is holy.

4.5.2 Love and desire

For Augustine, love and desire is different from each other. Desire is about motivations, intentions and purposes, thus willing and acting are sealed with desire. And in his culture, it was specifically referring to something out of the possession, that are wants. Comparatively, love carries a more intensive want to possess the object. There is a movement to strive to get united with each other among the beloved objects. [30] If his view on love and desire is applied into the marriage, the husband and wife would both have the strong motivations, intentions and purposes to get united with each other so to possess each other.

4.5.3 Fidelity

According to 1 Cor 7:4, the wife has no authority on her body, but her husband; the husband has no authority on his body, but his wife. Augustine describes that there is a very debt among married persons, they owe each other. [31] Therefore they have fidelity to each other that they could not have sexual intercourse out of the marriage, they commit sins if they commit adultery.

4.5.4 An ordered oneness of heart

Because of the fidelity in marriage, it is the foundation of the friendship between the husband and wife, the parents and child, the master and the servant, this society should maintain the relationship with friendship, and the family is the base. The husband and wife could find rest and trust in this loving union to share their heart in this unbreakable friendship. They have the domestic peace to command and obey, it is called “an ordered oneness of heart” according to Concordia. [\[32\]](#) The domestic peace is built on the foundation of friendship and fidelity.

4.5.5 Friendly oneness of heart

For Augustine, the ability and willingness to be one in heart among the husband and wife is crucial to bring good marriage, since friendly oneness of heart is the primary element in marriage, it could result to the natural companionship. [\[33\]](#)

4.5.6 The marriage in Christ and oneness

According to Augustine, Christ is the first to maintain the forms of unity in marriage because the relationship between Christ and church is the key modeling of marriage. Besides, he emphasizes about oneness in unity, the loving union, the ordered oneness of heart and friendly oneness of heart, it is echoing to the creation order that the husband and wife are created to become one flesh. Thus become oneness is crucial to facilitate good marriage, fidelity, love Christ first and friendship are the crucial elements to maintain this oneness or unity.

5. The perspective of St. Augustine on spiritual transformation

5.1 Worship

Based on the human nature and the Genesis, we are created to attach with God because we are created according to the image of God. Thus we are tied to acknowledge our creator and respond to creator. [\[34\]](#) Worshipping Jesus Christ is the temporal means toward the eternal goal, it is the means to heal human soul. [\[35\]](#) Because of our both sinful nature and the nature according to the image of God, we need to worship Jesus Christ for the healing and moving toward the celestial goal.

5.2 Know God to know self to restore the real order of life

God is the source of knowledge because of His nature of self-presence and self-discovery according to Augustine, and he believes that the sources of evil converted human soul and mind into self-enclosure from self-reflexivity, thus people make themselves as the centre of the world. The presence of God is the only means to the spiritual healing from this conversion from the sources of evil. [\[36\]](#)

Furthermore, money, power, popularity and romance become the replacement of God to human according to Augustine. This kind of replacement becomes the misdirection to love and over-attachment and the excessive devotion on the wrong objects, therefore it results to the disorder in our lives. [37] And this disorder in our lives become the false propositions rooting deeply in our heart to shape our emotional responses and behaviors, therefore the words of God are very significant in figuring out the hidden false propositions. [

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Since God is the source of the knowledge, we are unable to understand about ourselves because of the false propositions, misdirection of the over-attachment on the wrong objects and the disorders in our lives. In addition, we are created according to the image of God, we could only come back to God through worship and the words of God in order to restore the order of life.

According to Augustine, a “just and holy life” could enable human to have the impartial evaluation of things, to love things so to have the right orders. It could avoid human loving the subject on our journey instead of our homeland where is heaven of the celestial goal by the cognitive migration which is asking the ultimate reference of human love. [39] Celestial goal is crucial in restoring the order from the misdirection, since it could help us to differentiate what really matters to us.

5.3 Self-sacrificial love

Because of the Christology of Augustine, self-sacrificial love is very essential in manifesting the self-giving Christ in our daily life. Since Jesus Christ is a self-giving and self-emptying God to bring us to the homeland, also defeat the power of Satan, his suffering and humbleness left us an example to follow according to 1 Peter 2:21. Therefore Augustine associates the neighbor-love closely to the example of Jesus, we are willing to humble ourselves to reflect the patterns of Jesus and love God. [\[40\]](#)

5.4 Self-narration and daily practice on God's words

Augustine believes that self-narration is a spiritual exercise to help the people to focus on the origin and the ground of the story, the goal in God, so they could grow in the Christian virtues. [\[41\]](#)

And daily practice on God's words could internalize the words of God, this process could remind and retain the soul to have new information.

[\[42\]](#)

6. Insights on the challenges on marriage nowadays from Augustine

6.1 General challenges on marriage in Hong Kong

Apart from the high rate on getting divorced, homosexual marriage and LGBT are both the argumentative issues nowadays in Hong Kong, the anti-discrimination law and the related same-sex marriage issues are still debated in the society, it is influencing the commercial parties. [\[43\]](#) And based on the latest statistics from HKSAR Census and Statistic Department, it shows that there is a triple of the number of divorce decrees granted of 1991 in 2016.

[\[44\]](#)

The issues of getting divorced and the LGBT marriage are challenging the fundamental values of marriage in Christianity. According to the human nature and marriage of Augustine, it is no doubt that the marriage in LGBT parties could not favor God. Since it is very clear that God created a wife out of a husband to become one flesh based on Genesis, and we are created

according to the image of God, the marriage in LGBT parties distorts the creation order of God.

6.2 The possible reasons contributing to the challenges based on the perception of Augustine

Augustine may believe that the original sin and the sources of evil are both the key reason to lead to the LGBT tendency. Because some part of our nature was corrupted due to the fall, it results to the misdirection of the attachment, false propositions based on the customs in the society, so is the distortion of the subordination order between the body and the soul. The LGBT parties are favoring their desire of their bodies, it disrupts the order in procreation of children, and the order in family and society.

6.3 The possible outcome from the perception of Augustine

Augustine believes that we have to come back to God to understand about ourselves and to get healed in the presence of God through worship, daily practice on the words of God and self-narration, manifesting God through the neighbor love.

In order to engage them, the neighbor love from God is really crucial to help them to feel being accepted instead of rejected, also it is to manifest the acceptance from Jesus Christ. 60% of the LGBT employees of the 626 respondents from the online anonymous survey conducted by

HKUPOP, claimed that they would not be open about their sexual orientation with colleagues generally, since they concerned about the perception of others, the possibility of being stereotyped and losing the connection or relationship with colleagues. [45] Even though the protest for the LGBT has been so popular in the society and the churches in Hong Kong, most of the people from the LGBT are living under the fear of unacceptance in daily life. In this case, the neighbor love from God is so essential for them to get healed from the disorder. But it is a long road to restore the order and figure out the false propositions, it could not be made without the words of God.

Except the LGBT, the disorder between the role of husband and wife may contribute to the main reason to the issue of divorce. Augustine emphasizes the oneness in the husband and wife, he also mentioned about the subordination because of the modeling of Christ and the church. It is well known that the education level of women is getting higher than the men nowadays, it becomes the challenges in the subordination relationship between the husband and wife. Augustine claimed that if this order could not be maintained, it will result to the unhappy family. In this case, this disorder might contribute to the issues of getting divorced.

The humble love from Jesus Christ is the very answer to the challenging issues nowadays to restore the disorder and to resume the subordinating order in the form of unity. Augustine would not deny about the power of God to restore the disorders.

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[25] Donald X. Burt, *Friendship and society*, 111.

[26] Donald X. Burt, *Friendship and society*, 111–112.

[27] Donald X. Burt, *Friendship and society*, 110.

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