

Classroom encounters: Growing into the wisdom of God

by [Ellen T. Charry](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

Our parents are our first and most important teachers, but they cannot teach us everything. Sometimes they are not equipped to teach us some things we need. Sometimes they teach us things that we do not need. So we move at age five or so to additional teachers.

I come from a tradition that says we need teachers and we need to study all our life long in order to grow into the wisdom of God. It recognizes that we are capable of learning different things at different ages. A seven-month-old cannot learn to walk, but a 12-month-old can. A 12-month-old cannot be toilet-trained, but a 36-month-old can. My tradition says that we are not able to learn the wisdom of God until we are 40 years old.

This comforts me, although I have passed the deadline. It tells me that partaking of the wisdom of God for which I long does not come easily. I must be prepared for it. Spiritual maturity takes a long time.

One of the things that births spiritual maturity is, or at least ought to be, suffering. Everyone eventually encounters it. Perhaps 40 was picked as the age for wisdom because by then it is likely that we have encountered some impediment, some stumbling, some failure, some illness, some loss or some crisis that slows us down enough to recognize that we need more than we have. Put another way, suffering and tragedy set our lives in a different perspective. They cast our desires, habits and foibles in a broader, even cosmic framework that reveals the truth of our pettiness, narrow-mindedness or silliness. Such events can help us long for God, to crave God, so that we realize that we are part of a bigger reality, a reality bigger even than our own salvation. It is at such a point in one's life that one realizes that one cannot go it alone, that one needs a teacher. It is a humbling experience.

The other day I had a student in my office who had reached such a point. She shared her distress that she doesn't fit in at school because she asks questions that others

cannot understand and so dismiss as useless or irrelevant. She feels very alone. I immediately gave her a list of books to tackle. Her face brightened. You are not alone, I said. These people stand with you.

St. Augustine wrote a treatise in 389 called *The Teacher* in which he sets up a conversation between himself and his son about what learning is and who enables it. Teaching ordinarily consists of words. But, he says, if the words just sit there or simply pass through you, you have not learned anything. There has to be more than just words, more than just information. We must press beyond the words to the reality the words point toward. And that is the teacher's task: to set before the student the things that the student really wants to know. Learning is getting to know the things that are being pointed out, not just learning the words.

"Our real Teacher is he who is so listened to, who is said to dwell in the inner self, namely Christ, that is . . . the wisdom of God. . . . However, to each is given only so much as he is able to receive, according to his own good or evil will. Confessedly we must pay heed to the light that it may let us discern visible things so far as we are able," wrote Augustine. When we see with light that illumines the soul, the truth is genuinely enjoyed. Therefore, Augustine says, I do not teach him, but the things that God has made clear to him do.

At the end of the conversation, Augustine's interlocutor concludes, "I have learned that in order to know the truth of what is spoken, I must be taught by him who dwells within and gives me counsel about words spoken externally in the ear. By his favor I shall love him the more ardently the more I advance in learning."

This is to say that as a teacher I am called to help people come into the knowledge of God. As Augustine points out, it is an awesome responsibility, especially because I cannot know each student before I begin plying his or her ears with words. I do not know what the words mean to the students, and so I cannot judge whether they are reaching the place where they begin to really speak. This poses, of course, a great difficulty in classrooms. In the ancient world, education was not separated from spiritual education (the separation is a modern invention), and Augustine is speaking of reaching one student at a time.

Gregory Thaumaturgus became a student of the great Origen of Alexandria, one of the greatest teachers in the church's history and the church's first biblical scholar. Gregory had made his living as a Roman orator and magician until he found himself, by God's grace, with his brother at Origen's feet. He is overawed by the grace,

dignity and power of Origen's teaching, and tries to keep from falling over himself praising his teacher. Origen cultivated the longing in Gregory's heart and mind to know God and lured him away from his former life that depended on his own eloquence and skill.