Conversion as Transformation of the Heart: Guardini's Existential Interpretation of Augustine's *Confessions*

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This paper studies Guardini's perception of Augustine, especially in his two widely unknown books on Confessions: Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus (1935), and Anfang (1944), which are contrasted by the recently published Guardini lectures: Ewigkeit und Geschichte (1955/56 and 1961/62). The author discusses Guardini's emphasis and fascination with Augustine's conversion (cf. Conf. VIII), as it was relevant for his existential theology. Additionally, the text explores the Augustinian perception of the phenomenon of conversion by studying the passage from In evangelium Ioannis tractatus 53 (John 12:40), where Augustine delivers a beautiful synthesis about the conversion of the heart through grace: "Conversio gratia est" (Aug., In Io. tr. 53.11). It is hoped this study will evaluate Guardini's doctrine about the conversion of the heart using the concrete example of Augustine and also replenish and enrich his interpretation by contrasting it to the broader Augustinian corpus.

Keywords: *Guardini, Augustine, conversion, heart, existence, grace*

1. Introduction

The importance and impact of Augustine's *Confessions* throughout the whole Western civilization cannot be over-emphasized.¹ Augustine's conversion had been and still is an endless inspiration for generations over the centuries. Guardini was one of the authors in a group that, through the centuries, attempted to continue the exegesis of Augustine's work for their contemporaries.² His re-reading of *Confessions* left us with two books and with his

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² There have been some studies done on different topics related to Guardini's appropriation of Augustine, e.g.: Massimo Borghesi, "Romano Guardini. Lumen cordis e 'visione del mondo'," in *Agostino nella filosofia del Novecento*, vol. 1: Esistenza e libertà, eds. Luigi Alici, Remo Piccolomini and Antonio Pieretti (Roma: Città Nuova, 2000), 175–98; idem, "Guardini

recently published typescript draft for lectures that have been almost completely neglected and overlooked by the previous studies.³

Studying the famous authors – Socrates, Augustine, Dante, Pascal, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky etc. – inspired Guardini's "*Theologie der Existenz*." His approach towards them was integrative and synthetic, as it was also with two books on the bishop of Hippo. Besides these books, Guardini later also offered at least three cycles of lectures on Augustine: in 1924 in Berlin, in 1947/48 with a title "Augustinus und Rilke" in Tübingen and in 1955/56 in München.⁴

Augustine is for Guardini the second "Hauptpfeiler der Theologie" after Thomas Aquinas.⁵ Perhaps the greatest Latin Church father fascinated him because he uncovers the "unmittelbare Erfahrung" of his personal existence. Augustinian characteristics of Guardini's thought are also demonstrated by his two studies on Bonaventure.⁶

interpretare di Agostino," in *Romano Guardini, La conversione di Sant'Agostino* (Morcelliana: Brescia, 2002), 289–314; Bruno Do Spirito Santo, "L'Agostino di Romano Guardini: Uno studio storico-teologico della formazione agostiniana del pensiero guardiniano tra grazia, conversione e destino," *Alpha Omega* 22, no. 1 (2019): 43–57.

³ Romano Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus: der innere Vorgang in seinen Bekenntnissen* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner, 1935); idem, *Anfang: eine Auslegung der ersten fünf Kapitel von Augustins Bekenntnissen* (München: Kösel, 1944); idem, *Eternità e storia. La determinazione dell'esistenza nel pensiero di Platone e Agostino*, ed. Omar Brino (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2017). For the citations of the first two works we are referring to the volumes appeared in the collection *Romano Guardini Werke: Romano Guardini, Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus: der innere Vorgang in seinen Bekenntnissen* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989); idem, *Wurzeln eines großen Lebenswerks. Aufsätze und kleine Schriften*, Band 3 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002), 253–93 (*Anfang*). Parallel English translation of *Die Bekehrung* is cited from: Romano Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine* (Merrimack, New Hampshire: Thomas More College Press, 2007).

⁴ Hanna-Barbara Gerl, *Romano Guardini (1885-1968): Leben und Werk* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1987), 332–44. Recently (2017) Omar Brino published for the first time Guardini's typescript draft for lectures, still unedited in German, from the period of university professor in Munich: Guardini, *Eternità e storia*. Guardini ideated a course on Plato, Augustine and Dante for the winter semester 1955/56, but as far we know from the typescript it is evident that he treated only the first two authors. With some minor changes he repeated the course towards the end of his activity as professor, in the winter semester 1961/62.

⁵ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 15. About his own personal devotion to St Augustine we know a detail before his death. Before his death, on 30th September 1968, his housekeeper heard that he prayed for about an hour to St Augustine: "Die Haushälterin hat durch die Türe gehört, daß er noch fast eine Stunde lang «zum heiligen Augustinus gebetet habe» – offenbar hat er Augustinusworte aus seinem arm gewordenen Gedächtnis hervorgeholt –, und er sei bei dem Wort «Unruhig ist unser Herz ...» stehen geblieben und (habe) es oft wiederholt. Woraufhin wir es auf seinen Totenzettel gesetzt haben". (Gerl, *Romano Guardini*, 366. From a letter of Werner Becker to Ingeborg Klimmer, 26.4.1969)

⁶ His dissertation *Die Lehre des heiligen Bonaventura von der Erlösung*, was prepared in 1915, but published in 1921, and his habilitation work *Systembildende Elemente in der Theologie Bonaventuras*, was prepared in 1922 and first published in 1964.

This paper explores Guardini's perception of Augustine's *Confessions* which is fundamentally marked by fascination upon Augustine's conversion.⁷ The aim of the first part of this study is, therefore, to examine the inner nature of Augustine's process of conversion to Christianity, as perceived by Guardini. This will be carried out in the form of interpretational analysis. The second primary aim seeks to enrich Guardini's interpretation of Augustine's conversion as described in the *Confessions* with some particular insights into the inner structure of the transformational process itself, which takes place in the human heart. We will take into consideration the part of Augustine's work, *In evangelium Ioannis tractatus* 53 (John 12:40), where Augustine delivers a beautiful synthesis about the conversion of the heart through grace.

2. Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus: der innere Vorgang in seinen Bekenntnissen (1935)

The book *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus: der innere Vorgang in seinen Bekenntnissen*, published in 1935, followed the line of the two prior Guardini's studies on great Christian authors: F. M. Dostoevsky and B. Pascal.⁸ In general, the works on Dostoevsky and others have been considered by some as better written and more original than the works on Pascal or Augustine, and maybe this is the reason why there hasn't been such a great interest in Guardini's interpretation of Augustine.

2.1 The Conversion of Augustine

In general, the study is divided into two main parts since it originated in two different series of lectures. In the first part, Guardini defines Augustine's basic ideas, whereas in the second part, he discusses and analyzes the story of Augustine's conversion. Basically, both parts discuss the same subject, but from different viewpoints. The phenomenon of Augustine's conversion, therefore, plays an essential role in Guardini's existentialistic interpretation of the *Confessions*.

⁷ For a recent study on ethical implications of Guardini's understanding of conversion, see: Peter Schallenberg, "«Der Mensch wird ein Wesen, das es nicht gibt»: Zur theologischen Ethik als Bewegung der Konversion bei Romano Guardini," *Studia moralia* 46 (2008): 147–64.

⁸ Guardini's studies on Dostoevsky: *Der Mensch und der Glaube. Versuche über die religiöse Existenz in Dostojewskijs großen Romanen* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner Verlag, 1932) and on Pascal: *Christliches Bewußtsein: Versuche über Pascal* (Leipzig: Jakob Hegner Verlag, 1935). Although it is not directly related to the topic, we can also mention here Hannah Arendt's dissertation on Augustine: *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin. Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation* (Berlin: Julius Springer, 1929). Her own fascination with Augustine may be at least remotely connected with the influence of Guardini, since earlier she attended some of Guardini's courses.

The first part of the book consists of reflections on various philosophical and theological themes concerning Augustine's life and work: confession; memory; inwardness; the drama within; mind, sensuality, spirituality and heart; perfection and blissfulness; eros and heart; wisdom; blissful life and the God-value; amazement over existence; creation and providence; Augustine's "paganism"; and his mother. The second part of the work examines more precisely Augustine's way and progress in five stages towards his decision for Christianity: childhood, youth and early manhood; Rome and Milan; clarification; the decision; and the new life.

In *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus* Guardini established the so-called existential interpretive approach toward the question: "In what did Augustine's conversion actually consist?". He wanted to reject psychological, ethical and intellectual-historical interpretations of Augustine's conversion as described in his work *Confessions*. Instead, Guardini proposed Augustine's conversion to Christ as a focal paradigm for the understanding of his person and of his work.⁹ In other words, we must listen to what Augustine himself has to say. One should not separate Augustine from his own concrete existence because only through his personal, actual (hi)story can we have an objective view of him and his thought. If we try to systematize it, there is a danger of overlooking it.¹⁰ Augustine, observes Guardini, "steh[t] in einer solchen Nähe zum Leben, vor allem zum inneren Leben, daß er auf theoretischem Wege nicht oder nur zum Teil erfaßt werden k[an-n]."¹¹ Theology, therefore, must become existential.

2.2 Reception of the Book

Attention given to Guardini's book *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus* by different authors was up to this date very limited and it was not treated in much detail.

In his book on Guardini, Hans Urs von Balthasar discussed, among many works, his two books on Augustine.¹² He regards *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus* as "filled with profound personal speculations, but less transparently interpretative than his work on Socrates."¹³ From this work von Balthasar elucidated four steps towards Augustine's conversion. In

⁹ Guardini, *Anfang*, 253–57.

¹⁰ See: Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 14, 118.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. ("Possibly he stands so close to life, particularly to the interior life, that at best only a fraction of his personality can be grasped by theological means." Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 5).

¹² Balthasar, *Romano Guardini: Reform from the Source*, 55–59.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 55.

the dramatic process of discovering God and eventually himself, Augustine lays out these several fundamental characteristics which reflect the path from inauthenticity to authenticity.¹⁴ First, Augustinian “scepticism” lies in the consciousness of the unreal character of the non-absolute.¹⁵ Secondly, the method of ascending proof (*i.e. quarta via*) that both Augustine and Guardini employ throughout their works reflects the experience of a gradual sequence of levels of reality.¹⁶ Thirdly, the transcendent stage of fulfilment, which comes as a result, has its authenticity and legitimacy – in the biblical, not primarily Platonic sense – as it acquires “summa bona” and “vita beata” in God.¹⁷ Finally, as von Balthasar states, “there is the drama of conversion, a strenuous effort to harmonize the various levels and powers of the soul: the core of what it means to be human lies within the human heart – an idea that has the greatest importance in the intellectual history of the West”.¹⁸ In this brief presentation von Balthasar only indicates the culmination of Guardini’s existentialistic perception of Augustine’s story of conversion. But unfortunately, he makes no attempt to fully define and address the question of Augustine’s conversion as described in *Confessions*.

Kreiml dedicates a chapter to the analysis of Guardini’s perception of Augustine and discusses mainly the love of God towards humanity as a motive for creation in the broader context of revelation.¹⁹

Louis Dupré, in his recent short introduction preceding the English translation of the book, rightly emphasizes Guardini’s conviction about the religious nature of Augustine’s conversion, but offers no additional interpretation:

Guardini rightly considers Augustine’s conversion to have been a religious event, that is, a direct result of him being grasped by a power that, though conditioned by particular psychological, ethical, and philosophical factors, cannot be reduced to any of them nor to all combined.²⁰

He only indicates that the merit of Guardini’s beautiful book “consists in having restated Augustine’s eternal insight in the light and darkness of con-

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 58.

¹⁵ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 214; Idem, *Anfang*, 287.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 73, 113, 171, 208.

¹⁷ Guardini, *Anfang*, 283; idem, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 58, 80, 89.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *Romano Guardini: Reform from the Source*, 58.

¹⁹ Josef Kreiml, *Die Selbstoffenbarung Gottes und der Glaube des Menschen. Eine Studie zum Werk Romano Guardinis* (München: EOS Verlag Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 2002), 189–99.

²⁰ Louis Dupré, “Introduction” in *Romano Guardini, The Conversion of Augustine* (Merrimack, New Hampshire: Thomas More College Press, 2007), xviii.

temporary existence”.²¹ Dupré does not give sufficient consideration to how this was done.

2.3 Conversion as a Centre: *das Herz and der Geist*

As Guardini himself demonstrates in his *Vorwort* to the book, his intention is to interpret the interior process of Augustine’s conversion. He tries to perceive it between two extreme interpretations: neither was it only ethical-religious (simply from evil to good, from unbelief to belief) nor only psychological (overcoming and stifling his instincts, the sense of guilt, remaining under compulsion and contradiction). The third limited interpretation, also criticized by Guardini, is the “geistesgeschichtliche Deutung”: the level of the mind and the idea or a limited horizon of merely *vita beata* of the Cicero’s *Hortensius* or of Neoplatonism.²² Augustine’s conversion needs to be understood on a totally different level: “Der Vorgang kann gar kein anderer gewesen sein als jener, der den Menschen auf Leben und Tod erfaßt: die Hinkehr zu dem alles fordernden Gott Jesu Christi.”²³ This *Hinkehr* becomes the core of the existential conversion, which happens in the ambient of the human’s heart.

When commenting on the first chapter of the seventh book of *Confessions* – “Clamabat violenter cor meum adversus omnia phantasmata mea” (*Conf.* VII.1.1) –, Guardini brilliantly introduces the topic of this relation between the heart (*das Herz*) and the mind (*der denkende Geist*):

Wir sehen die Situation: Die innere Bewegung ist lebendig. Das Herz steht in Fühlung mit Gott. Der Wille will glauben. Das alles kann aber nicht in den denkenden Geist gelangen, weil dieser die nötigen Begriffe nicht hergibt. Das Herz weiß, wer Gott ist, und rennt gegen die Hindernisse an, die das Denken ihm entgegenstellt. Dieser ist aber zu mächtig, als daß es einfach vor dem glaubenswilligen Herzen kapitulierte. Ja, es darf das gar nicht; denn nicht nur das Herz, auch der Geist soll glauben.²⁴

²¹ *Ibidem*, xix.

²² See: Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 11.

²³ *Ibidem*, 12. “Conversion can only be something that seizes the man with a life-or-death grip: total orientation to the all-demanding God of Jesus Christ.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 206. “We can see the situation. Interiorly he is deeply perturbed. His heart is in touch with God. His will wants to believe. But all this cannot reach his mind because it lacks the necessary concepts. His heart knows who God is, and charges against the barriers which his thought sets up against Him. But Augustine’s mind is too powerful to capitulate to the heart’s desire for faith. And it is perfectly right; for not only the heart, but also the mind must be convinced.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 168.

Although Guardini values the Platonic doctrine on illumination in Augustine, which comes through the experience of spiritual light – “Intravi et vidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam, lucem incommutabilem”²⁵ (*Conf.* VII.10.16) –, and takes place “supra *mentem* meam”, Romano Guardini emphasizes the role of the heart. It is the heart where Augustine’s conversion takes place; as a matter of God’s grace: “Et clamasti de longinquo, «Immo vero ego sum qui sum» (Exod. 3:14). Et audiui, sicut auditur *in corde*, et non erat prorsus unde dubitarem”²⁶ (*Conf.* VII.10.16). Guardini claims that each recognition is a recognition of the heart. “Dieses Augustins geistige Existenz begründende Geschehnis vollzieht sich aber nicht aus dem bloßen Geist, sondern aus dem Herzen.”²⁷

The whole of Augustine’s spiritual-Christian existence is rooted in the heart, where the inter-relationship of idea, inner light, truth, being, spirit, self and eternal life dwell, are confirmed and evaluated. Not remotely in the isolated intellect, but in the mind, as Guardini says, warmed by the proximity of blood and body.²⁸ Here the existential theology of Guardini is expressed so clearly, since he opposes the heart against the bare theory, isolated intellect, abstract knowledge or the mere norm of a right concept. The ideas must be significant for personal existence and the heart is the centre where all this

²⁵ “And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable.” For the Latin text of the *Confessions* I refer to the J. J. O’Donnell edition, available also online: <https://www.stoa.org/hippo>. For the English text I refer to E. B. Pusey’s translation, available also online: <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/Englishconfessions.html>.

²⁶ “And Thou criedst to me from afar: «Yet verily, I am that I am». And I heard, as *the heart* heareth, nor had I room to doubt.” Italics by J.D.B.

²⁷ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 217. “This event, which is fundamental to Augustine’s whole spiritual existence, takes place, not in the mere intellect, but in the heart.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 176. See also Gerl-Falkovitz’s interpretation of this kind of “*philosophia cordis*”: Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, “Philosophie des Herzens. Ein Blick auf Augustinus, Pascal und Romano Guardini,” *Una Sancta* 63 (2008): 304–12.

²⁸ One typical Guardini’s attempt to determine the notion of the heart: “Das Herz, wie es bei Paulus und Johannes redet. Es ist die Sphäre der christlichen Innigkeit. Nicht «Gefühl» im neuzeitlichen Sinn des Wortes, sondern «Geist». Aber nicht losgelöster, gar abstrakter, sondern im Blute warmgewordener Geist; dem Schicksal zugänglich, verletzbar, preisgegeben und behütet zugleich; arm und himmlisch reich, der Tränen und des Lachens fähig.” Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 218. “The heart, as it speaks in Saint Paul and Saint John. It represents the sphere of Christian interiority. It is not «feeling» in the modern sense of the word, but «spirit». Yet this spirit is not separate, or even abstract, but a spirit that has been warmed in blood: open to destiny, vulnerable, both exposed and protected, poor and heavenly rich, capable of tears and laughter.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 177.

takes place: “Im Herzen strahlt das Licht ihrer Bewußtwerdung auf. Das Herz wird ihrer inne, hat erkennend und schätzend an ihr teil und macht so den Menschen seines Daseinssinnes gewiß.”²⁹

Conversion for Guardini exists in accepting and receiving grace and is realized through participation in God’s love. This Augustinian love is different from Plato’s *ἔπος*, but it is *caritas*, it is the *ἀγάπη* of the first Epistle of St. John. To acquire it, Guardini states, “bedarf es nicht nur des Durchdringens zur Lauterkeit der Gesinnung und Kraft des Könnens, sondern der Bekehrung.”³⁰ To Augustine, Christian instinct is stronger than the philosophical spirit, because it is not autonomous knowledge, but gift, grace, revelation. And with it comes also the personal response of the everyone’s existence. “Mit der Erkenntnis verbindet sich aber das Bewußtsein, tun zu müssen: die Notwendigkeit der «Bekehrung», die «Änderung des Sinnes».”³¹

All the various levels of existence stated above – Augustine’s moral struggle, psychological processes in him, his groping for a spiritual foothold and intellectual formation of existence – must be taken into consideration when we speak about the Hippionate’s conversion. They all confront one another in the psychological, intellectual and spiritual order.³² Conversion is therefore a progress of genuine rebirth, replacing the old existence with a new, incomparably higher and more alive existence. “Tu sciebas, ego autem non: sed tantum insaniebam salubriter et moriebar vitaliter, gnarus quid mali essem et ignarus quid boni post paululum futurus essem”³³ (*Conf.* VIII.8.19). According to Guardini, Augustine here describes the *metanoetic* Christian experience, the surrendering of the soul, which is dying because what is to come exists only in hope.³⁴

²⁹ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 217–18. “It is in the heart that awareness of the idea blazes. The heart perceives the idea, recognizing and evaluating it, thus assuring the person of the meaning of his existence.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 177.

³⁰ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 221. “One must not only penetrate to purity of intent and the power of actual capacity for love, but be converted.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 179.

³¹ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 227. “To knowledge is now added awareness of the need for action: the necessity of «conversion» and «change of heart».” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 185.

³² See: Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 232; Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 190.

³³ „Thou knewest, I knew not. Only I was healthfully distracted and dying, to live; knowing what evil thing I was, and not knowing what good thing I was shortly to become.”

³⁴ See: Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 234.

2.4 The Face of Conversion: from “*mutato vultu*” to “*tranquillo vultu*”

Commenting on the eighth book of the *Confessions*, where Augustine provides an in-depth description of his own conversion, Guardini traces this process with a special vocabulary of the transformation of the face.³⁵ *Vultus* seems to be a theological metaphor designating the outward expression for the inner term of heart. Augustine hears the famous phrase “*tolle lege*” with a changed face, *mutato vultu*:

Dicebam haec et flebam amarissima contritione cordis mei. Et ecce audio vocem de vicina domo cum cantu dicentis et crebro repetentis, quasi pueri an puellae, nescio: «Tolle lege, tolle lege.» Statimque *mutato vultu* intentissimus cogitare coepi utrumnam solerent pueri in aliquo genere ludendi cantitare tale aliquid.³⁶ (*Conf.* VIII.12.29)

This profound experience, as Guardini claims, was also perceived physically by Augustine, he felt it “als durch gottgesendete Stimme die Umwandlung des ganzen Daseins begann.”³⁷ The whole existence is somehow changed, transformed. It is through this decisive moment, how conversion takes place. It is neither a matter of words or reasoning nor a mere volition; it is a matter of heart, a matter of whole human existence: “Nicht im Sagbaren; nicht im Gedanklichen; nicht in der ausdrücklichen Willensbetätigung, sondern in der inneren Bewegung des ganz lebendig gewordenen Herzens – die freilich zugleich Gnade ist.”³⁸

Having experienced this profound existential conversion, which took place in the center of Augustine’s heart, he can now outline this change towards a perfect clarity flooding his heart with the same outward expression: “Tum interiecto aut digito aut nescio quo alio signo codicem clausi et *tranquillo iam vultu* indicavi Alypio”³⁹ (*Conf.* VIII.12.30). The transformation

³⁵ For the analysis of the term *vultus*, see: *ibidem*, 240–46. (*The Conversion of Augustine*, 197–200.)

³⁶ “So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, «Take up and read; Take up and read». Instantly, my *countenance altered*, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like.” Italics by J.D.B.

³⁷ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 240. “When the God-sent voice set into motion the transformation of his whole existence.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 197.

³⁸ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 245. “Through no thought or word or specific action of the will, but through the swift burgeoning of a heart become totally alive – motion that is, of course, also grace.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 199.

³⁹ “Then putting my finger between, or some other mark, I shut the volume, and with a *calmed countenance* made it known to Alypius.” Italics by J.D.B.

encompasses the whole existence, and it is also manifested outwardly. The heart is, therefore, a place of unity between body and spirit, wherein the mind and will, through conversion, come together.

2.5 The Transformation of the Heart

Guardini does not speak about the dualism between the mind and the heart. His perception of the heart is much broader:

Als Organ und Bereich des menschlichen Ganzen heißt die auf den Wert antwortende Innerlichkeit „Herz“. Damit ist nicht das Gefühlsleben im Gegensatz zum Geiste gemeint. Herz ist selbst Geist; aber wertschätzender, im Unterschied zum Normgehorchenden. Vom Wert her erregbarer und auf den Wert hin bewegbarer Geist. Geist als Erosträger.⁴⁰

Augustine had a heart like this. His conversion consisted in directing his *eros* towards God. In this manner, Guardini states that “er hat vielmehr aus der Herzsphäre heraus gedacht, und ein Bild vom Dasein geschaffen, das nur von ihr aus verstanden werden kann.”⁴¹

The heart is a place in which transformation operates. Guardini considered the will to be transformed as one of the most profound characteristics of the human essence.⁴² Transformation is not meant as something magical, it is not a direct change into something, like for example Ovid's *Metamorphoseos*. Instead, genuine transformation is a step upward to the higher, nobler, truer, the more intimate and more real. It takes place in the loving act through the sacrifice of self, through decline for the sake of good. Guardini is against moralistic perception of conversion, which is no mere ‘moral’ act, but something that happens to the whole being; it is transformed.⁴³ The redeemed heart becomes pure and free.

⁴⁰ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 69. “The inwardness that responds to value, that is both faculty and realm of human entirety, is known as «heart». This does not mean the life of the emotions as opposed to that of the mind; the heart itself is ‘mind’, but it is evaluating mind, not merely mind obedient to the norm. It is mind warmed and moved by value toward value: mind as Eros-bearer.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 51.

⁴¹ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 70. “He thought from the heart and he created an image of existence which only the heart can comprehend.” Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine*, 52.

⁴² See: Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 73–74.

⁴³ See: *Ibidem*, 74.

3. Anfang: eine Auslegung der ersten fünf Kapitel von Augustins Bekenntnissen (1944)

Guardini's second book on Augustine, *Anfang: eine Auslegung der ersten fünf Kapitel von Augustins Bekenntnissen*, issued in 1944, is much briefer, considering the length, and as well, the content. Its purpose is to deliver Guardini's explanation of only the first five chapters of the first book of *Confessions*, which are like a prologue to the entire text.

3.1 *Anfang* (Beginning)

Guardini intends to present five meditations in which he reflects on the existential characteristics of Augustine's thought. "Alles wird uns an den Rand der Existenz, damit aber auch zu ihrem Anfang, in den Bereich des Anfangs, in den Ur-Bereich führen."⁴⁴

Augustine's work *Confessions* represents one of the purest examples of the everlasting expressions of human existence which is fundamentally characterized by a constant – conscious or unconscious – quest for God:

Die Fragen, welche darin gestellt werden; die Art, wie sich dabei das Denken bewegt; die Weise, wie der Denkende die eigene Wirklichkeit im Verhältnis zur Welt und beide in Verhältnis zur Wirklichkeit Gottes empfindet, machen jene Kapitel zu einer der reinsten Ausbruchsstellen des neuzeitlichen Existenzserlebens.⁴⁵

For Guardini, *Confessions* represents an existential approach at its finest, which means that method and style are not very theoretical, and the focus is not on the systematic statements, but on the contrary, he rather highlights the "vorwissenschaftlich, dafür aber um so lebendig Zustand."⁴⁶

3.2 *Restless Existence Leads Towards Conversion*

In this book, Guardini does not draw our attention so precisely to Augustine's conversion, but he rather offers a profound meditation on the first five chapters. Therein, though, we can find some traces of the conversion account which follows afterward, especially in the eighth book.

The immortal words – "*Inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*" (*Conf.* I.1.1) – are for Guardini the basis of the Augustinian anthropological conception.⁴⁷ Our human existence is situated in front of God and precisely

⁴⁴ Guardini, *Anfang*, 257.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 254.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 257–59.

through appropriating this position one can achieve the fullness of his or her existence. The process is called conversion. When the human being becomes aware of our existential restlessness (*innere Unruhe*), accepts it as a stimulating factor of our existence and allows that our heart can be converted, “dann führt sie ihn zur wesenhaften Ruhe, nämlich der Erfüllung des Wesens.”⁴⁸

The concept of conversion, transformation of the heart, as elucidated and emphasized in Guardini’s first book on the bishop of Hippo, is therefore supplemented with the perception of the existential fullness in God. “Non ergo essem, deus meus, non omnino essem, nisi esses in me” (*Conf.* I.2.2).⁴⁹ Human existence is incomplete, in constant dependency on God, but precisely in this fact lies, according to Guardini, its dignity and possibility for progress. Conversion is, therefore, *Er-innerung*, a journey inwards, a growing awareness of the inner spiritual life, a renewed memory of everyone’s own heart.

Luigi Negri defines the epilogue of Guardini’s five meditations as a “radical conversion of the mind and the heart.”⁵⁰ It consists in permitting God to purify our hearts. “Angusta est domus animae meae quo venias ad eam: dilatetur abs te. Ruinosa est: refice eam” (*Conf.* I.5.6). *Domus animae* can be called also *heart*, which is in ruins and cries for restoration. The restlessness of human existence includes distress in order to allow God to reconstruct it. As Guardini says, “Das Haus ist verfallen; Gott soll es wieder herstellen; dazu muß er aber Steine, Wände, Räume aus ihrer verlorenen Ruhe aufstöbern.”⁵¹ But this lost inner peace is not the objective, it is rather an agent towards conversion and, finally, towards acquiring the fullness of existence in God’s love, as Guardini concludes his book. “Damit wird schließlich das ganze Dasein mit seinen undruchdringbaren Rätseln, seinen Widersprüchen und seiner Ausweglosigkeit in das Geheimnis der Liebe Gottes gegeben.”⁵²

4. Ewigkeit und Geschichte (1955/56 and 1961/62): Christian Interiority in Augustine

An additional insight in Guardini’s more recent perception of Augustine and the nature of his conversion can be learned from seminar lectures he gave in Munich in the winter semesters of 1955/56 and 1961/62. The typewritten outlines for his course entitled “*Ewigkeit und Geschichte. Die Bestimmung der Existenz im Denken von Platon, Augustinus, Dante*” remained unedited

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 259.

⁴⁹ “I could not be then, O my God, could not be at all, wert Thou not in me.”

⁵⁰ Luigi Negri, “Nota di edizione,” in *Romano Guardini. L’inizio: un commento ai primi cinque capitoli delle Confessioni di Agostino* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1973), 19.

⁵¹ Guardini, *Anfang*, 291.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 292.

until recently and although they do not present another systematic treatment of these three authors, they still offer some of his late reflections about the concept of existence in Plato and Augustine. Guardini perceives that the living God of the revelation who illuminates and gives sense was for Augustine at his conversion what the concept of *agathon* was for Plato. He treats Augustine's conversion as described in *Confessions* briefly in a short separate chapter.⁵³ After distinguishing two general lines of interpretation of the first phase (*Conf.* VII.10–13) – a Neoplatonic, intellectual, philosophical conversion or a more specifically Christian conversion –, where Guardini obviously opts for the latter, he clearly asserts that Augustine's conversion in *Conf.* VIII was obviously of a Biblical-Christian nature with a strong personal characteristic.⁵⁴ Albeit he refers twice to his book *Die Bekehrung*, which shows the continuity of his own interpretation of Augustine, he concludes by presenting a *novum* in Augustine as regards to Plato – the world of Augustine has one dimension more: Christian interiority.

5. Aug., *In evangelium Ioannis tractatus* 53: “*Conversio gratia est*”

However, to this point, a systematic understanding of how Augustine contributes to the perception of conversion is still lacking. Augustine's world is much wider than just *Confessions*. The last part of this research paper will try to enrich the previous study with some Augustinian insights on the conversion of the heart from some of his other works. Guardini himself admits that he was unable to relate the *Confessions* to other works by Augustine.⁵⁵ Drawing upon one significant commentary on the Gospel of John, the following reflection attempts to provide an additional insight into Augustine's conception of conversion of the heart.

Augustine's sermons, collected in the work *In evangelium Ioannis tractatus*, were delivered from 406 to 410 AD; so about ten years later than *Confessions* were written. In the Gospel of John, we find one famous and controversial statement when John speaks about the non-conversion of Jews, which later provoked Augustine to deliver a rich interpretation.

Indeed, they were unable to believe because, as Isaiah says again:
He has blinded their eyes (τετύφλωκεν αὐτῶν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς),

⁵³ Guardini, *Eternità e storia*, 184–88.

⁵⁴ For an excellent recent work on this topic see: Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion. The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge: University Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 14. On the other hand, given the state of insufficient but awakening interest in patristic studies in Catholic theology of Guardini's times, it is certainly not without importance that he interprets an author like Augustine not only superficially but so profoundly.

he has hardened their heart (ἐπώρωσεν αὐτῶν τὴν καρδίαν), to prevent them from using their eyes to see (ἵνα μὴ ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς), using their heart to understand (νοήσωσιν τῇ καρδίᾳ), changing their ways (στραφῶσιν) and being healed by me (ἰάσομαι αὐτούς). (John 12:39-40 NJB/NA28)

Here we find John's citing from the book of Isaiah (Isa. 6:10),⁵⁶ where some of the main concepts, used in the discussion above, are mentioned. We have to understand in our hearts – “יָבִין וְלִבָּו (yābîn ūlābābōw)”⁵⁷ – in order to be converted or to change our ways – “וָשָׁב (wāšāb)”⁵⁸. Even more evident and meaningful is the Latin version on which Augustine also commented: “Excaecavit oculos eorum, et induravit cor eorum ut non videant oculis, et non intelligent corde, et convertantur, et sanem eos” (John 12:40 VUL).

Seeking the explanation why God permitted Jews to not believe and therefore not to convert themselves, Augustine asserts that God acts mercifully and righteously, which is sometimes beyond our comprehension. Conversion is always an act of God's grace:

Et ipsa enim conversio de illius gratia est, cui dicitur: *Deus virtutum, converte nos* (Ps. 79:8). An forte et hoc de supernae medicinae misericordia factum intellegendum est, ut quoniam superbae et perversae voluntatis erant, et suam iustitiam constituere volebant, ad hoc desererentur, ut excaecarentur.⁵⁹ (Aug., *In Io. tr.* 53.11)

Conversion of the heart takes place because of a divine gift through His healing. The obstacle to conversion, as Augustine claims, is our own will to justify ourselves (cf. Rom. 10:2-3). In this fashion he continues, mentioning the need to be humbled in order to be converted, maybe even referring to his own story of conversion:

Ad hoc excaecarentur, ut offenderent in lapidem offensionis, et impleretur facies eorum ignominia; atque ita humiliati quaerent

⁵⁶ הַשְׁמֵךְ לִב־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְאֶת־הַכֶּבֶד וְעֵינֵיהֶם הַשְׁעֵם פֶּן־יִרְאֶה בְּעֵינָיו וּבְאָזְנוֹ יִשְׁמָע וְלִבָּו יִבִּין וְנִשְׁבַּ וְגִרְפָּא לוֹ: (Is 6:10 WTT).

⁵⁷ See: τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν (Is 6:10 LXX).

⁵⁸ See: ἐπιστρέψωσιν (Is 6:10 LXX).

⁵⁹ “For conversion itself is likewise a gift of His grace, as when it is said to Him, *Turn us, O God of Hosts*. Or may it be that we are to understand this also as actually taking place through the merciful experience of the divine method of healing, [namely this,] that, being of proud and perverse wills, and wishing to establish their own righteousness, they were left alone for the very purpose of being blinded.” For the Latin text I refer to Willems’ edition: *Augustinus: In Iohannis evangelium tractatus CXXIV*, CCSL 36 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990). For the English text the following translation was used: *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. Available online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701053.htm>.

nomen Domini, et non suam qua inflatur superbus, sed iustitiam Dei qua iustificatur impius? Hoc enim multis eorum profecit in bonum, qui de suo scelere compuncti, in Christum postea crediderunt.⁶⁰ (Aug., *In Io. tr.* 53.11)

Then he goes on and discusses whether they have not been converted because of ignorance:

De qua eorum ignorantia et Apostolus dicit: *Testimonium illis perhibeo quia zelum Dei habent, sed non secundum scientiam*: tunc enim et hoc subiunxit, atque ait: *Ignorantes enim Dei iustitiam, et suam volentes constituere, iustitiae Dei non sunt subiecti* (Rom. 10:2-3).⁶¹ (Aug., *In Io. tr.* 53.11)

Conversion is therefore not only a matter of knowledge (*scientia*), but foremost a matter of God's grace and our own zeal (*zelum Dei*) to desire and accept it, as Augustine explains. It is on us to seek the righteousness of God and not that of our own (cf. John 12:43).

Conversion, according to Augustine, is therefore first and foremost, a free act of God's benevolent will, an unmerited gift, and also a responsibility to enter into this process. Conversion is never made once and for all, but it is always a process that takes place in the human heart. "Ambulandum est, proficiendum est, crescendum est, ut sint corda nostra capacia earum rerum quas capere modo non possumus. Quod si nos ultimus dies proficientes invenerit, ibi discemus quod hic non potuimus."⁶² (Aug., *In Io. tr.* 53.7)

5. Conclusion

Guardini's attempt, when he was interpreting Augustine's *Confessions*, was not to focus on the biographical or historical circumstances and determinations,⁶³

⁶⁰ "And thus blinded in order that they might stumble on the stone of stumbling, and have their faces filled with shame; and so, being thus humbled, might seek the name of the Lord, and no longer a righteousness of their own, that inflated their pride, but the righteousness of God, that justifies the ungodly? For this very way turned out to the good of many of them, who were afterwards filled with remorse for wickedness, and believed in Christ."

⁶¹ "And it is of that ignorance of theirs also that the apostle says, *I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge*: for he then goes on also to add, *For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.*"

⁶² "We must be walking, making progress, and growing, that our hearts may become fit to receive the things which we cannot receive at present. And if the last day shall find us sufficiently advanced, we shall then learn what here we were unable to know."

⁶³ An interesting monograph in this regard written from a very distinct standpoint: Dong Young Kim, *Understanding Religious Conversion: The Case of St. Augustine* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012.) See also for example: Robert J. O'Connell, *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions* (Fordham: University Press, 1996).

but to emphasize the inner reality or structure of man's conversion, as inspired by Augustine's example.⁶⁴

Conversion toward the Christian existence does not include blind asceticism as a technique of intellectual ascent, or some method of painful measures with a view to religious results. This would not have been enough. What Christianity wants is to bring the *whole* person into a living relation, to a movement towards God.⁶⁵ Guardini does this using the notion of "heart", which collocates him in a long line of thought after Augustine – also Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich W. Nietzsche and Max Scheler. A more profound analysis of this very important notion in Guardini's thought exceeds the limits of the present study. Heart is marked by paradoxality and it is for this reason that the human being must in a certain sense be interiorized and de-constructed in order to again meet God and through that very encounter, finally, for the first time become one's true self.

Nock's interpretation of Augustine's conversion is interesting but lacks the grasp of Guardini's genuine existential tone: "Christianity is throughout presupposed and present in the subject's subconsciousness, but [...] it is not a conversion from indifference; it is a progress in a continuous line; it is like a chemical process in which the addition of a catalytic agent produces a reaction for which all the elements were already present."⁶⁶ This "chemical reaction" was much more intense, profound and complex. Guardini defends the transcendent nature of one's conversion. It is not a sheer act of will, a matter of knowledge or process of constraint or coercion. It is a matter of God's grace and human synergy with it. Recently Do Espírito Santo delivered a more balanced understanding: he related Guardini's concept of freedom as indebted to the conversion experience of Augustine.⁶⁷

The initial intention of Guardini was to deliver a general interpretation of *Confessions*, suitable for the people of his age. I would dare to say that his explanations might have been a little more relevant to our contemporary culture if he were also to include a broader and clearer relevance for the readers' conversion or transformation. Nevertheless, without any doubt, he

⁶⁴ Since the principal scope of the present study was to examine Guardini's works strictly related to Augustine, this limitation did not enable to treat his ideas pertinent to the topic of conversion in his other works. principal scope will be his works related to the matter, however, speaking of "conversion", there are also other ideas pertinent to this topic spread throughout other Guardini's works. See for example the discussion in his work *Die letzten Dinge. Die christliche Lehre vom Tode, der Läuterung nach dem Tode, Auferstehung, Gericht und Ewigkeit*.

⁶⁵ See: Guardini, *Die Bekehrung des heiligen Aurelius Augustinus*, 201.

⁶⁶ Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion. The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 266.

⁶⁷ Do Espírito Santo, "L'Agostino di Romano Guardini," 51–53.

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did intend his two works in the form of a perennial possibility of Christian existence. My remark is just that today the medieval phrase “*Augustinus dicit*” (or in other words, only a mere reassessment of Augustine’s story) does not present a relevant and inspiring authority anymore. In contrast, the examination of his existential struggles can signalize a spiritual inspiration for contemporary people. In this manner, I see the relevance of Guardini’s Augustine for the post-modern world.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ See for example also: John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).