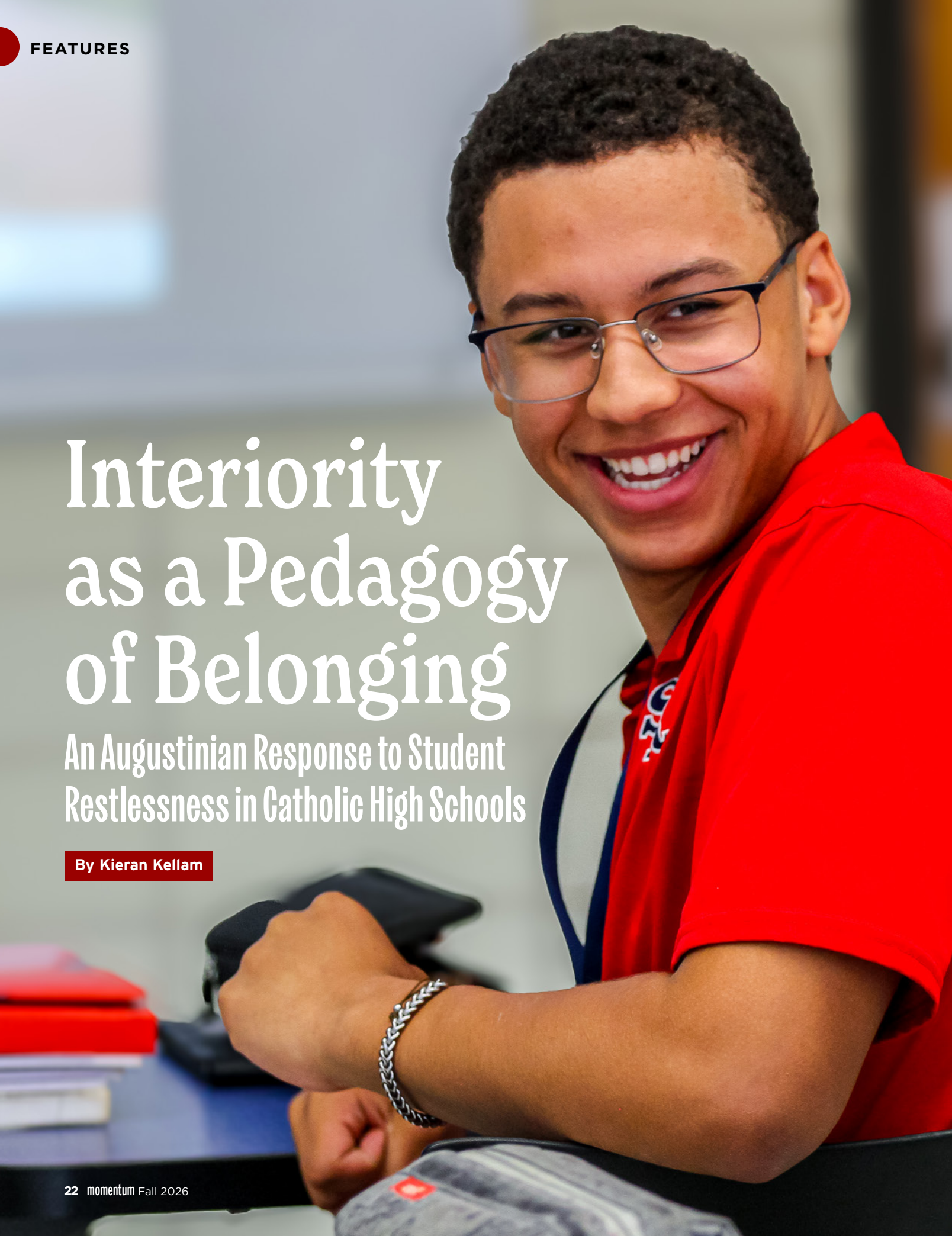




Interiority as a Pedagogy of Belonging

An Augustinian Response to Student
Restlessness in Catholic High Schools

By Kieran Kellam

I am sitting in my office at the end of what can only be described as a typical day in the life of a school: busy, full, joyful, and relentless. A senior enters my office in campus ministry and drops heavily onto the couch. His demeanor immediately catches my attention. Normally animated and good-humored, today he is withdrawn.

Sensing something amiss, I ask, “Danny, what’s going on?” He exhales sharply and begins, “I have all of this homework... two tests this Friday... my grades aren’t where they need to be...” His voice rises as the words tumble out faster. Soon, he is nearly shouting: “We have a huge football game this week. Our captain keeps hounding me during practice, and I still have to finish my college application essays!”

Danny’s stress is understandable, but it also feels familiar. Increasingly, we are meeting students who are not merely busy but burdened: students whose attention is scattered, whose sense of self is shaky, and whose experience of belonging is thinning. What is happening? What kind of formation do Catholic schools need in response?

When the Outside Gets Louder

What we are noticing in hallways and classrooms is not just anecdotal; it’s a pattern, and the data echoes lived experience.

Digital immersion is now close to constant for many teens: Pew Research Center reports that nearly half of U.S. adolescents say they are online “almost constantly,” and most use video-focused social platforms every day.

At the same time, school belonging has weakened. CDC data show that the share of high school students who reported feeling connected to others at school fell from 61.5 percent in 2021 to 55 percent in 2023. Because school connectedness is strongly linked with better mental-health outcomes, this decline matters for both learning and well-being.

The problem is not only academic or social; it is also spiritual. Pope Leo XIV, speaking to educators at the Jubilee of the World of Education, named this directly, urging schools to help students “get in touch with their inner selves” amid “technological screens and filters.”

A Phone-Based Adolescence Forms the Self Outwardly

One major force intensifying this moment is the shift in how adolescents socialize, measure themselves, and seek approval. Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Anxious Generation*, argues that it was the shift from a “play-based” to a “phone-based” childhood. Drawing on research in psychology and sociology, he explains how, beginning roughly in the early 2010s, constant digital connection has rewired their attention, amplified social comparison, and undermined

a sense of community in teens. Whether one agrees with every remedy, the synthesis is a useful diagnosis for schools: kids are more reachable than ever, and paradoxically, feel out of reach.

In practice, this shows up in a pattern I see repeatedly with teenage boys: their social world has become pervasive, perpetual, and performative.

- **Pervasive:** Nearly every student carries a device that has become camera, TV, game console, planner, and connection to all of their peers, acquaintances, and the world at large. Life without a phone is increasingly impractical. Even if a campus is “phone-free,” the rest of their lives are not. Pressures don’t end at the school entrance. Students grow accustomed to quick, easy results and constant stimulation. Therefore, patience and stamina are hard to come by.
- **Perpetual:** They have spent their lives being connected to everyone... always. Teens have always struggled with peer approval. Now, they never have a break from that struggle. Validation and criticism can arrive at any hour. That round-the-clock exposure makes ordinary social risks feel dangerous. It is not that some students are just tired; it is that they’re never off. In response, they are more anxious and hesitant to engage, lest a misstep live forever.
- **Performative:** Comparison culture isn’t new, but the stage is bigger and so is the audience. Through social media, teens curate a version of themselves, most likely to be rewarded with approval: homecoming smiles, the solo in a concert, the helmet in the air after a win. There aren’t many posts about sadness, about struggle or about grief. They measure themselves by unachievable, external standards that never stop.

This is a recipe for loneliness. When all you typically experience is rapid, superficial exchanges, depth is challenging. When we ask questions that require self-awareness: “Who are you?” “What do you love?” “What are you called to?” “Where is God in your relationships?” we often get what they think sounds like “the right answer” or a stunned silence. They are more connected than ever, but those connections are surface level. They share jokes, memes, and reels, but they don’t share themselves. They’re known socially, but not personally.

An Augustinian Diagnosis: Restless Hearts and Disordered Loves

If the self is being trained to live outwardly, under constant comparison and evaluation, then the deepest problem isn’t merely stress; it is restlessness. Our students need (and want) habits that restore attention, practices that lower the emotional temperature of the day, and communities where they can be known without auditioning. St. Augustine, a man from the early 5th century, provides us all with the correct lenses to see our modern world. Within his opening lines

of the *Confessions*, he sets the problem in the correct context: “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You.”

Restlessness is not merely an emotional problem but a theological one. Augustine helps us see that much of what agitates students is not just pressure, but misdirected love. Our students’ strain often comes from living in a state of *imago hominis* (a sense of worth measured by human approval) rather than *Imago Dei* (the grace-laden dignity of being made in God’s image). To live from *Imago Dei* takes intention and formation. It is a daily task to look inward in a world that is constantly inviting us to look outward.

Formation is Inevitable. So, Who is Doing the Forming?

Augustine helps us name the deeper issue: our loves are being trained. And if our loves are being trained, then formation is inevitable. The only question is *what* is forming students, and *toward what end*. Contemporary writer James K. A. Smith has provided us with a deeper dive into Augustine’s thinking as it applies today. “We are not just thinkers; we are believers, lovers, desiring animals. And our desires are shaped and aimed by the embodied practices in which we participate.” When we celebrate Mass on Sunday morning, we re-order our loves. We re-form our hearts and reset our desires, our loves toward Christ. However, our Sunday afternoons watching football games also attempts to re-order our love. We quickly become tribalistic devotees clad in team colors ready to cheer or jeer. Our identity becomes a logo, and our salvation is dependent upon our team’s victory. This isn’t to say such things as football carry the same weight to us as Mass or reconciliation. However, we need to be wary and understand that such secular activities still have an effect on us

and our loves. So, how do we insulate our students from a world so invested in counter-forming their loves with powerful technology? By forming them with a practice of interiority.

Interiority: Returning Within to Meet God in Truth

“Do not go outward; return into yourself. In the inner man dwells the truth.” To Augustine, interiority is the practiced, guided habit of turning inward to meet God in truth. We pause in a tumultuous, noisy world. We notice what churns within us and name our disordered loves. We re-order our focus toward what is true, good, and loving. Although it is personal, we do not practice in isolation. Properly taught, interiority deepens community. Students who continually ground themselves in God’s love need to perform less and want to be truly present to each other more. As they examine who they truly are, what they are truly loving, they will come to understand that when they turn their love toward what is eternal and not what is temporary, their identity steadies. Our task is to guide ourselves and our students inward; from noise to silence, from competition to contemplation, from achievement to authenticity.

A Simple Daily Practice

How can our students know God if they never have stillness in their lives? They need time and space to be reflective. This is a skill, and therefore, it takes time to develop. They need to be formed in how to engage with their inner self, and therefore, they require silence. Many of them find being silent uncomfortable and unsettling. It is a challenge. Yet, it is one they unknowingly crave. A routine of reflective silence (mindfulness/quiet contemplative practice) can strengthen metacognitive awareness, self-regulation, purpose, and belonging.



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One simple way to teach interiority is a brief, repeatable Augustinian daily examination. It simply calls for four to six minutes of guided reflective silence. The goal is not to “empty the mind,” but to notice where their attention went, what emotions surfaced, what they truly desired, and where grace (or disorder) showed up in their choices. Done consistently, this becomes a concrete habit of self-awareness and discipleship. It is small enough to fit into a school day and deep enough to reshape it. It shares some similarities with an Ignatian Examen, but its emphasis is distinctly Augustinian: not primarily “What mission am I moving toward?” but “Who am I before God, and what do I truly love?” (We need both!)

Augustinian Daily Examen

Settle into Silence

30 seconds–1 minute

Find stillness, breathe, and offer a simple prayer to turn inward.

Review the Day/Yesterday Without Judgment

1–2 minutes

Revisit key moments where you felt alive/loved, and where you felt restless/disconnected.

Examine Your Desires

1 minute

Identify what you wanted most in those moments and whether it drew you toward God or away from Him.

Confess and Trust God

1 minute

Think honestly about where you fell short and where you noticed grace.

Rest in God's Presence

1 minute

End in quiet trust, recognizing that you are known and loved by God.

Making it Sustainable in School Life

We are all busy with curricula, activities, tests, etc. We want our students to be academically successful. Yet, we also want them to know themselves and to know how God works within and through them. To turn them inward, we need to ask deeper questions: “Where did I see beauty or kindness today?” “What am I grateful for right now?” and “What is God calling me to in this struggle?” The ability to answer these types of questions is at the heart of a Catholic education. It is also the cure for what ails them. Self-awareness breeds self-confidence. Self-confidence breeds joy... the antithesis of

anxiety. A guided, meditative prayer that prompts them to look for God within their relationships and within themselves will alter the way they see and experience the world and the love of God. Over time, they start to understand that this isn’t just a classroom routine; it’s a way of living.

Interiority as a Pedagogy of Belonging

If adolescent attention is fragmented and belonging is thinning, then interiority cannot remain an occasional retreat theme. As Catholic schools, we should institutionalize brief, consistent practices of reflection. Integrated into prayer, advisories, classrooms, and coaching environments, silence and guided meditative prayer will teach our students the skills of attention, naming emotion, discerning desire, and re-ordering love.

In this way, interiority becomes a pedagogy of belonging: students are formed not only as profiles but as people; not only as competitors but as companions; not only as subscribers but as souls. The end is not mere calm, but joy. A joy that arises when their identities are secured in *Imago Dei*, and relationships are marked by presence rather than performance. In a restless age, Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to teach the most countercultural skill of all: the habit of returning within, where the Teacher dwells, so that students can return to one another in peace.



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Photos courtesy of St. Rita of Cascia High School

