

His-Story

Church history and why it matters to me

CHARACTER STUDY: MEET SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Opening Prayer:

Lord, speak so that I may hear your words. My heart has ears ready to listen to you, Lord. Open them wide and whisper in my heart, 'I am here to save you.' I shall hear your voice and make haste to clasp you to myself. Do not hide your face away from me, for I would gladly meet death to see it, since not to see it would be death indeed. My soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it. It is in ruins, but I ask you to remake it (*Confessions*, 1:5).

I. Introduction

1. Why study Saint Augustine?
2. Goal: not just to know about him but to get to know him as a person
3. Opening paragraph from Augustine's *Confessions*:

Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty? How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom! Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you (*Confessions*, 1:1).

4. Augustine's life could be summed up with this idea: *An insatiable search for the truth.*

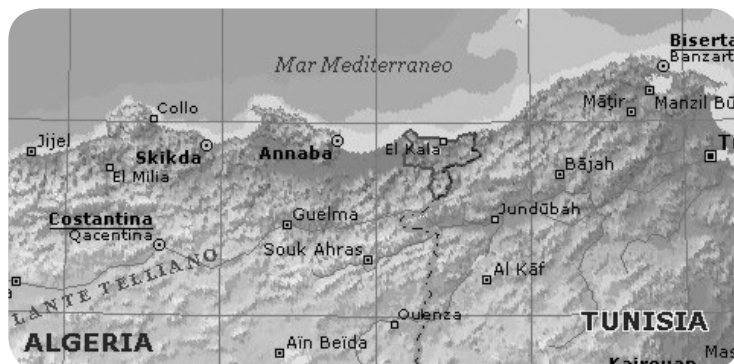
II. His early life

A. Childhood

1. Born in 354 in Tagaste, North Africa (Souk Ahras, Algeria)
 - a. Father, Patricius, was a Roman official (and followed Roman pagan religions)
 - b. Mother, Monica, a devout Christian who prayed fervently for Augustine
2. Showed exceptional intelligence
 - a. Parents sent him to near-by Madaura for the first years (what we would call elementary and middle school)
 - b. Sent to Carthage (Tunis, Tunisia) for further education at age 17 (what we would call high school and college): the political, economic, and cultural center of Latin-speaking Africa.

B. In Carthage

1. Excelled in school but also in pleasure
2. Had a live-in girl friend who bore him a son
3. Pursued an education in rhetoric, rejecting the popular tracks of law or government work: rhetoric is the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and other compositional techniques (Oxford English dictionary).



4. Loved reading the philosopher, Cicero, which created in him a hunger for truth (around 373)
 ...in Cicero's book was his advice not simply to admire one or another of the schools of philosophy, but to love the wisdom itself, whatever it might be, and to search for it, pursue it, hold it, and embrace it firmly (Confessions III:4).

5. The search for truth led Augustine to Manichaeism

- a. Name comes from its originator, Mani (AD 216-276); a Persian born in Mesopotamia who grew up among a sect of Jewish Christians
- b. Mani claimed to have received personal "revelations" and called himself the Apostle of Jesus Christ
- c. Major beliefs
 - Influenced by gnosticism in that it teaches a duality of light verses darkness (Christ was the representative of light; Satan was the representative of darkness)
 - According to Mani, these beliefs had been revealed to other prophets and gurus: Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Mani himself
 - Believed Jesus (and other religious leaders) came to release souls of light from the prisons of their bodies
 - Claimed the Apostles corrupted Christ's teachings, and Mani revealed it in pure form
 - Taught Christ's body was an illusion
- d. In Augustine's time, Manichaeism had spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. Its main appeal was its claim to be eminently rational. Like gnosticism earlier, Manichaeism supported many of its teachings on astronomical observation. Besides, part of its propaganda consisted in ridiculing the teachings of Christianity, and particularly the Bible, whose materialism and primitive language it mocked (Justo L. Gonzalez' *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1*).
 - Followed Manichaeism for nine years
 - Began to question the tenets of belief and came to distrust Manichaeism altogether (as he studied it with rational thought)

C. Moved to Rome and eventually Milan (Italy)

1. Went through a period of deep questioning and through an academic's despair of knowing anything with certainty

What crooked pants I trod! What dangers threatened my soul when it rashly hoped that by abandoning you it would find something better! Whichever way it turned, on front or back or sides, it lay on a bed that was hard, for in you alone the soul can rest. You are there to free us from the misery of error which leads us astray, to set us on your own path and to comfort us by saying, 'Run on, for I shall hold you up. I shall lead you and carry you on to the end' (Confessions VI:16).

2. In 384 appointed imperial rhetorician at Milan
3. Also around this time Monica, a recent widow, moved to Italy to be near her son

III. His mother, Monica

A. On Monica's faith

...When she was old enough, they [Monica's parents] gave her in marriage to a man who she served as her lord. She never ceased to try to gain him for you [God] as a convert, for the virtues with which you had adorned her, and for which he respected, loved, and admired her, were like so many voices constantly speaking to him of you. He was unfaithful to her, but her patience was so great that his infidelity never became the cause of quarreling between them. For she looked to you to show him mercy, hoping that the chastity would come with faith (Confessions IX:9).

- B. Monica a true prayer-warrior
1. Prayed earnestly for her husband's conversion
 - a. Following the instruction of I Peter 3, Monica realized her actions, more than her words, would be the means of her husband's conversion. By her living in patience and meekness, Monica won her mother-in-law to Christ (a woman who had been prejudiced against her).
 - b. In the end she won her husband for you as a convert in the very last days of his life on earth. After his conversion she no longer had to grieve over those faults which had tried her patience before he was a Christian. She was also the servant of your servants. Those of them who knew her praised you, honored you, and loved you in her, for they could feel your presence in her heart and her holy conversation gave rich proof of it. She had been faithful to one husband, had made due returns to those who gave her birth. Her own flesh and blood had had first claim on her piety, and she had a name for acts of charity (*Confessions IX:9*).
 2. Prayed earnestly for her son's conversion
 - a. "You can run far, but you can't outrun the prayers of a mother!" –Augustine
 - b. Then we went in and told my mother, who was overjoyed. And when we went on to describe how it had all happened, she was jubilant with triumph and glorified you, who are powerful enough, and more than powerful enough, to carry out your purpose beyond all our hopes and dreams... you converted me to yourself... you turned her sadness into rejoicing (*Confessions VIII:12*).
 - c. And then my mother said, 'My son, for my part I find no further pleasure in this life. What I am still to do or why I am here in the world, I do not know, for I have no more to hope for on this earth. There was one reason, and one alone, why I wished to remain a little longer in this life, and that was to see you a Catholic Christian before I died. God has granted my wish and more besides, for I now see you as his servant, spurning such happiness as the world can give. What is left for me to do in this world?' (*Confessions IX:10*).
- C. Five days after Augustine's conversion, Monica came down with a fever
1. Four days later she was taken from this life
 2. Monica died in 387 (age of 56)
"Now gone from my sight, who for years had wept over me, that I might live in your [God's] sight." –Augustine

IV. His conversion

- A. Living and working in Milan still in turmoil of the soul
- B. Influenced by Christians whom the Lord had put around him
1. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan
 2. Christian friends (both natives of North Africa): Ponticianus and Alypius
- C. Ambrose ministered in a monastery that had a spacious garden which Augustine frequented

Augustine describes his conversion

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I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I gathered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears . . . For I felt that I was still enslaved by my sins, and in my misery I kept crying, 'How long shall I go on saying "Tomorrow, tomorrow"? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?'

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again

Rome left impressive remains in North Africa. This aqueduct is at Ziqua (now Zaghuan, Tunisia).



it repeated the chorus, 'Take it and read, take it and read.' At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be God's command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. For I had heard the story of Antony, and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as an instruction addressed to himself when he heard the words, 'Go home and sell all that belongs to you. Give it to the poor, and so the treasure you have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me.' By this message from God he had at once been converted.

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul's Letters. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: 'No orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy. Take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ; and stop giving attention to your sinful nature, to satisfy its desires.' I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of faith flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.

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—David F. Wright. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*

V. His ministry

- A. Returned to Africa in 388 (after his mother's death)
- B. Formed a monastic community at Tagaste
- C. Became a priest in 391 and Bishop of Hippo in 396
- D. Spent his remaining days preaching, teaching, pastoring, and writing

VI. His legacy

A. Major writings

1. **The Confessions:** The son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, Saint Augustine spent his early years torn between conflicting faiths and world views. His Confessions, written when he was in his forties, recount how, slowly and painfully, he came to turn away from his youthful ideas and licentious lifestyle, to become instead a staunch advocate of Christianity and one of its most influential thinkers. A remarkably honest and revealing spiritual autobiography, the Confessions also address fundamental issues of Christian doctrine, and many of the prayers and meditations it includes are still an integral part of the practice of Christianity today. –*Penguin Classics, Amazon.com*
2. **The City of God:** St Augustine, bishop of Hippo, was one of the central figures in the history of Christianity, and City of God is one of his greatest theological works. Written as an eloquent defence of the faith at a time when the Roman Empire was on the brink of collapse, it examines the ancient pagan religions of Rome, the arguments of the Greek philosophers and the revelations of the Bible. Pointing the way forward to a citizenship that transcends the best political experiences of the world and offers citizenship that will last for eternity, City of God is one of the most influential documents in the development of Christianity. –*Penguin Classics, Amazon.com*
3. **On The Trinity:** St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was one of the most prolific geniuses that humanity has ever known, and is admired not only for the number of his works, but also for the variety of subjects, which traverse the whole realm of thought. The form in which he casts his work exercises a very powerful attraction on the reader. The fifteen books De Trinitate, on which he worked for fifteen years, from 400 to 416, are the most elaborate and profound work of St. Augustine. The last books on the analogies which the mystery of the Trinity have with our soul are much discussed. The saintly author himself declares that they are only analogous and are far-fetched and very obscure. –*Paul A. Boer Sr. (Editor). Amazon.com*

B. In a sense Augustine was the first “Reformer”

1. Normalized infant baptism
2. Taught on original sin and sought to explain the nature of sin. This was most pronounced in his defense against Pelagius.
3. Promoted Christian philosophy (a true “love of wisdom”)

VII. Why this segment of history matters (or *should matter*) to me

- A. How does this lesson enhance your knowledge of God?
- B. In what new ways are you challenged in your own walk with Christ?