

THE LIFE, TIMES AND WORKS OF AURELIUS AUGUSTINE

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Abstract

This work studied the life, times and works of Saint Augustine. It began from his youth days- his primary, secondary and university day, his search for the truth and eventual conversion to Christianity, his profound contemplation, his priestly days and ascension to the episcopate, his words and last days. His various accomplishments and experiences has led to his being called the Doctor of Grace, one of the greatest of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. He is the Patron saint of brewers, theologians, printers, sore eyes, Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut; Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan, Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin; Diocese of Tucson, Arizon. His symbols in art are a child, pen, dove and shell.

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Introduction

On 13th November 354 AD, precisely, 1,660 years ago, Saint Augustine was born to the family of Patricius and Monica with the names Aurelius Augustine. He was born in the Numidian city of Tagaste, a city of great culture (the centre of Berber culture) and the very hub of civilization. In the present day Algeria, Souk Ahras, a municipality in Algeria rests on the ruins of Tagaste. The town of Tagaste was situated in the north-east highlands of Numidia, the present Anaba- the sea-side city; and here, Augustine was to spend the last 40 years of his life. It is about 12 kilometers from Maduara where he went for his first studies between 354-369 AD and 200 kilometers from Carthage on the coast of the present Tunisia where he went during the autumn of 370 AD for higher education and the early years of his teaching career.

The father of Augustine, Patricius was a pagan who converted at his death bed. He was an official in the Roman administration of the region. His mother, St Monica was a devout Christian. Both parents were from Tagaste, however, with Monica from the Berber race. Monica gave birth to St Augustine at the age of 22, not knowing that she has brought to the world one of the greatest men that would come to make and influence the course of political and religious history by his verbal erudition and colossal literary exploits. Although the religions of the parents of Augustine had great influence on him, it is not surprising that the religion of the mother had more influence in shaping him, because he stayed more at home with the mother during his infant years.

Augustine as a Youth

In 370 AD, Augustine went to the University of Carthage to study rhetoric with a view to becoming a lawyer. While at the university, he gave up law to devote himself to literary pursuits and gradually abandoned his Christian faith taking a mistress with whom he lived for fifteen years and who bore him a son named Adeodatus in 372 AD, it was also around this period, between 371-372 AD that his father Patricius died. After reading the work of Cicero, *Hortensius* in 373 AD Augustine's intellect was awakened, and he became inspired with the quest for knowledge, and truth. In youth, Augustine parted from his mother, and became a pupil of pagan masters- so was it permitted by the Most High. Thus, he lost his early piety, became the unhappy slave of carnal pleasures and was ensnared in the toils of Manicheism, being for nearly nine years an adherent of that sect. In fact, from 373-375 AD, Augustine was an auditor of the Manichaean sect. God's purpose was, that the destined Doctor of Grace should learn by experience and transmit to later ages how extreme is the weakness and frailty of even the noblest spirit, if it be not made strong in the way of virtue by the safeguard of Christian training and ceaseless application to prayer, especially during youth, when the mind is bewitched more readily by the lure of error and the soul is led astray by the first stirrings of sense.

God further permitted his defection, that our Saint might realize in his own life how wretched is the man who tries to fill his heart to satiety with creatures. In his Confessions he wrote, 'For Thou were ever present with compassionate anger, mingling the bitterness of distaste with all my lawless delights, that I might seek delight without distaste and should fail to find this in aught, save in Thee, O Lord.'¹ Did not the Heavenly Father, then, abandon Augustine to his own devices, that Monica might seek Him with tearful entreaties and serve as a type of those mothers, who by their long-suffering and gentleness of temper, by their tireless supplication of the divine mercy, succeed at length in winning back their sons to virtue? For it was impossible that the sons would perish, for whom so many tears were shed.² Augustine thus writes, "And in those same books containing the story of my conversion, telling how God converted me to the Faith which my unhappy and mad abuse of language was bent on destroying, do you not recall that the purpose of my narrative was to show that I was a boon granted to the loyal, daily tears of my mother, lest I be lost?"³ The phrase that captures his investigating and experimenting with several philosophies is *an ardent seeker of truth*. He thought that the scripture could not offer solution to his intelligent questions and thus sought God outside his revelation. A summation of the thinking of Augustine at the time when he was a Manichaean is expressed in his confessions, "Lord give me chastity but not now". Augustine held on to this view until he read the work of Plotinus the *Enneads*; he thus rejected the Manichaean solution to the problem of evil in favour of that of Plotinus.

¹Confessions, Bk. 11, c. 2, n. 4.

²Confessions, Bk. m, c. 12, n. 21.

³De dono perseverantiae, c. 20, n. 53.

The Conversion of Augustine

By 384, Augustine accepted a chair of rhetoric in Milan. He was thus by degrees estranged from the Manichean heresy and, urged as it were by a Divine impulse, was led to Milan to meet Ambrose the Bishop, became a catechumen and began his journey towards the discovery of Neoplatonic philosophy. The Lord "little by little with a touch of tender pity shaping and moulding his heart,"⁴ though the wise words of Ambrose brought him to believe in the Catholic Church and in the truth of the Bible. Then it was that the son of Monica, though not yet immune from anxiety and from the allurements of vice, still grasped firmly the truth that Divine Providence has set the way of salvation only in Christ Our Lord and in the Sacred Scriptures, which find the sole warrant of their truth in the authority of the Catholic Church. Yet how hard and toilsome is the complete conversion of a man, who has long been straying from the straight path. He was still the prey of his passions and of mental disquiet, which he was not strong enough to control. So far was he from deriving the strength from the teaching of Platonists concerning God and creatures, that he would have filled the measure of his misfortunes with the still greater one of pride, had he not learned at length from the Epistles of the Apostle Paul, that he who wishes to live like a Christian must build on a foundation of humility and depend on the aid of Divine grace. And now we narrate a fact the story of which none can tell without tears grieving over the deeds of his past life and inspired by the example of so many Christians, who were ready to make shipwreck of all created goods to gain the "one thing necessary," he made his surrender to the Divine mercy, which had lovingly pursued him, at the moment when at prayer he was startled by a sudden voice that cried: "Take and read." He opened a copy of the Epistles lying near and with Heaven's graces effectively stirring his soul, the following passage met his eyes: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscence."⁵ And it is certain that from that moment to his dying breath, Augustine gave himself wholly to God. In 386, he resigned as professor of rhetoric and got converted to Catholicism. He retired with his friends to Cassiciacum for a retreat. In the Easter of 387 AD, he and his son Adeodatus were baptized. In the autumn of this same year, St Monica the mother of Saint Augustine died in Ostia. After his conversion, he shed the light of his abundant learning not merely on Christian Africa, but on the entire Church, bestowing the while the blessings of his apostolate. He meditated on books of Holy Writ, long and earnestly did he offer to the Lord the prayers, whereof the meaning and the accent still live in his writings. That he might daily better fathom and understand the truths of Divine Revelation, he read through with close scrutiny the works of the Fathers and Doctors who preceded him and whom he regarded with humble veneration. Though he came after Clement of Rome, and Irenaeus, Hilary and Athanasius, Cyprian and Ambrose, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom; though he was a contemporary of Jerome, nevertheless Augustine still excites in all people the greatest admiration because of the subtlety and depth of his thoughts and because of the marvellous wisdom breathing from the pages.

⁴Confessions, Bk. VI, c. 5, n. 7.

⁵Confessions, Bk. VIII, c. i2, n. 29. (Rom. xiii, 13-14.)

Augustine and Contemplation

Augustine frequently experienced the highest forms of contemplation, not only in his famous experience at Ostia,⁶ but in other forms too. He says of himself, "I often do this," referring to his recourse to the meditation of Scripture so that his pressing cares may not oppress him: "This is my delight, and I take refuge in this pleasure as much as the things I must do permit me to relax.... Sometimes You lead me into an interior sentiment that is utterly unusual, to a sweetness I cannot describe: if this were to reach its perfection in me, I cannot say what that would be, but it would not be this life."⁷ These experiences account for why he was able to describe the mystical ascents with such precision. Thus he is called "The Prince of Mystics".

History avouches that Augustine had seen at Milan, "outside the city walls under the fostering care of Ambrose,"⁸ a dwelling-place of holy souls. Again, a little after his mother's death, he knew of monasteries "at Rome also in large number . . . not merely for men, but for women likewise."⁹ Scarcely then had he landed on the shores of Africa in 388 AD, when he began to plan the progress of souls towards absolute perfection of life in the Religious state, and built a monastery in an estate of his. Here "he established himself for nearly three years, set himself free from all worldly cares, and with certain followers who attached themselves to him lived only for God, in the practice of fasting, prayer, and good works, meditating on the law of the Lord day and night."¹⁰ After his promotion to the priesthood in 390 AD, he founded another monastery at Hippo in the neighbourhood of the church; "and began to live with the servants of God according to the manner and rule fixed under the holy Apostles: so that before all else no one in that society kept anything of his own, but they held all things in common, giving to each whatever he needed."¹¹ When he was raised to the episcopal dignity, he established a community of clerics in the episcopal palace. He required that, after renouncing their family property, they should live in common a life which, while remote from the allurements of the world and from anything like luxury, would not be over-harsh or austere.

He also established a group of Religious women under the superiorship of his own sister. To these he gave an admirable rule, characterized at once by its wisdom and its moderation. Possidius relates that, appealed to from every quarter, Augustine permitted many Religious men to sally forth in all directions, in order that they might found new monasteries as one fire kindles another and might aid the churches of Africa by their learning and holiness of life.

⁶Confess. 9, 10, 24: PL 32, 774.

⁷Confess 10, 40, 65: PL 32, 807.

⁸Confessions, Bk. VIII, c. 6, n. 15.

⁹De moribus Ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum, Bk. 1, c. 33, n. 70.

¹⁰Possidius, Vita S. Augustini, c. 3.

¹¹Possidius, Vita S. Augustini, c. 5.

Augustine and the Episcopate

Although Augustine loved contemplation, he accepted the burden of the episcopate in 395 AD and made the coadjutor to Valerius, Bishop of Hippo, whom he succeeded the following year; he taught others to do likewise, responding thus with humility to the call of our mother the Church. He also taught through his example and his writings how to preserve the taste for prayer and contemplation among the tasks of pastoral activity. In the City of God, he wrote that "The love of the truth seeks the holy repose of leisure, but the necessity of love takes on the just duty. If no one imposes this burden, one should spend one's time in perceiving and grasping the truth: but in this case, the delight in the truth must not be altogether abandoned, lest the sweetness be lost, and necessity become oppressive."¹² It is not irrelevant to recall the pastoral activity of this bishop, who is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest pastors of the Church. His pastoral activities had its origin in his conversion, because the conversion gave birth to his resolve to serve God alone. He wrote, "Now I love You alone.... I am ready to serve You alone."¹³ When he then realized that this service must also include pastoral activity, he did not hesitate to accept it; he accepted it with humility and trepidation, but out of obedience to God and to the Church¹⁴. The apostolate of Augustine had three fields which spread out like concentric circles: the local church of Hippo, which was not large, but was troubled and needy; the African Church, which was sadly divided between Catholics and Donatists; and the universal Church, which was attacked by paganism and Manichaeism, and disturbed by heretical movements.

He saw himself as the servant of the Church in every way: "Christ's servant, and through him the servant of his servants."¹⁵ He drew all the consequences of this, including the most taxing, such as risking his own life for the faithful¹⁶: he asked the Lord for the strength to love them in such a way as to be ready to die for them "in reality or in disposition."¹⁷ He was convinced that one who was placed at the head of the people without this disposition was "a scarecrow standing in the vineyard"¹⁸ rather than a bishop. He did not want to be safe without his faithful¹⁹, and he was ready for any sacrifice, if it would bring those in error back to the way of truth. At a time of extreme danger because of the invasion by the Vandals, he taught his priests to stay among their faithful even at the risk of their own lives. In other words, he wished that bishops and priests should serve the faithful as Christ served them. "Let us therefore see in what sense the bishop who is set over others is a servant: in the same way as the Lord himself."²⁰

¹²De civ. Dei 19, 19: PL 41, 647.

¹³Solil. 1, 1, 5: PL 32, 872.

¹⁴Serm. 335, 2: PL 39, 1569.

¹⁵Ep. 217: PL 33, 978.

¹⁶Ep. 91, 10: PL 33, 317-318.

¹⁷Miscellanea Ag., I, 404.

¹⁸Miscellanea Ag. I, 568.

¹⁹Serm. 17:2: PL 38, 125.

²⁰Miscellanea Ag., I, 565.

In his diocese, which he never left except in a case of necessity,²¹ he was assiduous in preaching he preached on Saturday and Sunday, and frequently throughout the entire week,²² in catechesis²³; in what he called "the bishop's audience," which sometimes lasted for an entire day, so that he did not eat²⁴; for the care of the poor²⁵; in the formation of the clergy²⁶; in directing the monks, many of whom were later called to the priesthood and the episcopate²⁷, and in the guidance of the monasteries of nuns²⁸. When he died, "he left the Church a very numerous clergy, and monasteries of men and women full of those consecrated to chastity under their superiors, and libraries."²⁹

He worked with equal tirelessness for the Church in Africa, accepting the task of preaching whenever he was asked³⁰. He took part in the frequent regional councils, despite the difficulties of travel, and undertook with intelligence, assiduity and passion the work of terminating the Donatist schism which divided that Church into two parties. He strove hard to achieve this success, which was his great merit. He recorded the history of the doctrine of Donatism in innumerable writings, explaining the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments and of the Church; he promoted an ecumenical conference between Catholic and Donatist bishops, and he animated it by his presence. He proposed the removal of all obstacles to reunification, including that of the renunciation of the episcopate by the Donatist bishops³¹, and obtained this. He published the conclusions of this conference³², and brought the process of pacification to full success³³. When persecutors sought his death, he once escaped from the hands of the Donatist *circumcelliones* because their guide took the wrong way.³⁴

His Works and Last Days

Augustine composed very many works and wrote many letters for the universal Church, entering into many controversies. Among his best known works are his *Confessions* (397-400), *City of God* (413-426), *De Trinitate* (416), *De Doctrina Christiana*, *Enchiridion* (421), *Retractions* (427). When he died in August 28th 430, during the time that the vandals besieged Hippo at the age of seventy-six, he left three works unfinished: these three works are the most eloquent testimony to his sleepless diligence and to his unconquerable love for the Church. He is called the Doctor of Grace, one of the greatest of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. He is the Patron saint of brewers, theologians, printers, sore eyes, Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut; Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan, Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin; Diocese of Tucson, Arizona. His symbols in art are a child, pen, dove and shell.

²¹Ep. 122, 1: PL 33, 470.

²²Miscellanea Ag., I, 353; Tractatus in Io 19, 22: PL 35, 1543-1582.

²³De catech. rudibus: PL 40 309s.

²⁴POSSIDIO, Vita S. Augustini 19, 2-5 PL 32, 57

²⁵POSSIDIO, Ibid., 24, 14-25: PL 32, 53-54; Serm. 25.8: PL 38, 170; Ep. 122, 2: PL 33, 471-472.

²⁶Serm. 335, 2: PL 39, 1569-1570; Ep. 65: PL 33, 234-235.

²⁷POSSIDIO, Vita S. Augustini, 11, 1 : PL 32, 42.

²⁸Ep. 211, 1-4: PL 3, 958-965.

²⁹POSSIDIO, Vita S. Augustini 31, 8: PL 32, 64.

³⁰Retract., prol. 2: PL 32, 584.

³¹Ep. 128, 3: PL 33, 489; De gestis cum Emerito 7: PL 43, 702-703.

³²Post collationem contra Donatistas: PL 43, 651-690.

³³POSSIDIO, Vita S. Augustini 9-14: PL 32, 40-45.

³⁴POSSIDIO, Ibid. 12, 1-2: PL 32, 43.