



St. Augustine of Hippo

BORN 354; DIED 430
BISHOP AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 28

HUMAN BROKENNESS has many faces. Left to ourselves, the human situation is hopeless. Human nature left to itself is in a state of slavery — “*slaves of sin*” (Rom 6:17) is how St. Paul describes those who have not responded to the promptings of God’s grace. St. Augustine was painfully familiar with the slavery of sin, especially sins of the flesh.

Augustine was born in the small Numidian town of Tagaste, not far from Hippo (respectively, modern Souk-Ahras and modern Annaba in Algeria). His father Patritius was a pagan and his mother Monica was a Christian who did her best to raise Augustine in the faith, although his father would not allow him to be baptized. (Patritius himself eventually accepted Baptism shortly before his death.)

At the age of sixteen, Augustine left for Carthage (in modern Tunisia) to study law, rhetoric, and philosophy. He got involved with a young woman (we do not know her name) and, as many young men sadly do, got her pregnant. His son Adeodatus (“Gift of God”) was born in 372, when Augustine was eighteen. Even more irresponsibly, Augustine did not marry the woman but merely kept her for several years as his mistress (she eventually entered a cloistered religious life, leaving Adeodatus with his father).

Shortly thereafter, Augustine fell in with a religious sect called the Manicheans, which taught that God was the cause of all good but that there was an equally powerful evil force that was the creator of the material world. This kind of dualist belief, which appears again and again in human history, was

contrary to his Christian upbringing and so produced in him many questions. Nevertheless, he remained a Manichean for nine years, his spiritual life in confusion.

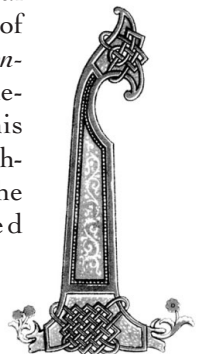
Yet during these years in Carthage, his career as a teacher of rhetoric was taking off and he became well-known for philosophy and poetry. In 383 at the age of twenty-nine, Augustine left for Rome to open a new school of rhetoric. However, he soon was offered a teaching post in Milan. His mother, now a widow, followed him to Milan, continually praying for his conversion.

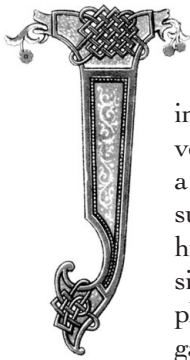
Augustine soon heard about St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. St. Ambrose was a powerful speaker who delivered eloquent sermons in the cathedral, was an eminent interpreter of Sacred Scripture, tenaciously fought heresy, and lived a life of deep prayer and charity. Under St. Ambrose’s influence, the power of God’s Word began to work on Augustine. He was more and more convinced about the truth of the Gospel, but could not see a way out of his sin. One day while walking through a garden, he cried out to the Lord, “How long, O Lord? Will you be angry with me forever? Remember not my past sins!” He then heard a voice saying, “Take and read!” He quickly picked up his Bible, and it fell open to the following passage:

“[L]et us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:13-14).

As he read these words, his heart filled with joy as he accepted the Lord into his life.

Many years later, Augustine wrote one of the great spiritual masterpieces of all time, his *Confessions*. He described in this book the wrenching struggle he experienced





in his soul at the time of his conversion. He was being drawn to a total change of life but was not sure if he could put the past behind him. The attraction of past sins kept haunting him. “They plucked,” he wrote, “at my fleshly garment, and they whispered softly: ‘Do you cast us off?’ and ‘From that moment we shall no more be with you forever and ever!’ and again, ‘From that moment no longer will this thing and that be allowed to you, forever and ever.’” The same question, he said, kept recurring: “Do you think that you can live without them?”

With God’s help, Augustine was finally able to break with his past, learning from his own battle with sin the saving power of grace.

In his later writings, this brilliant man never failed to emphasize the absolute necessity of grace — that no one can “make it” unaided. On Easter in 387, at the age of thirty-three, Augustine, together with fifteen-year-old Adeodatus, was baptized by St. Ambrose and received into the Church. In his *Confessions*, Augustine expressed his passionate regret for the wasted years, those years when his heart was closed to grace: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!

You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.” This is a heartfelt cry that every adult who finds God can echo.

After his Baptism, Augustine never turned away from God. His mother died shortly thereafter, her work in her son’s life completed, and his much-loved, brilliant son Adeodatus died around this



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Stained glass window of St. Augustine and St. Monica in St. Augustine Parish in Washington, DC

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same time. Augustine returned to Tagaste in 388 and formed a religious community. Three years later, he was ordained — against his desire — a priest, and in 396, forty-two years old, he was named the bishop of Hippo.

During his thirty-four years as bishop of Hippo, he gave his entire being to pastor his people, and put his powerful intellect to the service of the Church. He developed theology and philosophy, tirelessly defended the Church against numerous heresies, and wrote a catechism for catechumens. As he had done both before and after his ordination as a priest, he made his own residence into a monastery, which provided exceptional formation for priests and future bishops; this monastery and several of his written works together form the basis of what is now known as the rule of St. Augustine, one of the foundational forms of governance of communal monastic life. He wrote prolifically, and many of his sermons survive as well. He is considered the father of Christian philosophy and his writings are among the most influential of all the Doctors of the Church.

This was also a time of great barbarian invasions from the north. It was during the period of these invasions, following a horrifying sacking of Rome, that he wrote his phenomenal book *The City of God*, which contrasted the impermanent city of man with the imperishable city of God. In 430, when Augustine was seventy-six, the Vandals laid siege to Hippo. Within a few months, he came down with a fever and died. As the siege continued, the population of Hippo nearly starved to death, and after eighteen months the city fell and was completely destroyed by the barbarian invaders. Yet the legacy of its great bishop remains as a gift to all whose hearts are weighed down by sin and who yearn for God. No sin is too great for forgiveness; every sin can yield to God’s grace; and every sinner can find his heart’s desire in God, who alone can satisfy the longings of the human heart.

