

AUGUSTINE: A PILGRIMAGE OF GRACE

by Duane W. H. Arnold and C. George Fry*

In 1987, amidst our Easter celebrations, some of us paused to remember an event which took place 1600 years ago. It was an event which changed the course of western thought and influenced the shape of Christian theology to the present day. On Easter Eve, April 24, 387, in the dusk of a Milanese church in the north of Italy, candles flickered and cast a pallid glow as a man, already in his thirties, accompanied by his illegitimate son, stepped into the waters of the baptistry. Three times the young man would pass beneath the waters, then, dressed in a robe of white linen he would take his place in the congregation and with all the faithful proclaim, "Christ is Risen!", "He is Risen Indeed!". A prodigal had returned home. A restless intellect had found its calling. A discontented and troubled man had found peace.

His name was Augustine. Adolf van Harnack would call him the greatest man "between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer which the Christian Church has possessed".¹ Benjamin B. Warfield wrote that "he took up and then transfigured the Christian faith for those who would follow".² Frederick Copleston wrote that, "Augustine stands out as... the greatest of the Fathers both from a literary and from a theological standpoint".³ Augustine may be described, with equal fervor, as both the architect of the Christian Middle Ages, or as the first truly modern man. Indeed, there is something universal about the thought of this man. William James would write of Augustine's reflections that they constituted an expression of "psychological genius... which has never been surpassed".⁴ His theological works would be read by countless millions through the centuries. His devoted disciples would include Anselm and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Pascal and Newman, Tillich and Barth. For them, and for the Church through the ages, Augustine was the Doctor of Grace.

The life of Aurelius Augustinus began on November 13, 354 and came to a close on August 28, 430. For seventy-five years his was a "pilgrim's progress". In the course of his journey he would encounter detours and delays, failures and setbacks, but before his eyes loomed his destination. Although initially unknown, and for many years unarticulated, the City of God was to be the focus of his life. Before the city, however, Augustine would experience the desert and the garden.

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The Desert

Augustine was born, literally, on the edge of the Sahara where the Numidian plateau was separated from the vast sandy basin by the Aures mountains. His home was the prosperous Roman town of Tagaste, near present-day Souk-Ahras, Algeria. Although his twenty-three year old mother, Monica, was a believer, and had dedicated Augustine to Christ at his birth, his father Patricius, was a pagan, employed in the Roman administration of the town. Augustine was educated locally and in Carthage in the liberal arts and in rhetoric. His parents hoped, as did those of Luther and Calvin, that he would enter the lucrative profession of law. Monica would later be described in the *Confessions* as “a woman of fervent piety, amiableness, and good works”.⁵ Patricius, however, appears to have been an ill-tempered man and distant from his eldest son. Although Monica would occupy a favored place in Augustine’s writings, little mention is made of his father. In their household the witness of Christ would shine forth from the words and actions of a wife and mother. Patricius would come to confess Christ, and was baptized before his death in 370. Augustine, however, chose a different course. Leaving his youth behind, he made his way to Carthage, and, in the words of his *Confessions*, “so I became a barren desert unto myself”.⁶

To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning...
T.S. Eliot
The Waste Land

For Augustine there was a personal desert to be traversed. For fifteen years, he kept a concubine. To this union a son was born, unwelcomed at the time, but given the name of Adeodatus, “the gift of God”. Although this was an accepted practice in the late Roman Empire and Augustine appeared respectable to all outward appearances, he felt himself to be possessed by sensuality. Augustine would later recall, “I was rolling in the slime of sin, often attempting to rise, and still sinking deeper”.⁷ Lust — in the sense of the pursuit of pleasure apart from sacrificial love — became his lifestyle. Yet, Augustine was pursued by his own “hound of heaven”, as he later wrote, “the displeasure of God was all the time imbittering my soul”. Nevertheless, he continued in his way of life and “even invented false stories of (his) sinful exploits, that (he) might win the commendation of evil companions”.⁸ Despite all attempts at mastering his own nature, he could not find rest for his troubled heart.

It was at this time, during which Augustine lived both in Carthage and Tagaste, the young man found there was also an intellectual wilderness to be mastered. In 373, having read a now lost work of Cicero, the *Hortensius*, Augustine was consumed by a desire to possess

the truth. Eventually, seeking an opportunity to further his career, and, perhaps, to escape his mother's prayers, Augustine left North Africa for Italy. Monica came to Carthage and sought to prevent his departure, or failing that, to accompany him to Rome. Through an act of deception Augustine sailed without her, leaving her "distracted with grief".⁹

In Rome Augustine was to experience intellectual and professional disappointments. Dangerously ill upon his arrival in the Eternal City, he soon turned his attention to the various intellectual options at hand. He had become an adherent of Manichaeism while in North Africa. Before leaving Carthage, however, he had become disenchanted with this sect of Persian origin, and had begun to doubt the credibility of its dualistic system of thought. Although he would lodge with a leading Manichee in Rome, Augustine had already started to study the philosophy of the New Academy, a group which held that Truth can never really be known and that a person must be content to be a constant seeker rather than a finder. Augustine, however, wondered why one should seek if nothing could be found, for to deny either the possibility of absolute knowledge, or the knowledge of ultimates, seemed to him an inherent absurdity. Adding to his intellectual difficulties, Augustine was dissatisfied with his career as a teacher. He had despaired of his rowdy and ill-disciplined Carthaginian students, and found those in Rome to be little better. More than this, the Roman students were particularly careless about paying their fees! When, therefore, he was presented with the opportunity of becoming a teacher of rhetoric in Milan, he leapt at the prospect of advancement.

And I came to Milan... to Ambrose the bishop.

Augustine

Confessions V, xiii, 23

Augustine arrived in Milan in the autumn of 384. He considered his youth to be at an end. No certainties of either thought or action remained for the young teacher. Ambition, however, still guided his course. As he would later write, "I panted after honors, gain, marriage".¹⁰ Here Augustine encountered Neo-Platonism, a system of Alexandrian origin, which denied the existence of matter and affirmed the primacy of the mind. For Augustine the study of this popular system of thought based upon the writings of Plotinus would answer many questions and lead him to an appreciation of introspection. It would also lead him back to a study of the Scriptures by way of comparison. This system would not, however, resolve his struggle with evil — either in the cosmos or his own character. He soon began to question his manner of life and his motives once again. "Why, then, do I not give myself wholly to God?" he asked himself. "Do not be in a hurry," he answered, for "you have influential friends and may yet attain wealth and honor in

the world".¹¹ For almost a generation Augustine had lived in the desert of his own soul, "seeking happiness, yet flying from it".¹² It was at this juncture that the teacher of rhetoric, at the urging of his mother who had followed her son to Milan, began to turn his attention to the sermons of Ambrose. The barren waste began to recede as a cooling fountain appeared on the horizon.

The Garden

Every great desert has at least an occasional oasis. For Augustine, Milan had two — the Church and its bishop, Ambrose.

Milan had a great and thriving church with a reputation that extended throughout the Christian world. Its bishop was Ambrose — orator, scholar, poet, and pastor. It seems that Augustine's initial approach to the church had to do with his desire to take a wealthy and highly placed Christian wife. As a teacher of rhetoric, however, his approach to Ambrose had much to do with professional curiosity. Augustine was attracted to Ambrose by his art, not his attitudes, by his style, not his substance. A man of rare ability and great intellectual powers, Ambrose held the attention of Augustine. "The man of God", Augustine would later recall, "received me as a father; and I conceived an affection for him, not as a teacher of truth, which I had no idea of discovering in the Church, but as a man who was kind to me".¹³ Augustine noted that, "I studiously attended his preaching, only with a curious desire as to whether or not fame had done justice to his eloquence".¹⁴ It soon became clear, however, that the preaching of Ambrose was making an impact on Augustine. "Gradually," Augustine would later write, "I was brought to attend to the doctrine of the bishop".¹⁵ The young teacher of rhetoric soon realized that, "I had deferred from day to day devoting myself to God under the pretense that I was uncertain as to where the truth lay".¹⁶

Augustine remained "restlessly active". A philosopher of the first rank, his capitulation to Christ would not come easily or without internal turmoil. "How is it", Augustine asked, "that so many humble persons find peace so readily in religion, while I, with my philosophy and anxious reasonings, remain year after year in darkness and doubt?"¹⁷ Augustine had, by the reading of the Scriptures and the preaching of Ambrose, become convinced of the truth of Christianity as a philosophy, and of Christ as a teacher. Yet Christianity as God's way of salvation seemed beyond his ability to accept or comprehend. In spiritual and psychological anguish he retired with some friends to a small villa with a garden.

In the late summer of 386 Augustine's struggle within his soul reached its climax. During a discussion with a visitor concerning the renouncing of wealth and ambition for the cause of Christ, Augustine could listen no more. He ran from the house and sought refuge in the garden,

but, as he would recall, “there was no place where I could escape from myself...”¹⁸ Finally, in tears he cried out, “O Lord! How long shall I go on saying ‘Tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?”¹⁹ At that second he heard a voice, as of a child, repeating the refrain, “*Tolle lege*”, “Take it and read, take it and read”.²⁰ Augustine rushed into the house, opened a book containing the letters of Paul, and “in silence” read the first words his eyes fell upon: “Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and spend no more thought on the lust of the flesh.” (Romans 13:13,14). Augustine would reflect upon his conversion in later years saying, “in an instant...it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled”.²¹ The passage came to his mind as a direct message from heaven.

His conversion liberated Augustine from those forces which had driven him into the desert of sensuality, skepticism and ambition. Renouncing self, he received the Saviour. As Augustine said, “I bowed my shoulders to your light burden, Christ Jesus, my Helper and my Redeemer.”²² Augustine, who did little in haste, ran from the house to tell his mother Monica that her prayers, at long last, had been answered.

Augustine finished his summer term of teaching and then resigned his post. He enrolled himself with those who were preparing for baptism the following Easter. In the intervening months he retreated to a friend’s home some miles from Milan in order to be alone, to study, to pray, to discuss his new found faith with friends, and to write. During his few short months in Cassiciacum, Augustine would produce *Against the Academics*, *On the Happy Life*, *On Order* and the *Soliloquies*. Returning to Milan, Augustine, and his illegitimate son Adeodatus, received baptism at the hands of Ambrose at Easter, 387. At the urging of his mother, plans were made to return to Africa. Augustine envisioned for himself a quiet monastic life given over to Christian studies with his mother and son nearby. In Rome, however, awaiting a ship to Africa Monica fell ill. Augustine would recall his mother saying to him, “Son, I have no desire to cling to this life... I lived longer only that I might see you a Christian before I died. God has granted my desire”.²³ Within a week Monica had died. Two years later, in North Africa, his son would follow her in death. Augustine’s time in the garden was at an end; a city, “whose builder and maker was God”, had now come into view.

The City

Charles G. Finney used to say that, “we are saved to serve”.²⁴ That is a Pauline concept, for we are born into the Body of Christ and in

that Body each of us has a part to play. Augustine's mission was to be a bridge, for as Benjamin B. Warfield noted, "he stood on the watershed of two worlds. The old world was passing away, the new world was entering upon its heritage".²⁵ Yet Warfield observed that Augustine was more than a passionless historical link, he was also an interpreter, for "it fell to him to mediate the transference of the culture of the one to the other".²⁶ Augustine, the Doctor of Grace, became the living way by which Western Christianity passed from antiquity into the Middle Ages. For that reason Kenneth Scott Lattourette wrote that, "he moulded the whole of the Middle Ages" and "without St. Augustine's massive intellect Western theology would never have taken the shape in which it is familiar to us".²⁷ In fact, as Daniel D. Williams has pointed out, if "Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, we can say with equal justice that theology in Western Christianity has been a series of footnotes to Augustine".²⁸ For Augustine, however, his theology was only an expression of his life in the City of God, and that city, of which the Church was the living incarnation, was built upon the foundation of God's grace revealed in Christ.

Give what You command,
and command what you will.

Augustine
Confessions X, xxix, 40

Augustine returned to Tagaste, in North Africa, late in 388. He had no intention of being anything beyond a dedicated Christian within a loosely-knit lay brotherhood, a *servus Dei*. Not wishing to become a bishop, he studiously avoided visiting friends in communities where there was a vacancy, so as not to be "conscripted" by the faithful for the post. In 388, however, he visited the small community of Hippo. The community possessed a bishop, but few priests. A sermon was preached concerning the need for clergy in the community. As Augustine would recall thirty-five years after the event in a sermon, "I was grabbed. I was made a priest... and from there, I became your bishop".²⁹ Augustine remained with the "lesser clergy" for eight years before his elevation to the episcopate in 396. He would serve the church in Hippo until his death in 430.

A ceaseless laborer in the City of God, Augustine's work during his years in Hippo was two-fold, as a teacher and as a pastor.

A religious genius of the highest order, it was inevitable that Augustine would bring his intellectual energies to bear upon Christian doctrine. Augustine would admit that he labored in theology "with all the fibres of my soul".³⁰ Augustine expressed his faith not with his heart alone, for the heart does not think — nor with his mind alone, for he never grasps truth in the abstract, as if it were dead. Rather, to his task as a theologian he brought emotional tenacity, immense intellectual power,

purpose of will, deep spirituality, and heroic sanctity. Augustine's orientation in his theological reflections was thoroughly evangelical, for he regarded *caritas*, "charity", or "love", as the "animating force" of life, grace as its end result, and faith as the means by which the Christian was to journey. For Augustine, intellectual comprehension was the result of active faith. From the Latin translation of Isaiah, Augustine took a text which would illuminate his theology, "Unless you believe, you shall not understand" (Isaiah 7:9).

A prolific author, the works penned by Augustine during his time in Hippo have stood the test of time. His work ranged from psychological autobiography, as the *Confessions*, to extended historical/philosophical essays, as *The City of God*, to theological treatises, as *The Trinity*. He defended the faith of the Church in tracts against the Pelagians, the Manichees, and the Donatists, and gave attention to the teaching of the faithful in catechetical manuals as, *Christian Instruction* and *Concerning the Teacher*. Augustine's work, *On Grace and Free Will*, would be formative for Luther, as *On the Predestination of the Saints* would be for Calvin. Augustine's correspondence, as with Jerome, his philosophical dialogues, and his enormous number of sermons, came to fill volumes. Near the end of his life he would spend a good deal of his time organizing and editing a massive library which consisted entirely of his own literary labors. His final book, *Retractions*, was penned to provide a critical "self-review" of his earlier efforts.

Although a "giant among men" in terms of intellect, Augustine's heart was that of a pastor. That is how he was perceived even by those of his own generation. "Zealous" and "energetic" was how his student, the Bishop of Calama, described him.³¹ Even though Augustine was not physically strong, with illness and overwork ever present realities, as a pastor he did the work of many. Augustine often referred to his station as "an office of labor and not of honor".³² To his daily duties was added the additional weight of his reputation. As Joseph B. Bernardin has pointed out, "he was the spiritual father not only of North Africa; his parish, like John Wesley's, was the world of his day".³³

We know a good deal about the daily life of Augustine as a pastor due to the observations of a contemporary biographer, Possidius. As the bishop of Hippo, Augustine was the spiritual director of his flock, an administrator of church property, a judge within his own ecclesiastical court, as well as presiding over the normal services of the Christian community, often preaching on a daily basis. Beyond this, Possidius tells us that Augustine "adhered to the rule set forth by the apostle (James 1:27) and visited orphans and widows in their affliction".³⁴ In fact, the care of the poor, the persecuted, and the prisoners, was considered by Augustine to be a particular ministry for which he was responsible. In all his work as a pastor, however, Augustine never forgot those whom he served, and served with. As Peter Brown says, he "always thought

of himself as living among a new 'people' — the *populus Dei*, the 'people of God'...it was his first duty to look after his own, to maintain the identity and the morale of...the congregation."³⁵ Augustine's success as a pastor was the result of his setting "holy priorities".

You have created us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless until they
find rest in you.

Augustine
Confessions I, i, 1

Augustine's restless heart was set alight at his conversion by the fire of God's grace. It was a flame that could not be extinguished by either time or events. Rome fell to the Goths in 410, causing Augustine to write *The City of God*. The holocaust then turned to the west and the south. Even as Augustine died on August 28, 430, the Vandals were besieging Hippo. A year later the town was taken and burned, with two exceptions — Augustine's church and his library. Two centuries later Hippo would come under the sway of Islam. Even as the West entered a "dark age" and as the light of Christianity in North Africa was quenched, the glow of Augustine's faith and learning would steadily grow brighter — for the flame issued forth from a life which had been touched by God's grace. After a millenium and a half, our hearts are still warmed, our minds are still enlightened by this remarkable man who journeyed from the desert, through the garden, into the city, lighting the path as he went for those who would follow

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ENDNOTES

- ¹Quoted by Benjamin B. Warfield. *Calvin and Augustine*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974. p. 306
- ²*ibid.* p. 320
- ³Frederick Copleston. *A History of Philosophy Vol. 2, Medieval Philosophy Part I, Augustine to Bonaventure*. New York: Image Books, 1962. p. 55
- ⁴William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature*. London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1902. pp. 168, 169
- ⁵*Confessiones* VI, ii, 2. The Latin text and standard numbering used throughout may be found in *Confessiones opera et studio Monachorum S. Benedicti S. Mauri (Opera Omnia I, Paris, 1679)*, reprinted by J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* Vol. 32, cols. 659-866. Paris, 1845.
- ⁶*Conf.* II, x, 18
- ⁷*Conf.* VI, xvi, 26
- ⁸*Conf.* II, iii, 7
- ⁹*Conf.* V, viii, 15
- ¹⁰*Conf.* VI, vi, 9
- ¹¹*Conf.* VI, xi, 19
- ¹²*Conf.* VI, xi, 20
- ¹³*Conf.* V, xiii, 23
- ¹⁴*ibid.*
- ¹⁵*Conf.* V, xiv, 24
- ¹⁶*Conf.* VIII, v, 11
- ¹⁷*Conf.* VIII, viii, 19
- ¹⁸*Conf.* VIII, xii, 28
- ¹⁹*ibid.*
- ²⁰*Conf.* VIII, xii, 29
- ²¹*ibid.*
- ²²*Conf.* IX, i, 1
- ²³*Conf.* IX, x, 26
- ²⁴*cf.* Charles G. Finney. *Revival Lectures*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1968. p. 458
- ²⁵Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*. p. 310
- ²⁶*ibid.*
- ²⁷Kenneth Scott Latourette. *A History of Christianity*. New York: Harper and Row, 1953. p. 176

- ²⁸Daniel D. Williams. "The Significance of St. Augustine Today", *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*. (ed. by Roy W. Battenhouse) Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979. p. 4
- ²⁹*Sermones* 355, 2. cf. Migne, *PL* Vol. 38
- ³⁰*Epistulam* 137, 3. cf. Magne, *PL* Vol. 33
- ³¹Possidius. *Vita Sancti Aurelli Augustine Hipponensis Episcopi*, 7. cf. Migne, *PL* Vol. 32, cols. 33-66
- ³²*De civitate Dei* XIX, 19. cf. *Ep.* 48, 1
- ³³Joseph B. Bernardin, "St. Augustine as Pastor", *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*. p. 60
- ³⁴Possidius. *Vita Augustini* 27
- ³⁵Peter Brown. *Augustine of Hippo*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969. p. 250