

potent in conforming man to His moral perfection ; but it is, even when there is no consciousness of the personal presence of Christ, so long as faith claims grace, a habitation and operation in man of God by His Spirit, the very life of God become the life of man.

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STUDIES IN CONVERSION.

III. ST. AUGUSTINE.

IF the conversion of the Emperor Constantine is an instance of the power of dreams and visions, that of Augustine is a no less striking illustration of how another means of conversion mentioned in the thirty-third chapter of Job—namely, testimony—may take effect.

Augustine's life covers the second half of the fourth century and the first quarter of the fifth, his date being 354 to 430. He was a native of Thagaste, a town of Numidia in North Africa ; and most of his life was spent in that province. Soon after this time Numidia was blotted from the map of civilisation by the incursions of barbarians ; but, in his day, not only did it form part of the Roman Empire, but its capital, Carthage, was one of the leading cities of the world. The town of Hippo, where his mature life was spent, has been restored in recent times by the French, under the name of Bona, and, at the present day, is a busy seaport, containing 25,000 inhabitants.

Augustine was of good family. His father was a government official and, though far from being a wealthy man, made great efforts for the education of his gifted son, who was trained first at home, then in the neighbouring town of Madaura, and finally at the university of Carthage. The profession for which he was intended was that of a rhetorician or, as we should say, a professor of literature,

his pupils being those who meant to practise in the courts of law. This profession he exercised both at Thagaste, his native place, and at Carthage, as well as subsequently at Rome and Milan. But, after his conversion and baptism, which took place in his thirty-third year, he abandoned this calling and entered the Church, where he soon became a bishop and was settled for life in the town of Hippo, not far from the place of his birth. In this new position the full force of his genius unfolded itself, and he became one of the best known men of his age. But his fame in subsequent centuries has far exceeded even that of his lifetime. In the Middle Ages his influence was equally great in the intellectual life of the Church, which we call Scholasticism, and in the spiritual movements which we comprehend under the name of Mysticism; and at the Reformation the leading Reformers learnt more from him than from all other teachers, outside the Bible, put together. In fact, since the Apostle Paul there has arisen no greater teacher in the Christian Church.¹

From his own hand we have received an account of his early life and of his conversion which certainly holds a leading place among the religious classics of the world, and perhaps the foremost place of all among personal accounts of conversion. In literary form it is singular; for from beginning to end—and it extends to about three hundred pages—it is a continuous prayer. It abounds in sublime and ardent addresses to God such as we should call prayers. But, besides, the author recounts minutely—still in the form of prayer—the incidents of his life. And not only so; but he pauses at every opportunity to recapitulate the reflections occasioned

¹ Zwischen Paulus, dem Apostel, und Luther, dem Reformator, hat die christliche Kirche niemanden besessen, der sich mit Augustin messen könnte, und an umfassender Wirkung kommt ihm kein anderer gleich."—Harnack, *Reden und Aufsätze*, i. 53.

by these incidents in his highly trained and speculative mind, and still he keeps up the form of prayer. Hence the book is the most extraordinary *mélange* not only of self-analysis but of descriptions of the state of society, character-studies of his friends and acquaintances, shrewd remarks on human life, psychological observations and glances into the deepest mysteries of the soul. It ought to be read in its native Latin; because the epigrammatic sayings—some of them the deepest ever uttered—and the sublime invocations of the Deity have an extraordinary impressiveness in that language. The book was penned when the author was forty-three years of age; and the whole may be called an account of his conversion; for all the influences both which retarded and which led up to this event are carefully traced out; and, very soon after it takes place, the narrative portion comes to a close.

Although, in the half-century preceding St. Augustine's birth, Christianity had become the state-religion and had closed the idol temples all over the Empire, yet the old religions were still far from being overcome; and the heathenism of Numidia, which had been of a singularly dark and intense type, had not by any means entirely lost its hold, Carthage especially being a notoriously profligate city. St. Augustine's father was not a Christian, and he lived with the freedom of a pagan. His mother, Monica, however, was not only a professor of the new faith, but one in whom Christianity had accomplished its most perfect work. She was a woman of rare excellence—wise, affectionate and benevolent—and she proved the good angel of her son, the God whose servant she was giving her, before her own life ended, the supreme satisfaction of seeing both her husband and her son converted and baptized. The husband, however, died in the son's seventeenth year, leaving her a widow, to watch over the

development of the young man, who was still far from God and righteousness ; and she remains to all the Christian centuries the type of what a mother so circumstanced should be and do.

St. Augustine calls his autobiography *Confessions*—a name which suggests a penitential account of sins. This is not, indeed, exactly what he means by the word : his book is a confession of the divine mercies no less than of his own transgressions ; and its object is the praise of God. Still, the penitential element is predominant, and the author tells with frankness, but never with the slightest tone of boasting, at what points and by what influences he was led away from the path of virtue.

He goes very far back, confessing even the sins of his childhood, which he does not remember ; because, he argues, the anger, jealousy and other vices which he observes in other children must have existed in him also, when he was a child. In the account of his boyhood he charges himself with such sins as lying and petty thefts ; and, in the whole course of his education, he was possessed with the spirit of rivalry and vanity—a spirit which, he says, his father and his teachers encouraged rather than checked. At an incredibly early age he fell under the power of the sin which especially became his chain : it is sad and painful to have to mention—but the conversion of St. Augustine could hardly be made intelligible without mentioning the fact—that, before he had reached his eighteenth year, he had become the father of a son, with whose mother he had entered into a connexion in which heathen morality saw nothing to blame, but which Christianity inexorably condemns, and his conscience also condemned, though he was faithful to her. He was entangled also in the company of young men who plunged far more more deeply into vice than himself ; and he confesses that, when they were boasting of

their disgraceful acts, he made himself out worse than he was, lest he should be jeered at as an innocent. "O friendship," he exclaims, "too unfriendly! thou mysterious seducer of the soul; for, when they say 'Let us go: let us do it,' we are ashamed not to be shameless."¹

Meantime his education was being completed, and his mind was unfolding its remarkable talents. On the intellectual side of his nature too, however, he fell into error, in which he was long held captive, through becoming connected with the Manichaeans—a sect in whose tenets there was a strange combination of Oriental mysticism with some elements of Christianity. Its fundamental notion was that there exists in the universe an eternal dualism: in both nature and human nature two principles—the one good and the other evil—are forever at war with each other, being incapable of reconciliation. Its adherents made great pretensions to superior intellectuality and even to sanctity, but they ridiculed the Scriptures, and their doctrines destroyed the sense of responsibility for such sins as those to which Augustine had yielded. "It seemed to me," says he, "that it was not we that sinned, but I know not what other nature sinned in us. And it gratified my pride to be free from blame and, after I had committed a fault, not to acknowledge that I had done wrong."

Thus, by the time he had reached his majority, he was held fast by the cords on both sides of his nature—both the side of the senses and the side of the intellect. Yet influences of an opposite kind were never wanting; and—to use the words of John Owen—in the ashes there gleamed up from time to time sparks of celestial fire.²

There was always his mother's influence. She had imbued

¹ *Confessions*, Bk. ii. ch. 9.

² Owen has a chapter on the Conversion of St. Augustine in his work on the Holy Spirit.

his mind with Gospel truth ; he well knew that she prayed for him incessantly ; and he had constantly her example before his eyes. When he began to be wild and to distress her with his conduct, she had a dream of his conversion, by which she was greatly cheered. On another occasion she requested a bishop to converse with him and refute his Manichæan errors ; “ but he refused,” says Augustine, “ very prudently, as I afterwards came to see ; for he answered that I was still unteachable, being inflated with the novelty of that heresy, and that I had already perplexed divers inexperienced persons with vexatious questions, as she had informed him, ‘ But leave him alone for a while,’ saith he, ‘ only pray God for him ; he will of himself, through reading, discover what the error is, and how great is its impiety.’ He then disclosed to her that he had himself in his youth been given over to the Manichæans, but had come to see, without argument from anyone, how much that sect was to be shunned, and had shunned it. Which, when he had said and she would not be satisfied, but repeated more earnestly her entreaty, shedding copious tears, he, a little vexed at her importunity, exclaimed, ‘ Go thy way, and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish.’ Which answer, as she often mentioned in her conversations with me, she accepted as though it were a voice from heaven.”¹

In his boyhood Augustine had often been visited with the strivings of the Spirit of God. He mentions one time in particular when, being in extreme bodily pain and apparently at the point of death, he passionately begged to be baptized. His mother was at a loss ; but she distrusted the depth of his impressions ; though he himself, when writing of the circumstance, is not sure if she took the right course in refusing his request.

¹ iii. 12.

At a more mature stage of his youth he experienced another moral crisis in a somewhat singular way—through the reading of the *Hortensius*, a moral treatise of Cicero. In this work the author presented the claims of wisdom, as against the service of the flesh, with such persuasiveness that Augustine was almost persuaded to cast off his bonds. “This book,” he says, “changed my affections and turned my prayers to Thyself, O Lord, and made me have other hopes and desires. Worthless suddenly became every vain hope to me; and with an incredible warmth of heart I yearned for an immortality of wisdom”; and he adds the remarkable statement, “This alone checked me thus ardent, that the name of Christ was not in Cicero’s book. For this name according to Thy mercy, O Lord, this name of my Saviour Thy Son, had my tender heart piously drunk in even with my mother’s milk; and whatever was without that name, though never so erudite, polished and truthful, took not complete hold of me.”¹

In fact, although he was entangled both in vice and in doctrinal error, his was still in many respects a noble nature. Thus he tells that on one occasion, having offered himself as a competitor for a rhetorical prize, he was accosted by a soothsayer, who proposed, by sacrificing certain creatures in accordance with his art, to secure his triumph, but he indignantly replied: “If the garland were of imperishable gold, I would not suffer a fly to be destroyed to secure it for me.”²

He had a heart full of affection, and in his youth—as, indeed, all his life long—he was surrounded by troops of friends, to the choicer of whom he displayed a rare devotion. No one has ever spoken more glowingly of the delight of intercourse with friends—“to discourse and jest with them; to indulge in an interchange of kindness; to read together pleasant books; together to trifle and together to be earnest;

¹ iii. 4.

² iv. 2.

to differ at times without ill humour, as a man would do with his own self ; and even by the infrequency of these differences to give zest to our more frequent consentings ; sometimes teaching ; sometimes being taught ; longing for the absent with impatience and welcoming the coming with joy.”¹ By the death of one dearly loved friend he was so immoderately affected that he could no longer live in his native town, where he had begun to practise his profession, but removed to Carthage. “ Mine eyes sought him everywhere,” he writes, “ but he was not granted them ; and I hated all places because he was not in them ; I was astonished that other mortals lived, since he whom I loved was dead ; and I wondered still more that I, who was to him a second self, could live without him.”² Sentences like these betray what manner of man Augustine was—a deep, passionate nature, with an inappeasable thirst for the infinite.

The oft-quoted saying, which occurs in the first paragraph of the Confessions, is the keynote of his entire life, “ Thou hast formed us, O Lord, for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.” He tried every substitute for God, but always in vain. He tried sensual pleasure ; but he confesses that he was “ scourged with burning rods of jealousy, suspicion, fear, anger and strife.” He tried ambition and honours. He tried learning and philosophy. He tried friendship. But an attraction far more divine was ever drawing him, though he was shy of yielding to it. “ So,” says he, “ I fretted, sighed, wept, tormented myself, and took neither rest nor advice. For I bore about with me a rent and polluted soul, and where to repose it I found not. Not in pleasure groves, not in sport or song, not in fragrant spots, not in magnificent banquetings, not in the pleasures of the bed and the couch, not, finally, in books or songs did

¹ iv. 5.

² iv. 5.

I find repose. To Thee, O Lord, should my soul have been raised. This I knew, but was neither willing nor able.”

It turned out that the bondage of the intellect to error was the one from which he was to be first delivered. He gradually lost faith in Manichæism. This change of mind was partly brought about by a growing acquaintance with science ; for the sect had woven into its creed certain unscientific tenets on scientific subjects ; and, when Augustine discovered that these were mistaken, the whole system crumbled away in his mind. The process of disenchantment was completed by his coming in contact with a famous high-priest of the sect, whom he expected to find able to solve all his difficulties, but whom he discovered, on close acquaintance, to be a mere orator with no depth of speculative power. “ And,” says he, “ what profit to me was the elegance of my cupbearer, since he offered me not the more precious draught for which I thirsted? ”¹ At this stage he was like to fall into univereal scepticism, for he had dropped the false faith but had not yet adopted the true, and, indeed, was to a large extent ignorant of it, as he had not yet attached himself to the study of the Holy Scriptures. Certain Platonic books, however, which fell into his hands at this time, fortified him with a few elementary convictions. Augustine is one of those, of whom there have been not a few, to whom philosophy has served as a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ ; and he used to compare those who came into Christianity out of heathenism enriched with the doctrines of the philosophers to the children of Israel who came into Canaan laden with the spoil of the Egyptians.

About the time of his emergence from Manichæism he transferred his abode from Carthage to Rome. So opposed was this to the wishes of his mother, who feared for him the temptations of the capital, that it was only by practising

¹ v. 7.

on her a cruel deception that he was able to get away. She prayed against his going, yet, by not answering this prayer, as Augustine characteristically observes, God was answering all the prayers of her lifetime ; for, when her son directed his course towards Italy, he was unawares on the way to meet the redeeming influence of his life. He was not long in Rome before he received an enviable appointment in Milan, then the second capital of Italy and an imperial residence. The Bishop of Milan, at the time, was St. Ambrose—one who is now reckoned, along with St. Augustine, among the four greatest teachers of the Latin Church. He is best remembered perhaps for his eminent service to the praise of the Church ; but he was, besides, an eloquent preacher and a solid teacher. Augustine was introduced to him and at once fell under his fascination. At first, indeed, he confesses, he went to hear him preach on account of the eloquence of his delivery and the elegance of his Latinity ; but soon he was enthralled with the truth itself. From Ambrose he obtained a view of Christianity and an interpretation of the Scriptures with which his intellect was satisfied ; and in no long time he was thoroughly convinced that the teaching of the Church was the truth of God.

Thus the half of his conversion may be said to have been accomplished. Yet the decisive step had still to be taken. His intellect was satisfied, but the bondage of his senses to lust was as unbroken as ever. His mother had joined him at Milan, and she started a project of marriage, to which he assented, and he sent back to Africa the woman who had been the companion of his guilty life. The marriage, however, could not take place for two years on account of the youth of the bride ; and in the interval he miserably fell into a connexion of the same kind as that from which he had escaped.

This is the darkest blot on the record of St. Augustine ;

and to us the astonishing thing, betraying how undeveloped was the morality of the age, is that he seems to have had no idea what he owed to the mother of his son. Now he experienced in all its violence the struggle, described in the seventh of Romans, between the law in the members and the law of the mind, and felt all the bitterness and shame of knowing to do right and yet doing it not. His conversion became, in short, a stand-up fight between a deep-seated, besetting sin on the one hand and the law of God and the attraction of Christ on the other.

The final passages in the struggle are of absorbing interest. Milan, full of Ambrose's influence, was a place where remarkable religious decisions were taking place, and Augustine could not but hear of them. His soul was shaken and he burned to imitate them; yet he could not make up his mind. His miserable prayer, he says, was, "Grant me chastity and continency—but not yet." "To Thee," he says again, "showing me on every side that what thou saidst was true, I, convicted by the truth, had nothing to reply but, 'Presently, lo, presently; oh, leave me a little while; but 'presently, presently' had no present, and my 'leave me a little while' went on for a long while."

One day a friend, who held high office in the Emperor's court, was calling on him and expressed surprise at seeing a volume of St. Paul's Epistles lying on the table. When Augustine confessed that he was now a reader of such literature, the man, who was a Christian, began to testify to his Saviour, and especially to describe the case of two fellow-officials, who had recently, in very trying circumstances, given up all for Christ. As he listened, Augustine was overwhelmed with shame, remembering in how many ways the Spirit of God had striven with him, and with what trivial pleas he had stifled his convictions. When the visitor had departed, he threw himself in a tumult of emotion on

Alypius, a friend who lived with him and who had been passing through an experience not unlike his own, crying : " What is wrong with us ? What is this ? Didst thou hear what he said ? The unlearned are taking heaven by force, and we, with our learning, but wanting heart—see where we wallow in flesh and blood."¹

There was a garden behind the house into which he rushed, followed by Alypius, and there, casting himself down, he resigned himself to the tumult of emotion. The hour had come ; and it was as if the powers of heaven and hell were contending for his soul. " Lo," he says, " I said mentally, Let it be done now. And, as I spoke, I all but came to a resolve. I all but did it, yet I did it not. Yet fell I not back into my old condition, but took up my position hard by and drew breath. And I tried again, and wanted but very little of reaching it, and somewhat less, and then all but touched and grasped it ; and yet came not at it, hesitating to die unto death and live unto life. And the very moment that I was to become another man, the nearer it approached me, the greater horror did it strike into me ; but it did not strike me back nor turn me aside, but kept me in suspense."²

At length, feeling himself about to give way to a rush of tears, he rose from Alypius' side and moved away to a remote part of the garden ; but, as he went, he heard, from a neighbouring house the voice of a boy or girl, saying, perhaps in some game, " Take up and read, take up and read " ! In his excitement it sounded to him as a divine command to take up and read the Epistle of St Paul, with which he had been occupied. Returning at once, he took up the roll, when the first words on which his eyes fell were these : " Let us walk honestly as in the day ; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying ; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision

¹ viii. 8.

² viii. 11.

for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.”¹ This Scripture, it will be observed, struck straight at his besetting sin : and, as has happened so often in other cases, the sword of the Spirit proved to be the weapon needed to cut the cords asunder ; they fell at his feet, and he stepped out of his bonds forever. Not only did he at once feel release, but the peace of God which passeth all understanding flowed into his soul ; and he returned to the house, to make his mother happy with the news.

Fortunately the autumn holidays of the institution in which he was a lecturer were at hand, and he retired to a country-house, at the foot of the Alps, placed at his disposal by an acquaintance, accompanied by a number of young men, who had apparently been swept into the kingdom in his wake ; and there he stayed for six months in heavenly communion, occupied with the study of Scripture and literary composition ; for he had resolved to give up the rhetorician’s trade.

At the end of this delightful interval, he was baptized by Ambrose, along with his son Adeodatus and his friend Alypius ; and immediately thereafter, he set out with them and his mother for his native Africa. But at Ostia, the port at which they were to embark, he lost his beloved mother. She had obtained the desire of her heart, and had nothing left to live for. Her son tells of a conversation they had at Ostia, before she was seized with the fever of which she died. Leaning out of the window of the house of entertainment at which they were lodged, they spoke long and pleasantly about the past and the wonderful goodness of God. Augustine began to confess how he had tried her, but she would not allow that he had ever been anything but kind. Then their thoughts took a higher flight, and they spoke so intimately of the enjoyments and glories of heaven that they

¹ Rom. xiii. 13, 14.

could scarcely believe they were not in that place of bliss. Within a week she had actually passed to the better country, and Augustine had to set forth alone to face the great future that lay before him.

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PAULINISM AND THE RELIGION OF JESUS.

THE true criterion of any religion or system of thought is the effect it produces upon its followers. And in the case of the Religion of Jesus this line of evidence is all the more essential because it is the evidence to which He Himself trusted. Jesus Himself wrote no book. He never, so far as we learn from the Gospel narratives, made any attempt to present His teaching in systematized form. He was content to implant certain seed-thoughts and truths in the minds and hearts of his immediate followers, and leave them to germinate and develop there. The disciples of Jesus thus became in a very special sense His witnesses, to whom the future proclamation and propagation of His religion were intrusted, and any attempt to estimate in what the real significance of Jesus' Religion lay must necessarily start from their testimony.

Amongst these witnesses, the Apostle Paul occupies an outstanding, if not the outstanding place. True, it may at once be said that St. Paul was not himself one of the original Twelve, nor even a personal companion of Jesus. But this, so far from being an objection, rather tells the other way. Historical personages and events are as a rule best understood not by those who stand immediately under their shadow, but by those who, while furnished with adequate knowledge, are able to look at them as it were from the outside, and under circumstances favourable to an impartial judgment. And from this point of view where