

PROFILES IN FAITH

Augustine (354 - 430 AD)

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After Jesus and the apostle Paul, Augustine is arguably the most influential person in the history of the Church. His influence on the Catholic Church is massive, and he had a similarly great influence on the Protestant reformers. Martin Luther was notably a monk of the Augustinian order, and in Calvin's *Institutes*, the Church father quoted most often is Augustine.

Early Life

Augustine was born in 354 AD in Thagaste, Numidia, North Africa and died in 430 in Hippo (both in present-day Algeria). His father was a pagan who was converted on his deathbed, and his mother, Monnica, was a devoted believer in Christ. In his early education, he described himself as rather lazy and an underachiever; however, he showed sparks of brilliance. When Augustine was seventeen, a rich patron, Romanianus, saw this young man's potential as a philosopher. Romanianus had hoped through this patronage to turn the tide against Christianity and back towards paganism. Ironically, Augustine later converted Romanianus to Christianity.

While in Carthage pursuing his studies, Augustine started living with a concubine. He never reveals her name, but a year later they had a son whom they named Adeodatus, which means "the gift of God." Augustine struggled for much of his early life with sexual desire. He says:

From a perverted act of will, desire had grown, and when desire is given satisfaction, habit is forged; and when habit passes unresisted, a compulsive urge sets in.

Augustine lived with his concubine for more than a decade until Monnica finally persuaded him to send her away so that he could marry a high society Milanese girl. But, he was required to remain chaste for two years until the girl reached a marriageable age. He couldn't do it. Not long afterwards, he took another mistress. He says, "I thought it should be too miserable unless folded in female arms." His sexual



desire in part prevented him from considering Christ. His infamous prayer was "God, give me chastity and continence—but not just now."

Conversion

After an initial dabbling in paganism, Augustine was drawn into more than a decade of fascination with the dualistic sect Manichaeism. He was drawn to this rather strange set of beliefs, among other things, by its mocking of the Bible (of which he approved at the time) and its explanation of evil (by postulating an all-good and an all-evil God). Gradually, though, he became disillusioned with Manichaeism. Many objections accumulated. After a meeting with the celebrated Manichaean teacher Faustus, his questions remained unanswered. He became sorry that he had become involved with the sect, and he began to search earnestly for the truth. He began to consider the possibility that if truth was to be known, perhaps it would be known through divine authority.

It was particularly through the preaching of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, that Augustine began to believe that which he once thought absurd. Ambrose was learned and eloquent and particularly convincing in the way that he defended the Old Testament against Manichaean objections. Augustine says:

For now those things which heretofore appeared incongruous to me in Scripture, and used to offend me, having heard diverse of them expounded reasonably, I referred to the depth of the mysteries, and its authority seemed to be all the more venerable and worthy of religious belief.

Later, while in the throes of an intense internal philosophical struggle, Augustine threw himself in tears to the ground in the garden of his house. Then from the neighboring garden, he heard a child's voice repeating over and over the words, "Take and read. Take and read..." Believing it to be a heavenly prompt, he picked up a copy of St. Paul's epistles and read the first verses he found. They were Romans 13:13-14: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity

and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regards to its lusts.”

Immediately after reading this sentence, light seemed to penetrate his understanding and “all the darkness of doubt vanished away.” He went and told his mother, Monnica, who had been praying for him for years, and she leapt for joy.

Augustine soon resigned his professorship in Milan and retreated to Cassisiacum with Monnica and a group of friends. It was his strong desire to have a community of philosopher/friends that would serve the Church not as priests or bishops, but as writers and thinkers.

Augustine on Friendship

One of the lesser-noted aspects of Augustine’s life is the value he placed on friendship. This is true not only in the period in Cassisiacum mentioned above, but also later in Thagaste and Hippo. Peter Brown, in his excellent biography *Augustine of Hippo*, says: “Augustine was an imperialist in his friendships. To be a friend of Augustine’s meant only too often becoming part of Augustine himself.” The death of an early friend was a crisis point in his life. In his Confessions, he says that it was “a friendship that was sweeter to me than all sweetness that in life I had ever known ... I who was his other self. ... half of his own soul ... one soul in two bodies.” When his friend died, Augustine had a horror of living because he did not want to live as half a being; yet he was afraid to die lest his friend die wholly and completely.

Yet, when Augustine looks back on his friend who died and on other friendships in his pre-Christian years, he sees them as falling short of the true meaning of friendship:

...There can be no true friendship unless those who cling to each other are welded together by You in that love which is spread throughout our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given us.

Augustine was quite clear that the origin of friendship was need. It is pride to think that one can exist alone. When he was wearied with the scandals of the world, he threw himself entirely on the charity of his friends and rested in their love. He says:

Whenever I feel that a man burning with Christian charity and love for me has become my friend, when I entrust any of my plans and thoughts to him, I am entrusting them not to a man but to Him in whom he abides, so as to be like Him, for God is charity, and he who abides in charity abides in God.

Thus, God’s love is the very essence of true friendship. It is in this love that we have the binding cement of friendship.

Good conversation and good food around the dinner table were Augustine’s delight. By the end of Augustine’s life, visitors were so many that a hostel was built to lodge them. These visitors would meet around Augustine’s table: Gothic monks, hermits from islands off Sardinia, and others from throughout the world. He had written on his table some lines warning against gossip that I have seen translated in various ways. The most memorable, “Who loves another’s name to stain, shall not dine with me again.” Peter Brown translates the words: “Whoever thinks that he is able to nibble at the life of absent friends must know that he’s unworthy of this table.”

On one occasion when some fellow bishops forgot his rule, Augustine got so angry that he said they should either rub these verses off the table, or he would get up and go to his room in the middle of the meal. Thus, we see that he was often concerned for his friends’ reputations.

Once Augustine wrote to Severus, “As for me when praise is given me by one who is very near and dear to my soul, I feel as if I were being praised by part of myself.” After he was bishop in Hippo in an early period, his friends Severus, Possidius, Evodius, Alypius, and Profuturus, were there with him. Gradually, though, each one left to become bishop of distant cities. He saw them sometimes on special trips or at Church Councils, but he came to miss their presence especially as he became consumed by the details of ecclesiastical life. He writes later in life:

But when you yourself begin to surrender some of the dearest and sweetest of those you have reared, to the needs of churches situated far from you, then you will understand the pangs of longing that stab me on losing the physical presence of friends united to me in the most close and sweet intimacy.

As he became more and more a public figure in the debates with the Donatists and the Pelagians, he had less time to cultivate his close group of friends, but he never ceased to value them and carve out time for them when possible.

The City of God

In terms of significance for our time, Augustine’s book *The City of God* stands out as valuable. Augustine began writing this work in 413 AD, and it appeared in installments over the next thirteen years. It was written in order to respond to a devastating tragedy—the destruction and sack of Rome. In 410 AD, Alaric and the Goths, barbarians from the north, sacked Rome.

Jerome described the emotional impact: “The whole world perished in one city.” Some had suggested that Christianity was the cause of this awful event. The pagan gods were displeased with the empire’s embracing of Christ. Augustine’s answer was *The City of God*. It would be an oversimplification to say, though, that this work was solely about the sacking of Rome, because much of the book sets out a positive philosophy of creation, time, evil, freedom, and above all, a Biblical perspective of history.

It has become a classic because of its brilliance and depth. Augustine can pack a lot into a small sentence. For instance:

God’s son assuming humanity without destroying His divinity established and founded this faith, that there might be a way for man to be man’s God through God’s man.

One of his great contributions is a tough-minded perspective on suffering and death. For instance, he says:

And who is so absurd and blinded as to be audacious enough to affirm that in the midst of the calamities of this mortal state, God’s people, or even one single saint, does live, or has ever lived, or shall ever live, without tears and pain.

Particularly, he addressed the pain and grief to those that lost all they had to the barbarian armies:

They lost all they had? Their faith? Their godliness? The possessions of the hidden man of the heart which in the sight of God are of great price? Did they lose these? For these are the wealth of the Christian to whom the wealthy apostle said, ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us therewith be content.

But what about those believers who were cruelly put to death? How do we reconcile our faith in God with that? Augustine says:

But it is added, many Christians were slaughtered, and were put to death in a hideous variety of cruel ways. Well, if this be hard to bear, it is assuredly the common lot of all who are born into this life. Of this at least I am certain, that no one has ever died who was not destined to die sometime. Now the end of life puts the longest life on a par with the shortest ... That death is not to be judged an evil which is the end of a good life; for death becomes evil only by the retribution which follows it.

They, then, who are destined to die, need not inquire about what death they are to die, but into what place death will usher them.

Augustine was clearly aware of the depth and reality of evil but placed this within a Biblical context. Biblically, you can have good without evil (as in God’s original creation or in heaven) but you cannot have evil without good. Evil is, in Augustine’s terms, “privatio boni”—a privation of the good. Evil exists as a parasite on its host. The very fact that we can identify evil proves that we know what is good. Tragedy is the compliment that evil pays to goodness. The greater the tragedy the greater the good presupposed. There is certainly a problem of evil that believers need to address, but there is also an argument for the existence of a good God from the reality of evil.

In a short article about Augustine, it is impossible to even begin to do justice to his genius. Perhaps, though, I can interest you in knowing more. Various works of Augustine’s are readily available, such as *Confessions* or *The City of God*. Other, secondary, works are also helpful, such as Peter Brown’s *Augustine of Hippo* or Gerald Bonner’s *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*.

Augustine’s life shows one who passionately sought God with both his heart and his mind. His most famous quote speaks to us all: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

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