

LIFE AND WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

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In the last chapter of his *Sancti Augustini vita (Life of Saint Augustine)*, Possidius Bishop of Calama quoted an unknown ancient secular poet, who directed that a monument be erected for himself in a public place after his death, and composed an inscription to be placed the monument. It reads:

Wouldst thou know that poets live again, O traveller, after death?

These words thou readest, lo, I speak! Thy voice is but my breath.

Possidius wants to show us that if this truth holds for any poet or writer, it does in the most eminent way when it comes to Our Holy Father Augustine whose breath never stopped over centuries. As we read his writings and feel his presence and as we endeavour to live according to his ideal of Christian life, we confirm his undying impact in the Church and in the world which we serve.

In this first module, we shall brief recall to your minds things that you certainly know very well about the life of Saint Augustine in the first part, and then we shall give an overview and general characteristics of his works. We shall also attempt to bring in some new aspects of where you could find Augustine in case you are interested in a doing research on a particular aspect of his life and works.

PART 1: THE LIFE OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

It is important to know with precision some fundamental facts about the life of the Bishop of Hippo, most especially those regarding his return to catholic faith. The

reason why this important is that most of the time, scholars make reference to these data to interpret his thought. And once they are not accurately presented, they give rise to all sorts of deviations and the host of problems regarding Augustinian scholarship when it comes to interpreting his thought. Let's now examine our sources on the life of Saint Augustine.

I.1. SOURCES

I.1.1. AUGUSTINE WRITINGS AS MAJOR SOURCES

THE DIALOGUES OF CASSICIACUM, could be considered as the first *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. They were composed between November 386 and March 387. They provide in their prefaces (*De beata vita* 1-5 ; *Contra Acad.* 2, 3-6 ; *De ordine* 1, 2, 5), the first important information about Augustine's life, and in their contents, they give indications about Augustine's interior dispositions before his baptism. And the facts that Augustine narrates in the *Dialogues* remain fundamentally true even though some scholars think that the dialogical form of the first three dialogues is not historical but only literary.

THE CONFESSIONS. The *Confessions* were written between 397 (the year of Saint Ambrose' death) and 400 constitute the prime source for St. Augustine's life. This work is an autobiographical writing, but it's also philosophical, theological, mystic and poetical. It's from it that we gather the largest part of the information about his life we are going to examine subsequently. From Book I to IX Augustine narrates his life from childhood to conversion and to the death of his mother Monica. The remaining four Books (X-XIII), more speculative reflection on creation, time, eternity, and other philosophical aspects still in the framework of the Praise of God that guides Augustine's reflection (*Confessio* = *Laus*).

THE RETRACTATIONES.¹ With this work written toward the end of his life (426/427) Augustine sought to highlight what was significant in his previous writings and to correct what he found inappropriate and incorrect. Time did not allow him to revise all his works so he left his letters and sermons unrevised. No other ancient author provided such a searching revision of his works. This work is fundamental for the study of Augustine's writings, as they provide invaluable information about the motivations, the social and religious contexts that inspired Augustine to undertake the work. The *Retractationes* are a long examination of conscience of the old Bishop on his literary activities so they could be considered this last *Confessions* and Trapè summarised the book as bibliographical, doctrinal and autobiographical.

SERMONS 355 and 356 preached respectively on December 18th 425 and shortly after the celebration of Epiphany of the following year, provide partial information about the period going from his return from Italy to his episcopal consecration. They inform us about the foundation of the monasteries of Hippo and give an idea of the style of life that was being led there. In *Sermon* 355 he recounted how a visit to the town of Hippo led to his priestly ordination and how greatly this visit changed his life. *Sermon* 356 contains the names and details about the membership of his *monasterium clericorum* in Hippo at one point during the year 425 or 426.

I. 2. A SECONDARY SOURCE

POSSIDIUS, *THE LIFE OF SAINT AUGUSTINE*.

The work is believed to have been written between 431-439, composed on the basis of its author's personal memories (*quae in eodem vidi et audiui*)², on the writings of Augustine available in the Library of Hippo. Possidius' work has an exceptional historical value and is an unreplaceable guide for knowing the life and activities of Saint Augustine from his ordination to his death.

¹ G. Madec, *Introduction au 'Révisions' et à la Lecture des Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, Collections des Études Augustiniennes : Série Antiquité 150, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1996.

² Possidius, *Vita praef.* 1.

II. THE NARRATION

II. 1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY-GEOGRAPHY OF AUGUSTINE'S HOMELAND

Augustine's African homeland had been part of Rome's empire since the destruction of Carthage (146 BC) five hundred years before his birth. This destruction came as the result of series of three wars fought between Rome and Carthage from 264 BC to 146 BC, and known as the *Punic wars*. The main cause of the Punic Wars was the conflicts of interest between the existing Carthaginian Empire and the expanding Roman Republic. The Romans were initially interested in expansion via Sicily (which at that time was a cultural melting pot), part of which lay under Carthaginian control. At the start of the First Punic War (264 to 241 BC), Carthage was the dominant power of the Western Mediterranean, with an extensive maritime empire, while Rome was the rapidly ascending power in Italy, but lacked the naval power of Carthage. By the end of the third war (149 to 146 BC), after more than a hundred years, and the loss of many hundreds of thousands of soldiers from both sides, Rome had conquered Carthage's empire and completely destroyed the city, becoming the most powerful state of the Western Mediterranean.

However, Carthage had been rebuilt by Rome as the metropolis of Roman Africa, wealthy once again but posing no threat. The language of business and culture throughout Roman Africa was Latin. The dominant religion of Africa became Christianity--a religion that violently opposed the traditions of old Rome but that could not have spread as it did without the prosperity and unity that Rome had brought to the ancient world. By the time Augustine became a Christian and a clergy man, the Christian Church was divided by a schism known as Donatism of which we shall speak later on. It's in this context that Augustine lived and exercised his ministry.

II. 2. THE STAGES OF THE LIFE OF SAINT AUGUSTINE.

II. 2. 1. PRECONVERSION

II. 2.1. 1. INFANCY, CHILDHOOD, YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Birth and Family: Augustine was born on November 13, 354, in the town of Tagaste (modern Souk-Ahras in Algeria), situated in the northern African province of Numidia, as the son of Patricius, a non-Christian officer of the Roman curia who was not baptized until shortly before he died (372), and of Monica (Monnica), who was a zealous Christian. Monica, was a prayerful woman, a highly intellectual and spiritual person, with a deep prayer life and a loving personality. She was a model of patience and gentleness. At times she shed tears over her son when he went off the right path. Even if little is normally heard about his siblings, he was not an only child but had at least a brother, named Navigius, who later accompanied him to Milan and Cassiciacum and into the monastic community of Tagaste, as well as a sister whose name is unknown. A remark in the *Confessiones* that Monica had “raised sons”³ and the subsequent mention of some nephews and nieces suggest that the family may have been even larger.

Infancy/Childhood: Of Augustine’s infancy and childhood we know only what he chooses to tell us in the highly selective memoirs that form part of the *Confessions*. He started from the period of infancy which was passed away without leaving any traces in his memory, much like to that which he passed in his mother’s womb. From what he observed in other children Augustine deduced what he must have been like in his infancy; for he perceived that little children are easily possessed with jealousy, anger, and revenge, which they sometimes express by their pale and envious looks; and they require with tears what would be hurtful if granted. Children often rage and swell against their elders and those who owe them no subjection, and would even have elders to comply with their will, and to obey them even in things that are

³ *Conf.* IX. 9. 22 : “nutrierat filios”

hurtful; they also suck in very early sentiments of vanity and pride. For this, Augustine laments that custom should make it appear against reason for children in this tender age to suffer correction for what certainly deserves reproof, and strengthened by being flattered, and becomes sinful upon the first dawning of the use of reason; whereas there is no age which is not docile, and capable of some degree of correction by the senses, whereby the first seeds of the passions may be crushed⁴. That is why Augustine thinks it is abusive to call infancy a period of innocence. Augustine then began to remember things about himself : how he learnt to speak and entered into the stormy society of human life.

In keeping with the contemporary practice of delaying baptism until adulthood, Augustine did not receive baptism but, according to custom, was registered as a catechumen at birth marked with sign of the Cross, and was raised in the Christian faith by his mother.

Despite all the aberrations of his life until his conversion, he always perceived himself to be a Christian and in search of Christ, though not as a Catholic, and Monica, his mother, did not become discouraged in firmly leading and accompanying him to the Catholic church.

In spite of their limited financial means, it was his parents' ambition to provide their gifted son with the best possible education as an indispensable condition for any professional career, whether as a teacher, a lawyer, or a politician.

So Augustine began his primary education in his hometown Thagaste 361 A.D. to 366 A.D. He depicts himself as a rather ordinary sort of child, good at his lessons but not fond of school. The customarily enforced learning in the elementary school, was accompanied with corporal punishment, and that went against his grain. It also soured his Greek instruction that he was never fluent in the Greek language. He felt

⁴ *Conf.* I, 7.

enthusiastic for the studies in Latin literature, however, and excelled in this field. The first level of education in Augustine's time included instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic on the elementary level, and language and literary studies with a *grammaticus*.

During the years of his primary education in his own town, falling dangerously ill, Augustine desired baptism, and his mother got every thing ready for it; but he on a sudden grew better, and his baptism was deferred.

When Augustine finished elementary school in Thagaste at the age of 11, he was first sent to Madaurus, a small city located 19 miles south of Thagaste to attend a secondary school from 366 A.D. to 369 A.D. There the young Augustine dedicated himself to the study of dialectics and rhetoric, as well as the other *artes liberales* (arithmetic, music, geometry, astronomy, philosophy), with a *rheter*.

Upon finishing from Madaurus, he had to return to his village in the year 369 A.D. and spend a whole year there with enforced leisure because his parents first had to secure the financial means for the planned longer study visit to Carthage. During this time, Augustine's sexuality awakened, which his father observed with delight in the hope of grandchildren in due course. (He was not to experience the birth of his grandson Adeodatus, however.) It seems almost like an inevitable consequence that during this time of idleness and raging personal development, Augustine would join a group of like-minded young men perpetrating all kinds of pranks. So neglecting the good advice of his mother, Augustine fell into a bad company⁵. He gave himself up to pastimes and diversions, particularly to sporting and hunting for birds, which sometimes left him exhausted. In the meantime his passions grew uncontrollable, and his father took no care of his leading a good life provided that he excelled as an orator.⁶ His mother indeed secretly tried to convince him with great concern to keep himself free from vice; "*which,*" says St Augustine, "*seemed to me but the*

⁵ *Conf.* II, 3, 6

⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 3, 5.

admonitions of a woman, which I was ashamed to obey; whereas they were your admonitions, O God, and I knew it not. Through her you did speak to me, and I despised you in her".⁷

Eventually, it was thanks to the financial support and help of a certain wealthy fellow citizen named Romanianus that Augustine could continue his studies.

Arriving at Carthage, Augustine says that he was "*In love with loving*," not that he was in love with anything but that he was "*casting about for something to love*."⁸ His desire to experience strong emotions is fed by being a spectator at the theatrical shows featured in Carthage. He enjoyed being moved to tears by the theatrical tragedies.⁹

In Carthage Augustine became a master in the School of Rhetoric, with the goal of working in the law courts.¹⁰ He applied himself to his studies with much eagerness and pleasure. But his motives were pride in himself and ambition, and in his studies he was filled with pride and puffed up with his own self-importance. He associated with a group of friends who called themselves the "*wreckers*", who involved themselves in different kinds of activities such as bullying sensitive newcomers to the school.

II. 2. 1. 2. IN SEARCH OF THE "TRUE PHILOSOPHY": FATHER OF A FAMILY, MANICHAEAN AND TEACHER IN CARTHAGE.

During his studies in Carthage, Augustine not only completed his rhetorical education but also had three decisive encounters that were to set his life's pattern for years.

⁷ *Ibid.* II, 3, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 1, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 2, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 3, 6.

After a series of sexual adventures—apparently of a less serious kind—already in Tagaste and then in Carthage, he maintained an ongoing and committed quasi-marital union with a woman (whose name he never mentions), beginning no later than 372, the year his son Adeodatus was born. An official marriage with this woman was not desirable because of the class difference or for the sake of his career, for he left her only in Milan (after 384) precisely in order to enter into a *matrimonium* befitting his station and beneficial to his career.

At the age of nineteen, he read *Hortensius*, Cicero's dialogue, of which only the fragments cited in his *Confessiones* are extant. This kindled the "love for wisdom" (*philosophical*) in him and until his conversion became the basis of his persistent search for it, albeit taking him on many wrong tracks. By "philosophy" a person in antiquity never meant a theoretical construct of ideas alone but always also the correct knowledge of life and lifestyle (ethics), which had already enabled the apologists to proclaim Christianity attractively as the "true philosophy". On the basis of his upbringing, Augustine naturally linked his newly discovered "love for wisdom" with the question of Christ and therefore turned to reading the Bible, which indeed deeply disappointed him because of the barbaric stories of the OT and, compared with Cicero, especially because of its uncultured style.

In this situation he encountered Manichaeism, which apparently offered him everything he searched for: the name of Christ, rationality, and culture instead of mere faith in the authority of the church, rejection of the OT, and a plausible answer to the question *Unde malum?* which had tormented him for a long time. It was based on a materialistic concept of God and a dualistic concept of the world, according to which good and evil exist as two equally eternal antagonistic principles (realms) of light and darkness, whose battleground is the inner being of the human person, since he or she is composed of spirit and matter. For nine years Augustine adhered to this teaching at the lower level of the *auditores*, which did not demand of him the

extremely high standards of ethics and asceticism of the *electi*, although these probably substantially contributed to the great attraction of Manichaeism.

As a zealous Catholic, Monica was appalled by her son's acceptance of Manichaeism. She wanted nothing to do with a heretic, and so when Augustine returned to Tagaste in 374/375 to work there as a teacher, she barred him from entering the house at times. Only after having a dream about his son did she resumed contact with him for the sake of his salvation. In the *Confessiones*, Augustine himself recalls his mother's dream, which has become famous and clarifies her motivation:

*"She saw herself standing upon a certain wooden rule, and coming towards her a young man, splendid, joyful, and smiling upon her although she grieved and was crushed with grief. When he asked her the reasons for her sorrow and her daily tears,... she replied that she lamented for my perdition. Then he bade her rest secure and instructed her that she should attend and see that where she was, there was I also. And when she looked, there she saw me standing on the same rule."*¹¹

A little later an unidentified bishop consoled her with prophetic words that have become equally famous: *"It is impossible that the son of such tears should perish"*.¹²

Teacher in Carthage : Meanwhile Augustine found shelter and encouragement with Romanianus, one of the wealthy Manichaeans of Tagaste, who provided him with a recommendation when he returned to Carthage a year later, precipitated by the death of a close friend.

The following years of teaching in Carthage increasingly disappointed Augustine; his pupils were ill-mannered, and he inwardly distanced himself more and more from Manichaeism, which seemed to be so convincing initially, because its followers were unable to answer his critical questions on the inconsistencies of their system. They put him off until the arrival of their spiritual leader, Bishop Faustus. When he finally

¹¹ *Conf.* III, 11, 19.

¹² *Ibid.* III, 12, 21.

arrived, however—Augustine was twenty-nine years old—he proved to be nothing more than a smooth talker without substance who had no answers for Augustines questions. Nevertheless Augustine did not yet break with Manichaeism officially but had his friends recommend him to Rome, where he hoped for a better living and especially for more compliant pupils.

II. 2. 1 . 3. RHETOR IN ROME AND MILAN: SKEPTIC AND PLATONIST

Augustine's stay in Rome, where he arrived in 383, was brief. On the one hand, his pupils disappointed him here as well; although they were more disciplined, they enjoyed cheating their teachers out of their honorarium. On the other hand, there was an unusual opportunity already in the first year to make a major jump in his career. The imperial court in Milan had commissioned Symmachus, the prefect of the city of Rome, to find a *magister rhetoricae* for Milan, whose primary task it was to give public speeches in honor of the emperor and other important personalities and to provide instruction in rhetoric besides.

With the assistance of his Manichaean friends, Augustine was successful in securing the recommendation; and so in the fall of 384 he had already arrived in Milan to take up his new commission.

Milan was to be Augustine's final station on his way to conversion, even if he was not able to foresee this personally and a number of factors still had to accrue in the following two years to lead him ultimately to the culminating point in his development. Most important was Ambrose, the city's bishop.

Having inwardly turned away completely from Manichaeism in the meantime but still in search of wisdom, that is, of Christ, and as a catechumen of the Catholic Church, Augustine attended the bishop's worship services. As he often confessed later on, he did this not so much because he hoped finally to learn the cogent truth as because Ambrose warmly welcomed him at his arrival and Augustine wanted to test

whether he deserved his great reputation as an orator.¹³ Ambrose justified his reputation even more than Augustine expected, for with his sermons he not only gained the approval of the trained rhetor, but with his platonizing, spiritual interpretation of the OT he also won Augustine's heart by opening up for him for the first time an acceptable meaning for the Bible, against his earlier impression of barbarism in the OT and against the Manichaean critique of the OT. This led to the final break with Manichaeism, which Monica was delighted to learn about when she arrived in Milan in the spring of 385.

Skeptic: Although Augustine, "after the manner of the academics", now found himself in a state of fundamental methodological doubt toward all convictions, for Monica the turning away from error was already the first hopeful step toward the truth of the Church, and she immediately began actively to promote her son's further progress. To begin with, this called for a marriage befitting his station, not only for the sake of his professional career but especially in the hope that once he was securely in the haven of marriage, Augustine would also be able to decide to be baptized¹⁴. Therefore Monica arranged for Augustine's engagement to a young noble girl from Milan who was still two years younger than the legal age for marriage (twelve years). He had to break up with his longtime companion immediately, of course, which caused him considerable pain. She returned to Africa without their son, Adeodatus, who remained with his father.

Platonist: In early 386 Augustine's decision making and his inner conflict between longing for a life of wisdom, namely in asceticism, and his seemingly still undeniable need for sexual fulfillment intensified when he became acquainted with the writings of the Neoplatonists through a group of friends, probably in the translation of Marius Victorinus, the famous rhetor. After the latter was accorded the

¹³ *Conf.* V, 13, 23.

¹⁴ *Conf.* VI, 13, 23.

extraordinary honor of a statue in the Forum Romanum, he converted to Christianity in spectacular fashion ca. 355. It was his example that was presented to Augustine by the priest Simplicianus in Milan.¹⁵

Platonism for the first time convinced him of a purely spiritual concept of God as the one who is and who is good and solved the question of the origin of evil by viewing it as the absence of good and as devoid of substance.

What was still missing was Christ as the redeemer and not only as the wisest of all humans and the doctrinal authority. For this reason, Augustine again turned to the letters of Paul and discovered him as the teacher of grace in a Platonic synthesis: “*Whatever truths I had read in those other words I here found to be uttered along with the praise of your grace*”¹⁶. For the first time he now realized that he did not have to choose either reason *or* faith as alternatives but that faith *and* reason belonged together as a complementary unity. At a later point he captures their reciprocal function in the famous double formula *Intellege ut credas, crede ut intellegas*.¹⁷

The decisive crisis was finally brought about by the example of Anthony, the Egyptian monastic father, about whom he was told by his African friend Ponticianus. “What do you hear?” Augustine shouted to his friend Alypius, “The unlearned rise up and take heaven by storm, and we, with all our erudition but empty of heart, see how we wallow in flesh and blood!”¹⁸, and hurried out into the garden. This is where the now world-famous conversion scene took place. While Augustine paced back and forth distraught, he heard the voice of a child from a neighboring house saying, *Tolle, lege, tolle, lege* (“Take up and read”), and since he was not able to remember a children's game using these words, he understood it as a sign from God, as Anthony

¹⁵ *Conf.* VIII, 2, 3-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, VII, 21, 27

¹⁷ *S.* 43, 9

¹⁸ *Conf.* VIII, 8, 19

had formerly, to open up the Bible. He opened to the letters of Paul at *Rom.* 13:13-14., “*not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature*”. “*Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away*”.¹⁹ The historicity of this conversion scene has been the subject of much debate; all the same, this event likely occurred ca. August 1, 386.²⁰

II. 2. 2. FROM BAPTISM TO ORDINATION

II. 2. 2. 1. *CHRISTIANAE VITAE OTIUM* IN CASSICIACUM AND THE CATECHUMENATE

As for Basil, Jerome, and many other contemporaries, Augustine’s decision for Christianity meant accepting an ascetic life. At the beginning of the harvest holiday (August 23 to October 15), he withdrew, together with his mother, his son, and several other relatives and friends, to the nearby country estate of Cassiciacum, belonging to his friend Verecundus (possibly modern Cassago di Brianza, nineteen miles north of Milan, at the foot of the Alps). Already before his conversion Augustine had planned for such a tranquil life of cultivated *otium*²¹, but now it became *christianae vitae otium* (cf. *Retract.* 1.1.1), shaped by prayer, conversations, Bible reading, and literary activity. The conversations gave rise to literary dialogues of a Platonic kind about the issues of concern to Augustine and his companions: *Contra Academicos*, against scepticism; *De vita beata*, *based on the knowledge of God*; *De ordine*, on the question of evil in the divine providence; and the *Soliloquia*, on the search for God and the immortality of the soul.

¹⁹ *Conf.* VIII, 12, 29.

²⁰ Otherwise Bonner, “Augustinus (vita),” 532: at the end of August 386.

²¹ Cf. *Conf.* VI, 14, 24.

At the end of the holiday, he resigned from his office as rhetor and in early 387 returned to Milan in order to be registered as a candidate for baptism at Easter 387, together with Adeodatus, his son, and Alypius, his friend. During the period of his catechumenate, he produced further writings, among them a comprehensively laid out cycle of textbooks on all seven *artes liberales*, though he only completed *De grammatica* (now lost) and *De musica*. On Easter eve, April 24th 387, Augustine, together with his son and his friend, was baptized by Bishop Ambrose in the cathedral of Milan, in the presence of his overjoyed mother. The story of the baptism in the Confessions is one of the most laconic: “*And we were baptized, and solicitude about our past life left us.*” Such an experience is not narrated, it is lived! But we read further on: “*I could not get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled me as I meditated upon your deep design for the salvation of the human race.*”

II. 2. 2. 2. RETURN TO AFRICA AND MONASTIC COMMUNITY IN TAGASTE

Not long after his baptism, Augustine, together with his mother, made preparations to return to their homeland in order to establish a monastic community of Christian *otium* on the parental estates in Thagaste, as did Basil the Great in Annesi.. So in autumn 387 A.D., they left Milan and were going back to Africa together with his brother, his Son, his Mother and some friends. They remained at Ostia, where they waited for a ship for their journey while the harbours of Rome were blocked by an on-going civil war due to invasion of Italy by the usurper Magnus Maximus. It was there that Augustine and Monica, leaning on a windowsill, experienced a moment of mystic blessedness together which has been called the “*ecstasy*” or “*contemplation*” of Ostia. Five days later, Monica was down with a fever. Augustine and his brother, Navigius, were at her bedside; the latter thought it was a good idea to say that he hoped their mother would end her days in their country and not in a foreign land. Monica reprimanded him saying: “*Lay this body anywhere, and take no trouble over it. One thing only do I ask of you, that you*

*remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be*²²”. Monica died on the ninth day of her illness at the age of fifty-six, before 13th November 387, having spent her final days in spiritual conversation with her son.

Since the voyage to Africa was delayed because of the weather and the war, Augustine remained in Rome during the winter and worked on the literary refutation of the Manichaeans. It is there that he started writing his *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*, the first work in which Augustine made more use of the Bible. Together with his companions, he finally arrived in Africa in the summer or fall of 388.

Augustine landed at Carthage about September in 388, and there lodged for some time in the house of a virtuous lawyer, named Innocent, and was witness to his miraculous healing of a dangerous fistula, while the best surgeons of Carthage and Alexandria were preparing to perform a dangerous surgery; a sinus which was deeper than the rest of the sore having escaped several operations which he had already undergone. The patient prayed with many tears that God would mercifully preserve him from this danger, and Saturninus, bishop of Uzalis, Aurelius, who was afterward bishop of Carthage, and several other pious clergymen who often visited him during his illness, and were then present, falling on their knees, joined him in his devout prayer. St. Augustine was one of the company, and relates how, the physicians coming the next day, he who was to perform the operation took off the bandages, and to the astonishment of all who had seen the wound before, found it entirely healed, and covered with a very firm scar²³. He spent short period in Carthage before leaving for Tagaste.

²² *Confessions* IX, 27.

²³ Cf. Aug., *civ.* XXII, 8, 3.

He carried out his plan to establish a monastic community on the parental estates in Tagaste, for which he made all of his possession available, and for three years lived with his companions in a spiritually and literarily most fruitful *otium christianum*.

Possidius tells us in his *Life of Saint Augustine* that “*He renounced his possessions and along with others who joined him lived for God in fasting, prayers and good works. And the truth that God revealed to his mind in meditation and prayer, he shared with others, present and absent, teaching them in his sermons and his books*”.²⁴

Together they lived a style of life centered on prayer, study and work. Augustine's tranquil life of prayer and study in community was soon shattered by the death of his gifted son, Adeodatus, at age seventeen, and of another dear friend, Nebridius.

In that community, members strive to live in harmony - in a quest for union of mind and heart, to mutual concern for and assistance to each other in every way possible, including fraternal correction, in a spirit of love and understanding. Members look upon their work as an expression of one's human nature, not as a burden, but in cooperation with the Creator in shaping the world and serving humankind. For that reason Augustine did not resist otherwise when he was chosen to become a priest. He had a heart always ready to serve. Augustinian spirituality follows exactly that line.

II. 2. 2. 3. ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD IN HIPPO

As Augustine told his church as an experienced bishop in *Serm.* 355 (425/426), it did not take long for the community to be disturbed by the appointment of members of their resident Christian intellectual elite as bishops, especially when they traveled to cities whose episcopal see was vacant. For this reason, Augustine avoided as much as possible entering a town where there was no bishop.

²⁴ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, 3, 1-2.

In January 391, however, he went to Hippo Regius to establish another monastic community; here he felt comfortable because Bishop Valerius was in office. During the worship service, the bishop presented his desire to secure a priest for the gathered community, which decided on Augustine by acclamation. Possidius, his biographer, reports that Augustine burst into tears over the great dangers of the episcopate but that the people misunderstood this and sought to console him, saying that as a priest he would also become a bishop.²⁵ Nevertheless Augustine petitioned Valerius for the opportunity to undertake his initial plan, to which the latter responded by donating a garden to him near the cathedral, where he established his monastery, lived in it himself, and there originally may also have written his monastic rule for it.

The primary reason for Augustine's ordination to the priesthood, according to Possidius, was Bishop Valerius's insecurity about preaching in Latin, given his upbringing in the context of a Greek family.²⁶ Although preaching traditionally was exclusively a bishop's prerogative and Augustine's appointment to this function initially triggered criticism, other North African bishops soon emulated Valerius's example. But since Augustine felt that he was not yet sufficiently prepared for this, he asked for a brief interlude in order to study Scripture, a request Valerius granted. He delivered his first sermon to the catechumens of Hippo on March 15, 391; hence the ordination to the priesthood, the date of which we do not know, must have taken place in late 390 or early 391.

²⁵ Cf. Possidius, *Vita* 4, 2-3.

²⁶ Possidius *Vita*, 5, 3-5

II. 2. 3. MINISTRY : PRIEST AND BISHOP OF HIPPO

In order to do full justice to the person and the almost forty years of effectiveness of Augustine as priest and bishop of Hippo (his consecration as bishop occurred between May 395 and August 397, initially as coadjutor of Valerius), we must constantly have him in view as a zealous pastor, an influential ecclesiastical politician, an outstanding theologian, and a spiritual individual at the same time.

II. 2. 3. 1. PASTOR

Augustine was a priest for five years before becoming a bishop. This was a formative time for him. As a priest, Augustine devoted himself to the study of Scripture in a different way than before, and even successfully sought a study leave from Bishop Valerius of Hippo in order to do so. He wrote : *“I ought to carefully consider God's medication in the Scriptures. I can do this by prayer and reading, in order that strength sufficient for such dangerous obligations (as priesthood) may be granted to me”*²⁷. Studying the Gospel, praying them, and translating them into deeds: this was the preparation that Augustine saw himself as needing. So he prepared himself for the years ahead. There would be struggles with heretics and a huge amount of writing that he would undertake. During this period he wrote the first of his treatises against the Manicheans. The dialogues that Augustine wrote at Cassiciacum the year following his conversion and preceding his baptism show few substantial signs of a theological understanding that was decisively or distinctively Christian. But by the time of his ordination to the priesthood the basic lines of a comprehensive and orthodox theology within him were firmly laid out.

He began this ministry not later than the Easter of 391 A.D., when he preached to the candidates for baptism in Hippo. Valerius had insisted that he preached, in spite of the custom in Africa of reserving that ministry to bishops. While he was a priest Augustine combated heresy, especially Manichaeism, which in earlier years he

²⁷ Letter 21, 3

himself had followed. Partly because of this past experience with it, his success against Manichaeism was notable.

Fortunatus, one of their scholars and a Manichean priest at Hippo, whom Augustine debated in a public conference in the year 392, was so humiliated by his defeat that he fled from Hippo.

Other details of this period are that Augustine appealed to Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage, to suppress the custom of holding banquets and entertainments in the churches. By the year 395 A.D. Augustine had succeeded, through his courageous words, in abolishing this custom in Hippo²⁸. As well, his treatise *De fide et symboli* (“About Faith and symbols”) was prepared to be read before the bishops of the region assembled at the Council held at Hippo on 8th October 393. After that he travelled to Carthage, which was to become the most frequent destination of all of his subsequent journeys. Augustine remained there for a while, perhaps in connection with the synod held there in 394 A.D.

All of Augustine’s actions, including his writings, controversies, and theology, were in the service of pastoral care. None of his works originated as a theoretical construct of an armchair scholar; rather, all of them were written in view of the relevant practical and pastoral needs of his diocese and of his time, frequently in response to concrete questions from far away. This is particularly true of his extensive collections of sermons and letters. Almost six hundred sermons are extant; these were usually taken down in shorthand and then collected in Augustine’s own library. Even so this represents only a fraction of the roughly three or four thousand sermons actually delivered during his almost forty years of service, relative to every part of the church calendar, the commemoration of saints, Scripture, Christian doctrine, and correct Christian behavior. As recently as 1990, Francis Dolbeau identified twenty-six sermons in the city library in Mainz, which until then had been forgotten in part or in

²⁸ Cf. L. S. Le Nain de Tillemont, *The life of Augustine: Childhood to Episcopal Consecration (354-395)*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York 2010, 225.

whole but which the *indiculus* of Possidius proved to be authentic. In his corpus of sermons, Augustine shows that he was a brilliant speaker, skilled in stirring and gripping formulation, as well as a very empathetic and lucid teacher.

Augustine used to start his day with the celebration of the Eucharist²⁹. Faithful to his initial project of living in community, he gathered around himself clerics who composed his household and community. Monks, nuns and fervent lay people surrounded him for the celebration of the sacred Mysteries. During weekday celebrations, he used to preach only on Saturdays³⁰.

Augustine did not only preach against the vices of his time. He also carried out concrete actions to give meaning to his words.

Many poor people went daily to beg from the Bishop conscious of the fact that he would never turn them away. In fact, there were different categories of poor at Hippo: seasonal jobless young men, abandoned widows, professional beggars, and so on³¹. It was the Church's custom to provide help to every person whoever he or she might be, a prostitute or a fighter in the arena, on account of their human nature. Augustine says: "*How many people there are nowadays, who are not yet Christians, who run to the church and ask for assistance. They want temporal help.*" From *The Life of Augustine* by Possidius, we know that the Bishop of Hippo "*never forgot his companions in poverty*³²". Possidius says:

When the funds of the Church gave out, Augustine announced this to his flock, telling them he had nothing to bestow upon the needy. It even happened that he ordered that the sacred vessels to be broken and melted down and the proceeds distributed for the benefit captives and of as many of poor people as possible. I would not have mentioned this, if I had not seen that it was done against the all

²⁹ *On the Gift of Perseverance* 4, 7

³⁰ Cf. *Sermon* 128, 6.

³¹ Cf. A. G. Hamman, *op. Cit.*, 278.

³² Possidius, *Vita* 23; *Sermon* 64, 1, 2; *Letter* 185, 35.

*too human greed of some. Ambrose of revered memory said and wrote that this was a thing that ought to be done in such extreme circumstances*³³.

He admired Augustine as a man of powerful intellect and a stirring orator who took every opportunity to defend the Catholic faith against all detractors. Possidius also described Augustine's personal traits in detail, drawing a portrait of a man who ate sparingly, worked tirelessly, despised gossip, shunned the temptations of the flesh, and exercised prudence in the financial stewardship of his diocese.³⁴

Augustine never worried about material things to the extent that even sometimes, he deliberately refused gifts from rich people. When a powerful ship-owner wanted to give his ship to Augustine, he answered:

*It is not the task of a bishop to save up gold and push away the hand of the beggar. How many poor people come daily to me for money, pouring their troubles to me and making appeal to me? It pains me that I must sometimes disappoint their expectations because I do not have enough to give to all of them.*³⁵

II. 2. 3. 2. ECCLESIASTICAL POLITICIAN

The Bishop was also the intermediary between his people and the civil authority. And in that capacity, he would receive hundreds of people who wanted him to help them obtain some favour from the mighty ones. We also learnt from Possidius that he

³³ *Possidius, Vita* 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Sermon* 355, 4, 5.

interceded by letter with a Vicar of Africa, Macedonius by name, on behalf of a suppliant. Macedonius granted the request and sent him an answer on this wise:

I am struck with wonder at your wisdom, both in the books you have published and in this letter which you have not found it too great a burden to send me by way of intercession for those in distress. For the former writings, my venerable lord and esteemed father, possess a discernment, wisdom and holiness which leave nothing to be desired, and the latter such modesty, that unless I do as you request, I could not regard myself as remaining free from blame in the matter. You do not insist, like most men in your position, on extorting all that the suppliant asks. But what seemed to you fair to ask of a judge occupied with many cares, this you advise with a humble modesty which is most efficacious in settling difficulties among good men. Consequently I have not hesitated to grant your request as you recommended and as I had given you reason to expect³⁶.

As a bishop he fulfilled the role of a magistrate himself, and had to dispense justice in the public court.³⁷ He responded to concrete problems faced by magistrates and judges. Again and again Augustine shows that moral reasoning must be transformed by the deeper wisdom offered by Christ and the Bible. On the question of activity of St. Augustine as a judge, and the person of the Bishop in general in his relationship with the imperial administration, there are many works carried out by distinguished researchers and specialists in the field.³⁸

³⁶ Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine* 20, 3-5.

³⁷ Cf. K. Chabi, OSA, *Augustine on Justice: Theory and Praxis*, in B. Chidili, K. I. Anthony (eds), *Augustine through the ages : passionate reflections of his african spiritual sons at their 75*, Augustinian Publications, Jos – Nigeria 2014, 362-382.

³⁸ Prominent among them are the works R. Dodaro, O.S.A., *Church and State*, in A. Fitzgerald, O.S.A.(ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, 176-184 ; the one of the Anglican prelate and celebrated patrologist H. Chadwick, *The Role of the Christian Bishop in Ancient Society*, in *Protocol, Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies*, Berkeley 1979 ; A. Cunningham's *The Bishop in the Church: Patristic Textes on the Role of the Episkopos*, Wilmington, Glazier 1985, G. Vismara's *La giurisdizione civile dei vescovi (secoli I-IX)* Milan, Dott. A. Giuffrè, 1995, to name but a few.

Let's also consider Augustine's requests for new laws or his criticism of the extant legislation. In 401 A.D., the bishops of North Africa requested the reintroduction of the institution of "*defenders in view of the distress of the poor*." Their request must have remained unanswered, for we see Augustine, in 420 A.D., asking the mediation of bishops Alypius and Peregrinus who were in Italy then to obtain such a defender for the city of Hippo. He says that he feels himself powerless to defend the poor.³⁹

Recently a document called Augustine's *Letter 22* was discovered several centuries after its writing. This epistolary correspondence provides us with much information on social justice and clearly shows the powerlessness of the weak toward the juridical and administrative machine. Roman justice was always a class-justice, favouring the elite.⁴⁰ And it was in this context that Augustine found himself as the shepherd of the Church of Hippo.

In his epistolary correspondences, we discover many issues Augustine tackled in his ministry, which constitute important information we wouldn't have got otherwise. On the question of Justice the Bishop of Hippo explicitly took on the rhetoric of what in particular was required from a Christian judge⁴¹.

There is a fitting passage on the difference Augustine drew between a Christian and a non-Christian judge⁴²: The Christian proconsul Apringius was in charge of trials against some Donatist people who had murdered and beaten Catholic priests. This was at the end of the year 411, shortly after the conference of Carthage. Again the issue of religious peace had been settled in favour of Augustine's Catholic party. The imperial commissioner, who had presided over the conference, was Marcellinus,

³⁹ Cf. T. J. Van Bavel, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Cf. E. M. Kuhn, *Justice Applied by the Episcopal Arbitrator: Augustine and the Implementation of Divine Justice*, 82.

⁴² Aug., *Ep.* 134 to Apringius (CSEL 44, 84-88)

brother of Apringius and Augustine's new friend⁴³. Marcellinus was actively engaged with the enactment of the laws against the Donatists. Upon his verdict the emperor had proscribed Donatism. The clergy was to be separated and exiled, fines had to be paid and Donatists' property has to be handed over to the Catholics⁴⁴. The offences of murder and the injuries were usually under the jurisdiction of the proconsul, but in the person of Marcellinus a special imperial commissioner in charge was still in Africa. Thus Augustine was not sure who would take the chair in the trial and wrote them both⁴⁵. He was concerned about court procedure and wanted to advise on the verdict.

Augustine's correspondances with Nectarius also reveal his relevance as an ecclesia politician. Nectarius in effect sought his intervention and intercession for the city of Calama whose citizens were to receive a punishment from the imperial authority for a crime they committed against the Christians of the city. His *Letters* 103-104.

II. 2. 3. 3. THEOLOGIAN, AND ASCETIC

It will be helpful to divide his long period of time according to the doctrinal battles that Augustine had to wage: against the Manichean dualism of 387-400 A.D.; against the Donatist schism, 400 to 412 A.D. (actually right from the beginning of his priesthood until 420); against Paganism, from 412 to 426 A.D. (the years during which he wrote *The City of God*) and against Pelagianism, 412 to 430 A.D.

But this distribution has the serious disadvantage of inducing an image of Augustine fighter of heretics, constantly struggling against the many religious aberrations of his time.

⁴³ On Augustine's politically marginal role in African and Roman politics until 412 see McLynn, *Augustine's Roman Empire*; the new friendship (ibid. 46ff.) "offered Augustine access to the empire at a new level and gave him, at last, a platform from which to address Marcellinus' peers", and thus the dedication of his City of God to his dearest son was "not incidental".

⁴⁴ Cf. *Cod. Theod.* 16, 5, 52. For more detail see W.H. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1952, 289ff.

⁴⁵ Cf. Aug., *Ep.* 139 (to Marcellinus, CSEL 44, 148-154); 133 (to Marcellinus, CSEL 44, 80-84), 134 (to Apringius, CSEL 44, 84-88).

His polemical works there is much that he sharply intensifies to the point of a misleading one-sidedness so as to heighten their persuasiveness, in his sermons and catechetical writings the presentation is very balanced. Therefore, in order to obtain an accurate picture of Augustine's theology, it is never appropriate to ascertain it from his polemical works alone; they should always be augmented by the pastoral writings.

Even when Augustine disputed with opponents, he first of all sought to win them and only then to vanquish them, because of his concern that no one go astray. The four major controversies he fought not only provide the best organization of his almost forty years of pastoral care, they also contributed substantially to the development of his theology.

II. 2. 4. END OF LIFE AND HERITAGE

The last years of the Bishop of Hippo were difficult and painful. On September 26th 426 A.D., he had chosen his successor, giving him care of the administration⁴⁶. On this occasion, he said:

In this present life all of us will die, but the last day of life is always uncertain for the individual. Nevertheless in childhood we hope to reach adolescence, and then in succession young manhood, adulthood, maturity, and finally old age. We are not sure we will reach these successive stages, but we hope we will. Old age, however, there is no further period to hope for: even the duration of old age is uncertain. The only thing certain is that there will be no further period of life. By God's will I came to this city, as a vigorous grown man, but now I am old⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Cf. Trapè, A., *op. cit.*, p. 252.

⁴⁷ *Ep.*, 213, 1

After entrusting the administration of the diocese to Eraclius, Augustine lived another four years during which he completed his Masterpiece *City of God* and many other writings.

Shortly before Augustine's death, Roman Africa was overrun by the Vandals, a warlike East Germanic tribe who also sacked and looted Rome. These Vandals were a brutal nation, both by birth and disposition. Regarding religion, they were heretical Arian Christians, who hated Roman Catholic Christians. They had entered Africa at the instigation of Count Boniface, but soon turned to lawlessness, plundering private citizens and churches and killing many of the inhabitants. A force of as many as 80,000 Vandal men attacked the fertile coastline of North Africa. They were savage and cruel, and imposed destruction and captivity wherever they went. Local inhabitants fled ahead of their arrival. They became refugees in other towns, in caves and in remote mountainous places. The Vandals even destroyed the fruit trees which might have afforded some food to the local people.

In May or June of 430, they surrounded Hippo and set siege to it. According to the testimony of Possidius “*In the third month of the siege, Augustine took to bed with a fever, it was his final illness.*”⁴⁸ Augustine used that period for prayer. He had Penitential Psalms written on large sheets and had them displayed on the wall opposite his bed. He read them as he lay down, and reading them, “*he wept continuous, passionate tears*”⁴⁹. He had often recited these psalms with the people and had commented on them at great length so that they might form and feed Christian devotion. And now that he was alone in the presence of death, he found them to be still an expression of his sentiments.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Possidius, *Vita* 29, 3.

⁴⁹ Possidius, *Vita* 31,2.

⁵⁰ Trapè, A., *op. cit.*, p. 328

The more ill Augustine became, the more he felt the need to be alone in order to prepare himself by prayer for the face to face meeting with God to which he had looked forward day and night.

In order that he might remain recollected, he asked us about ten days before his death, not to admit anyone to his room outside the hours when doctors came to see him or when his meals were brought to him. We carried out his wishes to the letter, and during all that time he gave himself to prayer⁵¹.

On 28th August 430 A.D., after ten days of fever at the great age of seventy six years, Augustine calmly resigned his spirit to God. “*We took part in the sacrifice offered to God at his funeral and then he was buried⁵²*”, said Possidius. Presumably he was buried in the Basilica of Peace; from here, at a date uncertain, the remains were transferred to Sardinia, and then, about 725 A.D., to the basilica of St. Peter in Ciel d'Oro in Pavia, where they now rest.

The dying Augustine “*made no will, because this poor of God had nothing to bequeath⁵³*”. But he left the church three great treasures: his books, his clergy and his monasteries. The first of them was an immense treasure, which the thieves could not seize nor the Vandals destroy.

He left the Church a numerous clergy, as well as monasteries full of men and women, vowed to continence and living under obedience to superiors. He also left a library books and sermons, both of his own and those of other saints. From these we can gauge the merits that were his by the grace of God, and the great place he has in the Church. In them, too, the faithful have him ever alive before them⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Possidius, *Vita* 31, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.* 31,5.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 31,6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 31, 8.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to notice in the progression of the story narrated above how each stage of the life of St. Augustine has contributed to his human and spiritual growth. He started off with many difficulties related to sin and disobedience to God. But in his errors his heart sought something for which his entire being longed: Truth. Through the prayers of his mother St. Monica and by the special grace of God in his life, he was converted and became an instrument in the hands of God at the service of the Holy Catholic Church.

Agostino Trape, one of the outstanding twentieth-century experts on Augustine, summarizes the variety of Augustine's industriousness as follows⁵⁵:

- (1) for the church in Hippo: sermons, at least Saturday and Sunday, frequently also several days in succession and twice a day; audiences with clergy and people, as well as to decide in legal cases and complaints, which often lasted an entire day; caring for the poor and orphans, training clergy, organizing monasteries for men and women, managing church property, visiting the sick, intervening with governmental authorities on behalf of members of the church;
- (2) for the church in Africa: frequent journeys to participate in annual synods, to visit fellow brothers and attend ecclesiastical functions;
- (3) for the worldwide church: dogmatic controversies, responses to many inquiries, books upon books on the most diverse questions addressed to him.

More than anything else, the corpus of letters, containing 299 entries, reflects the variety of Augustine's pastoral, social, political, and personal effectiveness extending over more than forty years (from 386 to his death in 430). As recently as 1981, Johannes Divjak published 29 newly discovered letters, which have been submitted to extensive scrutiny since then.

⁵⁵J. Quasten, *Patrology* (4 vols.; Westminster, Md.; Christian Classics, 1984-1988), 3:33ff.; *EECh* 1:98.

But shall we say at this point that St. Augustine was an infallible doctor or a perfect theologian or that all his positions on various issues are spotless and met no oppositions? No, Augustine knew he had imperfections and was his own first critique. He recognised the possibility of errors in his writings. Indeed, he clearly asserted this truth when he wrote:

“I do not wish that someone accept all my views in such a way as to follow me blindly, except in those points in which the reader has come to the conviction that I was not mistaken. For not even I myself have followed myself on all points. With God's mercy, I have written books constantly making progress. But I did not start off in perfection, and to claim that I now, in my old age, write perfectly and without error would be rather a sign of conceit than of veracity”⁵⁶.

The humility of Augustine in this statement makes it clear to us that he really commands respect even where he errs inasmuch as he does not have the pretention of having the monopole of the truth.

It is important to say that Augustine like every human being undoubtedly had his limits. These can be seen, for example, in his learning, for though he had this in an uncommon degree, he did not move freely in the world of Greek literature; in his polemical ardour, which did not always permit him to polish his language; in the different ways in which he moved in the world of ideas, on the one hand, and in the world of facts, on the other; in the relentless power of his dialectic, which tended to shed light on one truth at the seeming cost of forgetting another. Surely these limits were due to the personality of the man, who knew the torments of conversion and had the radical outlook of the convert, to his philosophical and theological formation, and, perhaps most of all, to the times in which it was his destiny to live.⁵⁷ As Robert

⁵⁶ *On the Gift of Perseverance* 21, 55.

⁵⁷ Trapè, A., *op. cit.*, p. 296.

Dodaro, OSA points out, all the rough spots of his theology – predestination, religious coercion, unbaptized infants, just war, and other areas where his views seem to fall out of favour in modern thinking – occur mainly because the Word of God on which all his reflections are based is jarring and enigmatic as it is lucid and alluring.⁵⁸ It must be said above all that despite all the limitations we could find in this holy man of God, much more light comes from him than shade.

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⁵⁸ Cf. Robert Dodaro, OSA, "Sacramentum Caritatis: Foundation of Augustine's Spirituality," in John E. Rotelle, OSA, (ed.), *Augustinian Spirituality and the Charism of the Augustinians*, Augustinian Press, Villanova 1995, 49.

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