

RESOURCE SHEET 62A

Saint Augustine

Bishop of Hippo, Doctor of the Church

Born: November 13, 354 at Tagaste, Numidia, North Africa

Died: August 28, 430 at Hippo (Feast Day)

Introduction

"And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long? Is it to be tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour put an end to shame?"

These words of repentance marked the beginning of Augustine's new life. A few years after he came in contact with God, he said, "Our hearts, O Lord, were made for you, and they are restless until the rest in you."

Saint Augustine is one of the greatest Fathers of the Church. He was an original thinker who became recognized as a remarkable leader of Christian faith. One of the guiding forces in Saint Augustine's life was his Christian mother, Saint Monica.

His Childhood and Youth

Saint Augustine, who used commonly to be called Austin in English, was born on November 13, 354 at Tagaste, a small town of Numidia in north Africa, not far from Hippo. His father, Patricius, was a pagan and of a violent disposition; but through the example and prudent conduct of his wife, Saint Monica, he was baptized a little before his death.

As a child, Saint Monica instructed him in the Christian religion and taught him how to pray; falling dangerously ill, he desired baptism and his mother got everything ready for it: but he suddenly grew better, and it was put off.

His father wanted him to become a man of learning and cared very little about his character. In his writings, Augustine accuses himself of often studying by constraint, disobeying his parents and masters, not writing, reading, or minding his lessons so much as was required of him; and this he did not for lack of wit or memory, but out of love of play. But he prayed to God with great earnestness that he might escape punishment at school. He later on did so well with his studies that he went to Carthage in 370 when he was still 17. He studied rhetoric with eagerness and pleasure; but his motives were vanity and ambition, and to them he joined loose living.

Years away from Christ

At Carthage, he entered into relations with a woman (to whom he remained faithful until he sent her away from him 15 years later). She bore him a son, Adeodatus, in 372. His father had died in 371, but he continued at Carthage and switched to philosophy and the search for the truth. He also studied the Scriptures but from a subjective attitude. He was offended with the simplicity of style, and could not relish their humility or penetrate their spirit. Then he fell into Manichaeism - a combination of pagan religions and philosophy. The darkening of the understanding and clumsiness in the use of the faculties helped to betray him into his company; and pride did the rest. "I sought with pride", he says, "what only humility could make me find. Fool that I was, I left the nest, imagining myself able to fly; and I fell to the ground."

For nine years he had his own schools of rhetoric and grammar in Tagaste and Carthage, while his devoted mother, Saint Monica, spurred on by the assurance of a holy bishop that "the son of so many tears could not perish", never ceased by prayer and gentle persuasion to try to bring him to conversion and reform.

In 383 he departed to Rome, secretly, lest his mother should prevent him from going to the big city. He opened a school of rhetoric, and then was appointed by the government as a teacher in Milan, where his mother, and his friend Alipius joined him. Saint Monica's only ambition was to convert her son to Christianity.

His Repentance

In Milan, Saint Augustine came under the influence of Saint Ambrose the bishop; he began to go to his sermons, not so much with an expectation of profiting by them as to gratify his curiosity and to enjoy the eloquence. He found that the discourses more learned than the heresies he adopted and began to read the New Testament especially Saint Paul's writings. In the same time, the mother of Adeodatus his son left back to Africa leaving the child behind.

Saint Augustine's spiritual, moral and intellectual struggle went on; he was convinced of the truth of Christianity, but his will was weaker than the worldly temptations, and delayed his return to Christ for many months. "Soon, in a little while, I shall make up my mind, but not right now" he kept telling himself. In his half desires of conversion he was accustomed to beg of God the grace of chastity, but was at the same time in some measure afraid of being heard too soon. He realized that his problem was a moral one. The Divine truth for which he was seeking would never be his unless he first overcame his weakness.

Soon after, Pontitian, an African, came to visit Saint Augustine and his friend Alipius; he told them about two men who had been suddenly turned to the service of God by reading about the life of Saint Anthony. His words had a powerful influence on the mind of Saint Augustine. He was ashamed his will has been so weak and said to Alipius:

"What are we doing to let the unlearned seize Heaven by force, whilst we with all our knowledge remain behind, cowardly and heartless, wallowing in our sins? Because they have outstripped us and gone before, are we ashamed to follow them? Is it not more shameful not even to follow them?"

He rushed to the garden, greatly upset; tears filling his eyes, he threw himself on the grass under a fig tree and reproached himself bitterly crying out:

"And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long? Is it to be tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour put an end to shame?"

As he spoke these words he heard a child's voice singing "Tolle lege! Tolle lege!" (Take up and read! Take up and read!). He could not remember any childhood game he played with any such words. He remembered that Saint Anthony was converted from the world by hearing a single verse. He took up Saint Paul's epistles and read the first chapter that met his eyes: "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 not provision for the flesh, fulfil the lusts thereof." (Romans 13:13-14)

When he told Alipius what he had experienced, Alipius took the book and read, he found the next words to be: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye" and applied them to himself and joined his friend in his resolution.

This high point in the conversion of Saint Augustine took place in the September of 386, when he was 32 years old. He, his son Adeodatus and Alipius were baptized by Saint Ambrose at Easter the following year

in the presence of saint Monica. She knew that her prayers were answered and died shortly after. Saint Augustine prayed:

"Too late, have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved Thee! Thou wast with me, and I was not with Thee; I was abroad, running after those beauties which Thou hast made; those things which could have no being but in Thee kept me away from Thee. Thou hast called, Thou hast cried out, and hast pierced my deafness. Thou hast enlightened, Thou hast shone forth, and my blindness is dispelled. I have tasted Thee, and am hungry of Thee. Thou hast touched me, and I am afire with the desire of thy embraces."

A Priest and then a Bishop

From that time, Saint Augustine went back to Tagaste, his native city, and lived for three years with his friends and shared a life of prayer, study and poverty. All things were in common and were distributed according to everyone's needs. He had no idea of becoming a priest, but in 391 he was ordained as an assistant to Valerius, Bishop of Hippo, and he had to move to that city.

He established a sort of monastery in his house, living with Saint Alipius, Saint Evodius, Saint Possidius and others according to the rule of the holy Apostles. Valerius who had an impediment in speaking appointed Saint Augustine to preach in his own presence and he has not interrupted the course of his sermons until his death (nearly 400 sermons). He vigorously opposed the Manicheans and the Donatists.

In 395 he was consecrated bishop as co-adjutor to Valerius, and succeeded him in the see of Hippo on his death soon after. He established regular and common life in his episcopal residence, and required all the priests, deacons, and subdeacons to renounce property following the regular mode of life recognized by the early Church as instituted by the Apostles.

He founded a community of religious women and on the death of his sister, the first "abbess", he addressed a letter on the general ascetic principles of the religious life; this letter is known as the "Rule of Saint Augustine".

He employed the revenues of his church in relieving the poor and in redeeming the captives. Like another Moses or Saint Paul, he said to his people: "I do not want to be saved without you. What shall I desire? What shall I say? Why am I a bishop? Why am I in the world? Only to live in Jesus Christ: but to live in Him with you. This is my passion, my honor, my glory, my joy and my riches."

There is a good example of Saint Augustine's modesty and humility in his discussion with Saint Jerome over the interpretation of a text of Galatians. Owing to the miscarriage of a letter Saint Jerome, not an easily patient man, deemed himself publicly attacked. Saint Augustine wrote to him: "I entreat you again and again to correct me confidently when you perceive me to stand in need of it; for though the office of a bishop be greater than that of a priest, yet in many things Augustine is inferior to Jerome."

Through his 35 years as a bishop of Hippo, Saint Augustine had to defend the faith against one heresy or another. He opposed the Donatists, the Pelagians, and the Alarians. In order to finish his valuable writings, and to provide against a troublesome election after his death, he proposed to his clergy and people to choose for his co-adjutor Heraclius, the youngest among his deacons, and his election was confirmed by acclamation in 426.

Saint Augustine calmly resigned his spirit into the hands of God on August 28, 430, after having lived 76 years and spent almost 40 of them in the labors of the ministry. Among his greatest work is the 15 volume "On the City of God" which took him 30 years to write, and his "Confessions".

May the prayers and supplications of the great Saint Augustine be with us. Amen.

Source: <http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/synexarion/augustine.html>