

The Feast Day of St. Augustine

August 28, 2019

Today the Church celebrates the life of St. Augustine who was born in Tagaste, modern Algeria in 354. His mother, Monica, whose memorial we marked yesterday was devoted to Jesus and the Church. As a child she instilled in her son the teachings of the Catholic Faith. However as he entered his teen years Augustine's soul was like the seed sown amongst thorns in Jesus' Parable of the Sower. As a late adolescent the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, entered in and choked the word, and so it proved unfruitful.¹

In his 19th year though something changed when he picked up a book called the Hortensius, written by the great Roman orator Cicero. In it, the author includes an appeal to abandon the superficial quest of money and pleasure and instead pursue wisdom. Augustine, jolted into recognizing the vanity of his career ambitions, abandoned his worldly plans and dedicated himself instead to the search for truth. To find it, he went to the Christian Scriptures, as Monica had hoped. But he was quickly disillusioned. To a young man schooled in the classics, the Bible was frankly unimpressive in style and filled with crude stories that seemed unworthy of God.²

So for the next decade he pursued a philosophical school called Manicheism, who followed the teachings of a Persian prophet named Mani. They were dualists, that is people who believed the realm of the Spirit was good and the realm of the material world was evil. For them the idea of God becoming human was abhorrent because it was inconceivable for God to enter the realm of evil matter – that is this world.

In his twenties Augustine moved from North Africa to Italy where he eventually settled in Milan. There he was in the service as the Emperor, as his speech writer. In Milan was the Bishop Ambrose, whom Augustine heard was an outstanding communicator. Sunday by Sunday he would sit under Ambrose's teaching. As he explained the Scriptures, they suddenly began to make a lot more sense. Ambrose taught that beneath the literal sense of those troublesome Old Testament figures and events, there was a profound spiritual meaning that prepared for, prefigured, and predicted Christ, his Church, and the institutions of the New Covenant. Ambrose taught that the humble surface of the Bible concealed depths of meaning that were truly inexhaustible. Confronted by Ambrose's spiritual interpretation of Scripture, the rationalistic objections that Augustine and his Manichaean friends had against the Bible and the Catholic faith began to crumble.³ Now in his thirties he wrestled with what he was hearing and prayed:

¹ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mk 4:19). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

² D'Ambrosio, Marcellino. *When the Church Was Young: Voices of the Early Fathers* (p. 224). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

³ D'Ambrosio, Marcellino. *When the Church Was Young: Voices of the Early Fathers* (pp. 227-228). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

“Soon, in a little while, I shall make up my mind, but not right now”. He kept delaying until at the age of 32 he was walking in his Milanese garden and he cried 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 took up Saint Paul's epistles and read the first chapter that met his eyes:

¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.⁴ (Romans 13:13-14)

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, his dearest friend 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.

Augustine would live for another 42 years, dying in the year 430. Through these years he would be a prolific writer, his extant books total more than 4 million words; a defender of the Catholic Faith against two heresies that were detracting many from the Catholicism and administered his Diocese of Hippo in North Africa for many years. In 397 he was at the Synod in Carthage North Africa where the 73 books of the Old and New Testaments were declared authoritative.

What happened in Augustine's life was his discovery that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God as expressed by Paul in 1st Thessalonians:

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.⁵

This word came alive in Augustine because under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and St. Ambrose God spoke into his heart, and the worldly sceptic, turned dualist came home to the Church as he said so eloquently:

"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

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Ro 13:12–14). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (1 Th 2:13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

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."