



# Confessions of Augustine

# **AUGUSTINE: CONFESSIONS**

*Newly translated and edited*

*by*

**ALBERT C. OUTLER, Ph.D., D.D.**

Professor of Theology  
Perkins School of Theology  
Southern Methodist University  
Dallas, Texas

*First published MCMLV*

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 55-5021

This book is in the public domain.  
It was scanned from an uncopyrighted edition.

Harry Plantinga  
planting@cs.pitt.edu

## Introduction

LIKE A COLOSSUS BESTRIDING TWO WORLDS, Augustine stands as the last patristic and the first medieval father of Western Christianity. He gathered together and conserved all the main motifs of Latin Christianity from Tertullian to Ambrose; he appropriated the heritage of Nicene orthodoxy; he was a Chalcedonian before Chalcedon--and he drew all this into an unsystematic synthesis which is still our best mirror of the heart and mind of the Christian community in the Roman Empire. More than this, he freely received and deliberately reconsecrated the religious philosophy of the Greco-Roman world to a new apologetic use in maintaining the intelligibility of the Christian proclamation. Yet, even in his role as summator of tradition, he was no mere eclectic. The center of his "system" is in the Holy Scriptures, as they ordered and moved his heart and mind. It was in Scripture that, first and last, Augustine found the focus of his religious authority.

At the same time, it was this essentially conservative genius who recast the patristic tradition into the new pattern by which European Christianity would be largely shaped and who, with relatively little interest in historical detail, wrought out the first comprehensive "philosophy of history." Augustine regarded himself as much less an innovator than a summator. He was less a reformer of the Church than the defender of the Church's faith. His own self-chosen project was to save Christianity from the disruption of heresy and the calumnies of the pagans, and, above everything else, to renew and exalt the faithful hearing of the gospel of man's utter need and God's abundant grace. But the unforeseen result of this enterprise was to furnish the motifs of the Church's piety and doctrine for the next thousand years and more. Wherever one touches the Middle Ages, he finds the marks of Augustine's influence, powerful and pervasive--even Aquinas is more of an Augustinian at heart than a "proper" Aristotelian. In the Protestant Reformation, the evangelical elements in Augustine's thought were appealed to in condemnation of the corruptions of popular Catholicism--yet even those corruptions had a certain right of appeal to some of the non-evangelical aspects of Augustine's thought and life. And, still today, in the important theological revival of our own time, the influence of Augustine is obviously one of the most potent and productive impulses at work.

A succinct characterization of Augustine is impossible, not only because his thought is so extraordinarily complex and his expository method so incurably digressive, but also because throughout his entire career there were lively tensions and massive prejudices in his heart and head. His doctrine of God holds the Plotinian notions of divine unity and remotion in tension with the Biblical emphasis upon the sovereign God's active involvement in creation and redemption. For all his devotion to Jesus Christ, this theology was never adequately Christocentric, and this reflects itself in many ways in his practical conception of the Christian life. He did not invent the doctrines of original sin and seminal transmission of guilt but he did set them as cornerstones in his "system," matching them with a doctrine of infant baptism which cancels, *ex opere operato*, birth sin and hereditary guilt. He never wearied of celebrating God's abundant mercy and grace--but he was also fully persuaded that the vast majority of mankind are condemned to a wholly just and appalling damnation. He never denied the reality of human freedom and never allowed the excuse of human irresponsibility before God--but against all detractors of the primacy of God's grace, he vigorously insisted on both double predestination and irresistible grace.

For all this the Catholic Church was fully justified in giving Augustine his aptest title, *Doctor Gratiae*. The central theme in all Augustine's writings is the

sovereign God of grace and the sovereign grace of God. Grace, for Augustine, is God's freedom to act without any external necessity whatsoever--to act in love beyond human understanding or control; to act in creation, judgment, and redemption; to give his Son freely as Mediator and Redeemer; to endue the Church with the indwelling power and guidance of the Holy Spirit; to shape the destinies of all creation and the ends of the two human societies, the "city of earth" and the "city of God." Grace is God's unmerited love and favor, prevenient and occurrent. It touches man's inmost heart and will. It guides and impels the pilgrimage of those called to be faithful. It draws and raises the soul to repentance, faith, and praise. It transforms the human will so that it is capable of doing good. It relieves man's religious anxiety by forgiveness and the gift of hope. It establishes the ground of Christian humility by abolishing the ground of human pride. God's grace became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and it remains immanent in the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Augustine had no system--but he did have a stable and coherent Christian outlook. Moreover, he had an unwearied, ardent concern: man's salvation from his hopeless plight, through the gracious action of God's redeeming love. To understand and interpret this was his one endeavor, and to this task he devoted his entire genius.

He was, of course, by conscious intent and profession, a Christian theologian, a pastor and teacher in the Christian community. And yet it has come about that his contributions to the larger heritage of Western civilization are hardly less important than his services to the Christian Church. He was far and away the best--if not the very first--psychologist in the ancient world. His observations and descriptions of human motives and emotions, his depth analyses of will and thought in their interaction, and his exploration of the inner nature of the human self--these have established one of the main traditions in European conceptions of human nature, even down to our own time. Augustine is an essential source for both contemporary depth psychology and existentialist philosophy. His view of the shape and process of human history has been more influential than any other single source in the development of the Western tradition which regards political order as inextricably involved in moral order. His conception of a *societas* as a community identified and held together by its loyalties and love has become an integral part of the general tradition of Christian social teaching and the Christian vision of "Christendom." His metaphysical explorations of the problems of being, the character of evil, the relation of faith and knowledge, of will and reason, of time and eternity, of creation and cosmic order, have not ceased to animate and enrich various philosophic reflections throughout the succeeding centuries. At the same time the hallmark of the Augustinian philosophy is its insistent demand that reflective thought issue in practical consequence; no contemplation of the end of life suffices unless it discovers the means by which men are brought to their proper goals. In sum, Augustine is one of the very few men who simply cannot be ignored or depreciated in any estimate of Western civilization without serious distortion and impoverishment of one's historical and religious understanding.

In the space of some forty-four years, from his conversion in Milan (A.D. 386) to his death in Hippo Regius (A.D. 430), Augustine wrote--mostly at dictation--a vast sprawling library of books, sermons, and letters, the remains of which (in the Benedictine edition of St. Maur) fill fourteen volumes as they are reprinted in Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series Latina (Vols. 32-45). In his old age, Augustine reviewed his authorship (in the *Retractations*) and has left us a critical review of ninety-three of his works he judged most important. Even a cursory glance at them shows how enormous was his range of interest. Yet almost everything he

wrote was in response to a specific problem or an actual crisis in the immediate situation. One may mark off significant developments in his thought over this twoscore years, but one can hardly miss the fundamental consistency in his entire life's work. He was never interested in writing a systematic *summa theologica*, and would have been incapable of producing a balanced digest of his multifaceted teaching. Thus, if he is to be read wisely, he must be read widely--and always in context, with due attention to the specific aim in view in each particular treatise.

For the general reader who wishes to approach Augustine as directly as possible, however, it is a useful and fortunate thing that at the very beginning of his Christian ministry and then again at the very climax of it, Augustine set himself to focus his experience and thought into what were, for him, summings up. The result of the first effort is the *Confessions*, which is his most familiar and widely read work. The second is in the *Enchiridion*, written more than twenty years later. In the *Confessions*, he stands on the threshold of his career in the Church. In the *Enchiridion*, he stands forth as triumphant champion of orthodox Christianity. In these two works--the nearest equivalent to summation in the whole of the Augustinian corpus--we can find all his essential themes and can sample the characteristic flavor of his thought.

Augustine was baptized by Ambrose at Milan during Eastertide, A.D. 387. A short time later his mother, Monica, died at Ostia on the journey back to Africa. A year later, Augustine was back in Roman Africa living in a monastery at Tagaste, his native town. In 391, he was ordained presbyter in the church of Hippo Regius (a small coastal town nearby). Here in 395--with grave misgivings on his own part (cf. *Sermon CCCLV*, 2) and in actual violation of the eighth canon of Nicea (cf. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum*, II, 671, and IV, 1167)--he was consecrated assistant bishop to the aged Valerius, whom he succeeded the following year. Shortly after he entered into his episcopal duties he began his *Confessions*, completing them probably in 398 (cf. De Labriolle, I, vi (see Bibliography), and di Capua, *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, II, 678).

Augustine had a complex motive for undertaking such a self-analysis.<sup>1</sup> His pilgrimage of grace had led him to a most unexpected outcome. Now he felt a compelling need to retrace the crucial turnings of the way by which he had come. And since he was sure that it was God's grace that had been his prime mover on that way, it was a spontaneous expression of his heart that cast his self-recollection into the form of a sustained prayer to God.

The *Confessions* are not Augustine's autobiography. They are, instead, a deliberate effort, in the permissive atmosphere of God's felt presence, to recall those crucial episodes and events in which he can now see and celebrate the mysterious actions of God's prevenient and provident grace. Thus he follows the windings of his memory as it re-presents the upheavals of his youth and the stages of his disorderly quest for wisdom. He omits very much indeed. Yet he builds his successive climaxes so skillfully that the denouement in Book VIII is a vivid and believable convergence of influences, reconstructed and "placed" with consummate dramatic skill. We see how Cicero's *Hortensius* first awakened his thirst for wisdom, how the Manicheans deluded him with their promise of true wisdom, and how the Academics upset his confidence in certain knowledge--how they loosed him from the dogmatism of the Manicheans only to confront him with the opposite threat that all knowledge is uncertain. He shows us (Bk. V, Ch. X, 19) that almost the sole cause of his

---

<sup>1</sup>He had no models before him, for such earlier writings as the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and the autobiographical sections in Hilary of Poitiers and Cyprian of Carthage have only to be compared with the *Confessions* to see how different they are.

intellectual perplexity in religion was his stubborn, materialistic prejudice that if God existed he had to exist in a body, and thus had to have extension, shape, and finite relation. He remembers how the "Platonists" rescued him from this "materialism" and taught him how to think of spiritual and immaterial reality--and so to become able to conceive of God in non-dualistic categories. We can follow him in his extraordinarily candid and plain report of his Plotinian ecstasy, and his momentary communion with the One (Book VII). The "Platonists" liberated him from error, but they could not loose him from the fetters of incontinence. Thus, with a divided will, he continues to seek a stable peace in the Christian faith while he stubbornly clings to his pride and appetite.

In Book VIII, Augustine piles up a series of remembered incidents that inflamed his desire to imitate those who already seemed to have gained what he had so long been seeking. First of all, there had been Ambrose, who embodied for Augustine the dignity of Christian learning and the majesty of the authority of the Christian Scriptures. Then Simplicianus tells him the moving story of Victorinus (a more famous scholar than Augustine ever hoped to be), who finally came to the baptismal font in Milan as humbly as any other catechumen. Then, from Ponticianus he hears the story of Antony and about the increasing influence of the monastic calling. The story that stirs him most, perhaps, relates the dramatic conversion of the two "special agents of the imperial police" in the garden at Treves--two unlikely prospects snatched abruptly from their worldly ways to the monastic life.

He makes it plain that these examples forced his own feelings to an intolerable tension. His intellectual perplexities had become resolved; the virtue of continence had been consciously preferred; there was a strong desire for the storms of his breast to be calmed; he longed to imitate these men who had done what he could not and who were enjoying the peace he longed for.

But the old habits were still strong and he could not muster a full act of the whole will to strike them down. Then comes the scene in the Milanese garden which is an interesting parallel to Ponticianus' story about the garden at Treves. The long struggle is recapitulated in a brief moment; his will struggles against and within itself. The trivial distraction of a child's voice, chanting, "*Tolle, lege,*" precipitates the resolution of the conflict. There is a radical shift in mood and will, he turns eagerly to the chance text in Rom. 13:13--and a new spirit rises in his heart.

After this radical change, there was only one more past event that had to be relived before his personal history could be seen in its right perspective. This was the death of his mother and the severance of his strongest earthly tie. Book IX tells us this story. The climactic moment in it is, of course, the vision at Ostia where mother and son are uplifted in an ecstasy that parallels--but also differs significantly from--the Plotinian vision of Book VII. After this, the mother dies and the son who had loved her almost too much goes on alone, now upheld and led by a greater and a wiser love.

We can observe two separate stages in Augustine's "conversion." The first was the dramatic striking off of the slavery of incontinence and pride which had so long held him from decisive commitment to the Christian faith. The second was the development of an adequate understanding of the Christian faith itself and his baptismal confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The former was achieved in the Milanese garden. The latter came more slowly and had no "dramatic moment." The dialogues that Augustine wrote at Cassiciacum the year following his conversion show few substantial signs of a theological understanding, decisively or distinctively Christian. But by the time of his ordination to the presbyterate we can see the basic lines of a comprehensive and orthodox theology firmly laid out.

Augustine neglects to tell us (in 398) what had happened in his thought between 385 and 391. He had other questions, more interesting to him, with which to wrestle.

One does not read far in the *Confessions* before he recognizes that the term “confess” has a double range of meaning. On the one hand, it obviously refers to the free acknowledgment, before God, of the truth one knows about oneself--and this obviously meant, for Augustine, the “confession of sins.” But, at the same time, and more importantly, *confiteri* means to acknowledge, to God, the truth one knows about God. To confess, then, is to praise and glorify God; it is an exercise in self-knowledge and true humility in the atmosphere of grace and reconciliation.

Thus the *Confessions* are by no means complete when the personal history is concluded at the end of Book IX. There are two more closely related problems to be explored: First, how does the finite self find the infinite God (or, how is it found of him?)? And, secondly, how may we interpret God’s action in producing this created world in which such personal histories and revelations do occur? Book X, therefore, is an exploration of *man’s way to God*, a way which begins in sense experience but swiftly passes beyond it, through and beyond the awesome mystery of memory, to the ineffable encounter between God and the soul in man’s inmost subject-self. But such a journey is not complete until the process is reversed and man has looked as deeply as may be into the mystery of creation, on which all our history and experience depend. In Book XI, therefore, we discover why *time* is such a problem and how “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*” is the basic formula of a massive Christian metaphysical world view. In Books XII and XIII, Augustine elaborates, in loving patience and with considerable allegorical license, the mysteries of creation--exegeting the first chapter of Genesis, verse by verse, until he is able to relate the whole round of creation to the point where we can view the drama of God’s enterprise in human history on the vast stage of the cosmos itself. The Creator is the Redeemer! Man’s end and the beginning meet at a single point!

The *Enchiridion* is a briefer treatise on the grace of God and represents Augustine’s fully matured theological perspective--after the magnificent achievements of the *De Trinitate* and the greater part of the *De civitate Dei*, and after the tremendous turmoil of the Pelagian controversy in which the doctrine of grace was the exact epicenter. Sometime in 421, Augustine received a request from one Laurentius, a Christian layman who was the brother of the tribune Dulcitius (for whom Augustine wrote the *De octo dulcitii quaestionibus* in 423-425). This Laurentius wanted a handbook (*enchiridion*) that would sum up the essential Christian teaching in the briefest possible form. Augustine dryly comments that the shortest complete summary of the Christian faith is that God is to be served by man in faith, hope, and love. Then, acknowledging that this answer might indeed be *too* brief, he proceeds to expand it in an essay in which he tries unsuccessfully to subdue his natural digressive manner by imposing on it a patently artificial schematism. Despite its awkward form, however, the *Enchiridion* is one of the most important of all of Augustine’s writings, for it is a conscious effort of the theological magistrate of the Western Church to stand on final ground of testimony to the Christian truth.

For his framework, Augustine chooses the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. The treatise begins, naturally enough, with a discussion of God’s work in creation. Augustine makes a firm distinction between the comparatively unimportant knowledge of nature and the supremely important acknowledgment of the Creator of nature. But creation lies under the shadow of sin and evil and Augustine reviews his famous (and borrowed!) doctrine of the privative character of

evil. From this he digresses into an extended comment on error and lying as special instances of evil. He then returns to the hopeless case of fallen man, to which God's wholly unmerited grace has responded in the incarnation of the Mediator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. The questions about the appropriation of God's grace lead naturally to a discussion of baptism and justification, and beyond these, to the Holy Spirit and the Church. Augustine then sets forth the benefits of redeeming grace and weighs the balance between faith and good works in the forgiven sinner. But redemption looks forward toward resurrection, and Augustine feels he must devote a good deal of energy and subtle speculation to the questions about the manner and mode of the life everlasting. From this he moves on to the problem of the destiny of the wicked and the mystery of predestination. Nor does he shrink from these grim topics; indeed, he actually *expands* some of his most rigid ideas of God's ruthless justice toward the damned. Having thus treated the Christian faith and Christian hope, he turns in a too-brief concluding section to the virtue of Christian love as the heart of the Christian life. This, then, is the "handbook" on faith, hope, and love which he hopes Laurence will put to use and not leave as "baggage on his bookshelf."

Taken together, the *Confessions* and the *Enchiridion* give us two very important vantage points from which to view the Augustinian perspective as a whole, since they represent both his early and his mature formulation. From them, we can gain a competent--though by no means complete--introduction to the heart and mind of this great Christian saint and sage. There are important differences between the two works, and these ought to be noted by the careful reader. But all the main themes of Augustinian Christianity appear in them, and through them we can penetrate to its inner dynamic core.

There is no need to justify a new English translation of these books, even though many good ones already exist. Every translation is, at best, only an approximation--and an interpretation too. There is small hope for a translation to end all translations. Augustine's Latin is, for the most part, comparatively easy to read. One feels directly the force of his constant wordplay, the artful balancing of his clauses, his laconic use of parataxis, and his deliberate involutions of thought and word order. He was always a Latin rhetor; artifice of style had come to be second nature with him--even though the Latin scriptures were powerful modifiers of his classical literary patterns. But it is a very tricky business to convey such a Latin style into anything like modern English without considerable violence one way or the other. A literal rendering of the text is simply not readable English. And this falsifies the text in another way, for Augustine's Latin is eminently readable! On the other side, when one resorts to the unavoidable paraphrase there is always the open question as to the point beyond which the thought itself is being recast. It has been my aim and hope that these translations will give the reader an accurate medium of contact with Augustine's temper and mode of argumentation. There has been no thought of trying to contrive an English equivalent for his style. If Augustine's ideas come through this translation with positive force and clarity, there can be no serious reproach if it is neither as eloquent nor as elegant as Augustine in his own language. In any case, those who will compare this translation with the others will get at least a faint notion of how complex and truly brilliant the original is!

The sensitive reader soon recognizes that Augustine will not willingly be inspected from a distance or by a neutral observer. In all his writings there is a strong concern and moving power to involve his reader in his own process of inquiry and perplexity. There is a manifest eagerness to have him share in his own flashes of insight and his sudden glimpses of God's glory. Augustine's style is deeply

personal; it is therefore idiomatic, and often colloquial. Even in his knottiest arguments, or in the labyrinthine mazes of his allegorizing (e.g., *Confessions*, Bk. XIII, or *Enchiridion*, XVIII), he seeks to maintain contact with his reader in genuine respect and openness. He is never content to seek and find the truth in solitude. He must enlist his fellows in seeing and applying the truth as given. He is never the blind fideist; even in the face of mystery, there is a constant reliance on the limited but real powers of human reason, and a constant striving for clarity and intelligibility. In this sense, he was a consistent follower of his own principle of "Christian Socratism," developed in the *De Magistro* and the *De catechezandis rudibus*.

Even the best of Augustine's writing bears the marks of his own time and there is much in these old books that is of little interest to any but the specialist. There are many stones of stumbling in them for the modern secularist--and even for the modern Christian! Despite all this, it is impossible to read him with any attention at all without recognizing how his genius and his piety burst through the limitations of his times and his language--and even his English translations! He grips our hearts and minds and enlists us in the great enterprise to which his whole life was devoted: the search for and the celebration of God's grace and glory by which his faithful children are sustained and guided in their pilgrimage toward the true Light of us all.

The most useful critical text of the *Confessions* is that of Pierre de Labriolle (fifth edition, Paris, 1950). I have collated this with the other major critical editions: Martin Skutella, *S. Aureli Augustini Confessionum Libri Tredecim* (Leipzig, 1934)--itself a recension of the *Corpus Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum XXXIII* text of Pius Knöll (Vienna, 1896)--and the second edition of John Gibb and William Montgomery (Cambridge, 1927).

There are two good critical texts of the *Enchiridion* and I have collated them: Otto Scheel, *Augustins Enchiridion* (zweite Auflage, Tübingen, 1930), and Jean Rivière, *Enchiridion* in the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne, Œuvres de S. Augustin, première série: Opuscules, IX: Exposés généraux de la foi* (Paris, 1947).

It remains for me to express my appreciation to the General Editors of this Library for their constructive help; to Professor Hollis W. Huston, who read the entire manuscript and made many valuable suggestions; and to Professor William A. Irwin, who greatly aided with parts of the *Enchiridion*. These men share the credit for preventing many flaws, but naturally no responsibility for those remaining. Professors Raymond P. Morris, of the Yale Divinity School Library; Robert Beach, of the Union Theological Seminary Library; and Decherd Turner, of our Bridwell Library here at Southern Methodist University, were especially generous in their bibliographical assistance. Last, but not least, Mrs. Hollis W. Huston and my wife, between them, managed the difficult task of putting the results of this project into fair copy. To them all I am most grateful.

## AUGUSTINE'S TESTIMONY CONCERNING THE *CONFESSIONS*

### I. THE *Retractations*, II, 6 (A.D. 427)

1. My *Confessions*, in thirteen books, praise the righteous and good God as they speak either of my evil or good, and they are meant to excite men's minds and affections toward him. At least as far as I am concerned, this is what they did for me when they were being written and they still do this when read. What some people think of them is their own affair [*ipse viderint*]; but I do know that they have given pleasure to many of my brethren and still do so. The first through the tenth books were written about myself; the other three about Holy Scripture, from what is written there, *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*,<sup>2</sup> even as far as the reference to the Sabbath rest.<sup>3</sup>

2. In Book IV, when I confessed my soul's misery over the death of a friend and said that our soul had somehow been made one out of two souls, "But it may have been that I was afraid to die, lest he should then die wholly whom I had so greatly loved" (Ch. VI, 11)--this now seems to be more a trivial declamation than a serious confession, although this inept expression may be tempered somewhat by the "may have been" [*forte*] which I added. And in Book XIII what I said--"The firmament was made between the higher waters (and superior) and the lower (and inferior) waters"--was said without sufficient thought. In any case, the matter is very obscure.

This work begins thus: "Great art thou, O Lord."

### II. *De Dono Perseverantiae*, XX, 53 (A.D. 428)

Which of my shorter works has been more widely known or given greater pleasure than the [thirteen] books of my *Confessions*? And, although I published them long before the Pelagian heresy had even begun to be, it is plain that in them I said to my God, again and again, "Give what thou commandest and command what thou wilt." When these words of mine were repeated in Pelagius' presence at Rome by a certain brother of mine (an episcopal colleague), he could not bear them and contradicted him so excitedly that they nearly came to a quarrel. Now what, indeed, does God command, first and foremost, except that we believe in him? This faith, therefore, he himself gives; so that it is well said to him, "Give what thou commandest." Moreover, in those same books, concerning my account of my conversion when God turned me to that faith which I was laying waste with a very wretched and wild verbal assault,<sup>4</sup> do you not remember how the narration shows that I was given as a gift to the faithful and daily tears of my mother, who had been promised that I should not perish? I certainly declared there that God by his grace turns men's wills to the true faith when they are not only averse to it, but actually adverse. As for the other ways in which I sought God's aid in my growth in perseverance, you either know or can review them as you wish (*PL*, 45, c. 1025).

### III. *Letter to Darius* (A.D. 429)

---

<sup>2</sup>Gen. 1:1.

<sup>3</sup>Gen. 2:2.

<sup>4</sup>Notice the echo here of Acts 9:1.

Thus, my son, take the books of my *Confessions* and use them as a good man should--not superficially, but as a Christian in Christian charity. Here see me as I am and do not praise me for more than I am. Here believe nothing else about me than my own testimony. Here observe what I have been in myself and through myself. And if something in me pleases you, here praise Him with me--him whom I desire to be praised on my account and not myself. "For it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we were ourselves quite lost; but he who made us, remade us [*sed qui fecit, refecit*]. As, then, you find me in these pages, pray for me that I shall not fail but that I may go on to be perfected. Pray for me, my son, pray for me! (*Epist. CCXXXI, PL, 33, c. 1025*).

---

<sup>5</sup>Ps. 100:3.

# ***The Confessions of Saint Augustine***

## **BOOK ONE**

*In God's searching presence, Augustine undertakes to plumb the depths of his memory to trace the mysterious pilgrimage of grace which his life has been--and to praise God for his constant and omnipotent grace. In a mood of sustained prayer, he recalls what he can of his infancy, his learning to speak, and his childhood experiences in school. He concludes with a paean of grateful praise to God.*

### **CHAPTER I**

1. "Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and infinite is thy wisdom."<sup>6</sup> And man desires to praise thee, for he is a part of thy creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that thou dost resist the proud. Still he desires to praise thee, this man who is only a small part of thy creation. Thou hast prompted him, that he should delight to praise thee, for thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee. Grant me, O Lord, to know and understand whether first to invoke thee or to praise thee; whether first to know thee or call upon thee. But who can invoke thee, knowing thee not? For he who knows thee not may invoke thee as another than thou art. It may be that we should invoke thee in order that we may come to know thee. But "how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe without a preacher?"<sup>7</sup> Now, "they shall praise the Lord who seek him,"<sup>8</sup> for "those who seek shall find him,"<sup>9</sup> and, finding him, shall praise him. I will seek thee, O Lord, and call upon thee. I call upon thee, O Lord, in my faith which thou hast given me, which thou hast inspired in me through the humanity of thy Son, and through the ministry of thy preacher.<sup>10</sup>

### **CHAPTER II**

2. And how shall I call upon my God--my God and my Lord? For when I call on him I ask him to come into me. And what place is there in me into which my God can come? How could God, the God who made both heaven and earth, come into me? Is there anything in me, O Lord my God, that can contain thee? Do even the heaven and the earth, which thou hast made, and in which thou didst make me, contain thee? Is it possible that, since without thee nothing would be which does exist, thou didst make it so that whatever exists has some capacity to receive thee? Why, then, do I ask thee to come into me, since I also am and could not be if thou wert not in me? For I am not, after all, in hell--and yet thou art there too, for "if I go down into

---

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Ps. 145:3 and Ps. 147:5.

<sup>7</sup>Rom. 10:14.

<sup>8</sup>Ps. 22:26.

<sup>9</sup>Matt. 7:7.

<sup>10</sup>A reference to Bishop Ambrose of Milan; see Bk. V, Ch. XIII; Bk. VIII, Ch. 11, 3.

hell, thou art there.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore I would not exist--I would simply not be at all--unless I exist in thee, from whom and by whom and in whom all things are. Even so, Lord; even so. Where do I call thee to, when I am already in thee? Or from whence wouldst thou come into me? Where, beyond heaven and earth, could I go that there my God might come to me--he who hath said, “I fill heaven and earth”?<sup>12</sup>

### CHAPTER III

3. Since, then, thou dost fill the heaven and earth, do they contain thee? Or, dost thou fill and overflow them, because they cannot contain thee? And where dost thou pour out what remains of thee after heaven and earth are full? Or, indeed, is there no need that thou, who dost contain all things, shouldst be contained by any, since those things which thou dost fill thou fillest by containing them? For the vessels which thou dost fill do not confine thee, since even if they were broken, thou wouldst not be poured out. And, when thou art poured out on us, thou art not thereby brought down; rather, we are uplifted. Thou art not scattered; rather, thou dost gather us together. But when thou dost fill all things, dost thou fill them with thy whole being? Or, since not even all things together could contain thee altogether, does any one thing contain a single part, and do all things contain that same part at the same time? Do singulars contain thee singly? Do greater things contain more of thee, and smaller things less? Or, is it not rather that thou art wholly present everywhere, yet in such a way that nothing contains thee wholly?

### CHAPTER IV

4. What, therefore, is my God? What, I ask, but the Lord God? “For who is Lord but the Lord himself, or who is God besides our God?”<sup>13</sup> Most high, most excellent, most potent, most omnipotent; most merciful and most just; most secret and most truly present; most beautiful and most strong; stable, yet not supported; unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new, yet bringing old age upon the proud, and they know it not; always working, ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing; sustaining, pervading, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and developing; seeking, and yet possessing all things. Thou dost love, but without passion; art jealous, yet free from care; dost repent without remorse; art angry, yet remainest serene. Thou changest thy ways, leaving thy plans unchanged; thou recoverest what thou hast never really lost. Thou art never in need but still thou dost rejoice at thy gains; art never greedy, yet demandest dividends. Men pay more than is required so that thou dost become a debtor; yet who can possess anything at all which is not already thine? Thou owest men nothing, yet payest out to them as if in debt to thy creature, and when thou dost cancel debts thou lovest nothing thereby. Yet, O my God, my life, my holy Joy, what is this that I have said? What can any man say when he speaks of thee? But woe to them that keep silence--since even those who say most are dumb.

### CHAPTER V

5. Who shall bring me to rest in thee? Who will send thee into my heart so to overwhelm it that my sins shall be blotted out and I may embrace thee, my only

---

<sup>11</sup>Ps. 139:8.

<sup>12</sup>Jer. 23:24.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Ps. 18:31.

good? What art thou to me? Have mercy that I may speak. What am I to thee that thou shouldst command me to love thee, and if I do it not, art angry and threatenest vast misery? Is it, then, a trifling sorrow not to love thee? It is not so to me. Tell me, by thy mercy, O Lord, my God, what thou art to me. "Say to my soul, I am your salvation."<sup>14</sup> So speak that I may hear. Behold, the ears of my heart are before thee, O Lord; open them and "say to my soul, I am your salvation." I will hasten after that voice, and I will lay hold upon thee. Hide not thy face from me. Even if I die, let me see thy face lest I die.

6. The house of my soul is too narrow for thee to come in to me; let it be enlarged by thee. It is in ruins; do thou restore it. There is much about it which must offend thy eyes; I confess and know it. But who will cleanse it? Or, to whom shall I cry but to thee? "Cleanse thou me from my secret faults," O Lord, "and keep back thy servant from strange sins."<sup>15</sup> "I believe, and therefore do I speak."<sup>16</sup> But thou, O Lord, thou knowest. Have I not confessed my transgressions unto thee, O my God; and hast thou not put away the iniquity of my heart?<sup>17</sup> I do not contend in judgment with thee,<sup>18</sup> who art truth itself; and I would not deceive myself, lest my iniquity lie even to itself. I do not, therefore, contend in judgment with thee, for "if thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"<sup>19</sup>

## CHAPTER VI

7. Still, dust and ashes as I am, allow me to speak before thy mercy. Allow me to speak, for, behold, it is to thy mercy that I speak and not to a man who scorns me. Yet perhaps even thou mightest scorn me; but when thou dost turn and attend to me, thou wilt have mercy upon me. For what do I wish to say, O Lord my God, but that I know not whence I came hither into this life-in-death. Or should I call it death-in-life? I do not know. And yet the consolations of thy mercy have sustained me from the very beginning, as I have heard from my fleshly parents, from whom and in whom thou didst form me in time--for I cannot myself remember. Thus even though they sustained me by the consolation of woman's milk, neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts but thou, through them, didst give me the food of infancy according to thy ordinance and thy bounty which underlie all things. For it was thou who didst cause me not to want more than thou gavest and it was thou who gavest to those who nourished me the will to give me what thou didst give them. And they, by an instinctive affection, were willing to give me what thou hadst supplied abundantly. It was, indeed, good for them that my good should come through them, though, in truth, it was not from them but by them. For it is from thee, O God, that all good things come--and from my God is all my health. This is what I have since learned, as thou hast made it abundantly clear by all that I have seen thee give, both to me and to those around me. For even at the very first I knew how to suck, to lie quiet when I was full, and to cry when in pain--nothing more.

8. Afterward I began to laugh--at first in my sleep, then when waking. For this I have been told about myself and I believe it--though I cannot remember it--for I see the same things in other infants. Then, little by little, I realized where I was and wished to tell my wishes to those who might satisfy them, but I could not! For

---

<sup>14</sup>Ps. 35:3.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Ps. 19:12, 13.

<sup>16</sup>Ps. 116:10.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Ps. 32:5.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Job 9:2.

<sup>19</sup>Ps. 130:3.

my wants were inside me, and they were outside, and they could not by any power of theirs come into my soul. And so I would fling my arms and legs about and cry, making the few and feeble gestures that I could, though indeed the signs were not much like what I inwardly desired and when I was not satisfied--either from not being understood or because what I got was not good for me--I grew indignant that my elders were not subject to me and that those on whom I actually had no claim did not wait on me as slaves--and I avenged myself on them by crying. That infants are like this, I have myself been able to learn by watching them; and they, though they knew me not, have shown me better what I was like than my own nurses who knew me.

9. And, behold, my infancy died long ago, but I am still living. But thou, O Lord, whose life is forever and in whom nothing dies--since before the world was, indeed, before all that can be called "before," thou wast, and thou art the God and Lord of all thy creatures; and with thee abide all the stable causes of all unstable things, the unchanging sources of all changeable things, and the eternal reasons of all non-rational and temporal things--tell me, thy suppliant, O God, tell me, O merciful One, in pity tell a pitiful creature whether my infancy followed yet an earlier age of my life that had already passed away before it. Was it such another age which I spent in my mother's womb? For something of that sort has been suggested to me, and I have myself seen pregnant women. But what, O God, my Joy, preceded *that* period of life? Was I, indeed, anywhere, or anybody? No one can explain these things to me, neither father nor mother, nor the experience of others, nor my own memory. Dost thou laugh at me for asking such things? Or dost thou command me to praise and confess unto thee only what I know?

10. I give thanks to thee, O Lord of heaven and earth, giving praise to thee for that first being and my infancy of which I have no memory. For thou hast granted to man that he should come to self-knowledge through the knowledge of others, and that he should believe many things about himself on the authority of the womenfolk. Now, clearly, I had life and being; and, as my infancy closed, I was already learning signs by which my feelings could be communicated to others.

Whence could such a creature come but from thee, O Lord? Is any man skillful enough to have fashioned himself? Or is there any other source from which being and life could flow into us, save this, that thou, O Lord, hast made us--thou with whom being and life are one, since thou thyself art supreme being and supreme life both together. For thou art infinite and in thee there is no change, nor an end to this present day--although there is a sense in which it ends in thee since all things are in thee and there would be no such thing as days passing away unless thou didst sustain them. And since "thy years shall have no end,"<sup>20</sup> thy years are an ever-present day. And how many of ours and our fathers' days have passed through this thy day and have received from it what measure and fashion of being they had? And all the days to come shall so receive and so pass away. "But thou art the same!"<sup>21</sup> And all the things of tomorrow and the days yet to come, and all of yesterday and the days that are past, thou wilt gather into this thy day. What is it to me if someone does not understand this? Let him still rejoice and continue to ask, "What is this?" Let him also rejoice and prefer to seek thee, even if he fails to find an answer, rather than to seek an answer and not find thee!

## CHAPTER VII

---

<sup>20</sup>Ps. 102:27.

<sup>21</sup>Ps. 102:27.