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Historical Pictures/Stock Montage

AUGUSTINE: THE CEREBRAL SAINT

354	Born
383	Went to teach in Rome, then Milan
387	Baptism by St. Ambrose
396	Made Bishop of Hippo
396-410	Struggle with the Donatist heresy
c. 397-428	<i>De doctrina christiana</i>
c. 400	<i>The Confessions</i>
410-430	Struggle with the Pelagian heresy
c. 413-426	<i>The City of God</i>
430	Died

The historian Edward Gibbon capsulized the rise of Christianity in this dramatic sentence: "A pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol."¹ While modern historians may quarrel with one aspect or another of Gibbon's views, most agree that by the mid-fourth century, Christianity was the dominant spiritual force in the Roman Empire. The public policy of persecution had been replaced by toleration and then endorsement; and, since Constantine, every emperor, save only Julian "the Apostate" (361-363), had been at least nominally Christian. The church as an institution had taken form, and its officials were people of importance, from one end of the empire to the other. It was at long last both fashionable and profitable to be Christian; and persons of position and substance adopted the faith.

It is thus not surprising that a bright, well-educated, and ambitious young man of the late fourth century should have been attracted to Christianity. What is unusual is that he wrote a sensitive, detailed

¹*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Ch. XV.1.

account of the experience of his conversion, entitled the *Confessions*. This work is all the more valuable because the man who wrote it went on to become the most important theologian of the early church and one of the most influential thinkers in human history—St. Augustine.

The Confessions

ST. AUGUSTINE

The *Confessions* are a remarkable book. A modern critic has called them “one of the truest, frankest, and most heart-lifting autobiographies ever written.”² For us, however, their “heart-lifting” inspirational quality—and surely they were written to impart just that quality—will be of less interest than their fascinating revelation of the process by which a tough-minded intellectual, examining his own life, was brought not only to embrace Christianity but to make it the very center of his being. No document has ever laid open that process more candidly or more searchingly than the *Confessions*.

Aurelius Augustinus was born at Tagaste in Roman North Africa in 354, of a not-uneducated pagan father and a devoutly Christian mother. Signs of intellectual precocity led his father to send the boy to school at an early age and at considerable financial sacrifice. He was trained first at the nearby town of Madaura and then at the great city of Carthage, the capital and the intellectual and trade center of Roman Africa. Augustine was studying to be a professional rhetorician, and neither the program nor its aims—the study of eloquence for the sake of persuasion—had changed in centuries. When he finished his schooling, Augustine became a teacher of rhetoric. He also became a member of the Manichaeans, a sect particularly strong in North Africa that taught a form of radical dualism as its principal spiritual-intellectual doctrine.³ Though he remained a Manichaean for some nine years, Augustine was also attracted to astrology; he was impressed with Cicero’s urbane, academic skepticism; he studied Aristotle and Plato and the fashionable Neoplatonism⁴; and he sampled

²Stewart Perowne, *The End of the Roman World* (New York: Crowell, 1967), p. 143.

³In its Manichaean form, this represented the philosophical opposition of such entities as light and darkness, warmth and cold, flesh and spirit, body and soul. Though Augustine denounced it, he retained some strong Manichaean influences in his own thought.—Ed.

⁴Plotinus, the greatest of Neoplatonic philosophers, and his popularizer Porphyry had died only half a century earlier, and their movement still enjoyed great popularity, especially among intellectuals. It profited from the general ancient reverence for Plato while emphasizing the more transcendental aspects of his system. The result was the creation, in Neoplatonism, of something approaching a religion. It had a powerful, ongoing influence in the history both of philosophy and theology, and even St. Augustine never entirely abandoned some of its tenets.—Ed.

and rejected the Christian Bible. Without fully realizing it, he was beginning his search for belief.

By this time Augustine had become a teacher in his native Tagaste, had taken a wife, and had fathered a son. He then obtained a teaching position in Carthage and was becoming a well-known rhetorician and philosopher when, in 383 at the age of twenty-nine, he went to teach in Rome. Within a year, he heard of a position as master of rhetoric to the great city of Milan, which in these declining years of the Roman Empire had come to overshadow the old capital as the center of imperial government in the West. The position was an important one. Augustine competed for it, delivering a public oration, and was awarded the post.

It was in Milan that Augustine came under the influence of one of the most powerful figures in the early church, St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, who, as Augustine says, "received me as a father." The process of conversion was under way. But it was to be neither easy nor painless, for such a man as Augustine had hard intellectual questions to ask of any faith.

Let St. Augustine himself continue the story.

I began to love him at first not as a teacher of the truth (for I had quite despaired of finding it in your Church) but simply as a man who was kind and generous to me. I used to listen eagerly when he preached to the people, but my intention was not what it should have been; I was, as it were, putting his eloquence on trial to see whether it came up to his reputation, or whether its flow was greater or less than I had been told. So I hung intently on his words, but I was not interested in what he was really saying and stood aside from this in contempt. I was much pleased by the charm of his style, which, although it was more learned, was still, so far as the manner of delivery was concerned, not so warm and winning as the style of Faustus.⁵ With regard to the actual matter there was, of course, no comparison. Faustus was merely roving around among Manichaean fallacies, while Ambrose was healthily teaching salvation. But salvation is far from sinners of the kind that I was then. Yet, though I did not realize it, I was drawing gradually nearer. . . .

For although my concern was not to learn what he said but only to hear how he said it (this empty interest being all that remained to me, now that I had despaired of man's being able to find his way to you),

⁵A famous Manichaean preacher. Augustine had eagerly anticipated hearing him but was disappointed when he did. From this point, his break with Manichaeism began.—Ed.

nevertheless, together with the language, which I admired, the subject matter also, to which I was indifferent, began to enter into my mind. Indeed I could not separate the one from the other. And as I opened my heart in order to recognize how eloquently he was speaking it occurred to me at the same time (though this idea came gradually) how truly he was speaking. . . .

By this time my mother had joined me. Her piety had given her strength and she had followed me over land and sea, confident in you throughout all dangers. In the perils of the sea it was she who put the fresh heart into the sailors although as a rule it is for the sailors to reassure the passengers who are inexperienced on the high seas. But she promised them that they would get safely to land because you had promised this to her in a vision. She found me in grave danger indeed, my danger being that of despairing of ever discovering the truth. I told her that, though I was not yet a Catholic Christian, I was certainly no longer a Manichaean; but she showed no great signs of delight, as though at some unexpected piece of news, because she already felt at ease regarding that particular aspect of my misery; she bewailed me as one dead, certainly, but as one who would be raised up again by you; she was in her mind laying me before you on the bier so that you might say to the widow's son: "*Young man, I say unto thee, Arise,*" and he should revive and begin to speak and you should give him to his mother. So her heart was shaken by no storm of exultation when she heard that what she had daily begged you with her tears should happen had in so large a part taken place—that I was now rescued from falsehood, even though I had not yet attained the truth. She was indeed quite certain that you, who had promised her the whole, would give her the part that remained, and she replied to me very calmly and with a heart full of confidence that she believed in Christ that, before she departed from this life, she would see me a true Catholic. . . .

I was not yet groaning in prayer for you to help me. My mind was intent on inquiry and restless in dispute. I considered Ambrose himself, who was honored by people of such importance, a lucky man by worldly standards; only his celibacy seemed to me rather a burden to bear. But I could neither guess nor tell from my own experience what hope he had within him, what were his struggles against the temptations of his exalted position, what solace he found in adversity; nor could I tell of that hidden mouth of his (the mouth of his heart), what joys it tasted in the rumination of your bread. And he on his side did not know of the turmoil in which I was or the deep pit of danger before my feet. I was not able to ask him the questions I wanted to ask in the way I wanted to ask them, because I was prevented from

having an intimate conversation with him by the crowds of people, all of whom had some business with him and to whose infirmities he was a servant. And for the very short periods of time when he was not with them, he was either refreshing his body with necessary food or his mind with reading. When he was reading, his eyes went over the pages and his heart looked into the sense, but voice and tongue were resting. Often when we came to him (for no one was forbidden to come in, and it was not customary for visitors even to be announced) we found him reading, always to himself and never otherwise; we would sit in silence for a long time, not venturing to interrupt him in his intense concentration on his task, and then we would go away again. We guessed that in the very small time which he was able to set aside for mental refreshment he wanted to be free from the disturbance of other people's business and would not like to have his attention distracted. . . . But I needed to find him with plenty of time to spare if I was to pour out to him the full flood of agitation boiling up inside me, and I could never find him like this. Yet every Sunday I listened to him rightly preaching to the people the word of truth, and I became more and more sure that all those knots of cunning calumny which, in their attacks on the holy books, my deceivers had tied could be unraveled. . . .

. . . So I was both confounded and converted, and I was glad, my God, that your only Church, the body of your only son—that Church in which the name of Christ had been put upon me as an infant⁶—was not flavored with this childish nonsense and did not, in her healthy doctrine, maintain the view that you, the Creator of all things, could be, in the form of a human body, packed into a definite space which, however mighty and large, must still be bounded on all sides. . . . But it was the same with me as with a man who, having once had a bad doctor, is afraid of trusting himself even to a good one. So it was with the health of my soul which could not possibly be cured except by believing, but refused to be cured for fear of believing something falser. So I resisted your hands, for it was you who prepared the medicines of faith and applied them to the diseases of the world and gave them such potency. . . .

And I, as I looked back, over my life, was quite amazed to think of how long a time had passed since my nineteenth year, when I had first become inflamed with a passion for wisdom and had resolved that, when once I found it, I would leave behind me all the empty hopes and deceitful frenzies of vain desires. And now I was in my thirtieth

⁶Though he had not been baptized as a child, he had apparently been at least nominally Christian, through his mother's influence.—ED.

year, still sticking in the same mud, still greedy for the enjoyment of things present, which fled from me and wasted me away, and all the time saying: "I shall find it tomorrow. See, it will become quite clear and I shall grasp it. Now Faustus will come and explain everything. What great men the Academics are! Is it true that no certainty can possibly be comprehended for the direction of our lives? No, it cannot be. We must look into things more carefully and not give up hope. And now see, those things in the Scriptures which used to seem absurd are not absurd; they can be understood in a different and perfectly good way. I shall take my stand where my parents placed me as a child until I can see the truth plainly. But where shall I look for it? And when shall I look for it? Ambrose has no spare time; nor have I time for reading. And where can I find the books? From where can I get them and when can I get them? Can I borrow them from anybody? I must arrange fixed periods of time and set aside certain hours for the health of my soul. A great hope has dawned. The Catholic faith does not teach the things I thought it did and vainly accused it of teaching. The learned men of that faith think it quite wrong to believe that God is bounded within the shape of a human body. Why then do I hesitate to knock, so that the rest may be laid open to me? My pupils take up all my time in the morning. But what do I do for the rest of the day? Why not do this? But, if I do, how shall I find time to call on influential friends whose support will be useful to me? When shall I prepare the lessons for which my pupils pay? When shall I have time to relax and to refresh my mind from all my preoccupations?" . . . As I became more unhappy, so you drew closer to me. Your right hand was ready, it was ready to drag me out of the mud and to wash me; but I did not know. And there was nothing to call me back from that deeper gulf of carnal pleasure, except the fear of death and of judgment to come, and this, whatever the opinions I held from time to time, never left my mind. . . .

As to me, I would certainly say and I firmly believed that you—our Lord, the true God, who made not only our souls but our bodies, and not only our souls and bodies but all men and all things—were undefilable and unalterable and in no way to be changed, and yet I still could not understand clearly and distinctly what was the cause of evil. Whatever it might be, however, I did realize that my inquiry must not be carried out along lines which would lead me to believe that the immutable God was mutable; if I did that, I should become myself the very evil which I was looking for. And so I pursued the inquiry without anxiety, being quite certain that what the Manichees said was not true. I had turned against them with my whole heart, because I saw that in their inquiries into

the origin of evil they were full of evil themselves; for they preferred to believe that your substance could suffer evil rather than that their substance could do evil. . . . So I thought of your creation as finite and as filled with you, who were infinite. And I said: "Here is God, and here is what God has created; and God is good and is most mightily and incomparably better than all these. Yet He, being good, created them good, and see how He surrounds them and fills them. Where, then, is evil? Where did it come from and how did it creep in here? What is its root and seed? Or does it simply not exist? In that case why do we fear and take precautions against something that does not exist? Or if there is no point in our fears, then our fears themselves are an evil which goads and tortures the heart for no good reason—and all the worse an evil if there is nothing to be afraid of and we are still afraid. Therefore, either there is evil which we fear or else the fact that we do fear is evil. Where then does evil come from, seeing that God is good and made all things good? Certainly it was the greater and supreme Good who made these lesser goods, yet still all are good, both the creator and his creation. Where then did evil come from? Or was there some evil element in the material of creation, and did God shape and form it, yet still leave in it something which He did not change into good? But why? Being omnipotent, did He lack the power to change and transform the whole so that no trace of evil should remain? Indeed why should He choose to use such material for making anything? Would He not rather, with this same omnipotence, cause it not to exist at all? Could it exist against His will? Or, supposing it was eternal, why for so long through all the infinite spaces of time did He allow it to exist and then so much later decide to make something out of it? Or, if He did suddenly decide on some action, would not the omnipotent prefer to act in such a way that this evil material should cease to exist, and that He alone should be, the whole, true, supreme, and infinite Good? Or, since it was not good that He who was good should frame and create something not good, then why did He not take away and reduce to nothing the material that was evil and then Himself provide good material from which to create all things? For He would not be omnipotent if He could not create something good without having to rely on material which He had not Himself created."

These were the kind of thoughts⁷ which I turned over and over in my unhappy heart, a heart overburdened with those biting cares that

⁷The long and complex foregoing discussion of "the problem of evil" relates, on the one hand, to Augustine's rejection of Manichaeism, which explained evil by identifying it with matter, and, on the other, to his own important speculations on the problem of free will and predestination.—Ed.

came from my fear of death and my failure to discover the truth. Yet the faith of your Christ, our Lord and Saviour, professed in the Catholic Church, remained steadfastly fixed in my heart, even though it was on many points still unformed and swerving from the right rule of doctrine. But, nevertheless, my mind did not abandon it, but rather drank more and more deeply of it every day.

By this time too I had rejected the fallacious forecasts and impious ravings of the astrologers. . . .

But then, after reading these books of the Platonists which taught me to seek for a truth which was incorporeal, I came to see your *invisible things, understood by those things which are made*. I fell back again from this point, but still I had an apprehension of what, through the darkness of my mind, I was not able to contemplate; I was certain that you are and that you are infinite, yet not in the sense of being diffused through space whether infinite or finite: that you truly are, and are always the same, not in any part or by any motion different or otherwise: also that all other things are from you, as is proved most certainly by the mere fact that they exist. On all these points I was perfectly certain, but I was still too weak to be able to enjoy you. I talked away as if I were a finished scholar; but, if I had not sought the way to you in Christ our Saviour, what would have been finished would have been my soul. For I had begun to want to have the reputation of a wise man; my punishment was within me, but I did not weep; I was merely puffed up with my knowledge. Where was that charity which builds from the foundation of humility, the foundation which is Christ Jesus? Humility was not a subject which those books would ever have taught me. Yet I believe that you wanted me to come upon these books before I made a study of your Scriptures. You wanted the impression made by them on me to be printed in my memory, so that when later I had become, as it were, tamed by your books (your fingers dressing my wounds), I should be able to see clearly what the difference is between presumption and confession, between those who see their goal without seeing how to get there and those who see the way which leads to that happy country which is there for us not only to perceive but to live in. For if I had been first trained in your Scriptures and by my familiarity with them had found you growing sweet to me, and had then afterward come upon these books of the Platonists, it is possible that they might have swept me away from the solid basis of piety; or, even if I had held firmly to that healthy disposition which I had imbibed, I might have thought that the

same disposition could be acquired by someone who had read only the Platonic books.⁸

So I most greedily seized upon the venerable writings of your spirit and in particular the works of the apostle Paul. In the past it had sometimes seemed to me that he contradicted himself and that what he said conflicted with the testimonies of the law and the prophets; but all these difficulties had now disappeared; I saw one and the same face of pure eloquence and learned to *rejoice with trembling*. Having begun, I discovered that everything in the Platonists which I had found true was expressed here, but it was expressed to the glory of your grace. . . .

Augustine, convinced now on the intellectual plane, retires to a garden with his friend Alypius, who had accompanied him from Africa—and the controversy “in my heart” begins.

So went the controversy in my heart—about self, and self against self. And Alypius stayed close by me, waiting to see how this strange agitation of mine would end.

And now from my hidden depths my searching thought had dragged up and set before the sight of my heart the whole mass of my misery. Then a huge storm rose up within me bringing with it a huge downpour of tears. So that I might pour out all these tears and speak the words that came with them I rose up from Alypius (solitude seemed better for the business of weeping) and went further away so that I might not be embarrassed even by his presence. This was how I felt and he realized it. No doubt I had said something or other, and he could feel the weight of my tears in the sound of my voice. And so I rose to my feet, and he, in a state of utter amazement, remained in the place where we had been sitting. I flung myself down on the ground somehow under a fig tree and gave free rein to my tears; they streamed and flooded from my eyes, an *acceptable sacrifice to Thee*. And I kept saying to you, not perhaps in these words, but with this sense: “*And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long, Lord; wilt Thou be angry forever? Remember not our former iniquities.*” For I felt that it was these which were holding me fast. And in my misery I would exclaim: “How long, how long this ‘tomorrow and tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not finish this very hour with my uncleanness?”

⁸This is a reference to the Neoplatonic writings that Augustine had again taken up with renewed interest. These works had long been esteemed by the Christians as being an aid to faith. Notice that they are so regarded by Augustine.—Ed.

So I spoke, weeping in the bitter contrition of my heart. Suddenly a voice reaches my ears from a nearby house. It is the voice of a boy or a girl (I don't know which) and in a kind of singsong the words are constantly repeated: “Take it and read it. Take it and read it.” At once my face changed, and I began to think carefully of whether the singing of words like these came into any kind of game which children play, and I could not remember that I had ever heard anything like it before. I checked the force of my tears and rose to my feet, being quite certain that I must interpret this as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first passage which I should come upon. For I had heard this about Antony⁹: he had happened to come in when the Gospel was being read, and as though the words read were spoken directly to himself, had received the admonition: *Go, sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me*. And by such an oracle he had been immediately converted to you.

So I went eagerly back to the place where Alypius was sitting, since it was there that I had left the book of the Apostle when I rose to my feet. I snatched up the book, opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which my eyes first fell: *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 in concupiscence*. I had no wish to read further; there was no need to. For immediately I had reached the end of this sentence it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away.

The Confessions: What Did They Mean?

ETIENNE GILSON

St. Augustine is one of the world's most complex thinkers. Everything he wrote had multiple levels of meaning that have fascinated critics and commentators since his own time. This is true even of so seemingly simple and straightforward an account as that which we have just presented from the *Confessions*. To answer the question,

⁹The Egyptian desert hermit, St. Anthony. Augustine and his friends had only recently heard the whole miraculous story of St. Anthony from a mutual friend who had visited them. Thus, it was much in his mind.—Ed.

“What did the conversion of Augustine mean?”—and the account of it in the *Confessions*—we turn to an analysis written by the greatest authority on medieval philosophy in this century, the French Catholic scholar Etienne Gilson (d. 1978), from his important work *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin*, translated as *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. Gilson begins his analysis at about the point where we picked up the narrative in the *Confessions*.

Whatever his idea of God and the extent of his scepticism may have been, Augustine had never lost faith in the existence of a provident God. How, then, could one avoid suspecting that there was a final source of authority? How could anyone help thinking that God willed the authority of Scripture and of the Church which interprets it precisely in order to provide all men with the doctrine of salvation couched in humble language suited to their grasp? Yet it is not merely for the ignorant and simple that the authority of faith can prove salutary; it is salutary for the wise as well. Since the wise man does not always stay on the level of his wisdom, he is happy to find the support of authority available in his moments of weariness. Hence, one can believe before understanding because there are positive reasons for believing. In Catholicism authority does come before reason, but there are reasons for accepting authority; in fact, in one sense, we should never believe anything if we did not first understand that we have to believe it. From this point it was but a short way to taking the last step and bending reason to faith. Augustine finally took the step and accepted the doctrine of salvation contained in the Scriptures, guaranteed by the Church's authority and based on Christ, the Son of God.

To maintain, as some have hoped to do, that Augustine was not a Christian at this time is to contradict all the texts and, while pretending to be critical, to destroy the historical method itself. To imagine that his conversion was perfect and complete from this moment is to fail completely to recognize its character as Augustine himself has revealed it. In his own eyes it did not consist in an instantaneous act; it was a continuing movement that began with his reading of the *Hortensius*,¹⁰ was carried on by his discovery of the spiritual meaning of Scripture and culminated in the act of faith in Christ's Church noted above. He had the faith, he was in the Church, and yet his faith was still unformed, still encumbered with ignorance; and he still had to grasp its content distinctly.

¹⁰A book of Cicero, now lost, that was extremely influential in the early thought of Augustine.—ED.

At this period two obstacles still separated him from a faith no longer “unformed and diverging from doctrinal rules” . . . : the first was his unyielding materialism along with the problem of evil of which it made an insoluble enigma; the second was the corruption of his own moral life. He was in search, not of a theory alone, but of a practice as well. The wisdom he sought was a rule of life: adhering to it meant practicing it. Now he was impressed by the fact that the lives of Christians like St. Anthony, the hermit, or St. Ambrose translated an evident wisdom into action. Here was detachment from the goods of this world, continence, chastity, the soul's freedom from the body, everything which gave evidence of perfect self-mastery. But Augustine was faced with a dilemma from which he could not free himself. Judging from his own personal experience continence was impossible, but the lives of saints about whom he had read or who were there for him to see showed that it was possible. Consequently, he was not merely a believer who did not have a correct knowledge of the content of his faith, he was also a man who aspired to the Christian life but lacked the power to live it. His final liberation was accomplished in two stages, namely by his contact with Neoplatonism and with St. Paul.

Augustine's introduction to Neoplatonism was brought about by a man filled with appalling pride. He gave him a Latin translation of the books of Plotinus and perhaps of Porphyry as well.¹¹ The effect of this contact was to reveal philosophical spiritualism to him. In these books he found first doctrine of the divine Word, the creation of the world in the Word and the illumination of men by a divine light which was purely spiritual in nature; but he did not find the Incarnation. Another acquisition which proved decisive for him was the discovery that, since God is immaterial and immutably subsistent truth, He is Being, and compared with Him changing things do not truly deserve the name “beings.” Of such things it can neither be said that they are nor that they are not.

A third ray of light for Augustine was the idea that everything is good to the extent that it exists. When the objection is raised that beings are not good because they become corrupt, we forget that they must first be good before they can become corrupt. Evil is the deprivation of being, and if we follow this to its conclusion, the complete deprivation of good would bring about absolute evil and would mean by definition the complete deprivation of being, and this would be

¹¹His fellow rhetorician Marius Victorinus. The reference is to Plotinus (205–270), the leading Neoplatonic philosopher, whom Augustine surely read, and to Porphyry (c. 234–c. 305), Plotinus' chief biographer and editor.—ED.

nothing. This is to say that evil is only the absence and lack of something. Instead of being an entity, evil is nothing.

One final conclusion follows from this, a conclusion that freed Augustine of his metaphysical anguish once and for all. Since evil is nothing God cannot be its author. Everything that exists is good to the extent that it exists. What is true of material entities is also true of spiritual entities, and what is true of their substances is true of their acts as well, even of evil acts like sins, because these imply some good in so far as they imply being. As soon as he saw this clearly, Augustine was finally given some respite; his distraction subsided, his soul awakened to the knowledge of God. He saw in God an infinite, spiritual substance, and for the first time his view was not that of the flesh but of the spirit.

In its essential features, this was the discovery Neoplatonism brought him. Its importance cannot be exaggerated, provided we do not reduce his conversion to that discovery. In his view, it meant a purification and spiritualization of his Christianity. After Plotinus had made him attentive, he entered into himself and with God's help discovered the spiritual and immaterial nature of the Light of which St. John speaks. In short, Plotinus enabled him to grasp the spiritual nature of the Christian God and the unreal nature of evil. That this vision was indissolubly philosophical and religious is incontestable. He discovered the purely spiritual nature of the Christian God whom he had already accepted through faith. We have here a philosophical vision combined with a religious experience and the two cannot be separated without falsifying arbitrarily the testimony of Augustine himself.

No matter which account of these events we follow, whether that given in the *Contra Academicos* or that of the *Confessions*, we see that the effect, surprising as it seems to us, was to lead Augustine to read St. Paul. The hidden reason for this apparently strange combination was that Augustine was confronted by two pieces of evidence: on the one hand, Christ's admirable life in which he believed through the Scriptures as well as the lives of saints who had imitated Him; and on the other, the clear evidence of Plotinus' philosophy which he had just discovered. Now the good and the true cannot contradict each other, therefore Christian doctrine must be in essential agreement with the thought of Plotinus. It was to test this hypothesis that he took up, tremblingly, the Epistles of St. Paul. One final decisive illumination awaited him there, namely the doctrine of sin and redemption through the grace of Jesus Christ.

In Plotinus Augustine had found the whole prologue of St. John's Gospel with the exception of the one essential fact that the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. Reading the Neoplatonists en-

ables us to know the truth but it gives no means of attaining it. By becoming flesh the Word came to give men something more than precepts; He gave them an example capable of bringing souls to themselves and leading them to God. As he read St. Paul he found not only the harmony between the good and true that he had hoped to find, but more important still, he saw that all philosophical truth had already been revealed to men by God and made available by a divine authority which made it unnecessary for their feeble reasons to exhaust themselves in long study. In addition he found the basic cause of his own moral impotence. St. Paul's Christianity makes it possible for the Platonism of the mind to become a thing of the heart, for the Platonism of theory to become practice. To say with Plotinus that spirit is distinct from flesh is in no sense to free the spirit from the flesh. Although Augustine might follow Plotinus in his metaphysical fights towards the intelligible, he was certain to fall back again beneath the weight of his carnal habits until St. Paul showed him the law of sin and the need of grace to set him free from it. Only after this last discovery did he see philosophy in all its grandeur, but from that moment also philosophy was always to mean wisdom, and wisdom was always to imply the life of grace, the acceptance of those things God grants the humble who receive them and denies the proud who claim to provide them for themselves.

The *Confessions*: How Did They Work?

PETER BROWN

The *Confessions* were not only a work tied into the philosophic system of Augustine, they were also a work tied into his responsibilities as a bishop, a servant of the church. In this sense, like so many of Augustine's other works, they were practical in intent. This is the interpretation of the historian Peter Brown, whose *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* is the best modern biography of Augustine. Brown argues that the book was meant for the *spiritaes*, the "men of the spirit" of Augustine's time, and for those whom Augustine hoped to convert to the spirit. For, as Brown sees it, the *Confessions* were a missionary work, among other things, in which Augustine

intended to hold up the example of his own life in order to influence the lives of others. The following excerpts are taken from Brown's *Augustine of Hippo*.

Wandering, temptations, sad thoughts of mortality and the search for truth: these had always been the stuff of autobiography for fine souls, who refused to accept superficial security. Pagan philosophers had already created a tradition of "religious autobiography" in this vein: it will be continued by Christians in the fourth century, and will reach its climax in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine.

Augustine, therefore, did not need to look far to find an audience for the *Confessions*. It had been created for him quite recently, by the amazing spread of asceticism in the Latin world. The *Confessions* was a book for the *servi Dei*, for the "servants of God"; it is a classic document of the tastes of a group of highly sophisticated men, the *spiritalis*, the "men of the spirit." It told such men just what they wanted to know about—the course of a notable conversion; it asked of its readers what they made a habit of asking for themselves—the support of their prayers. It even contained moving appeals to the men who might join this new élite: to the austere Manichee and the pagan Platonist, still standing aloof from the crowded basilicas of the Christians. . . .

The *Confessions* is very much the book of a man who had come to regard his past as a training for his present career. Thus, Augustine will select as important, incidents and problems that immediately betray the new bishop of Hippo. He had come to believe that the understanding and exposition of the Scriptures was the heart of a bishop's life. His relations with the Scriptures, therefore, come to form a constant theme throughout the *Confessions*. His conversion to the Manichees, for instance, is now diagnosed, not in terms of a philosophical preoccupation with the origin of evil, but as a failure to accept the Bible. We see Ambrose through the eyes of a fellow-professional: we meet him as a preacher and exegete, facing the Christian people in the basilica, not as the connoisseur of Plotinus.¹² Augustine remembered how, in his early days in Milan, he had seen the distant figure of Ambrose as a bishop, from the outside only. Now a bishop himself, he will ensure that he will not be seen in this way: he will tell his readers exactly how he still had to struggle with his own temptations; and in the last three books of the *Confessions*, as he meditates on the opening lines of the book of *Genesis*, he will carry his readers with him into his thoughts as he, also, sat in his study, as he

¹²The third-century Alexandrian scholar who really created Neoplatonism. He was a great favorite of St. Ambrose.—ED.

had once seen Ambrose sit, wrapt in the silent contemplation of an open page. . . .

The *Confessions*, therefore, is not a book of reminiscences. They are an anxious turning to the past. The note of urgency is unmistakable. "Allow me, I beseech You, grant me to wind round and round in my present memory the spirals of my errors. . . ."

It is also a poignant book. In it, one constantly senses the tension between the "then" of the young man and the "now" of the bishop. The past can come very close: its powerful and complex emotions have only recently passed away; we can still feel their contours through the thin layer of new feeling that has grown over them. . . .

Augustine had been forced to come to terms with himself. The writing of the *Confessions* was an act of therapy. The many attempts to explain the book in terms of a single, external provocation, or of a single, philosophical *idée fixe*, ignore the life that runs through it. In this attempt to find himself, every single fibre in Augustine's middle age grew together with every other, to make the *Confessions* what it is. . . .

The *Confessions* are a masterpiece of strictly intellectual autobiography. Augustine communicates such a sense of intense personal involvement in the ideas he is handling, that we are made to forget that it is an exceptionally difficult book. Augustine paid his audience of *spiritalis* the great (perhaps the unmerited) compliment of talking to them, as if they were as steeped in Neo-Platonic philosophy as himself. His Manichean phase, for instance, is discussed in terms of ideas on which the Platonists regarded themselves as far in advance of the average thought of their age, the ideas of a "spiritual" reality, and of the omnipresence of God. . . .

It is often said that the *Confessions* is not an "autobiography" in the modern sense. This is true, but not particularly helpful. Because, for a Late Roman man, it is precisely this intense, autobiographical vein in the *Confessions* that sets it apart from the intellectual tradition to which Augustine belonged.

It is more important to realize that the *Confessions* is an autobiography in which the author has imposed a drastic, fully-conscious choice of what is significant. The *Confessions* are, quite succinctly, the story of Augustine's "heart," or of his "feelings"—his *affectus*. An intellectual event, such as the reading of a new book, is registered only, as it were, from the inside, in terms of the sheer excitement of the experience, of its impact on Augustine's feelings: of the *Hortensius* of Cicero, for instance, he would never say "it changed my views" but, so characteristically, "it changed my way of feeling"—*mutavit affectum meum*.

The emotional tone of the *Confessions* strikes any modern reader.

The book owes its lasting appeal to the way in which Augustine, in his middle age, had dared to open himself up to the feelings of his youth. Yet, such a tone was not inevitable. Augustine's intense awareness of the vital role of "feeling" in his past life had come to grow upon him. . . .

Seeing that Augustine wrote his *Confessions* "remembering my wicked ways, thinking them over again in bitterness," it is amazing how little of this bitterness he has allowed to colour his past feelings. They are not made pale by regret: it is plainly the autobiography of a man who, even as a schoolboy, had known what it was to be moved only by "delight," to be bored by duty, who had enjoyed fully what he had enjoyed: "'One and one is two, two and two is four,' this was a hateful jingle to me: and the greatest treat of all, that sweet illusion—the Wooden Horse full of armed men, Troy burning and the very ghost of Creusa." . . .

Augustine analyses his past feelings with ferocious honesty. They were too important to him to be falsified by sentimental stereotypes. It is not that he had abandoned strong feeling: he merely believed it possible to transform feelings, to direct them more profitably. This involved scrutinizing them intently. . . .

The *Confessions* are one of the few books of Augustine's where the title is significant. *Confessio* meant, for Augustine, "accusation of oneself; praise of God." In this one word, he had summed up his attitude to the human condition: it was the new key with which he hoped, in middle age, to unlock the riddle of evil.

Review and Study Questions

1. What were the main factors leading up to Augustine's conversion?
2. What was the world like in which Augustine lived? How did this contribute to his conversion?
3. Why did Augustine write the *Confessions*? Discuss.

Suggestions for Further Reading

St. Augustine was not only an important and influential thinker, he was also a prolific writer, and students are encouraged to read more extensively in his works—certainly to read further in the *Confessions* and at least to try the book generally considered Augustine's most

influential work, *The City of God*. Both works are available in a number of editions. For *The City of God*, because of its size and complexity, students may prefer St. Augustine, *The City of God: An Abridged Version*, tr. Gerald G. Walsh, D. B. Zema, Grace Monahan, and D. J. Honan, ed. and intro. V. J. Bourke (New York: Doubleday, 1958). For a further sampling, *An Augustine Reader*, ed. John J. O'Meara (New York: Doubleday, 1973) or *Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1948) is recommended.

There is a wilderness of interpretive and explanatory writing about Augustine and his thought, most of it recondite in the extreme, but there are some useful aids. The most readily available and one of the most generally useful is *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955). A more strictly theological guide of the same sort is Eugène Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine*, intro. V. J. Bourke, tr. R. J. Bastian (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), the republication and translation of a famous essay from a French dictionary of Catholic theology at the turn of the century. Students can also read from a well-selected series of modern critical essays, *Saint Augustine: His Age, Life and Thought* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1969).

Of a more biographical nature is Frederik van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop* (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), a classic work dealing in great detail essentially with Augustine as Bishop of Hippo, with the city, its people, the area, and the controversies that involved its famous bishop. Three of those controversies—the Manichaean, the Donatist, and the Pelagian—are examined in considerable detail in Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). Students may prefer the more general introductory work of Warren Thomas Smith, *Augustine: His Life and Thought* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980) or two other books that are both literary-intellectual biographies: James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine* (Boston: Twayne, 1985) and Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

There is no lack of books dealing with the historical setting of Augustine and Augustinianism or with late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Three of the old standard works are still among the best: Ferdinand Lot, *The End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*, tr. Philip and Mariette Leon (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1953 [1931]); Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1898); and M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe A.D. 500 to 900*, new edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957). One of the best recent accounts of the rise of Christianity within late Roman antiquity is R. A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York: Scribner's,

1974). Students will find useful (if somewhat heavyweight) a fundamental work of reference, A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964). Both more readable and more manageable is Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: Harcourt, 1971).

