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A Look at the Life and Teachings of St. Augustine

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"After deciding to research St. Augustine, a long process of digging through the multiple books in the library and the vast amount of articles on the Internet was needed. Sifting through the voluminous load of information was a great task. However, this task supported the reason I initially chose Augustine: to learn about the man who converted, the convert who became a bishop, the bishop who became a saint, and the saint who became how we know Augustine today—as a great theologian and devoted Christian. Within his many writings, we can see how these characteristics previously mentioned are evident. We will do so by looking at a brief section from Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God*. In addition, we will examine how various scholars such as Brown, Meagher, and Placher, interpret and understand St. Augustine. Along with this textual research, we will explore a video, *St. Augustine: His Life and Spirituality*, by Fr. Benedict Groeschel. Over all, we will determine the multiple ways Augustine has been interpreted within different mediums—from text to tape—and draw a conclusion to the portrait of who is Augustine, then and now. Who is this man from the fourth Century CE? Perhaps a brief look into the biography of Augustine will begin our search for the mystery behind the man, the bishop, and the saint."

A Look at the Life and Teachings of St. Augustine

by

Jodi Rowland

Introduction

After deciding to research St. Augustine, a long process of digging through the multiple books in the library and the vast amount of articles on the Internet was needed. Sifting through the voluminous load of information was a great task. However, this task supported the reason I initially chose Augustine: to learn about the man who converted, the convert who became a bishop, the bishop who became a saint, and the saint who became how we know Augustine today—as a great theologian and devoted Christian. Within his many writings, we can see how these characteristics previously mentioned are evident. We will do so by looking at a brief section from Augustine’s *Confessions* and *City of God*. In addition, we will examine how various scholars such as Brown, Meagher, and Placher, interpret and understand St. Augustine. Along with this textual research, we will explore a video, *St. Augustine: His Life and Spirituality*, by Fr. Benedict Groeschel. Over all, we will determine the multiple ways Augustine has been interpreted within different mediums—from text to tape—and draw a conclusion to the portrait of who is Augustine, then and now. Who is this man from the fourth Century CE? Perhaps a brief look into the biography of Augustine will begin our search for the mystery behind the man, the bishop, and the saint.

Biography

Although St. Augustine’s life is full of many accomplishments and deeds, to account for them all would be strenuous and beyond our purpose. Therefore, our intention is to cover the major points in his life that lead to who he became. First, we will take a glance at his life before conversion; then we will move forward to Augustine’s work as a devoted Christian and theologian.

Tagaste in 354, the year St. Augustine was born, was a small town in North Africa not far from Hippo. At the time, Tagaste, established nearly three hundred years prior to Augustine, was a part of the Roman Empire. Following custom, Monica, his mother, did not have Augustine baptized when he was born; however, he was a catechumen, which basically meant that he was soon to be baptized (*One Hundred Saints* 122).

Unfortunately, his mother had to pray for most of her life for Augustine and his father's baptism. Monica, a devoted Christian, was married to a pagan man, who on his deathbed converted to Christianity and accepted baptism (O'Donnell 1).

Although Augustine was born into middle class, his ambitions to become a part of, and immersed in, the Roman Empire never ceased. Thus, his schooling during childhood was to prepare him as a Roman lawyer or official. At age sixteen, Augustine's study at Madauros, which was from 365 to 369, stopped when his father could no longer support him and he was forced to withdraw for a year (Placher 109). Within this year, an event, which triggered the start of a long, sought-out conversion, occurred. Along with a group of others, Augustine stole pears from a neighbor's tree. The importance of this seemingly insignificant event shows that Augustine realized his desire to seek evil for the sake of enjoyment. Although this event sent Augustine on a search for wisdom, enlightenment, and truth, eventually this search of philosophy would lead him to conversion.

Returning to his education in 370 at Carthage, Augustine studied rhetoric with a zealous ambition. During this time, his mistress, who he remained with until his move to Milan in 385, bore an illegitimate son named Adeodatus, which means "creature of God." Before his move to Milan, Augustine held his own school of rhetoric in Tagaste and

Carthage. During this time, Augustine still sought knowledge, for he struggled with a philosophical understanding of the world. Augustine joined the Manichees—a religious cult from Persia that infiltrated the Roman walls—and found a soothing relief in what he was taught. This religious cult is not far from Gnosticism: “The world seen by human eyes was the battleground for their cosmic conflict. The Manichees and their followers were the few who were on the side of the good spirit and who would be rewarded for their allegiance with eternal bliss” (O’Donnell 2). After time, the initial soothing of the cult did not satisfy Augustine’s desire for philosophy. Hoping to understand a deeper truth about Manicheism, Augustine met with a spokesman for the cult. However, when the man repeated what Augustine had already heard from his contemporaries, Augustine found that the man was a great orator who lacked the ability to be a deep thinker (Wills 34).

Now with anxiety, at age twenty-nine, Augustine traveled to Rome in search of equals and an outlet for his worries concerning the world around him. While in Rome, Augustine studied Neoplatonism. Eventually, with Monica’s persistence, in hope for his conversion, Augustine moved to Milan where he was welcomed by the bishop, Ambrose. During his time of study under Ambrose, Augustine found enlightenment from Scripture (*One Hundred Saints* 122).

It was thirty-two years living life a pagan, in the midst of the Roman Empire, searching for a philosophical explanation to his worldly desire, before Augustine converted to Christianity. All the venues he searched, prior to his conversion, left Augustine with anxiety to understand the world. His anxieties were settled with the words: *Tolle lege! Tolle lege!* (“Take up and read”) Looking at St. Paul’s conversion, we

can see a similarity: “Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard the voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (NRSV, Acts 9:3-5). In fact, it was Paul’s epistle to the Romans where Augustine found the wisdom, ease, and guidance he had been searching for so diligently. Augustine heard God’s call while children were playing a game. Thus, he picked up Paul’s letter and read. A serene calmness surrounded him, and within an instant, Augustine had wholly converted to Christianity (*One Hundred Saints* 123). Augustine was ordained at age thirty-six and became a bishop at forty-one. He remained in Hippo as the bishop for thirty-five years, writing and attacking heretics, establishing foundations in Christianity that we still hold today (<<http://www.americancatholic.org>>).

Seeing how full and engaging Augustine’s life was prior to his conversion, we can only expect his Christian life to be that much more fulfilling. This is similar to the parable of the Unjust Judge, where Luke allegorizes that if an unjust person can give, then God will give more than any human. How much more did Augustine give as a Christian? Looking at two of his most famous works, out of five million, we will see how much Augustine offers to Christian history, and how many foundations are based on his words and deeds.

Confessions

St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is one of the most profound, recognized, and widely read books in Christian history, possibly, other than the bible. The relevancy Augustine wrote in his book is still predominately found in the social customs and world affairs

nearly sixteen hundred years later. Later, we will dabble into *City of God*, which is still pertinent today. For now, we will look at his poetic, philosophical, and loving language found threaded in his work that has touched Christians and non-Christians alike for centuries.

The *Confessions* of St. Augustine have been considered his autobiography and memoir. However, neither of these genres captures the true light in which Augustine wrote, nor in the way we read *Confessions*. Augustine's work was a complete losing of oneself to God. Giving up completely all of worldly possessions, including bodily and mind possession, such as emotions and intellectual thoughts. *Confessions* is a prayer lifted up to God; one of praise, understanding, and adoration. After looking at a few of the theological and philosophical ideas presented in book ten, we will attempt to interpret their meaning and influence.

First, we will begin with a passage that states the intention Augustine held in writing *Confessions*. "I wish to act in truth, making my confession both in my heart before you and in this book before the many who will read it" (207). By carefully dissecting this statement, we can clearly understand the devotion Augustine placed in God and in writing this devotion for others to understand. The definition Augustine holds of truth is one that is completely within God. At this point in his life, Augustine had come to know God as the sole redeemer, truth, and righteousness. Within the tenth book of *Confessions*, Augustine stated: "You are the Truth which presides over all things" (249). Therefore, when he made the assessment that he is writing in truth, Augustine meant that he is writing in God; the Grace of God inspired his words. Next, Augustine established that God already hears Augustine's confession within his own heart. Perhaps viewing a

passage from the book of Psalms will help identify exactly what Augustine meant: “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you” (119:11). Clearly, the psalmist, like Augustine, understood that God is already within the walls of his body. Thus, Augustine wrote his confessions for others to read. Not only did Augustine portray his adoration and praise for the Grace of God, he showed that there is potential for even the utmost sinner to be loved in the eyes of God.

Second, we will look at how Augustine viewed the five senses and memory. Within the following poetic statement, Augustine showed his love for God and stated that we experience God through our senses: “You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odor. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace” (232). By appreciating our senses as a mediator between the divine and human, as Jesus Christ is a mediator between God and human, we come to fullness, on this earth, with God. However, the fullness we encounter on earth is not the complete unity we desire with God. Until we reach that unity—the salvation promised with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ—we hunger for more of God: “for the price of my redemption is always in my thoughts. I eat it and drink it and minister it to others; and as one of the poor I long to be filled with it, to be one of those who *eat and have their fill*” (Augustine, *Confessions* 252).

By the same token, Augustine spoke of memory: “Where and when, therefore, did I experience a state of blessed happiness, so that I am enabled to remember it and love it and long for it?” (Augustine, *Confessions* 228). Augustine spoke of memory as a file

within the mind. He stated that he has searched every file in his mind, including his memory, but cannot remember the first time he heard of God. From his questioning, he reveals that God has always been inside him, which is similar to the aforementioned passage from the book of Psalms. God was constantly there; before his conception (see John 1:1-5), during Augustine's conversion, at his death, and throughout his eternal union with God. Although our interpretation of Augustine's *Confessions* merely "scrapes the surface" of the deep theological importance of the book, we will move forward to another of his great texts revered by Christians: *City of God*.

City of God

Within *City of God*, Augustine claimed that there are two cities: one of humans and one of God. Viewing a few passages from book nine of *City of God*, we will attempt to understand and interpret what Augustine stated. Before we venture further, it is important to have a background of what the two cities represent:

Since the beginning of time, he [Augustine] said, humanity has been divided into two cities: the city of [hu]man[s], whose history is traced in the rise and fall of empires, fame, wealth, and human accomplishments, and the city of God, the company of those who love and serve God. It is the character of their love that divides people into these two cities.

Placher 118

In book nine of *City of God*, Augustine countered the Platonist idea of gods. Platonists proposed that demons act as an intercessor between gods and humans, that gods never interact with humans and vice versa. Augustine wrote, "On the other hand, they hold that 'gods never have direct contact with men [humans]' and therefore suppose that these demons are established midway between men [humans] and gods, to carry men's [human's] requests to the gods and to bring back the benefits the gods have

granted” (343). After this statement, Augustine continued to dispute the various ideas associated with this thought. Taking a look at two, out of the multiple statements, we will see a glimpse at the masterful way Augustine opposes the unorthodox views presented by certain groups, such as the Platonists and Manicheans.

1. “Are there any good demons who might assist the human soul to attain felicity?” (Augustine, *City of God* 344). Within the following passage, Augustine stated that since these men believe demons act as mediators between them (humans) and gods, since they count on *demons* to reach gods, those humans will only be led astray from the one true God. For only through God, and God alone, can the soul of humans attain felicity.

2. “The opinions of Peripatetics and Stoics about the passions” (Augustine, *City of God* 345). These philosophers felt that to describe the states of the soul one would have to call them disturbances, affections, or passions. In addition, every human, including those who are wise, are subject to passions. Basically, Augustine discussed the ways in which these groups understood passions, as inducement to sin. Then, in the next section, Augustine explained that passions, according to Christians, lead to virtue. “Scripture subjects the mind to God for his direction and assistance, and subjects the passions to the mind for their restraint and control so that they may be turned into the instruments of justice” (*City of God* 349). In this passage, Augustine reversed the philosophical understanding that all bodily things are evil and any act—around sexual intercourse—is wrong. This was to the extreme that, literally, any act of the body regarding sexual relations, whether in marriage or out, was considered sinful because the body is of humans and humans are of evil. However, Augustine drastically contradicted this

thought, declaring that it is not necessarily the action that is sinful, but the motive behind the action. An example would be having intercourse to fulfill a burning lust (sinful), versus having intercourse in a married, loving relationship physically to manifest one's love for God (not sinful). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we would consider Augustine a contemporary in our day-in-age, even though he lived in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Although we only briefly discussed *City of God*, it is important to know that Augustine maintained an important theological insight in this book. Attacking many heresies, he established the two cities, and where our priorities of *love* should be set. If we are in the city of God, then we love the world, for God created the world, but before we love these possessions, we love God. Therefore, the world is not an evil place itself; however, the actions, or motivation behind the actions of humans, create sin. When humans live within the city of humans, they have no concrete concept of true virtue, passions, and justice. These humans will be lead astray from God by their *demons*, their temptations, for they do not communicate with God alone—their demons talk for them.

St. Augustine: His Life and Spirituality

In a ninety-minute video, Fr. Benedict Groeschel journeys through the life and accomplishments of St. Augustine. Dividing this exploration into three parts, Fr. Groeschel captures the essence of Augustine. Briefly, we will give a synopsis of each part that Fr. Groeschel presented.

First we will start with the part called: Convert. Within the thirty-minute part of the video, Convert, Fr. Groeschel gives a condensed biography of Augustine. Fr. Groeschel reflected on the main portions of his life that led Augustine to conversion and

the accomplishments after he became a Christian. Since we already covered a summary of Augustine's life, we will not expand any further on this portion of the video.

Next, there was another thirty-minute presentation called: Theologian of Christian Scripture. Mostly, within this portion of the video, Fr. Groeschel talks about Augustine's writings, such as *Confessions*. In fact, a large portion of the thirty minutes is devoted to understanding the theological and philosophical ideas presented in *Confessions*. Seeing as how we already explored, in a minimal way, the *Confessions*, we will not expand much further on what Fr. Groeschel presented. However, it is beneficial to note that Fr. Groeschel explains that Augustine questioned important ideas in order to reach his reflection of God.

Finally, the third portion, another thirty-minutes of the video, was called: Spiritual Director. Within this part, Fr. Groeschel spoke about the accomplishments that Augustine made as a bishop. Examples would be Augustine's practice of faith, his hope in God, and starting the Servants of God monastery. Also, Fr. Groeschel mentioned the heretics Augustine was battling as North Africa was falling to barbarians. Previously, we mentioned a few of these heretics and their notions in the section of *City of God*. Over all, the video was an informative experience with insights into the life of St. Augustine.

Conclusion

We seem able to know only what we have made; and what we have made, of ourselves or of our world, is cast always adrift upon a sea of what we have never made. We claim vast power; and, to be sure, the forces in which we meddle are vast. However, to possess power is not only to be able to summon it forth but to call it home as well. The truest sign of power lies not in troubling the seas but in calming them. The weakest child may turn a forest into an inferno; but only fools would call that true power. We may yet show ourselves capable of bringing about a last day, but can we bring about a first day? Our power is

derivative. We mediate forces which we did not and cannot call forth from nothing. We are not primarily creators but knowers; and to knowers a degree of humility is essential. Here too Augustine is a true teacher.

Meagher 292

St. Augustine was a man of great importance and faith. Due to his achievements, in his works where he battled heretics, like in *City of God*, and because of the complete revealing of himself within *Confessions*, Augustine is renowned and remembered for being a strong Christian in faith and practice. Many of the doctrines of the Church find root in Augustine's writings, including his notion of the trinity, which can be found in *The Trinity*. Also, the establishment of the *just war theory* is deeply founded from Augustine's theological influence. Many of his ideas and thoughts match those of our contemporaries. Not only do Augustine's teachings transcend time, not only were his theological and philosophical understandings of God *before his time*, his mystical union with God has impacted the lives of many Christians throughout centuries; whether those Christians are aware of Augustine and his ideas or not. Augustine is a piece of the foundation. He is another rock on top of the first. "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:18-19).

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