

## FEAST OF ST. AUGUSTINE

Reflection

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 8b-10.

Matthew 23:13-22

Thank God for St. Monica, the Christian mother of Augustine, for if she had not persisted in pursuing him to become a Christian, who knows what would have happened to Augustine, a Doctor of the Church.

The story of Augustine's conversion contains several twists and turns. Augustine was born on November 13, 354, in Thagaste, a Roman province in North Africa (currently Algeria). In a first twist and turn, Monica implored her pagan husband, Patricius, to have their son baptized to which he agreed; but then, Patricius refused.

At the age of eleven, Augustine was sent to a school about 20 miles from Thagaste where he became very familiar with Latin literature, including Cicero, Virgil and Horace. Then, at the age of 17, he went to Carthage (currently Tunis in Tunisia) where he met great rhetoricians and also developed an interest in philosophy.

It was also in Carthage at the age of 18 that he met a woman with whom he had a son named Adeodatus, which means *God from God*. Monica was shocked, for she warned her son against fornication. Then, in 385, Augustine ended his relationship with the mother of Adeodatus to marry another teenage heiress with whom he had fallen in love. He had to wait some time for her father's permission to marry her.

But then, another twist occurred. Augustine moved to Rome to teach rhetoric. Dissatisfied with his lazy students, he went to Milan where he assumed the position of Professor of Rhetoric. It was there that he met Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who was also a master of rhetoric and an orator. Ambrose instructed him in the more intellectual forms of the Christian faith, for Augustine was one who asked questions. Ambrose baptized Augustine and his son Adeodatus at the Easter Vigil in 387 and Monica was there. I can imagine how she hugged her son and grandson and said, "Praise to you, our loving God, who has called my son and grandson into your love!"

Augustine and Adeodatus moved back to North Africa and in 391. He never married his teenaged girlfriend for Augustine was ordained a priest in Hippo, currently Algeria. Four years later, he was made Bishop of Hippo. He preached around 6000 sermons, using his rhetorical skills including similes, metaphors, repetition, rhymes, and rhetorical questions. He also wrote several books and treatises on theology and philosophy which have influenced scholars right up to this day. He died in 430 and asked that the penitential Psalms of David be posted in his room which led him "to weep freely and constantly." (Possidius' Biography)

Augustine said this about the thirty-three years that it took him to realize how the following of Christ attracted him:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new;  
late have I loved you!

You were within me, but I was outside,  
and it was there that I searched for you.

In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things  
which you created.

You were with me, but I was not with you.  
Created things kept me from you;  
yet if they had not been in you, they would have not been at all.

You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.  
You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.  
You breathed your fragrance on me;  
I drew in breath and now I pant for you.

I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.  
You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

One of my favorite quotes is the way that Augustine describes the Trinity as Love begetting Love begetting Love *eternally*:

Love needs three things: the person who is doing the loving,  
the person who is being loved  
and the love itself.

If God is love, these three aspects  
must have been present in God from all eternity,  
even before God had made any creatures to love.

And again:

Not only the Father, but the Trinity, is affirmed to be immortal.  
All things are not from the Father alone,  
but also from the Son  
and the Holy Spirit is Very God,  
equal with the Father and the Son.

And again:

Because God has made us for Godself,  
our hearts are restless until they rest in God. ...  
As love grows within you, so beauty grows;  
for love is the beauty of the soul.

Like Paul, Augustine was “thrown from his horse,” so to speak, in his mid-thirties when he met Ambrose of Milan who brought him to Christian faith. But like Paul, Timothy and Silvanus in today’s first reading, Augustine received “the grace and peace of God,” turning them into action as he preached *simply* among the poor, encouraging them to claim *fully* their dignity in God.

Let us *also* today claim our dignity in God, for in the words of St. Augustine:

A Christian is a mind through which Christ thinks,  
a heart through which Christ loves,  
a voice through which Christ speaks,  
and a hand through which Christ helps.

And let us also open our restless hearts  
for as love grows within all of us, so beauty grows;  
for love is the beauty of the soul.

Let us all show our love and beauty wherever we are  
and also recognize in each other  
God’s love and beauty!