



**ST. AUGUSTINE
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SAINT AUGUSTINE AFTER FIFTEEN HUNDRED YEARS

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IN the presence of an established fact we have no choice but to accept it. It may cause comment and attract attention, but it cannot be successfully contradicted. Such, for example, is the Church, whom, as Chesterton says, "we may oppose but whom we cannot ignore." So also the fact that Saint Augustine, fifteen hundred years after his death still remains a power and an influence in the world of thought of to-day. To have convened the Thirtieth International Eucharistic Congress in the land of his birth was no idle gesture on the part of the Holy See, nor the issuing of an Encyclical Letter by the Pope in memory of this Doctor of the Church in commemoration of the centenary, to bring before the men of today the wealth of wisdom to be found in the study of the life and works of this great Saint.

Augustine, "the greatest of the Fathers," the "Doctor of Grace," "Clarissimum Lumen Ecclesiae," is a figure that has commanded the attention, respect and admiration of men ever since as a boy at school in ancient Tagaste, his birthplace, he astonished his teachers, brought honor to his father's house, and stirred his mother's heart to hope for great things from this her son. After fifteen hundred years, while old Carthage, once Mistress of the Mediterranean in the lifetime of Augustine, is now no more than "a low, isolated hill . . . littered with heaps of debris and dotted with excavation mounds, strewn with the rubble of crumbling walls and shattered marbles,"¹ the memory and influence of Augustine still thrive in the most remote corners of the earth.

¹E. A. Powell, *In Barbary* (New York, 1926). p. 81.

That his memory should be so long-lived finds explanation not only in the power and influence of the man's personality, but also in the permanence and pertinence of the doctrines which he taught and the principles he laid down. He was the mouth-piece of the Church, one of her teachers, an Apostle. The fact that he so put before the minds of men the eternal truths, and so translated them into action, that those who heard him were profoundly moved has given him a title to reverence in the minds and memory of men of all time. He is not only a man of a particular age, whose doctrines have served as a guide to theologians and philosophers, but his life was such that by imitating him, studying him rather, modern youth may come to the rescue of the world. We need only consider his age and the part he played in it, with its problems, struggles, temptations, and vices, to better appreciate the parallel between it and the twentieth century. The conditions surrounding his spirit and character find a counterpart in our time.

Augustine, it must be remembered, was the son of a mixed marriage. His father, Patricius, was a pagan, or at best a none too exemplary Catechumen, whose indifference did much to lead the impressionable youth astray. In the face of such an attitude Monica's efforts to restrain her son were almost fruitless, and Augustine relates how he regarded with the conceit characteristic of youth the admonitions of his mother—"These seemed to me womanish advices, which I should blush to obey." Thus he continues: "I ran headlong with such blindness, that amongst my equals I was ashamed of a less shamelessness, when I heard them boast of their flagitiousness, yea, and the more boasting, the more they were degraded: and I took pleasure, not only in the pleasure of the deed, but in the praise."² So he "walked the streets of Babylon, and wallowed in the mire thereof"³ until, as was inevitable, he became disgusted with the dissolute practices of his companions and sought for peace of mind and satisfaction in the study of philosophy and the classics. This was at Carthage, whither he had gone to study and eventually to teach Rhetoric. In this quest for wisdom his "guide on the way was kind, clever, wordy, vain old Marcus Tullius Cicero,"⁴ whose *Hortensius* induced him to believe that herein was the path to truth and happiness. So for twelve years he ran the gamut of all the philosophies of his day, finally succumbing to

² *Conf.* ii, 3, 7.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Andrew Lang, *Adventures Among Books*, p. 167.

the plausibleness of the Manichaeans' theories regarding life's all-absorbing problems. It was at this time that he came upon the Bible and to him it "seemed unworthy to be compared to the stateliness of Tully."⁵ He preferred the classic prose of his friend Cicero. Not long after he was to meet with another disappointment as the inadequacy of the tenets of the Manichees dawned upon him. His doubts and difficulties regarding the fundamental doctrines of this sect were referred by those of its supporters whom he had consulted, to a certain Faustus, a learned exponent of Manichaeism. Augustine's interview with Faustus left him unconvinced and disillusioned, and the search for truth, and contentment began again.

Thus the "wandering outlaw of his own dark mind" Augustine steeped himself in all the activities of the University life of his day, and strove to drown his discontent in dissipation. Although to all appearances calm and contained this placid exterior was but a mask for a troubled soul, ever seeking, ever failing to find peace. He did not fall into sin so much because he was logical, but because he was weak, or rather because the systems of philosophy he embraced failed to support him in a moral crisis. At best it was a sore struggle to combat temptation with the puny weapons of a soulless philosophy. We find him attending the circus, the theater, the games of all sorts that characterized life in the Carthage of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Fifteen centuries separate Augustine's time and our own, but the same heart beats beneath the tuxedo and the toga, the same troubles, the same anxieties, the same yearnings for real peace. Surrounded on all sides by influences that tend to distort his sense of moral values, the modern student has much to cope with in his every day school life. In the classroom he must listen to "educators and philosophers who spend their lives in searching for a universal moral code of education, as if there existed no decalogue, no gospel law, no law even of nature stamped by God on the heart of man, promulgated by right reason, and codified in positive revelation by God Himself in the ten commandments."⁶ "On the campus he must associate with men whose standards, such as they are, cannot be said to have the best effect on his moral life. Consequently he leads a reckless existence trying out some new fad or following in the

⁵ *Conf.* iii. 5. 9.

⁶ Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI on "Christian Education of Youth," (Vatican Polyglot Press, 1929), p. 22.

footsteps of some new fashion, either in philosophy, if he is serious enough, or, what is more likely, something less abstruse and subtle. His life is made up of distractions, for there will always be from time to time some inward voice goading him on to seek for a more rational mode of living, which voice he can no more strive to silence than he can restrain his animal impulses without divine grace and the support found only in the Church. The confusion arising from misconceptions of what liberty and license are does not add to the solution of the problems confronting the youth of to-day. To do as Augustine did in his early life is a mistake as that great mind soon realized.

There came a crisis in the life of Augustine when looking upon the shards of his life scattered at his feet, disgusted with the disorder of his younger days, disappointed in the Bible, and disillusioned in finding the system of philosophy he first considered faultless a mass of contradictions and false principles, he left Carthage and set out for Rome and thence to Milan. Here he met Ambrose and came under the spell of his doctrine. More doubts arose in his mind, which were to be dispelled only with his entrance into the true Church. His vacillations and hesitation even on the threshold of the Church are poignantly and perhaps too harshly described in the *Confessions*. Augustine does not spare himself and in fact seems to overemphasize his misdeeds, which may in reality not have been as gross as he would have us believe. Hence it is that we are sometimes startled by the rough simplicity of his language. Cardinal Newman, who, as one "who loved to choose and see his path," sympathized with Augustine's difficulties, has written: "How far he (Augustine) had fallen into any great excesses is doubtful. He uses language of himself which may have the worst of meanings, but may, on the other hand, be but the expression of deep repentance and spiritual sensitiveness."⁷ In the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine we find a soul stripped naked, for the whole world to see, and wonder at. It seemed as if their author regarded those who were to read his book as outsiders, bystanders while he and his God conversed, for "to him, as to Newman, there were two and two only luminously self-evident beings, himself and his Creator."⁸

After a few conferences with Saint Ambrose, Augustine retired to Cassiacum with his mother and some friends. In the midst of his perplexities he heard a voice telling him to take

⁷ *Historical Sketches*, (London, 1888.) Vol. II, p. 142.

⁸ J. J. Reilly, *Newman as a Man of Letters*, (New York, 1925), p. 260.

up and read the book at his feet. It was the Epistles of Saint Paul, wherein he tells the Romans to "put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh."⁹ "No further would I read," he tells us, "nor needed I; for instantly, at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away."¹⁰ His quest for God was ended. His conversion, although in a sense miraculous was nevertheless, the outcome of a lifetime of sincere and constant searching after truth. For forty years he was to be the champion and defender of the Faith against the Donatists, Pelagians, and Manichaeans of his own time, and for centuries to come he was to be the source for those who were to lay the ghosts of these same sects as they reappeared in each succeeding age.

In his conversion Saint Augustine has given an example of how inevitable it is that a man with a sincere intention and a keen mind should come to but one conclusion regarding God and Church. Augustine was logical, consistent, and uncompromising. If he be followed step by step up to the moment of his conversion one cannot but be convinced. In writing and working for his own age Augustine wrought for all ages. Evidence of this may be had from his Confessions which "are most current in that they come home to men's business and bosoms." They "appeal to that side of human nature which knows by instinct that the greatest romance in the world is the romance of an individual's life."¹¹

"To stress some practical points which the modern mind may dwell upon with profit: it is obvious that those who read Augustine will not be trapped in that pernicious error which spread abroad during the eighteenth century, to wit, that the instinctive tendencies of the will are, all of them, good, and hence are neither to be feared nor checked. On this false principle are based those schemes of education which have for their final result the indiscriminate treatment of the sexes and the total neglect of precaution against the nascent passions of childhood and youth. Also from the same comes the unrestrained liberty of writing and reading, of staging and witnessing plays which involve not merely snares and dangers for innocence and purity but also actual downfall and ruin. . . . Augustine teaches that man since the fall of our first parents is no longer

⁹ Rom. xiii, 13-14.

¹⁰ Conf. viii, 12. 29.

¹¹ J. J. Reilly, op. cit. p. 256.

possessed of the uprightness in which he was created and through which, so long as he enjoyed it, he was easily and readily led to right action. In his present mortal condition, on the contrary, he must withstand and restrain the evil desires, by which he is drawn and driven. . . ."¹² As an instance of the respect in which Augustine is held by theologians we may cite Saint Thomas Aquinas the only other Doctor of the Church to contest Augustine's high rank, who, rather than disagree with his views distinguishes the sense in which his arguments may be taken, thus preserving the authority of this great master without relinquishing his own opinion.

While dwelling upon the early life of Augustine we are tempted to regard it as a necessary prelude to his later life that of deep repentance and sympathy for those who strayed as he did. The fact is that although Augustine was better able to sympathize with others who may have fallen away, he never ceases to lament this period of his life, and would rather never to have lived so. But since the fact remains that his early life was not all that could be desired he is in better position to help others, with his experience of the same difficulties and doubts. Hence we may fifteen hundred years after his death apply a phrase of Saint Jerome's to this great Doctor of the Church: "The world resounds with thy praise. The Catholics admire and honor thee as the restorer of the ancient faith (*conditorem antiquae rursus fidei*)."¹³

¹² Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI on "Saint Augustine," p. 31. (N.C.W.C. transl., 1930).

¹³ Ep. 195, inter Epp. S. Aug. cited by O. Bardenhewer in "Patrology: Lives and Works of the Fathers of the Church," p. 477. Transl.

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