



The Confessions

Saint Augustine

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THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

A Translation for the 21st Century

Part I – Books

Volume 1

The Confessions

THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

A Translation for the 21st Century

The Confessions

I/1

introduction, translation and notes

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Introduction

The background to The Confessions

Augustine took up his pen to write this book in about 397, when he was aged 43. He had been a Christian for some ten years, a priest for about six years, and a bishop for only two. It is probably the greatest of his very numerous writings, and certainly the one best loved and most widely read during the more than sixteen centuries that have passed since that day.

His foremost reason for attempting the work was that he believed that God wanted him to do so (XI,1,1), and he therefore prayed repeatedly for the grace to write it. Yet *The Confessions* are themselves a prayer: a long, passionate, intimate prayer to God, which Augustine wishes us to overhear. So he prayed to his God to enable him to offer this prayer. The paradox is entirely typical of him, and a key to understanding the book.

External circumstances also prompted the enterprise. There must have been many people in his own dioceses, and in the wider Church of Roman Africa, who had misgivings about this new and brilliant bishop. His pre-baptismal life raised questions, especially his long adherence to the Manichean sect and his scornful attacks on the Catholic Church in the days before his conversion. Some kind of *apologia pro vita sua* was clearly appropriate. More positively, there were other educated persons of philosophical bent who had, like Augustine, embraced Christianity at a mature age after a long search for the truth, and these would be extremely interested in what he had to say. Beyond these, the wider circle of Augustine's fellow-Christians, attuned to him by charity and willing to look into their own hearts with comparable honesty, would hear in his story some echoes of their own experience.

Outer and inner journeys

Augustine's "Africa" was very different from the vast and varied continent evoked by that name today. Cut off from the rest of the continent by the Aures mountains and the impassable Sahara to the south, it had been Carthaginian country for centuries until Rome subjugated Carthage in the 2nd century B.C. Since then, Roman civilization had been imposed on the ethnic substrate. Agriculture,

cities, commerce, municipal organization, marble-encrusted buildings, baths, an efficient road network, Roman education and Roman law were taken for granted. The whole region was prosperous and proud, and it looked north, across the Mediterranean toward Rome.

Augustine was born into a middle-class family at Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras in Algeria) on 13 November 354. His father was a local official and a pagan, his mother Monica a Christian. Though enrolled in early childhood as a catechumen, the young Augustine seems to have learned little of Christianity, and was not baptized. He was educated locally at first, and at about 17 was sent to Carthage for higher studies in an educational system dominated by classical literature and rhetoric. At Carthage he began to cohabit with the unnamed woman he loved. It was a marriage in all but name, and they were exclusively faithful to each other for about fourteen years. When Augustine was about 18 she bore him a son whom he named Adeodatus (“Godsend”).

During his time in Carthage Augustine joined the Manichees. Manicheanism was a theosophical system founded by the Persian Mani or Manes, an amalgam of some elements of Christianity with Gnostic beliefs and bizarre speculations. It held that there were two opposing powers, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. The latter, evil power was responsible for the existence of the material world, within which some particles of light had become trapped. The struggle of the light particles to escape was at its most intense in human beings, who therefore experienced fierce tension within themselves between good and evil. This radically dualistic system implied a God who, though good, was not omnipotent – indeed, was helpless in face of the world’s evil. It also entailed rejection of any possibility of divine incarnation (since flesh was evil), and a matter-hating asceticism on the part of serious and committed Manichees. Augustine was an adherent (probably a fringe-adherent) for about nine years. That such a bizarre sect could captivate him was probably due in large part to its radical attempt to grapple with the problem of evil. He struggled for years with the theoretical question of how evil could exist in a world created by a good and omnipotent God; and he was vividly conscious all his life of the tensions within himself. He longed passionately for wisdom, for beauty, for love, but would have to make a long inner journey before he could exclaim, “Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!” (X,27,38).

His student days over, Augustine taught rhetoric for some time in

Africa. Disgusted by the hooliganism of his students, he sailed in 383 for Rome, where students were reputed to be better behaved. On discovering that the student problem there was the dodging of fees, Augustine competed successfully for a professorship in Milan. "And so I came to Milan, and to Bishop Ambrose," he says (V,13,23). The geographical move led him to a turning-point in his inner journey.

A vital stage in the search for truth: Neo-Platonism

At the age of nineteen Augustine had read a (now lost) work of Cicero, the *Hortensius*, and had responded ardently to its invitation to seek wisdom. His life at the time was disordered and he had far to go before his passionate thirst for wisdom and truth would be in any degree satisfied, but the longing never left him. On his arrival in Milan two influences began to work powerfully upon him. The first was Neo-Platonism, brought to his attention by certain "books of the Platonists" which came into his hands at this time. The second influence was the preaching of Saint Ambrose.

Neo-Platonism derived from the teaching of the great Plotinus (A.D. c.204-270) as recorded by his disciple Porphyry. Central to Plotinus' thought was the One, or the Good, which is the primary, transcendent, unchanging reality, beyond all definition, unlimited. From the One, by some kind of rebellious self-assertion, sprang Intellect, which is the timeless divine mind, thinking itself. Within Intellect were contained the Platonic "Forms" or "Ideas." Intellect immediately turned back toward the One in contemplation, yet Intellect was not pure unity, but unity in multiplicity. A third hypostasis, which Plotinus called Soul, sprang from Intellect. Soul originated time, which was a restlessness born of desire for succession in preference to simultaneous, eternal being. Discursive thought became Soul's mode of understanding; but the higher levels of Soul were in immediate contact with Intellect, by which it was illuminated, and through contemplation Soul could transcend itself and rise with Intellect to union with the One. The lower levels of Soul cast upon formless matter an image of the Forms contained in Intellect, thus giving rise to the ordered material cosmos. Human beings were held to exist on the lowest divine level, that of Soul. But their duty was to strive upward by purification of thought and moral behavior, and so awaken to their divine reality. The goal of philosophy must be to attain to union with the One, or the Good, by becoming what we truly are.

In this system there is no real question of sin, or any need of redemption or grace, since our origin has already endowed us with all the dynamism needed for return to the One. Nonetheless Neo-Platonism made a powerful appeal to Augustine. He had hitherto been hampered by inability to conceive the notion of a purely spiritual substance, and had imagined God as some enormous extended body, however ethereal. Catholic belief that men and women are created in God's image therefore seemed to him grotesque. Now he found in Neo-Platonism a less unworthy notion of God as utterly real, purely spiritual, undivided, eternal, the One who is the source of all the multiplicity of beings. At the same time the Neo-Platonic invitation to self-transcendence spoke to his deepest longings for union with that Reality.

Yet he eventually came to see as insufficient the system which helped him on his way. The God to whom Augustine aspired was not the remote, indifferent One of Plotinus, but the loving God revealed in the Old and New Testaments who constantly seeks, attracts, heals and guides, the humble God of the incarnation and redemption who forms a people for himself, the God encountered in the Church. The preaching of Ambrose, a thoroughly cultured man, himself conversant with Neo-Platonism and possessed of considerable oratorical powers, fascinated Augustine. Certain passages in the Old Testament had repelled him by their moral crudity, but now Ambrose's explanation of the "spiritual sense" of scripture helped to dissolve another block in Augustine's mind. Intellectually, he was almost ready to embrace Christianity.

Moral struggle, and conversion

The moral obstacles remained. At this time Augustine discovered Saint Paul, and was particularly impressed by the struggle depicted so vividly in Romans 7: the pull of the flesh against the spirit and our absolute need of grace. Chastity appeared to him impossible. His common-law wife had by this time been dismissed on Monica's insistence, to Augustine's bitter regret. It seems that no immediate prospect of honorable marriage was open to him, and he regressed into a loveless short-term liaison. But the persuasion was building up. Book VIII of *The Confessions* relates the effect on Augustine and his friends of a series of conversion stories, and leads to the famous, dramatic scene in the garden, where Augustine capitulated in August 386.

Full of peaceful joy, Augustine retired to a country retreat for the

next few months with his mother, his friends and his son. The following spring, during the night of Easter 387, Augustine, Adeodatus, Alypius and various other friends were baptized. Not long after this they travelled to Ostia to await a ship for Africa, and there occurred the mystical experience he and Monica shared. This famous event is related in Book IX, 23-25. Monica's death soon afterward closes Book IX, and with it the narrative part of *The Confessions*.

The question of the last four books

All we know of the rest of Augustine's long, turbulent, fruitful, ardent, argumentative pastoral life comes from sources other than *The Confessions*. Instead of continuing his story he gives us four long books on, respectively, "memory", time and eternity, the creation of heaven and earth, and the adumbration of the Church in the days of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. Various explanations have been offered of the relationship between Books X-XIII and the preceding narrative. One of the most attractive is that Augustine intended his personal story to serve as an illustration, or particular exemplification, of the thesis he spells out in the last books: that only by turning back to its creator can the creature, sunk in its own darkness, instability, and formless futility, find its destined happiness. The idea of conversion would then be central to the whole work, and Augustine's own story would be the more clearly seen to have a universal reference, like that of the prodigal son to whom he often compares himself.

The disconcerting presence of the last four books reminds us that Augustine was not, and never professed to be, writing autobiography in the modern sense. He referred to the work many years later as "The thirteen books of my Confessions" (*Revisions* II,6,1). To hear him, we need to have some idea of what he meant by "confession."

The meaning of "confession"

There is, first, the confession of sin, a meaning commonly understood. There is plenty of this. In addition to his sexual failings Augustine confesses to vanity, concern to be praised, inordinate desire to excel, sycophancy toward the great, and acceptance of the compromises it entailed. He dwells at bewildering length on the apparently motiveless theft of pears in adolescence; this episode may be intended to symbolize his personal re-enactment of the fall

of Adam and Eve, and it also demonstrates the essentially irrational character of sin. Camaraderie was significant in the affair, a perverted and immature form of the gift for friendship which was to be highly significant in Augustine's life.

A second level of "confession" is confession of God's glory, a meaning which pervades the psalms, beloved of Augustine. *The Confessions* open with praise, and throughout the work he praises God for the great glories of creation and salvation, for the unnumbered mercies of God in his life, for providence, for healing, and for forgiveness.

A third level is suggested by Augustine's constantly repeated prayer to God to enable him to make his confession: "I can say nothing right to other people unless you have heard it from me first, nor can you even hear anything of the kind from me which you have not first told me" (X,2,2). He struggles to keep communication open between his own speech and the Word which is its creative source. At the deepest level of creaturely being, divine creativity gives birth to human self-expression; the eternal generation of the Word is mirrored in this special kind of creature which expresses itself by wrestling with words and meaning.

Human words, however inadequate and stumbling, must therefore transcend themselves and remain one with the Word, or they will degenerate into *loquacitas*, talkativeness (III,6,10). It follows that the graced word is co-creative. The creature comes to be in responding to God, in speaking the word of faith and love and obedience back to the God who says, "Let us make man according to our image and likeness." The word of confession is therefore not simply a statement of what is, of the present truth of oneself, seen and admitted in the light of God's presence. It is more than a static recognition; it is a creative process. The human speaker is at one with God who is creating him; he becomes co-creator of himself, constituting himself in being by confession.

The individual within the story of salvation

And so we leave him at the end of this, his most personal book, poring over Genesis, asking to receive, seeking in order to find, knocking as he longs for the door to be opened (XIII,38,53). The light that God created on the first day is the same light that shone on Augustine at the Easter of his baptism, and on every believer. In the story of creation, in the psalms, in the gospels, in the letters of Paul, Augustine read and pondered a story that was his own story, one in

which he and every believer or hearer is engaged down the centuries until its final consummation.

Note on the numbering

The earliest manuscripts recognized only a division into thirteen books. Separate chapters within these were marked from the fifteenth century. Paragraphs were numbered within the chapters from the late seventeenth century. In this edition all three sets of numbers appear; thus X,31,43 means Book X, Chapter 31, numbered paragraph 43. The title to each book, and the subheadings within the text, have been added by the translator.

Book I

Infancy and Boyhood

Opening prayer and meditation

1. 1. Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise;¹ your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning.² And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we who carry our mortality about with us,³ carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud.⁴ Yet these humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is inquiet until it rests in you.

Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first: to call upon you or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you? But how can people call upon someone in whom they do not yet believe? And how can they believe without a preacher?⁵ But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise him,⁶ for as they seek they find him,⁷ and on finding him they will praise him. Let me seek you, then, Lord, even while I am calling upon you, and call upon you even as I believe in you; for to us you have indeed been preached. My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher.

2. 2. How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, when by the very act of calling upon him I would be calling him into myself? Is there any place within me into which my God might come? How should the God who made heaven and earth⁸ come into me? Is there any room in me for you, Lord, my God? Even heaven and earth, which you have made and in which you have made me—can even they contain you? Since nothing that exists would exist without you, does it follow that whatever exists does in some way contain you? But if this is so, how can I, who am one of these existing things, ask you to come into me, when I would not exist at

1. See Ps 47:2(48:1); 95(96):4;

144(145):3.

2. See Ps 146(147):5.

3. See 2 Cor 4:10.

4. See 1 Pt 5:5.

5. See Rom 10:14.

6. See Ps 21:27(22:26).

7. See Mt 7:7-8; Lk 11:10.

8. See Gn 1:1.