

ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354 - 430 A.D.)

St. Augustine is acknowledged as having been one of the most important influences on the development of western Christianity. The theological system he developed dominated the mediaeval church until the 13th century and its influence is still felt today. After the authors of the New Testament, he has probably been the most influential Christian writer. A large number of his writings have survived and we know a great deal about his life from his '*Confessions*', written about 397 A.D. This work was not only intended as an autobiography but also as a long prayer of penitence and thanksgiving for the grace of God evidenced during the first 33 years of his life.

The greatest of the Latin Fathers of the Church, St. Augustine lived during a period in which the Roman Empire was in deep decline and Christianity was taking root as the official religion. It was a time of great political stress and widespread religious anxiety. Augustine's own spiritual struggles reflect the historical transition from a dying pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages. '*The Confessions*' reveals much about his formative years, when he strove to overcome his sensual desires, find faith, and understand religious and philosophical doctrines.

St. Augustine was born at Thagaste (modern Souk-Ahras, Algeria) on 13th November, 354 A.D. Although his father, Patricius, was to become a Christian only when near his death, Augustine's mother, Monica, was a devout Christian. She saw to his education in this religion, but in accord with what was then the custom, his baptism into the faith of his mother was deferred. Owing to the promise he showed in his early schooling, Augustine was sent to study rhetoric in Carthage in 370 A.D. While successfully pursuing his studies, he abandoned the Christian moral teachings of his early years. He took a mistress, with whom he was to live for 10 years, and fathered a son, Adeotus (the God-given).

At the age of nineteen Augustine read Cicero's dialogue 'Hortensius', a work that was an exhortation to philosophy. According to Augustine, "Suddenly all the vanity that I had hoped in I saw as worthless, and with an incredible intensity of desire I longed after immortal wisdom" (*Confessions, III, 4*). To this end, Augustine embraced the Persian religion of Manichaeism which held that in the world there were opposing forces of good and evil and that their struggle with one another was represented in man by the conflict between the soul, the good element, and the body, the evil one. Manichaeism made a very strong appeal to Augustine because of its materialistic outlook and account of evil.

Augustine opened a school of rhetoric in Carthage in 373 A.D. and in 383 A.D. he went to Rome to teach rhetoric. Unfortunately his students had the unpleasant habit of leaving their instructors just before the payment of fees was due and so, the following year he took a civic post in Milan as professor of rhetoric.

During his year in Rome Augustine became very sympathetic to the scepticism of Cicero who held that certitude about any topic was not attainable and that therefore man's beliefs should be regarded as dubious. However, in Milan, Augustine was deeply impressed by the sermons of the bishop Ambrose. Around Ambrose there was a community whose members were as much Platonists as Christians. They regarded Platonism as compatible with, and an anticipation of Christianity and believed that evil was only a privation of good. Augustine's skepticism and his former Manichaean views were gradually transformed by these new convictions but still, this extraordinary transformation was to him only an intellectual one. What was lacking and what he now longed for in a state of torment, was the conversion of his will to Christianity and the acceptance of Christ.

This event is described in the famous 'garden scene' in Augustine's '*Confessions*' (VII, 12). Upon hearing a child's voice repeating the words 'Take and read', Augustine opened his Scriptures at random and saw this passage in St. Paul's letter to the Romans (13:13): "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences." Augustine then notes, "I had no wish to read further and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart."

From then on St. Augustine was a confirmed Christian, and he was baptised by Ambrose on Easter 387 A.D. In 388 A.D., following the death of his mother, St. Monica, Augustine returned to Thagaste and established a religious community. Ordained a priest in 391 A.D., he founded a similar community in Hippo (modern Bone, Algeria), becoming bishop there in 396 A.D. Augustine then busied himself with pastoral labours and wrote a vast number of theological and philosophical works. On 28th August 430 A.D. St. Augustine died whilst Hippo was under siege by the Vandals.

Augustine was canonized by popular recognition and later declared a Doctor of the Church in recognition of the great influence and importance of his teaching and preaching. His feast day is celebrated on 28th August, the date of his death.

