Anthós Journal (1990-1996)

Volume 1 | Number 5 Article 4

1996

Confessions

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Augustine of Hippo was a man who wanted two inharmonious states. He wanted to have the security of an absolute and sustaining faith in God, a faith that would have proscribed and clear definitions of what he should believe. At the same time, he was quite unable to control the roaming of his restless, seeking mind. Seeing apparent contradictions in Scriptures, he wanted to be able to explain them in a way that would allow his logical mind to accept them, not on faith alone but on the satisfaction of all his questions. The *Confessions* tells the tale of his life leading up to his final conversion to Catholicism, then offers a lengthy treatise on dealing with temptation, and then moves to an explication of the first book of Genesis. Written 10 years after his conversion, the *Confessions* is both an exploration of his changed thinking since his conversion and a message from the Bishop of Hippo to his congregants. It is his attempt to reconcile his need for faith with his consuming doubts that makes the *Confessions* an intensely personal and intimate portrait of the man, Augustine. Complicating the story is the Bishop's acute awareness that his convictions about God and the Church are also his public argument for a Church doctrine that has been revised and rewritten for 300 years. Augustine is aware that others in the Church hierarchy, as well as other Christian sects, have very different ideas about the tenets of their faith and he feels a responsibility to argue for the conclusions he has so painfully acquired.

Augustine's first attempt to reconcile his desire for faith and his need to have his questions logically explained was to join the Manichee faith as an "auditor." At 18 years old, the Manichee

faith seemed to him to offer answers that allowed him to reject the idea of acceptance on faith alone while at the same time to be free of guilt for doing so. As an auditor, he could serve the Manichee elite and be "dependent for his salvation on their mysterious prayers" (Brown, 392). In looking back on this phase of his life, which lasted 13 years, Augustine said, "I thought it was not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us. It flattered my pride to think that I incurred no guilt, and when I did wrong, not to confess it so that you might bring healing to a soul that had sinned against you" (5, 10).

The attraction of the Manichee faith was twofold. Augustine had been introduced to Cicero and, on the basis of this introduction to philosophy, was in search of understanding the basic questions of life. The Manichee faith gave easy answers to his questions about the nature of God and the nature of evil. It exempted him to some degree from responsibility for his choices, one of which was to have a mistress. It allowed him to pursue his worldly ambitions to acquire status, power and money. In addition, it gave him an alternative to the choice his mother, Monica, was pushing at him. Monica wanted passionately for Augustine to embrace the Catholic faith, which he refused to do. His refusal was based on his initial, quick reading of the Scriptures and his belief that they were unclear and untrustworthy as a source of final knowledge. "[When I first read the Scriptures, to me] they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths" (3, 5).

Probably another reason for Augustine's rejection of Catholicism was his mother's very insistence on it. Monica was extremely ambitious for her boy; in her mind, acceptance of the Catholic faith would not only provide him with the salvation she

believed was to be found only in that faith, but would also be a vehicle for her worldly ambitions for him to be realized. Monica and Augustine's father, Patricius, had sacrificed for his education and expected him to become a lawyer, a good way to gain an entree into government circles, but Augustine chose teaching as a career. Augustine's resistance to at least some of Monica's plans may have had to do with his recognition that her devotion to him was excessive, creating a desire in him to pull away and make his own decisions. When he decided to leave Carthage and go to Rome, he found it necessary to trick Monica in order to leave her behind, "For, as mothers do, and far more than most, she loved to have me with her" (5, 8). It is probably significant that Augustine's favorite story as a boy was the episode in the Aeneid when Aeneas sails away and leaves Dido behind. "What were your feelings, Dido, then? What were the sighs you uttered at that sight, when far and wide, from your high citadel, you saw the beaches boil and turmoil take the waters, with such a vast uproar before your eyes? Voracious Love, to what do you not drive the hearts of men?" (Aeneid, 4, 561 ff.). Augustine says about his mother, "The wind blew and filled our sails, and the shore disappeared from sight. The next morning she was wild with grief, pouring her sighs and sorrows in your ear...you used her too jealous love for her son as a scourge of sorrow for her just punishment" (5, 8).

Unlike Dido, who died by her own hand, however, Monica followed Augustine, and eventually was successful in convincing him to comply with one of her plans; she managed to gain his agreement to an advantageous marriage with a girl from a wealthy, Catholic family. She hoped that this would lead not only to his advancement but also be influential in converting him to the one true faith. Even though the marriage never took place, the consequence of this decision was a key factor in bring-

ing Augustine to his conversion, in a way Monica could not have foreseen. Upon becoming betrothed, it was necessary for Augustine to separate from his mistress of many years "and this was a blow that crushed my heart to bleeding, because I loved her dearly" (6, 18). The mistress returned to Africa, vowing to never take another man but Augustine, in continuing pain and loneliness, immediately sought another mistress. This failed to still the ache in his heart and his recognition that his loneliness was not for sexual fulfillment and could not be filled by association with another woman was one of the factors contributing to his despair. He knew once again that the only solace he could find would be in God.

At this time, Augustine began to read the translated works of some of the Greek philosophers—particularly Plotinus, a Neoplatonist—and this reading gave him, in essence, a new way to see the Scriptures. Plotinus had combined the thinking of Plato and Aristotle with a variation of the idea of Divine Trinity. Augustine's reading prompted him "to look for truth as something incorporeal, and I caught sight of your invisible nature, as it is known through your creatures" (7, 20). For a period of time, Augustine's metaphysical questions seemed to be answered and he later looked back on this as a moment of danger: "I might have thought it possible for a man who read nothing but the Platonist books to derive the same spirit from them alone" (7, 20). Augustine needed to have the security of an outer authority, a stable and consoling discipline. He "turned to find a discipline to complement the lucid spirituality of the Platonists" and he found it in Paul (Brown, 104). "I seized eagerly upon the venerable writings inspired by your Holy Spirit, especially those of the apostle Paul" (7, 21). Paul's commentary on philosophers must have seemed directed straight at him: "So what about these wise men, these scholars, these brilliant debaters of the world's

great affairs? God has made them all look foolish and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense. For God in His wisdom saw to it that the world would never find God through human brilliance and then He stepped in and saved all those who believed his message, which the world calls foolish and silly" (I Corinthians 1, 20-21).

In all Augustine's searching for God and searching for answers, there is a constant conflict. Having decided to be a Catholic, "I believed it was in Christ...affirmed by the authority of your Catholic Church, that you had laid the path of man's salvation," he was quite unable to placidly accept that he was saved by his embrace of the Catholic faith. His restless mind still sought for answers: "I was still burning with anxiety to find the source from which evil comes" (7, 7). The conflict rose to a higher and higher pitch. This experience of conflict was part of the fiber of Augustine's life. It permeated the cultural tradition in which he had been educated. The texts he studied by Homer and his favorite, Virgil, contained endless, bloody conflicts. In fact, in his view, if a thing is worth fighting for, it has value; put another way, it is the fight that brings value to the prize. The problem was that both sides of the battle were within Augustine. If he was to win, then he was also to lose. Small wonder that he clung so tightly to Paul, who expressed the same agony of inward struggle: "But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Romans 7, 23-24). Augustine had to follow the advice of another fighter in the war against the flesh, Plotinus: "Withdraw into yourself and look" *(Enneads;* Beauty, 54). This turning inward was again a part of the cultural fiber of Augustine's life. The works of the

philosophers that he discovered as a young man introduced him to this idea of looking within for answers. The whole movement of the literary and historical legacy he inherited was a gradual turning from public, outer life to a private, inward reflection of the individual person. During his final struggle towards his conversion, Augustine's retreat further and further into the garden at the house in which he was staying reflected this movement inward. His final battle would take place in the farthest corner of the garden, away even from his closest friend.

There would be only one possible solution, and he avoided it as long as possible. If he was to devote himself to the life of a servus Dei, a servant of God, he would have to absolutely renounce his secular life, including carnal pleasures. This was a fairly common practice at that time for philosophers and for baptized Catholics. In fact, it was one way in which the Christian religion, which was open to all classes and both sexes, differentiated itself as a separate entity: "Strict codes of sexual discipline...provided the Christian Church with a distinctive code of behavior"; in particular, the "gesture of continence" was seen as "a form of physical heroism equivalent to...[facing down] the chill fear of death" (Brown, 60).

While Augustine's final struggle took place in the farthest reaches of the garden, his decision was made in front of a witness, his friend Alypius, and he rushed also to tell his mother of his choice, thus returning dramatically to the public from the private arena. His capitulation was absolute and he put absolute faith into his decision for baptism, believing that "if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. The old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" (II Corinthians 5, 17). Ten years later, a sadder, wiser Augustine will acknowledge that even in the area of fornication, which he has conquered completely in his conscious mind, he is still helpless to

control while sleeping. He has many areas of struggle, including the pleasures of eating and drinking and of desiring the good opinion of others, and he has come to believe that it is only in death that we will reach complete joy and peace in God: "You will perfect your mercies in me until I reach the fullness of peace, which I shall enjoy with you in soul and body, when death is swallowed up in victory" (10, 30). He is also gradually changing his belief that man has the power to turn towards God. If his own deep desire, passionate commitment and unremitting dedication to God did not result in living a life of peace in God, he has to come to the conclusion that it is God who must rescue us from the sins of the flesh; we cannot rescue ourselves. This is one of the messages he wishes to bring to the Church.

Augustine's final three books of the *Confessions* are an exposition of the first chapter of Genesis. In it, he describes the foundations of his faith as he describes the foundations of the creation of heaven and earth. Essential to this basic faith is the recognition of God's goodness and truth. While he carefully describes the meaning that he believes underlies the words of Genesis, he is humble enough to acknowledge that his "truth" is only the truth as far as he has had it revealed to him by God. Possibly the most important information Augustine wished to convey was that all people have the right to interpret Scriptures in their own way, provided we are searching for the truth, "For how can it harm me that it should be possible to interpret these words in several ways, all of which may yet be true? What harm is there if a reader believes what you, the Light of all truthful minds, show him to be the true meaning? It may not even be the meaning which the writer had in mind, and yet he too saw in them a true meaning, different though it may have been from this" (12, 18).

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