

READING FROM *THE CONFESSIONS OF ST. AUGUSTINE*

Translated by Frank Sheed, c. 1942. (Hackett Publishing Co, Indianapolis. Revised Edition, 1993) Read by George Meyer

Augustine of Hippo was born November 13, 354 at Thagaste (Souk-Ahras, Algeria) In this autobiography he addresses his praise to God, reviewing his life. In one of the first examples of reflective writing he explores who he was as a child and young adult and who he has become. He wrote the *Confessions* as Bishop of Hippo between June-August, 397-401. He was 43 years old at the time he began his writing. He was thirty-one years old as the time of his conversion.

The following are excerpts from *The Confessions*.

[You] have made us for [Yourself] and our hearts are restless till they rest in [You.] Book I, Ch. I, 3.

I propose now to set down my past wickedness and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not for love of them but that I may love You, O my God. Book II, Ch.II, 23.

My one delight was to love and to be loved. But in this I did not keep the measure of mind to mind, which is the luminous line of friendship; but from the muddy concupiscence of the flesh and the hot imagination of puberty mists steamed up to becloud and darken my heart so that I could not distinguish the white light of love from the fog of lust. Both love and lust boiled within me, and swept my youthful immaturity over the precipice of evil desires to leave me half drowned in a whirlpool of abominable sins. Your wrath had grown mighty against me and I knew it not. I had grown deaf from the clanking of the chain of my mortality, the punishment for the pride of my soul: and I departed further from You, and You left me to myself: and I was tossed about and wasted and poured out and boiling over in my fornications: and You were silent, O my late-won Joy. You were silent, and I, arrogant and depressed, weary and restless, wandered further and further from You into more and more sins which could bear no fruit save sorrows.

...The enemy held my will; and of it he made a chain and bound me. Because my will was perverse it changed to lust, and lust yielded to become habit, and habit not resisted became necessity. There were like links hanging one on another – which is why I have called it a chain – and their hard bondage held me bound hand and foot. The new will which I now began to have, by which I willed to worship You freely and to enjoy You, O God, the only certain Joy, was not yet strong enough to overcome that earlier will rooted deep through the years. My two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, one spiritual, were in conflict and in their conflict wasted my soul. Book VIII, Ch. V, 135.

I was held down as agreeably by this world's baggage as one often is by sleep; and indeed the thoughts with which I meditated upon You were like the efforts of a man who wants to get up but is so heavy with sleep that he simply sinks back into it again. There is no one who wants to be asleep always – for every sound judgment holds that it is

best to be awake – yet a man often postpones the effort of shaking himself awake when he feels a sluggish heaviness in the limbs, and settles pleasantly into another doze though he knows he should not, because it is time to get up. Similarly I regarded it as settled that it would be better to give myself to Your love rather than go on yielding to my own lust; but the first course delighted and convinced my mind, the second delighted my body and held it in bondage... 136. Book VII CH. V 136

[One day, a friend, Nebridius,] began to tell the story of the Egyptian monk [Anthony], whose name was held in high honor among Your servants, although Alypius and I had never heard it before that time. When he learned this, he was the more intent upon telling the story, anxious to introduce so great a man to men ignorant of him, and very much marveling at our ignorance. But Alypius and I stood amazed to hear of Your wonderful works, done in the true faith and in the Catholic Church so recently, practically in our own times, and with such numbers of witnesses. All three of us were filled with wonder, we because the deeds we were now hearing were so great, and he because we had never heard them before. Book VIII, Ch. VI, 137.

For many years had flowed by – a dozen or more- from the time when I was nineteen and was stirred by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* to the study of wisdom; and here was I still postponing the giving up of this world's happiness to devote myself to the search for that of which not the finding only but the mere seeking is better than to find all the treasures and kingdoms of men, better than all the body's pleasures though they were to be had merely for a nod. But I in my great worthlessness – for it was greater thus early – had begged you for chastity, saying: 'Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.' For I was afraid that You would hear my prayer too soon, and too soon would heal me from the disease of lust which I wanted satisfied rather than extinguished... Book VIII, Ch. VII, 139.

There was a garden attached to our lodging, of which we had the use, ... To this garden the storm in my breast somehow brought me, for there no one could intervene in the fierce suit I had brought against myself, until it should reach its issue: though what the issue was to be, You knew, not I: but there I was, going mad on my way to sanity, dying on my way to life, aware how evil I was, unaware that I was to grow better in a little while. Book VIII, Ch. VIII, 140.

Thus I was sick at heart and in torment, accusing myself with a new intensity of bitterness, twisting and turning in my chain in the hope that it might be utterly broken, for what held me was so small a thing! But it still held me. And You stood in the secret places of my soul, O Lord, in the harshness of Your mercy redoubling the scourges of fear and shame lest I should give way again and that small slight tie which remained should not be broken but should grow again to full strength and bind me closer even than before. For I kept saying within myself: 'Let it be now, let it be now,' and by the mere words I had begun to move towards the resolution. I almost made it, yet I did not quite make it. But I did not fall back into my original state, but as it were stood near to get my breath. And I tried again and I was almost there, and now I could all but touch it and hold it: yet I was not quite there, I did not touch it or hold it. I still shrank from dying

unto death and living unto life. The lower condition which had grown habitual was more powerful than the better condition which I had not tried. The nearer the point of time came in which I was to become different, the more it struck me with horror; but it did not force me utterly back nor turn me utterly away, but held me there between the two. Book VIII, Ch. XI, 144.

For I felt that I was still bound by them. And I continued my miserable complaining: ‘How long, how long shall I go on saying tomorrow and again tomorrow? Why not now, why not have an end to my uncleanness this very hour?’ Book VII CH. XI 146

Such things I said, weeping in the most bitter sorrow of my heart. And suddenly I heard a voice from some nearby house, a boy’s voice or a girl’s voice, I do not know: but it was a sort of sing-song, repeated again and again, ‘Take and read, take and read.’ I ceased weeping and immediately began to search my mind most carefully as to whether children were accustomed to chant these words in any kind of game and I could not remember that I had ever heard any such thing. Damming back the flood of my tears I arose, interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the passage at which I should open. For it was part of what I had been told about [Anthony], that from the Gospel which he happened to be reading he had felt that he was being admonished as though what he read was spoken directly to himself: ‘Go, sell what [you] have and give to the poor and [you] shall have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me! By this experience he had been in that instant converted to You. So I was moved to return to the place where Alypius was sitting, for I had put down the Apostle’s book there when I arose. I snatched it up, opened it and in silence read the passage upon which my eyes first fell: ‘Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put [you] on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.’ (Romans 13:13) 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, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away... Book VIII, Ch. XII, 146.

Then we went in to my mother and told her, to her great joy. We related how it had come about: she was filled with triumphant exultation, and praised You who are mighty beyond what we ask or conceive: for she saw that You had given her more than with all her pitiful weeping she had ever asked. For You converted me to yourself so that I no longer sought a wife nor any of this world’s promises, but stood upon that same rule of faith in which You had shown me to her so many years before. Thus You changed her mourning into joy, a joy far richer than she had thought to wish, a joy much dearer and purer than she had thought to find in grandchildren of my flesh. Book VIII, Ch. XII, 147.