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## **SAINT AUGUSTINE: FROM SINNER TO SAINT**

by Rick Carlburg

When I completed a class in college I kept my text books, figuring they would come in handy someday. Many have not, but they fill my library. About 4 months ago I picked up a book that I had not opened since my Freshman year, in 1970: Saint Augustine's Confessions. This is the autobiography of Augustine, at least for the first 43 years of his life.

Now, in 1970, this book meant little to me. I had to read it for my History of Western Civilization class, one of several challenging books, such as Plato's Republic. As I recall, I just got through it, making notes in the margins and underlining some key sentences, just so I could pass the mid-term and final exams. What did I know about life? I was 18 years old. What good could come out of a book written in 397 AD? 4 months ago, I decided to make this my bed time reading, an activity I have picked over the years to help me relax after a hectic day, whether it is due to work or things around the house.

One reason I had trouble with this book in my youth is that the author, Augustine of Hippo, loved writing as many words as possible to get his point across. Where you or I may use 10 to 20 words in a couple of sentences, Augustine of Hippo may write a few hundred. As I mentioned a moment ago, I was re-reading this in bed. His style of writing meant that in only 4 or 5 pages I was asleep, with Joanna taking the book off my chest and turning out the light.

So why am I bringing this hard to read, hard to understand for an 18 year old, book to you today? It is largely due to the additional 45 years I have experienced, particularly in my spiritual development that makes this man and his message important. You see, without Saint Augustine and his tenacity to protect the young Christian church, we may not be here today. Without Saint Augustine, the young Christian church may not have survived with the truth about who Jesus was, is and his relationship to us.

So, who is this person and how did he become so vital in the history of Christianity? More importantly, how is his message relevant to us today in our own Christian life? To begin to answer that we need to look at the life and times he was born into.

His life began on November 13, 354 AD in what is today Algeria, northern Africa. His father, Patricius is a farmer and a local government official. Patricius is a pagan. His mother, Monica, appears to be a typical homemaker of the time. However, she is a devout Christian, something she does not go around advertising about herself as that proclamation may get you into trouble with your neighbors. It is not as dangerous being a Christian as before, but not as safe as we experience today. Emperor Constantine, who became a Christian convert, made it less of a problem some 20 to 30 years earlier, but as we will see it is still problematic.

While his mother tries to convert him to the new faith, he appears to follow his father in pagan worship. His father openly cheats on his mother. Augustine learns to steal fruit from local farmers and by his mid to late teens has his own mistress. She gives birth to their son when Augustine is 18. This does not deter his Mother from constant prayers for his soul, something he will later credit in his life's turnaround. His

father would convert to Christianity before his death, but for Augustine the damage has been done. His sinful life has captured him during his teenage years.

There is enough family income to give Augustine a good Roman education. Augustine excels at rhetoric and philosophy. I get the impression he has a curious mind and excels at his studies. He seeks out books and ideas from the leading philosophers of the day. He studies at a prestigious school in Carthage. At age 21 he gets his first teaching job, some 20 miles from home. He teaches his favorite subject: rhetoric.

While receiving his formal education, he leads a life of a somewhat middle to upper middle class Roman citizen. He masters Latin, but struggles with Greek. He is taught how to think rigorously in his philosophy studies. All during this, his life develops. He has friends and family that are part of his life.

He travels between Rome, Milan and Carthage, picking up teaching jobs and living the good life. When he is 29 years old, he becomes disillusioned with some of the philosophies he admired and followed earlier. These are primarily eastern philosophies, such as the Manichee's, that try to explain the balance between good and evil as represented by light and darkness. Augustine's rational thinking thought that it made more sense than the trinity and his mother's Christianity. To him, Manicheism is logical and rational. But, his fondness of this belief disappeared when he met a Bishop of the movement, a man named Faustus, while teaching in Carthage.

Apparently Augustine has a long discussion with Faustus. He expects to have all of his questions answered, but instead finds that Faustus is clueless. He gives Augustine conflicting answers that Augustine's highly trained mind sees through. There are more inconsistencies than truth. He leaves Carthage for Rome, but as it turns out it is only for a short stay. His teaching skills are needed in Milan.

Augustine is still seeking the truth, and in Milan he begins to find it. Augustine finds the Christian Bishop of Milan, a man named Ambrose. It was friendship at first meeting. Augustine did not become an instant convert, but he listened and respected what Ambrose had to say. He liked the ability of Ambrose to defend himself using rhetoric. Augustine began to understand the challenges facing the early church. It is 384 AD, and the finalized Nicene Creed is just 3 years old.... And not everyone has accepted the full meaning of the trinity, that oneness of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit as laid out in that creed. Ambrose preaches that Christians should follow the gospel, selling their riches and giving the proceeds to the poor. Ambrose is also a firm believer in the new creed.

The early Christian church had fought against earlier heresies, and there was a big one that Ambrose had to fight head on. It is Arianism, a belief that Jesus is separate and subservient to God the father. It is fast growing and getting more backing from powerful people, rich people. With Augustine watching, Ambrose stopped it in Milan, a lesson Augustine will not forget.

Augustine reflects on the discussions and religious lessons from Ambrose. He begins to see how the Old Testament points to an eternal savior and how Jesus of Nazareth is that being. His sharp mind and rational thought cannot find a hole, a gap, in what the Christian church believes related by Bishop Ambrose. At the end of Book V of his Confessions, Augustine offers up a few sentences, "Nevertheless I utterly refused to entrust the healing of the maladies of my soul to these philosophers, because they

ignored the saving name of Christ. I therefore decided to remain a young convert in the Catholic Church, which was what my parents wanted, at least until I could clearly see a light to guide my steps.”

It takes a few years for his Christianity to mature before he becomes baptized by Bishop Ambrose. He apparently keeps his day job teaching, but reads more of the Old Testament and does some in depth study of the Epistles of Paul. His mother, Monica, helps where she can. He is baptized on Easter Sunday, 387 AD by Bishop Ambrose. Augustine is 32 year old. Monica dies several months later, and I have more about Monica and Bishop Ambrose later.

I mentioned that Augustine’s Confessions is challenging reading. It is written from the standpoint of his already converted to follow Christ. He writes a narrative about his life and quotes scripture to finish his point. This adds to the words, but it reflects just how much he knows about the Bible. Here are some statistics. He cites 303 Old Testament references, 300 New Testament references and 9 Apocrypha references, a total of 612 references. He quotes out of 14 Old Testament books and 19 New Testament books. He quotes extensively from the gospels, but does not quote Mark at all.

In addition to his convincing arguments about why we should live a Christian life, this book does something else: it validates our Bible. Scholars have chased down all 612 references and found them in our Bible. No extra words, no mistranslation, just fidelity to the truth, something that Augustine was brought up on with his Roman education.

Now, this was no time to be a weak Christian. Despite the conversion of Emperor Constantine about 330 AD, it is sometimes dangerous to be a follower of Christ. Many subsequent emperors took particular dislike to these followers of Christ and what better reason than the empire was crumbling. Invaders from the north, particularly the Vandals from Germany, were gaining ground and heading south. Toward the end of Augustine’s life, they even attacked the remaining remnants of the Roman Empire in northern Africa. Augustine died, a Bishop of Hippo in modern day Algeria, after falling ill during the siege of the city by the Vandals. Reportedly his remains are in a church in Pavia, Italy.

In 391 AD, 4 years after his baptism, he becomes a priest and he becomes known for his sound theology. He becomes passionate about Christ and how important Christ is to human freedom. He writes about how the Original Sin of Adam and Eve have stained humanity. He preaches against slavery, proclaims astrologers as swindlers and condemns anti-Semitism. By the force of his intellect and the grace of God he starts to institutionalize the fundamental beliefs of what followers of Christ believe in. His written word and personal stands keep heresies at bay. The church is able to perpetuate the truth about Christ, his relationship to the Father and his followers. [Pause]

We too often take for granted that we are worshiping God correctly. We have a long heritage of religious tradition and church practices. Think back to what existed before we had that tradition. It took someone like Augustine to help pull it all together, so our theology is sound. Throw in that challenge a crumbling Roman Empire, with Christians a frequent scapegoat of problems and you can see how much faith it required and by the grace of God the amount of courage it took to pull it off. His works are as venerated in the Eastern Orthodox Church as they are in the Roman Catholic Church.

This 347 page book has some great quotes about what Christ means to Augustine. In Book X, Chapter 6 he tells us about his love for God. To me, it is the best 2 paragraphs in the book. “My love of you, O Lord, is not some vague feeling: it is positive and certain. Your word struck into my heart and from that moment I loved you. Besides this, all about me, heaven and earth and all that they contain proclaim that I should love you, and their message never ceases to sound in the ears of all mankind, so that there is no excuse for any not to love you. But, more than all this, you will show pity on those whom you pity; you will show mercy where you are merciful; for if it were not for your mercy, heaven and earth would cry your praises to deaf ears.

..But what do I love when I love my God? Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not served by fulfillment of desire. That is what I love when I love my God.” [Pause]

Augustine was a man who looked at things rigorously. He had to be convinced what the truth is and came to the conclusion that Christ is the way, the truth and the life. We can depend on the truth he helped institutionalize, by practice and recording in written word.

Now, if Augustine under incredible pressure can accomplish writing books, fighting heresies, founding monasteries, establishing sound, coherent theology and nurturing young clergy to spread the gospel, can we accomplish something, right here in Kenosha County? Can you check in on an elderly neighbor to see how they are doing? Can you help provide meals for the less fortunate? Can you teach Sunday School, even as a substitute teacher? It does not take much to show your faith, and you do not even have to worry about Vandals coming in from the north, perhaps from Racine County to interrupt your day.

Remember the faith it took Augustine and the theological foundation he helped create during some difficult times, when standing for the truth of Christ meant you might literally have your head handed to you. Remember our ancestors who handed down our sound theology, generation after generation.

Now, I mentioned earlier that I was not done talking about his mother, Monica and his mentor, Bishop Ambrose. Both are saints in the Roman Catholic Church. Saint Monica, or in Spanish, Santa Monica is a name of a city in southern California. Ambrose’s body is still around, in a glass coffin in the Basilica of Sant’Ambrogio in Florence. I did not mention before, but he was a traveler who enjoyed trying new things in the local communities and is credited with the cliché all of us use: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

We may be 60 to 70 generations removed from the people I have shared with you today, but they point the way for us living the life God intends us to live. Focus on Christ and his teachings. All will be well. They took far more risks for the privilege of worshiping God with a sound theology than we take today. I

suspect they would be the first to admit that their lives were nothing compared to the sacrifice made by Christ for our behalf. To honor their memories we need to keep that focus on Christ and what he has done for us in our lives.

So make that telephone call to your elderly neighbor, feed the poor or teach that Sunday school class. Honor the legacy of those before us, who showed us the way, the truth and the life in Christ.

To remember what we stand for, will you please open your red hymnal to page 880. I would like all of us to read this together. Let us read together the Nicene Creed.

Amen.

Benediction:

Go out into the world with a new appreciation of our Christian heritage. Remember those who went before us, showing us the way, the truth and the life in Jesus Christ. May the grace, love and peace of Jesus Christ be with all of you, now and forever. Go in peace, knowing we have a new life in Christ to do his will on Earth. Amen.