

2.2 *Fathers of the East and West*

St. Augustine & St. Ambrose

PATRISTICS

St. Augustine the Philosopher

St. Augustine, a prominent figure in Christian history, was born in Tagaste, near Carthage, in 354 AD. His father, Patricius, adhered to pagan beliefs, while in stark contrast, his mother, St. Monica, was a devoted Christian. This juxtaposition of religious beliefs within his family played a significant role in shaping Augustine's spiritual journey.

At the tender age of 11, Augustine, accompanied by a group of friends, engaged in an act of theft. They ventured into a neighbor's garden and stole fruit, not driven by hunger, but solely because it was forbidden. This incident, as recounted in his autobiography, "The Confessions," became a pivotal moment in Augustine's understanding of human nature and the need for divine grace.

Reflecting on this act of theft, Augustine realized that he did not steal the fruit out of necessity or hunger. Instead, he was motivated by a perverse desire to transgress boundaries and defy societal norms, because "it was not permitted." He acknowledged that his nature was inherently flawed, tainted by a love for his own error rather than the object he erred for. "It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own error—not that for which I erred, but the error itself." This profound realization led Augustine to conclude that human beings possess a natural inclination toward sin and are in dire need of the transformative grace of Jesus Christ.

At the tender age of 17, he continued pursuing his studies of rhetoric, a subject that held a profound fascination for him. However, his family's financial situation was strained, making it challenging for them to support his educational endeavors. Despite these obstacles, he was determined to further his knowledge and skills in the art of persuasion and communication. Driven by an intense desire to fit in and be accepted by his peers, he embraced a hedonistic lifestyle. He indulged in extravagant parties, lavish entertainment, and sought out the company of those who shared his

taste for pleasure and excitement. He believed that by conforming to the social norms and expectations of his time, he could gain the approval and admiration he craved.

Nevertheless, deep down, he couldn't shake the feeling that his pursuit of superficial pleasures was ultimately unfulfilling. He longed for something more meaningful and substantial in his life. However, he struggled to reconcile his desire for acceptance with his inner yearning for purpose and authenticity. As he grappled with these internal conflicts, he found himself questioning the choices he was making and the direction his life was taking. The dissonance between his outward behavior and his true aspirations created a sense of unease within him, propelling him on a journey of self-discovery and reevaluation.

“woe is me! And dare I affirm that You held Your peace, O my God, while I strayed farther from You? Did You then hold Your peace to me? And whose words were they but Yours which by my mother, Your faithful handmaid, You poured into my ears, none of which sank into my heart to make me do it? For she desired, and I remember privately warned me, with great solicitude, not to commit fornication; but above all things never to defile another man's wife. These appeared to me but womanish counsels, which I should blush to obey. But they were Yours, and I knew it not, and I thought that You held Your peace, and that it was she who spoke, through whom You held not Your peace to me, and in her person was despised by me, her son, the son of Your handmaid, Your servant. But this I knew not; and rushed on headlong with such blindness, that among my equals I was ashamed to be less shameless, when I heard them pluming themselves upon their disgraceful acts, yea, and glorying all the more in proportion to the greatness of their baseness; and I took pleasure in doing it, not for the pleasure's sake only, but for the praise. What is worthy of despise but vice? But I made myself out worse than I was, in order that I might not be dispraised; and when in anything I had not sinned as the abandoned ones, I would affirm that I had done what I had not, that I might not appear abject for being more innocent, or of less esteem for being more chaste.” He had a thirst for knowledge, saying “I studied books of eloquence, wherein I was eager to be eminent from a damnable and inflated purpose, even a delight in human vanity.”

Due to his intake of erroneous information, he embraced Manichaeism, a religion that rigidly divides all things into inherently good or evil. Driven by a profound belief in the pursuit of knowledge, he embarked on a journey to establish a school in the heart of Rome in the year 383 AD. Rome, renowned for its vibrant intellectual scene, was believed to be the abode of the most skilled and brilliant rhetoricians of the era. The custom at this school was for students to pay their fees to the professor on the final day of the academic term. However, a regrettable pattern emerged: many

students diligently attended classes throughout the term, eagerly absorbing the wisdom imparted by their esteemed professor, only to vanish on the day of payment. This behavior left the professor in a precarious financial position, as he relied on these fees for his livelihood. “But I deceived her, when she violently restrained me either that she might retain me or accompany me, and I pretended that I had a friend whom I could not quit until he had a favorable wind to set sail. And I lied to my mother — and such a mother!— and got away.”

St. Augustine lived for 15 years out of wedlock, a period that he later reflected upon in his "Confessions." In this deeply personal text, St. Augustine delved into his emotions, motivations, and spiritual struggles during those years. He lived with his partner for 15 years, during which time they had a son named Adeodatus. He expressed deep remorse for his actions, recognizing that they deviated from the Christian principles he held dear. As a young scholar in Milan, St. Augustine had risen to the position of professor of rhetoric when his mother, St. Monica, convinced him to dismiss his unnamed mistress in pursuit of a high-society Milanese girl's hand in marriage. The arrangement required Augustine to remain celibate for two years, until the girl reached a marriageable age. However, his intense sexual desires hindered his ability to uphold his commitment. Soon after sending away the mother of his son, Adeodatus, he succumbed to temptation and took another mistress. St. Augustine described the turmoil within his soul, torn between his longing for spiritual fulfillment and his entanglement in earthly passions:

“Meanwhile my sins were being multiplied, and my mistress being torn from my side as an impediment to my marriage, my heart, which clave to her, was racked, and wounded, and bleeding. And she went back to Africa, making a vow unto You never to know another man, leaving with me my natural son by her. But I, unhappy one, who could not imitate a woman, impatient of delay, since it was not until two years' time I was to obtain her I sought — being not so much a lover of marriage as a slave to lust — procured another, (not a wife, though,) that so by the bondage of a lasting habit the disease of my soul might be nursed up, and kept up in its vigour, or even increased, into the kingdom of marriage. Nor was that wound of mine as yet cured which had been caused by the separation from my former mistress, but after inflammation and most acute anguish it mortified, and the pain became numbed, but more desperate. (Confession 6:15)

Against the advice of his mother, who didn't want him to marry someone of a lower class, he was married to the woman for fifteen years, as well as had a son with her. Confessions, all somewhat very relatable to common age issues. Disobedience to parents, trying to fit in, life of sexuality, seeking

elegance, etc... These are all things of which many, in modern age, struggle with, but if one can repent and confess, our Lord will take them back with open arms.

Engulfed in a Worldly Society: Friends and Confessions

During his early years, St. Augustine formed a profound friendship with a contemporary companion who shared his academic pursuits and interests. This friendship, as St. Augustine himself reflects, was “sweeter to me than all the sweetness of my life thus far.” The two friends bonded over their shared studies and activities. However, their friendship took an unexpected turn when St. Augustine, influenced by Manichean beliefs, attempted to sway his friend away from his Christian faith. St. Augustine was able to “turn him away from the true faith” and “turn him toward those superstitious and harmful fables which my mother mourned in me” (namely, Manichaeism) so that, “With me, this man went wandering off in error and my soul could not exist without him” (Conf. 4.4.7). St. Augustine's friend, whom he never names, succumbed to Augustine's persuasion and abandoned his true faith, much to the dismay of St. Augustine's mother, who had been mourning St. Augustine's own involvement with Manichaeism.

Consequently, St. Augustine and his friend embarked on a misguided journey together, with St. Augustine's soul feeling incomplete without his companion. Their bond deepened in their shared error, as they both strayed from the path of truth. However, their journey took a dramatic turn when St. Augustine's friend fell severely ill and approached death's door. Fearing the worst, his family arranged for him to be baptized, a religious ritual that St. Augustine scoffed at and assumed his friend would share his disdain for. To St. Augustine's surprise and dismay, when his friend recovered, he discovered that his attitude had transformed. St. Augustine, expecting his friend to dismiss the baptism as mere religious nonsense, was shocked to find that his friend had embraced it wholeheartedly. “Immediately, as soon as I could talk to him,” writes Augustine:

And I did this as soon as he was able, for I never left him and we hung on each other overmuch—I tried to jest with him, supposing that he also would jest in return about that baptism which he had received when his mind and senses were inactive, but which he had since learned that he had received. But he recoiled from me, as if I were his enemy, and, with a remarkable and unexpected freedom, he admonished me that, if I desired to continue as his friend, I must cease to say such things” (Conf. 4.4.7).

In the depths of his being, he felt an inconsolable sorrow, a profound emptiness that gnawed at his soul. The loss of his first close friend had shattered his world, leaving him adrift in a sea of grief and uncertainty. He wandered through his native place, once familiar and comforting, now transformed into a torture chamber. Every street, every corner, held memories of his friend—laughter shared, secrets whispered, and moments of pure joy. Now, those memories turned into sharp, piercing thorns, reminders of what was lost and could never be regained. A profound hatred filled his heart as he looked upon the places where his friend was not. The places that once held the promise of happiness and companionship now seemed cruel and taunting, for they could not offer him the one thing he longed for the most. They could not say, "Look, he is coming," as they had when his friend was alive and absent.

My heart was utterly darkened by this sorrow and everywhere I looked I saw death. My native place was a torture room to me . . . And all the things I had done with him—now that he was gone—became a frightful torment. My eyes sought him everywhere, but they did not see him; and I hated all places because he was not in them, because they could not say to me, "Look, he is coming," as they did when he was alive and absent (Conf. 4.4.9).

Early Church Fathers' Relationships Influencing One Another

Throughout the history of early Christianity, there have been numerous spiritually fruitful friendships that serve as a testament to the importance of surrounding oneself with spiritually-minded individuals. Among the most notable of these relationships are those between St. Paul and St. Timothy, as evidenced in the Epistle of St. Paul to St. Timothy. Their friendship was characterized by mutual respect, admiration, and a shared commitment to spreading the teachings of Christ.

Another remarkable friendship was that between St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp, as revealed in the Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp. These two men shared a deep bond of faith and love for the Church, and their letters to each other offer valuable insights into the spiritual lives of early Christians. In addition to these well-known pairings, St. Maximus and Domadius were also close companions. Their friendship was built on a foundation of mutual support and encouragement, and they worked together to advance the cause of Christianity in their community.

Collaboration was also a key aspect of the friendship between St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil. Together, they authored the work "On the Priesthood," which remains an important text for understanding the role and responsibilities of priests in the Church. In previous chapters, we explored

the influential friendship of the Cappadocian Fathers: St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Their intellectual pursuits and shared theological insights shaped the development of Christian thought and continue to inspire believers today.

Finally, we turn our attention to the friendship between St. Augustine and St. Ambrose, which will be the focus of this chapter. Their relationship was pivotal in St. Augustine's spiritual transformation. St. Ambrose served as a mentor and guide to St. Augustine, helping him to navigate his struggles with faith and identity and ultimately leading him to embrace Christianity.

These friendships serve as inspiring examples of the power of spiritual companionship. They remind us that surrounding ourselves with like-minded individuals can help us grow in faith, overcome challenges, and fulfill our potential as followers of Christ.

St. Ambrose

St. Ambrose, born between 337 and 339 AD in what is now Germany, hailed from a rich family. His birthplace remains uncertain, but historical accounts suggest it was somewhere within the Germanic region. From an early age, St. Ambrose displayed a keen intellect and an aptitude for learning.

In his youth, St. Ambrose relocated to Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire, to pursue higher education. He immersed himself in the study of rhetoric, the art of effective and persuasive speaking and writing. Through rigorous training, he mastered the use of figures of speech and compositional techniques, honing his skills in oratory and argumentation.

After completing his studies, St. Ambrose returned to his homeland, where he gained recognition for his eloquence and wisdom. In 374 AD, a significant event transpired in Milan, the capital of the Western Roman Empire. The bishop of Milan, who adhered to Arianism—a controversial theological doctrine that denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ—passed away, leaving a void in the leadership of the Christian community.

At this time, tensions escalated between the Arians and those who believed in the divinity of Christ. Both factions, recognizing St. Ambrose's exceptional qualities, converged in their support for him to become the next bishop of Milan. Remarkably, St. Ambrose was not yet a deacon or a priest, nor had he received baptism, when he was chosen for this esteemed position. To prepare for his role as bishop, St. Ambrose underwent an intensive period of study and instruction in Christianity. Within a

week of his formal baptism, he received ordination, a sacred ceremony that marked his elevation to the highest rank of the clergy.

St. Ambrose was described as the “..complete man with amazing gifts. He was both active and contemplative. He was intellectual and he was an orator. He was someone who won over St. Augustine and beat him on his own ground. He was always able to cope with the most difficult situations and tasks without any effort.” He advocated for the poor and the weak. One of his many writings is “The Story of Naboth” where he advocates for the just sharing of possessions. He made sure to educate the clergy to stay away from Arianism. He also wrote a series called: “On the Duties of the Clergy,” Finally, some of his other works are regarding the Holy Spirit, on the Mysteries, as well as on Repentance.

St. Ambrose’s Influence on St. Augustine

In Book 5 of his Confessions, St. Augustine recounts his arrival in Milan and his encounter with St. Ambrose, the bishop of the city. St. Augustine had heard of St. Ambrose’s reputation as an eloquent speaker, and he was eager to experience his oratory firsthand. He was not disappointed. St. Ambrose’s sermons were powerful and persuasive, and St. Augustine was captivated by his ability to communicate the Christian faith in a way that was both intellectually stimulating and spiritually moving.

St. Augustine’s initial attraction to Ambrose was primarily based on his eloquence. However, as he listened to St. Ambrose preach more regularly, he began to appreciate the depth of his faith and his commitment to the Christian community. St. Augustine was particularly impressed by St. Ambrose’s ability to defend the faith against the objections of the Manichees, a Gnostic sect that St. Augustine had been associated with for many years. St. Ambrose’s preaching helped St. Augustine to see that the faith was not as irrational or indefensible as he had once thought. He began to understand that the Bible could be interpreted figuratively as well as literally, and that this opened up new possibilities for understanding the Christian faith.

“to Milan I came, to Ambrose the Bishop... whose eloquent discourse did then plentifully dispense unto Thy people ... **That man of God received me as a father**, and showed me an Episcopal kindness on my coming. Thereafter **I began to love him....** And **I listened diligently** to him preaching to the people, not with that intent I ought, but, as it were, trying his eloquence, whether it answered the fame thereof, or flowed fuller or lower than was reported; ... For first, these things also had now begun to appear to me capable of defense; and the Catholic faith, for which I had thought nothing could be said against the Manichees’ objections, I

now thought might be maintained without shamelessness; especially after I had heard one or two places of the Old Testament resolved, and oftentimes “in a figure,” which when I understood literally, **I was slain spiritually...**“

St. Augustine's encounter with St. Ambrose was a turning point in his spiritual journey. It was through Ambrose's influence that St. Augustine eventually came to embrace the faith and to become one of the most influential theologians in the history of the church. In addition to his preaching, St. Ambrose also showed St. Augustine great personal kindness. He welcomed St. Augustine into his home and treated him like a son. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine states, "That man of God received me as a father would, and welcomed my coming as a good bishop should." This paternal care helped St. Augustine to heal from the wounds of his past and to begin to rebuild his life on a new foundation.

Why did St. Augustine come back to Christ? He returned because of the tears of his mother, St. Monica, as well as due to the wisdom and the intellectual capabilities of his bishop: St. Ambrose. God saw that “Augustine was a sincere seeker of the truth.” God worked through St. Ambrose to reveal Himself to St. Augustine. Moreover, the tears of St. Monica depicts what kind of heart she had, and her own relationship with Christ. Our beloved God sees each and everyone of us. He knows who is a “truth seeker,” and who is not. God will never forsake a “Truth seeker,” but rather, guide them to Himself. We should all strive to be inspiring like St. Ambrose. Our service can make a difference, just like that of St. Ambrose on St. Augustine.

St. Augustine and his surroundings provide us with one of the most striking examples of one running along the Lord's path with sincere zeal. He did just like the rabbit that was able with merely one hop to accomplish what the turtle had done in a number of days. St. Augustine was very far from God. He did not know the Lord for thirty long years, and many people had already surpassed him in the way of righteousness and godliness. Yet the minute he came to his senses and was drawn by the Lord, he was able to reach the first ranks with merely a few hops. With a few more, he became a spiritual counselor. With some more hops, he became one of the saints. Now, we all chant the name of St. Augustine until today. How so? He would run. He ran along the paths of the Lord, unlike those who are merely satisfied with their information desks and only content to point the way. Rather, St. Augustine was a man serious in his pursuit. Draw me away! We will run after you.

St. Augustine Notable Books

St. Augustine's writings covered a wide range of theological and philosophical topics. His "Confessions" is a deeply personal work in which he reflects on his life, his struggles, and his eventual

conversion to Christianity. It provides insights into his inner thoughts and emotions and is considered a classic of Christian literature.

The "City of God" is a monumental work in which he addresses fundamental questions of theology and philosophy. He explores the nature of God, the problem of evil, the relationship between faith and reason, and the destiny of human beings. The "City of God" is a profound and ambitious work that has influenced Christian thought for centuries.

St. Augustine's writings on the Trinity, "De Trinitate", focus on the concept of the Logos, the Divine Word, and His relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit. He argues that the Logos is not merely a created being but an eternal aspect of God's nature and that the Trinity is a mystery that can only be understood through faith.

In his work "On Christian Doctrine", St. Augustine outlines principles for interpreting and teaching the Scriptures. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and genre of biblical texts and of seeking to discover the truth in their content. He also discusses the need to defend scriptural truth when it is attacked, arguing that the Scriptures are the authoritative word of God.

St. Augustine's writings have had a profound impact on Christian theology and thought. His insights into the human condition, the nature of God, and the relationship between faith and reason have influenced countless thinkers and continue to be studied and debated today.



Review Questions

1. What is St. Augustine's most notable work? (A: Confessions)
2. True or false? His mother was a pagan. (A: False)
3. True or false? St. Augustine was born a devout Christian. (A: False)
4. Who inspired him to find Christianity again? (A: St. Ambrose)
5. What religion did he fall into before finding our Lord? (A: Manichaeism)
6. What did said religion preach? (A: It claims that everything falls under good or evil.)
7. True or false? St. Ambrose came from a poor family. (A: False)
8. Why did St. Augustine come back to Christ? (A: He returned because of the tears of his mother, and the wisdom of St. Ambrose.)
9. What is another relationship, like St. Augustine and St. Ambrose between Church

Fathers? (A: St. Paul and St. Timothy.)

10. Name two more of St. Augustine's works or their topics. (Sample A: City of God, as well as his writing on the Trinity.)



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