



## Who Was St. Augustine?

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**A**urelius Augustine was born on November 13, 354 AD in Thagaste (in modern Algeria). This region of North Africa had been an important part of the Roman Empire for some 500 years and was heavily latinized in both culture and language. Augustine was born into a respectable but impoverished family. His father Patricius was a pagan (he eventually converted before his death) and his mother Monica, a devout Christian.

With the help of a wealthy patron, his family managed to send him to Madura, a nearby university town so that he could continue his education. Obviously he demonstrated a great deal potential as a student, because soon after he went to Carthage (one of the great cities of North Africa) to pursue more advanced studies in rhetoric. Those who have read Augustine's masterpiece, the Confessions, are led to believe that the Saint sowed more than a few wild oats, while he was living in Carthage. Certainly he hung out with a rather rough crowd of young men and probably had more than a few casual sexual relationships---some perhaps with prostitutes. This having been said, Augustine's behavior was typical of any young man living at that time, who lived unsupervised in a seedy place like Carthage. While he was in Carthage, he fell in love with a nameless woman, with whom he began to live and she bore him his only son---Adeodatus. He would remain committed to this woman for the next fourteen years, a fact which indicates that he was probably not as degenerate a young man as he typically likes to portray himself.

While he was studying in Carthage he happened upon a work written by Cicero called the Hortensius that would change his life. This work, which was an exhortation to a philosophical lifestyle, inflamed him with a love for wisdom and a desire to change his lifestyle. The immediate result of this conversion was that Augustine fell in with a group of heretical Christians known as the Manichaeans. This cult espoused a dualistic world view, which saw the entire universe divided between the forced of light (God) and the forces of the dark (Satan) and which regarded all things material as evil. Although it is difficult from our perspective to understand how a person as intelligent and sensitive as Augustine could have been captivated by such a weird religion, it should be remembered that Manichaeism offered him a viable explanation about why he perpetually found himself unable to do the good he willed to do: it wasn't Augustine who was sinning, the Manichaeans explained, it was his body (matter) that was dragging his otherwise good soul down. Augustine remained with this sect for almost ten years, but gradually became disillusioned with them when he began to recognize the inherent contradiction in their religious system.

In the meanwhile, Augustine would begin to move steadily up the ladder of success. After a brief but unhappy stint teaching in Rome, in 384 he was awarded a position as professor of rhetoric in Milan. Milan at this time was the de facto capital of the Roman Empire, since this was where the imperial court was housed. It was while he was in Milan that Augustine fell under the spell of Ambrose, the Catholic Bishop of that city and one of the main proponents of Christian Neo-Platonism. In August of 386 Augustine had a conversion experience and decided to embrace a life within the Church. Giving up his career in rhetoric (and all the promises of

future success that such a life promised), he decided to return to Thagaste with his mother and his friends. While waiting in Ostia for a boat back to Africa, his mother Monica died suddenly.

Augustine's many talents were immediately recognized within the church and he was soon forced to become a priest in city of Hippo. In 395 he was made bishop of that city and would remain in the position for the next 35 years. He died on August 28, 430, just as the Roman Empire in North Africa was collapsing due to the invasion of the Vandals.

Augustine wrote numerous works on Catholic philosophy and theology. His most famous works, however, are the *Confessions*, an autobiographical account of his early life and conversion, and the *City of God*, which he wrote as Rome was falling to the barbarians. Most of Augustine's works were attempts to respond to the numerous heretical sects (particularly the Manichaeans, Donatists and Pelagians) that were creeping up at the time. In responding to these heresies Augustine formulated the Church's position on such important doctrines as grace, original sin and election. His contributions to the intellectual life of the Church were recognized after his death, when he was given the title "Doctor of Grace."

**For more information on the life of St. Augustine see:**

- Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967.
- Chadwick, Henry. *Augustine*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.
- O'Meara, John J. *The Young Augustine*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1954.

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