



## Augustine's *Confessions* I-IX: A Study Guide

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Augustine's *Confessions* is considered one of the classic works of Western literature and spirituality. For over 1500 years the work has served as a model of the spiritual life for Christians of all denominations. This on-line guide has been created as a resource for those with little or no philosophical and theological background who would like to attempt to read the work for their own spiritual and moral growth.

Although at first glance the *Confessions* might seem to be a fairly straightforward account of Augustine's life, struggles and ultimate conversion, the work, in fact, is actually quite complex. Augustine uses his own life as a microcosm for the life of all human beings, and frequently couches rather difficult philosophical and theological ideas in deceptively simple language. There is also a great deal of cultural and historical detail in the text that might be lost on the more casual reader. This short study guide, therefore, has been created to provide a basic background information that ideally should enable one to read the text in a more productive manner.

Those wishing to learn more about the life and thought of St. Augustine are advised to consult the bibliography included at the end of this work.

### Book 1: Augustine's Infancy and Boyhood

#### Opening Prayer [1.1 - 1.5]

The *Confessions* opens with Augustine's prayer extolling the goodness of God and the sinfulness of human beings. Augustine is convinced that the person who is separated from God through his own sinfulness can never be fully happy. "You have made us for yourself," he writes, "and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you." [1.1] This contrast between restlessness and peace is one that will come up repeatedly in the Confession. The soul, he believes, longs for peace, but can only find peace by resting in God.

Several big problems are raised already in this prayer: (1) We pray to God to allow us to know (i.e., experience) him. But unless we already knew him we would not be able to pray to him. So what is the point of prayer? [1.1] (2) Why should Augustine bother to pray to God to enter his soul, when God is already in his soul — as he is in all things? [1.2] (3) The very relation of God to created things is a bit of a mystery, since it boggles the mind to fathom how God could fill all creation with his being [1.3] (4) Finally, how can we even begin to understand

the infinite perfection that is God, when our finite minds are capable of understanding only what is finite and imperfect? [1.4] It seems that just about everything that even the most profound philosopher is capable of thinking about God is bound to be completely wrong, making any speculation of this sort a complete waste of time. And yet we need to “know” God in order to be saved. We are in quite a dilemma! [1.4]

Our aim must be to have God so fill our hearts [i.e., to “so inebriate it”] with his love that we completely reject our former sinful lives, rest in his goodness and find peace both in this life and in the next. But why should God bother to go out of his way for stinking sinners like us? We certainly haven’t done anything in our lives to merit salvation, have we? [1.5]

Actually, as we shall see, our whole lives are filled with sin from the moment we are born to the moment we die. We can’t help but sin; it is part of our nature. So to think that we deserve to be saved is a bit presumptuous, isn’t it? In fact, what you actually deserve is nothing more than eternal damnation. Boy are you in trouble!

### **Augustine’s Infancy (1.6 - 1.7)**

Augustine is born in Thagaste (present day Algeria in North Africa) in 354 to Patricius and Monica. He begins his description of his own infancy by reflecting on the life of infants in general. He observes that a natural order has been ordained by God between mother and child: in the harmonious relationship between the two, each gives what the other needs and both are ultimately satisfied. But this idealized image of natural order is in stark contrast to the infant’s actual behavior [1.6]. The infant, in short, is a selfish, nasty, volatile creature, who would do real harm to others if it wasn’t so helpless [1.7].

Augustine’s point is that there is no such thing as the innocence of infancy or childhood. From the moment of birth, the life of the infant, and later of the child, is characterized by disordered inclinations and desires that are only controlled by the prudent disciplinary actions of the child’s parents. Children left to their own devices, and without proper checks on their actions, would inevitably end up causing tremendous harm to themselves and others around them. This tendency towards moral disorder, he believes, is the inevitable consequence of original sin.

### **Augustine’s Boyhood (1.8 - 1.20)**

Infancy gives way to boyhood with the arrival of speech. Now Augustine is capable of expressing his needs to others through language [1.8] During the years 365-369 Augustine’s begins his education in the neighboring town of Madura. If we take him seriously in the Confessions his childhood education was anything but idyllic. He was often beaten for not learning his lessons to the satisfaction of his instructors [1.9].

Looking back on his own behavior during childhood, however, Augustine acknowledges that he too was at fault (“And yet I sinned, my Lord God”) for trying to evade his studies. His “sin” lies in choosing pleasure over studies that could have helped improve his intellect [1.10, 1.12] Later he also sins in preferring secular literature [Virgil’s Aeneid] to the more important study of reading, writing and arithmetic. Although he seems to go a bit overboard when he writes that his weeping over the death of Queen Dido in the Aeneid was an act of “fornication against [God],” he believes that he was wrong in choosing to spend his time on frivolous literature instead of that which could have improved his soul and aided his salvation (e.g., Scripture) [1.13].

Although Augustine sinned in preferring Virgil to Moses, the fault lay not solely with him, but also with those who are responsible for educating him properly—namely, his teachers. After all, it was his teachers who had determined that he would best be served by studying illicit passages from pagan classics. Had his instructors been truly concerned about his moral development they would have had him spend less time declaiming speeches based upon pagan works and more time studying Scripture. In the end, such a disordered educational system

leads one to worry more about violating the rules of pronunciation than about violating the moral law [1.16-18].

In 1.18 he goes on to describe other sins of his childhood (e.g., stealing, cheating, etc.), ultimately expressing amazement that anyone could talk at all about “the innocence of boyhood.” There is no such thing as an original state of innocence, despite what some idealists (e.g., The Pelagians) might believe.

What is the point of all this dwelling on the “sins” of his childhood? When Augustine writes that he was “so small a boy and so great a sinner,” [1.12] we should certainly take him literally. He really does believe that, while the transgressions of childhood are less serious than those of adolescence and adulthood, because they take place prior to the age of reason, they are sins nonetheless. The infant sins in “crying for more;” the child sins in trying to evade his studies. Although the object of sin has changed, the disordered desire that gives rise to sin in the first place remains constant.

In 1.11 we have what seems to be a digressionary story about a serious illness that Augustine experienced as a child that left him close to death. His mother, we are told prepares to have him baptized for the “remission of [his] sins.” He recovers and his baptism is put off in recognition that he was bound to sin in adulthood and therefore would have incurred even greater guilt than if he had not been baptized. Augustine believes that his mother made a mistake, since baptism would have put “reins on [his] sinning” by placing him in a community of believers who would have corrected his bad moral behavior. Without being part of such a supportive and nurturing community there is nothing to prevent him from slipping further and further into sin. The story is significant because it indicates a possible means of stemming the tide of original sin. It is the Church and particularly submission to authority within the Church that--while not completely eliminating the tendency towards sin--at least places some limitations upon human sinfulness. It takes Augustine many years before he realizes just how important being inscribed in the “walls of the Church” actually is to his moral and spiritual well-being [8.2, 8.6].

## **Book 2: Augustine’s Adolescence**

### **Adolescence Lust (2.1 - 2.3)**

In Book 2 of the Confessions Augustine describes his further descent into moral disorder during his adolescent years. By the time that a youth reaches adolescence, and becomes conscious of the demands of the moral law, his sins take on a far more troubling dimension than they previously had: whereas the child cannot be held personally accountable for his sins, the adolescent, by freely and consciously choosing to transgress God’s law, incurs a far greater penalty for his transgressions than he previously would have incurred.

In 2.2 Augustine contrasts the ordered love ( *caritas*), in which the soul loves created thing in God, and disordered love (*cupiditas* or *LUST*), in which the soul craves created things for their own sake. Augustine’s lust leaves him “storm-tossed” and “boil[ing] over in [his] fornication.” During this period he describes himself as sinking further and further into his own depravity, because there was no one around who could put “measure on [his] disorder. [Remember: although he is nominally a Catholic he is not officially a member of any Church because he has yet to be baptized]

He comes home from Madura for a short reprieve from his studies. We get the sense in chapter 2.3 that he believes that his parents failed to provide him with the kind of guidance he needed to avoid falling to sexual temptation. Instead of imparting a unified message about the dangers of sexual activity outside of marriage, they all but justified his illicit behavior. Although his mother Monica initially warned Augustine against premarital intercourse, she almost immediately qualified her warning by discouraging him instead against adultery—a

message which he evidently took to heart. Still worse, his father seemed completely uninterested “in how chaste I was,” and at times even encouraged his burgeoning sexuality.

Although there is some speculation about the extent of Augustine’s wanton activities during this period, most scholars maintain that Augustine did nothing worse than the average young adult in Roman society. Remember: he is writing the Confessions after his conversion and like all converts he is hyper-sensitive about his failings.

### **The Infamous Pear Theft (2.4 - 2.6)**

In what appears to be an almost innocuous event, Augustine aptly demonstrates the implications of personal sin in his recounting the theft of some pears during his adolescent years. On the surface the event seems harmless enough: the young Augustine and his friends stop in a neighbor’s orchard and steal some of his pears. They stole the pears, he writes, not because they were hungry, but simply for the sake of taking them, for afterwards they threw them to the pigs to eat. The strange part of the story for many contemporary readers is that Augustine makes this little foible out to be the worst kind of sin imaginable [Conf. 2.4]. Is this guy for real?

What is the point of this weird little story? Does it represent, as one author puts it, nothing more than a demonstration of Augustine’s “neurotic verbal flagellation” [Miles, Desire and Delight, 28]? I believe that we can read this story as a kind of symbolic representation of all human sinfulness. What makes Augustine’s act so darn bad is that he has now reached the age of reason and he clearly has some idea of what is right and wrong. He knows that God’s law prohibits theft of any kind, and yet he steals anyway. His real sin is not theft, but pride--thinking that he is above God and His Law [2.5 -2.6].

### **Reflections on Human Sinfulness (2.7 - 2.10)**

Augustine reflects on the reality of human sinfulness. It is only through the grace of God that any human being has the strength avoid the life of sin to which Augustine himself fell victim. We certainly should not feel proud of our good works, since if we were left to our own devices we could never sustain these works. Augustine believes that when we try to stand on our own, without God’s help, we can only fall big-time [2.7].

Where has Augustine’s pride gotten him? As we shall see his tendency to sin is starting to become habitual, and soon he will not be able to stop himself from doing what he clearly knows is wrong. He is, in short, on the path to becoming a “wasteland” unto himself [2.10]

## **Book 3: Carthage**

### **The Move to Carthage (3.1 -3.3)**

During the years 371-374 Augustine was sent to Carthage to finish his education. He was obviously recognized as a talented lad and was sent to Carthage — a much larger city with greater resources--to begin the study of rhetoric. Keep in mind that throughout the ancient world, the mastery of rhetoric was seen as a means for young men with limited resources to improve their station in life.

The city of Carthage was approximately a two day journey from his home-town of Thagaste and filled with all the temptations of any big city [the move would be similar to a young man from a small town in Wisconsin going to Chicago to study]. Right from the start Augustine gets into trouble in sin city: he has casual sexual relations with nameless women (and perhaps men as well) [3.1] and gets caught up in attending plays of dubious moral quality [3.2]. He also develops “unfriendly friendships” with an unsavory bunch of young men (the “Subverters),

although, being ambitious, he never goes so far as to allow his relationship with them to interfere with his studies [3.3].

### **Conversion #1: Philosophy (3.4 - 3.5)**

In the midst of all his dissipations, something remarkable happens to Augustine that changes the entire course of his life. He is given a copy of Cicero's Hortensius, which is an exhortation to pursue a philosophical way of life. He is set "on fire" by the work and dedicates himself to the pursuit of the truth through the use of his own reason [3.4].

Cicero also inspires him to pick up the Bible again, but he is immediately turned off by its simplistic style. The problem, he maintains, is that it takes humility to discover the truth in Scripture, and that is precisely what he is lacking [3.5].

Keep in mind that Augustine clearly sees himself as being a Christian in the most general sense of the term (he is disappointed, for example, by lack of reference to Christ in the Hortensius). But he is still far too proud to submit himself to the authority of the Catholic Church. So he needs to find another Christian approach that plays into his arrogance and self-reliance.

### **Conversion #2: Manicheanism (3.6 - 3.10)**

It is at this point in the story that Augustine undergoes his second major conversion--this time to Manicheanism. The Manicheans were a Christian sect, which appealed to Augustine's desire to stay part of the religion of his childhood. Like Cicero, the Manicheans preached a form of "heroic humanism" in which one could overcome the temptations of the body through ascetic practice (i.e., by the efforts of one's will alone). The idea that he could overcome his sexual addiction on his own, and without having to submit himself to anyone or anything, also appealed to Augustine's over-inflated sense of pride [3.6].

At first glance, Manicheanism seems like a strange religion for someone as intelligent as Augustine to embrace. Manicheanism is a dualistic religion that intermingled elements of Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. The Manicheans believed that there were two primordial forces in the Universe, Light (God, the spiritual) and Dark (the Devil, the material). The force of Light is responsible for the creation of the soul, while the force of Darkness is responsible for the creation of the body. Since human beings contain both elements of light and darkness in them, they are the principle battleground between these two forces.

A good Manichean, seeking to attain salvation, had only to deny the needs of his body (though a rigid form of asceticism) and try to live as spiritual (i.e., rational) an existence as possible. If he succeeded he would eventually be freed of the "prisons" of his body and the material world and would be able to live a purely spiritual existence in heaven. If he failed, he was condemned to be reborn into another body after death.

For Augustine, Manicheanism offered a neat explanation of the existence of evil in the Universe by attributing it to the work of the force of Darkness (the Devil). It also helped explain the slavery to sin that Augustine experienced without necessarily making him responsible for it (it was his flesh that was dragging his otherwise good soul into sin) [3.6 -3.9].

### **A Hint of Things to Come (3.11 - 3.12)**

Naturally, Augustine's pious mother, Monica, was not at all happy about his conversion to Manicheanism. It is form of heresy, after all! Fortunately, she receives a dream (divine providence at work again?) assuring her of Augustine's ultimate conversion back to Catholicism [3.11]. Being a rather annoying woman, she also pesters a local Catholic bishop to set her boy straight. He, however, assures her that Augustine would eventually return to the Church once he realized just how dopey Manicheanism actually is [3.12]

So for those of you who were worried that Augustine would die a damnable heretic, fear

not! God has been working behind the scenes to bring him back to the faith. Before we get to that point, however, we've got another ten years of sin and error to get through.

## **Book 4: Approaching Maturity**

### **Career and Family in Carthage (4.1 - 4.2)**

Augustine is now on the road to entering the big leagues. He has been able to put his education to use teaching rhetorical skills to young men in Carthage. At the same time, he continues his life as a "hearer" (novice) in the Manichean religion [4.1]

In 370 he begins a common-law relationship with a nameless woman, who bears him his only child, Adeodatus, in 372. We know that, although Augustine never married this woman, he was clearly in love with her, since he spent the next 15 years living faithfully with her [4.2]. Not so bad for a guy who is supposed to be a sexual addict! Of course, in his later years, Augustine will look back on this union with some regret, since he then recognizes that there is a world of difference between a marital covenant blessed by God and even the most committed common-law relationship.

### **Toying With Astrology (4.3)**

In his continual quest for wisdom, Augustine flirts briefly with astrology. Once again, astrology offers Augustine an explanation and excuse for his bad behavior (it is the alignment of the stars that caused him to sin). With the help of a friend of his, Augustine eventually comes to realize that astrology is a pseudo-science that is founded on deception.

### **The Death of His Friend (4.4 - 4.13)**

Augustine's relative happiness during this period of his life is marred by a tragedy that occurs to a close friend of his, whom he had led into the Manichean faith. This friend is stricken with a sudden illness and, while he is unconscious, his family has him baptized in the Catholic faith. Eventually he recovers somewhat, but wants nothing to do with Augustine as long as he remains a heretic. When his friend finally dies, Augustine is devastated. "My own country was a torment to me," he writes, "my own house was a strange unhappiness...And myself to myself had become a place of misery, a place where I could not bear to be and from which I could not go. For my heart could not flee away from my heart, nor could I escape from myself." His friend's death has left him inconsolable [4.4].

After talking about this tragic incident, Augustine then spends eight more chapters trying to explain to the reader why his love for his friend was morally problematic in the first place. Augustine believes that the sole cause of his misery lies in the fact that he loves his friend with the kind of love that should have been reserved for God alone.

To understand what Augustine is getting at here, we need to understand the distinction that he makes between *uti* (use) and *frui* (enjoyment). The term *frui* (enjoyment) signifies the type of love for a thing that is sought for its own sake (*propter se*), while *uti* (use) represents the love for something sought after for the sake of something else (*propter aliud*). Thus to enjoy something is to value or desire it as an end in itself; to use something, on the other hand, is to value it as a means of obtaining something higher. It should come as no surprise that Augustine believes that God alone should be enjoyed, while the world and everything in it should be used as a means of enjoying God.

Human beings, as part of the created realm, are to be loved *propter aliud* (for the sake of something else) not *propter se* (for their own sakes). When we truly love another, we do not

love that person in himself, but rather in God. We either love the presence of God within the other so that He might ultimately come to be in the other. “Blessed is the man who loves you, who loves his friends in you, and his enemies because of you.” Augustine prays, “He alone loses no one dear to him, for they are all dear to him in one who is not lost.” [4.9]

The cause of Augustine misery lies in the fact that he tries to love his friend for his own sake; he loves a transient being as though he was an immortal, and therefore must be devastated when his friend dies. Had he loved his friend in, for and through God, he would have had correctly ordered love (*caritas*), and would have been able to put his friend’s death into some kind of reasonable perspective. Sure, he would have been sad that his friend had died, but he would have had the satisfaction of knowing that he lived on in God [4.12].

### **Miscellaneous Tid-Bits (4.13 - 4.16)**

Augustine’s philosophical reflections on the nature of beauty inspire him to write his first work, “The Beautiful and the Fitting,” a work which has been lost to posterity (probably by Augustine’s own doing). He dedicates the work to the orator, Hierius, who was renowned for his rhetorical skills. Again, we see that Augustine’s pride is still causing him to lust for fame, and so he is naturally impressed--in a shallow sort of way--by famous people around him [4.13 - 4.14].

He begins to engage in metaphysical speculations about the nature of reality, although his Manichean dualism is still leading him to rather silly conclusions [4.15]. His pride also leads him to attempt to read Aristotle’s *Categories*, a rather difficult work on metaphysics and other complex works in the liberal arts. The fact that he seems to understand these works so easily, does little more than puff up his already inflated ego. Even worse, these works lead him to erroneous conclusions about the nature of God. The ignorant folk around him, he later realizes, were actually far better off than he was, since their ignorance led them to look to the Church for answers, whereas his pride leads him further away from it [4.16].

## **Book 5: Rome and Milan**

### **A Prayer (5.1 - 5.2)**

Augustine reflects on the purpose of confession. This might be a good point in which to discuss the various meanings of confession that Augustine uses through the work. The term itself comes from the latin *confiteri*, which means to acknowledge, to proclaim or to praise. Based on this etymology, John O’Meara (*The Young Augustine*, 2-3) has argued that Augustine uses the term in three distinct but interrelated senses in the *Confessions*: as confession of sins (*confesio peccati*) confessions of praise (*confessio laudis*) and confession of faith (*confessio fidei*).

In this section, Augustine clearly is using the term in the second sense. He is hoping that his praise of God’s goodness will lead him to love God more and ultimately to become one with Him [5.1]. The foolish person, he maintains, is so focused on the good of created things, that he fails to recognize their source (God). Unless he comes to understand that all created things are good only through their participation in God, he will undoubtedly come to misuse these good things. This is exactly what Augustine did in his own life [5.2]

### **Dissatisfaction with Manicheism (5.3 - 5.7)**

When he was 29 years old, something happened to Augustine that led him to become dissatisfied with Manicheism. One of the great leaders of the Manicheans, Faustus of Mileve, had come

to Carthage in 382, and Augustine was hoping that this Faustus, who was known for being a persuasive speaker, could address some of his concerns about the religion. Instead, what he realizes is that although Faustus may be a good rhetorician, he is not a very good religious thinker. Having now studied the writing of various philosophers (Cicero, Aristotle, etc), Augustine comes to realize that their explanations of reality were far more probable than the weird Manichean system that Faustus espoused.

He then goes on to say something about these philosophers that will be significant later on in his story. In his maturity, Augustine realizes that pagan philosophers had some legitimate things to teach him about the created realm and perhaps even about the Creator himself. But, because they are filled with pride, they are incapable of leading him to God. The problem is that pagan philosophers don't proceed "religiously" (humbly) in their investigations and, therefore, fail to realize that they need some extra help — namely, Christ, the mediator between God and human beings, and his Church. These silly people think that they can do it all on their own, simply by using the powers of their intellects [5.3]. Still the philosophers are better off than the Manicheans who are completely in error both about God Himself and the way to Him [5.4 -5.5].

As for his meeting with the famed Faustus, Augustine was disappointed to discover that Faustus couldn't respond adequately to any of his problems with the Manichean faith [5.6]. The only positive thing that Augustine can say about him was that he was modest enough to recognize his own limitations as a thinker. The result of his encounter with Faustus was that Augustine gradually began to lose interest in Manicheanism, and is resolved to find some better system to put in its place [5.7].

### **The Move to Rome (5.8 -5.9)**

The following year (383), Augustine decides to leave Carthage for Rome. Although this was a serious move for him to make, he was aided by having Manichean connections in Rome to help him get established.

This was an opportunity for a young man from the provinces to earn a nice living and perhaps gain some fame teaching rhetoric in the ancient capital of the Empire (it also was an opportunity for him to escape the annoy presence of his mother, who was probably incessantly haranguing him about his heretical tendencies) [5.8].

### **More Problems with Manicheanism (5.10 - 5.12)**

Either out of habit, or because he had not yet found something to take its place, Augustine takes up Manicheanism again when he arrives in Rome. He still cannot get beyond his dualistic view of the universe, since it enabled him to deny any responsibility for his sins.

Still he cannot embrace Manicheanism completely any more after his encounter with Faustus, so he begins to look for some reasonable alternative. Because his mind has been tainted by the Manicheans against the Catholic Church, he certainly is not going to look there, even though, being in Rome, he is in the very heart of the Church. Instead, he enters into a brief flirtation with the Academics (i.e., the later version of Plato's Academy), who practiced a form of radical skepticism (the belief that everything must be doubted and nothing could be proven to be true).

Because he is still working within the perimeters of Manichean metaphysics, he finds he is capable of thinking about God only as a material, and therefore finite, being [5.10]. He also still possesses the erroneous ideas of the Manicheans about the nature of Christ and the illegitimacy of the Old Testament [5.10-5.11]

Although his pupils in Rome are better behaved than those he taught in Carthage, he finds that they have their own particular vice: they would leave their instructor when the time came for them to pay him. All in all, things in Rome are not quite as tranquil as Augustine had hoped they would be [5.12]



## **Encountering Catholicism in Milan (5.13 - 5.14)**

Fortunately, the Manicheans provide Augustine with another golden opportunity: they support his application for the position of professor of Rhetoric in Milan. He accepts the position, and without realizing it winds up in a city where Christian-Neo-Platonism is spreading like wild-fire. At the heart of this movement is the Catholic Bishop of the city, Ambrose. Augustine is immediately swept off his feet by Ambrose's sermons, which combined a delightful rhetorical style with far more intelligent doctrine than he had ever heard from the Manicheans. Augustine begins to realize that, despite Manichean objections, the Catholic faith was, in fact, quite reasonable [5.13-14]

Ambrose showed Augustine that the Old Testament (which the Manicheans rejected) could be read figuratively and was in complete accord with the New Testament. Later Augustine will also be shown how to think about God and the soul in purely spiritual terms when he discovers the famed "books of the Platonists." With the help of Ambrose, he finally has the courage to reject Manicheanism and become a catechumen in the Catholic Church. Although he is still not a committed Catholic, he has run out of options [5.14]

The good news is that, although Augustine initially joins the Church half-heartedly, he has, nonetheless, taken the first real step on the road to his ultimate salvation. God will steer the ship of his life from this point on in the story and take him places he never even could have imagined.

## **Book 6: The Catholic Alternative**

### **The Example of Monica (6.1 -6.2)**

Although Augustine managed to ditch his mother back in North Africa when he initially left for Italy, it doesn't take long for her to catch up with him in Milan. While the contemporary reader is apt to think of Monica simply as Augustine's annoying mother, in the Confessions Augustine clearly views her as the embodiment of Christian piety and virtue.

She is confident that, despite his own hesitation to embrace the Catholic faith, that God will save her son [6.1]. When she is told by Ambrose to stop her practice of leaving food offerings at the shrines of saints — a practice that was perfectly acceptable in Africa — she immediately complies [6.2]. Augustine is intentionally contrasting his own skepticism, arrogance and pride with his mother's rock-solid faith, simple piety, and obedience to the Church. Although she is certainly not as intelligent as he is, Monica is far wiser than her son, because she understands her own limitations and recognizes her need for assistance from the Church. He, on the other hand, foolishly believes that he can do it all on his own.

### **Re-examining Catholic Doctrine (6.3 - 6.5)**

Augustine may not be completely sold on Catholicism, but he is willing to give the religion of his childhood one more shot. Although he doesn't have the opportunity to ask Ambrose specific questions about the Catholic faith, he is learning quite a bit just by listening to Ambrose's sermons on Sunday. Specifically, he is now on the path to developing a truly spiritual understanding of God and the soul (as opposed to his prior crude Manichean materialism) [6.3]. He also begins to realize that those teachings from Scripture which used to be absurd to him now make perfect sense when interpreted in allegorical rather than a literal manner [6.4].

Now that Augustine's objections to the Catholic faith have all been eliminated, he claims that he is beginning to see that Catholicism is far preferable to all the other approaches (secular philosophy and Manicheanism in particular) that he had previously toyed with. What impresses

him the most about the Catholicism that he encounters in Milan is that it demands belief in a higher truth that cannot be rationally demonstrated. The Manicheans, on the other hand, claim that they can rationally demonstrate the tenets of their religion, but--as we have seen--are actually incapable of doing so. Also, whereas Manicheanism and secular philosophy are fit only for an intellectual elite, the truths of the Catholic faith are accessible both to the simplest believer as well as to the most profound thinker [6.5].

### **The Beggar Analogy (6.6)**

Keep in mind that Augustine's primary concern in the Confessions is on the questions of happiness. This is what he is looking for throughout his early life, only to be thwarted again and again. In Confessions 6.6 he makes an analogy between himself and a poor drunken beggar that is meant to illustrate for the reader the futility of Augustine's own quest for the happy life. The beggar deludes himself into thinking that his drunken revelries make him happy; Augustine deludes himself into thinking that his own quest for fame will make him happy. Both are equally foolish, but at least the beggar gets a few moments reprieve from his cares--a heck of a lot more than Augustine gets.

The two actually suffer from the same "disease" — disordered love or lust. The beggar's lust is for booze, Augustine's for fame and glory. Both crave some limited good in an absolute way, and are enslaved by their disordered longing. Neither, therefore, is able to find the happiness he seeks.

### **The Story of Alypius (6.7 - 6.10)**

It is at this point in the Confessions that Augustine seems to digress from his own story to talk about a few incidents in the life of his friend, Alypius. Actually Augustine uses this story (and later those of Victorinus, the friends of Ponticianus and Monica) as a means of illustrating the mysterious working of Providence in the lives of those around him. The same pattern of conversion that we will see in all these stories, we will also see in Augustine's own conversion story in 8.12.

It has been observed by Frederick Van Fleteren (65-67) that there are no fewer than twelve different conversion stories in the Confessions, all of which share the same pattern: (1) someone is involved in a habitual pattern of behavior and is incapable of stopping this behavior through the exercise of his or her own will; (2) a mundane comment is made or banal situation occurs that is understood in a higher light; (3) the individual is inflamed with a desire to follow God's law and as a result becomes a model of Christian piety; (4) Augustine attributes the salvation of the individual to a divine calling operating through the person or thing that is the catalyst for conversion.

The end result of each of these accounts is also the same: the individual involved is inflamed with such a delight in God that all of his previous love interests seem pale in comparison. The expressions "to be set on fire" (*inflammare*) and "to be borne away" (*rapere*) occur repeatedly in these accounts, indicating a tone of passivity that bespeaks divine rather than human activity at work. The immediacy of the conversion of each individual after a long period of personal struggle with habitual behavior likewise points to the effects of Providence rather than those of man.

Let's look at the story of Alypius to see how this all works. Actually the transition from the previous chapter (6.6) to this one (6.7) is not quite as abrupt as I had made it appear to be. Augustine has just finished explaining that he cannot attain happiness because--like a drunken beggar--he is incapable of breaking free from his own disordered love for "for honors, for money, for marriage." Having demonstrated his own impotence to effect a change in his life, Augustine then proceeds to show how Alypius is saved from his habitual behavior, not by his own efforts, but through an act of grace.

Augustine describes how his friend Alypius at an earlier age was "sucked in the whirlpool

of Carthaginian bad habits,” eventually developing a strong fondness for the circus that bordered on addiction. One day, while Augustine was teaching rhetoric, Alypius happened to wander into his class. Augustine inadvertently uses an example from the circus, expressing his contempt for those who participate in such spectacles. Although, he certainly was not directing his comments towards Alypius, his friend takes his admonition to heart, vowing never to attend the circus again [6.7].

Augustine is convinced that Alypius’ “conversion” came through God using himself as a vehicle for his friend’s reformation. This is born out in the next chapter [6.8], where Alypius gets a bit cocky, thinking he can go to the gladiator games in Rome without getting sucked in again. Relying on himself, rather than God, he falls big-time. On our own, Augustine is convinced, all we can do is sin. But if we rely on God, we will ultimately be saved.

### **The Attempt at Moral Conversion (6.11 - 6.16)**

Augustine has now reached the age of 30, and although he recognizes the truth of the Catholic faith, he still is incapable of taking those steps necessary to reform his life. Although he knows that he should give up his vain ambitions (for career, status, wealth, marriage), he finds that he lacks the resolve to carry out his good intentions. He finds himself still tempted by the need for sexual intimacy, and believes that he lacks the power to ever reform himself. His mistake (his real sin, if you will), however, is precisely to believe that he has to do all this on his own. All he really needs to do is to ask God for help and he will be cured, but he lacks the humility to do this [6.11].

He still is contemplating the prospects of an “honorable marriage,” but actually wants to get married for the wrong reason (i.e., simply to provide an outlet for his sexual longing). His mother, to keep him on the right path, arranges a marriage between him and a younger woman from a respectable family. Because she is under-aged, he has to wait two years until he can marry her [6.12-13] These plans for marriage interfere with Augustine’s attempt to found a lay religious community with his friends in Milan, because they couldn’t figure out what to do with their wives [6.14].

While Augustine is engaged to be married, he realizes that he must separate from his common-law wife (although mistresses were tolerated among pagans, they were certainly frowned upon in Christian circles). She is sent back to Africa, and his pain at their separation is evidence that he loved her deeply. He is such a slave to his passions, however, that he finds another sexual partner to satisfy his lust [6.15].

Naturally, his moral weakness makes him wretched, and he despairs ever being able to attain the happiness for which he longs. Fortunately, his conversion is not far off.

## **Book 7: Augustine’s Encounter With Neo-Platonism**

### **Metaphysical Speculation (7.1 - 7.7)**

As we have seen at the end of Book 6, Augustine has been making serious efforts to reform himself with mixed success. He still is having problems being able to conceive of God in an intelligible way, since he continues to conceive of the divine being as a “corporeal substance” (i.e., a material being). He certainly cannot even begin to understand how anything can exist outside of space and time [7.1].

At least he no longer is caught up in his previous Manichean errors about God. He recognizes that if there are two primordial substances in the universe continually at war with one another (Good and Evil, God and the Devil), then either God cannot eliminate the force of darkness (in which case he is not omnipotent) or he simply chooses not to do so (in which case he is not

supremely good) [7.2].

This leaves Augustine to speculate about the cause of evil in the universe. The cause can certainly not be God, who is supremely good and has created only good things. He then comes to the conclusion that the cause of evil is nothing other than the free will of human beings used for evil purposes. However, at times it seemed to Augustine that he often did wicked things seemingly against his own will. How can we account for that? The answer is that this inability to do the good he wills is nothing other than a penalty for sins that he freely committed. As he puts it: “free will is the cause of our doing evil and [God’s] just judgment the cause of our suffering it.” [7.3 - 7.4]

### **Conversion #3: Christian Neo-Platonism (7.8 - 7.9)**

Now we arrive at one of the most important passages in the Confessions: Augustine’s encounter with the books of the Platonists (most likely the works of Plotinus rather than Plato himself). Keep in mind that Augustine’s primary aim at this time is to clarify his own metaphysical thoughts about God, the soul, the origins of evil in the universe. Neo-Platonism was one of the most influential schools of thought in the ancient world, and it offered Augustine a metaphysical system that is not at all materialistic.

It is important to note that the very language that Augustine uses to describe his encounter with the books of the Platonists seems to be de-emphasizing the human factor in this event and highlighting the work of the divine in bringing these books to him: “And so by means of a certain man I knew (he was an extraordinarily conceited person) you brought to my notice certain books written by the Platonists.”

In fact, although Augustine admires the metaphysical system of the Neo-Platonists very much, he frequently uses the word “proud” to describe them. While he believes that the Neo-Platonists may have the right ideas about the goal of human existence (union with a supremely good and perfect and spiritual God) they are completely wrong about the way to attain that goal. Augustine believes that they place far too much emphasis on the powers of reason, and fail to appreciate the need for faith in Christ and submission to his Church.

Augustine’s attacks on Neo-Platonic thought are relatively consistent throughout his philosophical career, and all of his criticisms center around the problem of pride or presumption, which he believes serves only to lead the Neo-Platonists away from God. In *De Trinitate*, for example, Augustine argues that it is the very pride of the Neo-Platonists that prevents them attaining the end that they seek:

There are, however, some who think themselves capable of being cleansed by their own righteousness, so as to contemplate God, and to dwell in God; whom their very pride itself stains above all other. For there is no sin to which divine law is more opposed...For these persons promise themselves cleansing by their own righteousness for this reason, because some of them have been able to penetrate with the eye of the mind beyond the whole creature, and to touch, though it be in ever so small a part, the light of unchangeable truth; a thing which they deride many Christians for being not yet able to do, in the meantime live by faith alone.

In this work the Neo-Platonists are characterized as the most presumptuous of all the philosophers, believing they can rest permanently in God without the mediation of Christ. Although they deride Christians, who proceed by faith alone, the Neo-Platonists in their arrogance are unable to attain what Christians possess in their humility: because they refuse to accept the mediation of Christ, Augustine maintains, the Neo-Platonists can only gaze at their true homeland from afar, whereas the Christian is ultimately able to reside permanently in it. Thus the pride of Neo-Platonism is seen as a necessary impediment to attaining the happy life.

Thus, Augustine’s encounter with the books of the Platonist is a bit of a mixed bag. On the one hand, these works teach him how to think properly about God, the soul and the cause of evil. On the other hand, they also reinforce his mistaken belief--his great sin, if you will--that human beings can reach God through their own efforts. This will be the cause of great suffering

for him later on.

### **The Failure of Neo-Platonism (7.10 - 7.20)**

Having read selected books of the Neo-Platonists and having assimilated those insights that were more or less compatible with Christianity, Augustine describes in chapters 10-20 of Book 7 how he was inspired to turn inward, away from all the noise and confusion of the sense world, and enter into himself. Attempting to experience the same ecstatic vision of the divine that he had read about in these works, he writes,

I was admonished by all this to return to my own self, and, with you to guide me, I entered into the innermost part of myself [intravi in intima mea], and I was able to do this because you were my helper. I entered and I saw with my soul and above my mind. It was not ordinary light which is visible to all flesh....No, it was not like that; it was different, entirely different from anything of the kind....It was higher than I, because it made me, and I was lower because I was made by it. He who knows truth, and he who knows that light knows eternity.

Certainly, the influence of Neo-Platonic thought is visible throughout these sections of the Confessions. Courcelle, O'Meara, and Henry, among others, have given ample consideration to the philosophical underpinnings of Augustine's so-called vision in Milan, and have concluded that it was highly influenced by Plotinus's work "On Beauty" (and perhaps also Porphyry's Return of the Soul) and that it represents a relatively successful attempt to ascend to God through the power of Augustine's own will. If the attempt is somewhat incomplete, these authors argue, it is only because Augustine's own moral state is not yet firm enough to sustain the vision of God, not because of the insufficiencies inherent within Neo-Platonism itself. Thus, the traditional interpretation of this text argues that Augustine experiences an intellectual conversion in Book 7 of the Confessions, but only experiences a moral conversion in Book 8. His disappointment in Book 7, therefore, is nothing more than a manifestation of moral weakness: had Augustine attained the same kind of moral purification that his intellect received, his attempt to return to God without the aid of the Church presumably would have been a success.

Eugene Teselle, on the other hand, maintains that the account of Augustine's attempt at mystical ascent in Book 7 should not be understood as an historical record of the event, but as retrospective critique of philosophical approaches to happiness and an affirmation of the need for grace in order to attain beatitude. What is it that makes the Neo-Platonist believe that they can attain happiness through their own efforts? It is nothing other than the sin of pride—the arrogant presumption of their own self-sufficiency. Throughout his later life Augustine consistently attacked the Platonists on the grounds that they reject Christ as the medium through which they can ascend to the "blessed fatherland." Relying on their own powers, the best that these philosophers can do is glimpse the happy life from afar; they can never rest tranquilly in it.

Although Augustine acknowledges that the Neo-Platonists have a correct understanding of God as an infinite and incorporeal being, he also maintains that the Neo-Platonists fail to understand the right way (via) to return to God. "It is one thing," writes Augustine, "to see from a mountaintop in the forests the land of peace in the distance and not to find the way to it and to struggle in vain along impassable tracks....and it is another thing to hold to the way that leads there...." The results of not recognizing this right way, Augustine claims, is an inability to attain the very end which Neo-Platonism inspired him to seek. In the light, the attempt at mystical ascent in Book 7 of the Confessions is nothing more than a miserable failure from Augustine's perspective, because it is grounded in the wrong way for the soul to return to God.

This is precisely the reason why Augustine views his own attempts to ascend to God in Milan as a complete failure. His own natural pride, magnified still further by his reading of the books of the Platonists, ensured that this vision could never be sustained. As Starnes has

correctly observed, the entire context of the description of his “vision” is placed squarely in the economy of pride—the pride of the Neo-Platonists, the pride of the man who gave him the books to read and his own pride at the time he received them. It is also worth noting that the entire discussion of his experience emphasizes his own activity. It is probably not purely coincidental that Augustine writes the passage in the first person singular: “I entered” (intravi); “I saw” (vidi); “perceived” (inveni); “I learned (cognovi). The emphasis on himself and his own activity in this passage is astounding given Augustine’s typically self-deprecating attitude throughout the Confessions and his natural tendency to credit everything good in his life to God’s work rather than his own.

### **The Pauline Alternative (7.21)**

Immediately following his encounter with the Neo-Platonists, Augustine describes in Confessions 7.21 how he was inspired to snatch up (arripui) the epistles of Paul, which he claims had a powerful effect on him. Although many commentators either ignore the importance of this transition from Plotinus to Paul in Book 7 or deny that Augustine himself saw any real difference between Christianity and Neo-Platonism, it is clearly the case that Augustine’s aim in 7.21 is to contrast the difference between the philosophical approach to happiness that he had previously adopted and the more biblically and ecclesiastically oriented one that he would eventually come to adopt.

But what is it that Augustine received from his reading of Paul that he could not have gotten simply from Neo-Platonism? Although he observes in 7.21 that everything he discovered in the books of the Platonists that was true he also finds in the writings of Paul, the truth that he discovers in Scripture is expressed “to the glory of [God’s] grace.” Thus, while the Neo-Platonists may have an accurate understanding of the nature of God, this understanding is undermined by their attitude of self-pride and their lack of gratitude to God. It is not enough, writes Augustine, for one to be able to see God, but one must also “grow strong enough to lay hold on [God].” Though the Neo-Platonists might see God from a distance, their pride prevents them from resting in God. The Christian, on the other hand, has developed the right attitude, which enables him not only to see from a distance but to reside, to rest and to dwell permanently in God. This proper attitude is characterized by “the face and look of pity, the tears of confession, your sacrifice—a troubled spirit, a broken and contrite heart, the salvation of the people, the bridal city, the earnest of the Holy Ghost, the cup of redemption.” Thus, the attitude of the Christian, as opposed to that of the Platonist—the attitude that enables them to not only see God but also remain in God—is an attitude of penance, humility and submission to authority. If Augustine is to overcome the pride that has prevented him from standing firmly in God, he must first subordinate his own interests and desires to those of the Church, which alone can show him the right way to attain salvation.

For Augustine the philosopher it was necessary to submit to external authority in order to provide a remedy for his excessive pride. By submitting himself to legitimate authority Augustine is also acknowledging his own sinful state, his inability to follow God’s law on his own and his need to be cared for by the collective body that is the Church. As we shall see in the next two books, salvation for Augustine will ultimately come to mean following a way of life that includes a “pattern of obedience within an authoritative religion.”

## **Book 8: Augustine’s Moral Conversion**

### **Introduction (8.1)**

Book 8 represents the immediate steps that led to Augustine’s ultimate conversion in August of

386 AD. In 8.1 Augustine affirms his intellectual certainty--gained from reading the books of the Platonists and the epistles of St. Paul--that God exists and that He is supremely good and all powerful. But he finds that there is a big difference between knowing something intellectually and living one's life according to this knowledge (between knowing the good and doing the good).

By this time, Augustine is aware that his is not a problem of intellectual certainty, but of moral stability. In order to attain this stability he needs to accept the way of the Savior (i.e., humble acceptance of his own moral infirmity and openness to the healing power of Christ), but he is unwilling to abandon the conviction of his own moral autonomy: "The way-the Savior himself-pleased me;" he says, "but I was still reluctant to enter its narrowness."

### **Examples of Simplicianus and Victorinus (8.2 - 8.4)**

In order to receive some guidance, Augustine goes to see Simplicianus, a bishop in Milan. Simplicianus tells Augustine the story of Victorinus, who was a pagan noted for his translation of Neo-Platonic philosophical texts. After studying Scripture with the same intensity as he previously did pagan literature, Victorinus suddenly informs Simplicianus that he has decided to become a Christian. Simplicianus in turn replies that he will not believe that Victorinus is a Christian until he see him in the Church. Hesitating to enter the Church for fear of offending his important pagan friends, he responds to Simplicianus' challenge by sarcastically questioning whether it is in fact "walls...that make the Christian." Eventually, however, Victorinus begins to overcome his doubt and hesitation and seeks to be baptized within the Church.

The result of this experience is that Victorinus becomes a model of Christian piety, giving up his career as a rhetorician for the sake of his new faith. But the account of Victorinus also serves the purpose of inspiring Augustine to following Victorinus' footsteps. "When this man of yours, Simplicianus, told me all this about Victorinus, I was on fire to imitate him, and this, of course, was why he had told me the story."

But what aspect of the story in particular is Augustine set on fire to imitate? The significance of Victorinus is that of a great man who chooses obscurity within the Church. By humbly submitting to its authority, he now has the power of the collective body of the members of the Church to inspire and guide him. Augustine compares Victorinus to Paul, another great man whose pride was beaten down and who also became a "simple subject" of Christ. Both Paul and Victorinus are compelled to forsake their pride, arrogance and self-reliance and in doing so find greater strength by becoming members of the Church. The example, then, that Augustine is set on fire to imitate is the example of one who rejects the presumptuous path of self-autonomy and places himself at the mercy of Christ by inscribing himself within the institution of the Church. This is the example that the reader is likewise inspired to be "set on fire" to imitate.

### **The Slavery of Habit (8.5)**

Augustine may be "set on fire" to imitate Victorinus' example, but he finds himself being "held back...by the iron bondage of [his] own will." Now that he is no longer a Manichean, he can't simply think that it was the "force of darkness" that was compelling him to sin against his own will. He now knows that he himself must ultimately be responsible for his own failings. But how can he account for the fact that he cannot simply will himself to stop sinning, even though he desires to do so?

To answer this question, Augustine devises his theory of the divided will. In general, an act of the will is quite simple. When it comes to moving a limb, for example, all one has to do is will the limb to move, and it does so automatically. Will and action here are one and the same. On the other hand, it is not quite so simple to think that we can overcome our illicit desires and inclinations, simple by willing them to disappear. I may desire to stop smoking, for example, but instead of being able to throw away my pack of cigarettes, I experience a conflict within my

own will. I want to stop smoking, but I find myself incapable of doing so.

What is the reason for such a conflict? The answer, according to Augustine, is that I am not really desiring to do the good resolutely. Part of me wants to give up smoking, but another part doesn't really want to give up the pleasure of a nicotine rush. I am not completely sincere in my desire to stop smoking, so I lack a will that is unified enough to help me kick the habit.

The problem for Augustine is not that he does not want to follow God's law--his anguish over his moral failings clearly indicates that he does — but that he is not deliberate enough in his commitment to this law. As Mary Clark puts it, "If the will already desires what the command imposes, a command is given half-heartedly, and not obeyed, so that it is useless to give it." In order for Augustine to overcome the division within his will, it is necessary for him to will resolutely and sincerely to follow God's law, and not in the half-hearted way that he had done so up until this point. In Confessions 8.8, for example, Augustine specifically says that although in principle he wants to adopt a Christian lifestyle he does not, in fact, really want to give up his lustful way of life: "I was afraid that you might hear me too soon and cure me too soon from the disease of a lust which I preferred to be satisfied rather than extinguished." Likewise, his lament in 8.7 to be made "chaste and continent, but not yet" is symptomatic of one who is not yet fully committed to change his life according to the requirements of the law.

### **The Example of Ponticianus and his Friends (8.6 - 8.7)**

In the midst of his struggles with his divided will, Augustine receives a surprise visit from Ponticianus, a fellow African. Ponticianus notices a collection of the epistles of Paul lying on a game table before him, and expresses his delight that Augustine is reading this work. He goes on to tell the two about the conversion of St. Anthony and about the various communities of ascetics living in the desert. After describing these incidents, Ponticianus then recounts another incident that he had personally witnessed. He explains to Augustine that, while he was in Trier, he and three friends went for a walk in a garden outside the wall of the city. Having split up during the course of the walk, two members of the group came upon a house in which some Christian ascetics resided. Upon entering, they discovered a book containing an account of the life of Anthony, which they proceeded to read. As a result of reading the text, one of these men became "filled with a holy love" and after a period of intense internal conflict decided to become a Christian:

So he read on, and his heart, where you saw it, was changed, and as soon appeared, his mind shook off the burden of the world. While he was reading and the waves of his heart rose and fell, there were times when he cried out against himself, and then he distinguished the better course and chose it for his own. Now he was yours, and he said to his friend: 'I have now broken away from all our service now, this moment, in this place. You may not like to imitate me in this, but you must not oppose me.'

His companion, far from opposing him, is immediately moved to follow him. Furthermore, when these two informed their fiancées of the path that they had chosen, they in turn also decided to enter the service of the Church. Ponticianus, on the other hand, still filled with a love for worldly ambition, is not yet able to put aside his career goals and follow his friends.

Although on the surface it again appears that this conversion account is meant to inspire Augustine to reject the married life or his secular career, this is not the aim that Augustine has in relaying it to the reader. Ultimately what impresses Augustine about Ponticianus' story is not specifically what his two friends had been able to give up (i.e., their fiancées and careers) but that they had been able to let go of their own wills, while he is completely unable to do so: "the more ardent was the love I felt for those two men of whom I was hearing and of how healthfully they had been moved to give themselves up entirely to you to be cured, the more bitter was the hatred I felt for myself when I compared myself with them." Augustine's aim in sharing this story with the reader-like Ponticianus' aim in sharing it with Augustine-is to convince the reader that his own salvation depends, not upon the specific vocation he adopts, but upon the particular moral attitude he adopts. The use of medical imagery here is highly appropriate: Augustine and



the reader must both admit that they are sick, that they are helpless to cure themselves and that they need to rely totally and exclusively on the divine physician's care in order to be cured. Neither Victorinus nor Ponticianus' friends in Trier had brought about their own conversion; their sole virtue lay in "giving themselves up" to God in order to be cured. Having done this, they experience precisely what Monica and Alypius eventually come to experience—liberation from the slavery of their respective habits. All of them, writes Augustine, "have had the weight taken from their backs and have been given wings to fly." As a result they not only have the will (*voluntas*) to follow God's law, but the power (*facultas*) as well.

The result of these stories is heightened sense of despair that slowly begins to tear down the walls of Augustine's pride. For the first time Augustine recognizes that his intellectual prowess can never assure him of the happiness he seeks, and, for the first time as well, he begins to experience a real sense of his own moral impotence. Only when Augustine has reached the point of utter desperation—the confidence in the strength of his own will completely shattered—can he sincerely and resolutely begin to look for a higher power to heal the division within his soul. It is at this moment of utter helplessness, and of complete surrender, that he experiences his greatest triumph in the garden of Milan.

### **Conversion in the Garden of Milan (8.8 - 8.12)**

In the midst of the crisis brought about by the conversion accounts told to him by Simplicianus and Ponticianus, Augustine finds himself in a garden with Alypius, where he has resolved to settle once and for all the conflict within his soul. He describes himself as "sick and in torture" over his inability to put aside lustful desires and finds himself growing progressively more ashamed of his own moral weakness. In what is certainly the most artfully written section of the Confessions, Augustine creates an imaginary conflict within his own mind between the personifications of the objects of his lust, his mistresses of old, and that of "calm and serene" Continence. These objects of his lust (sex, power, wealth and fame) taunt him with the challenge of whether he can live without them. Implied in this taunt is the idea that if he cannot live without these lesser goods, then they, rather than God, have become the ultimate source of his delight.

At the same time, Augustine receives a vision of Continence, urging him towards an ordered love of worldly things. But how can he maintain an ordered love, when his will is still captivated by a disordered longing for worldly pleasure? The answer that Continence reveals to him is by not trying to rely on his own strength to accomplish this end, but rather by depending on God. Showing Augustine the images of men and women who have managed to give up worldly pursuits, Continence then reminds him that the strength they have to forsake the ways of the flesh is not their own doing:

'Can you not do what these men and these women have done? Or do you think that their ability is in themselves and not in the Lord their God? It was the Lord God who gave me to them. Why do you try to stand by yourself, and so not stand at all [quid in te stas et non in te stas]? Let him support you. Do not be afraid. He will not draw away and let you fall. Put yourself fearlessly in His hands. He will receive you and will make you well.'

The choice that Augustine is faced with at this crucial juncture of the Confessions, then, is whether to continue along the path of presumption — the path of philosophy and of self-autonomy — and, in doing so, continue to fall prey to the force of habit; or whether to humbly implore the aid of the Liberator, forsaking the pride that has been the central driving force of his life until this point. Should he give up Cicero, Plotinus and the entire Latin philosophical tradition, that is, and return to the African religion of his childhood with its frightening tendencies toward authoritarianism and superstition? In light of fifteen hundred years of Catholic doctrine

the choice does seem as horrifying today as it must have been in 386. But the question that Augustine is ultimately faced with at this time is whether to forsake a philosophy of the will that was considered the common intellectual currency of his time for an approach to religion emphasizing original sin, election and grace that must have appeared dubious, at least, to his more enlightened contemporaries. He must decide, in the end, whether to take the insights that he had garnered from his reading of Paul to their logical, albeit frightening, conclusion, and in doing so subvert a tradition for which he had previously been a chief spokesman. Understood in this light, one can hardly blame Augustine for his reluctance to relinquish the last vestiges of his self-autonomy.

In the midst of this crisis--Augustine's confidence in the power of his own will at its lowest point in the Confessions--he tearfully throws himself under "a certain fig tree," and in utter desperation pleads for divine assistance. At that very moment he hears the voice of a child, which he interprets as a divine admonition:

Suddenly a voice reaches my ears from a nearby house. It is the voice of a boy or a girl [quasi pueri an puellae], I don't know which, and in a kind of singsong the words are constantly repeated: 'Take it and read it. Take it and read it. [tolle lege]...I check the force of my tears and rose to my feet, being quite certain that I must interpret this as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first passage which I should come upon....So I went eagerly back to the place where Alypius was sitting, since it was there that I had left the book of the apostle when I rose to my feet. I snatched it up [arripui], I opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in clamoring and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscence.' I had no wish to read further; there was no need to. For immediately [statim] I had reached the end of this sentence it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away.

Upon receiving this admonition, Augustine shares his experience with Alypius, who coincidentally is going through his own crisis. Upon opening the same text, Alypius receives a similar admonition, with the result that he too is strengthened in his resolve to follow God's law. Both decide immediately to put aside thoughts of marriage and a secular career and decide to enter the Church.

Several important factors reveal that Augustine is once again attempting to illustrate the process of conversion that we saw in the stories of Alypius, Victorinus and the friends of Ponticianus, this time using his own conversion as a model. First, as in the earlier accounts, the scene in the garden is replete with chance occurrences and indefinite expressions. He thus throws himself "under a certain fig tree" (sub quadam fici arbore), is aroused from his sorrows by the almost mystical voice of "a boy or a girl" (quasi pueri anpuellae) coming from a nearby house, and turns to a volume of the epistles of Paul, which he just happens to have with him. As John O'Meara points out, Augustine's fondness for indefinite expressions (as well as for chance occurrence) at the most crucial points in the Confessions reflects his belief that Providence disposes all things, however unrelated they might appear from a human perspective, for its own purposes: "Augustine had such confidence in this unerring Providence that he is content sometimes to indicate a detail in the pattern in the most general way only-as if to be too precise and explicit about petty facts were to distract one's attention from the really important thing-the working of Providence." O'Meara goes on to observe that in no other section of the Confessions does indefinite phasing occur to the degree that it does in Book 8.12.

The result of Augustine's experience of divine grace is a sense of inner peace, conviction and joy that overtakes him almost immediately. He describes himself as being "shot through [the] heart" with divine charity, as "on fire" to follow God's law, and "boiled again" with

hope in divine mercy. Like Victorinus before him, Augustine is inspired to give up all worldly ambitions and the desire for a wife, and is instead moved to a life of celibacy in the Church. By the beginning of Book 9 he has already sacrificed a lucrative career as a teacher of rhetoric for the sake of his new-found faith and subsequently discovers that he is better able to order the temporal goods in his life, since now his “good things were not external were not sought with the eyes of the flesh. Having been given the grace to attain an ordered love of worldly things, Augustine slowly begins to discover the joy that comes from loving all things in God rather than in themselves:

Those who find their joys in things outward easily become vain and waste themselves on things seen and temporal and, with their minds starving, go licking at shadows....if only they could see the eternal light inside themselves....I had tasted of it....Nor did I wish for any multiplication of earthly goods; in these one wastes and is wasted by time. In the Eternal Simplicity I had other corn and wine and oil.”

But the delight that Augustine experiences after his conversion in the garden of Milan is only a foretaste of what awaits him in Ostia. Having strived for years to attain the beatific vision, and having failed time and again, Augustine suddenly discovers that his greatest ambition is to be realized at the moment he has let go of all ambition.

## **Book 9: Augustine’s Mystical Experience**

### **The Effects of Conversion (9.1 - 9.7)**

Confessions 9 begins with yet another prayer extolling God’s goodness and mercy and acknowledging the sinfulness of human beings. Through God’s grace Augustine is set free from the enslavement to temporal goods [9.1]. He quietly withdraws from his profession as teacher of rhetoric, using health concerns as his excuse [9.2].

A wealthy friend of his, Verecundus, offers Augustine the peace and quiet of his country estate at Cassiciacum in Northern Italy, where Augustine in September of 386 retreats with his mother, son and a few close friends. It is here that Augustine begins his career as a Christian philosopher, writing such important works as *The Happy Life* and *The Soliloquies* [9.3 - 9.4].

Augustine returns to Milan in March of 387, where he, Alypius, and his son, Adeodatus, are all baptized. His happiness is slightly marred, however, by the death of his son a short time later [9.6]

### **The Example of Monica (9.8 - 9.9)**

The group decide to return to Africa to dedicate their lives to the service of God. On the way back to Thagaste, they stop at Ostia--a major port in Southern Italy--to await the boat to Africa.

Augustine interrupts his own story at this point to talk a bit more about some important events in the life of his mother, Monica. Remember: Although Monica may strike the modern reader as a bit of a pest, she represents the Christian ideal for Augustine. Her humility and obedience to the Church is in stark contrast to the arrogance and self-reliance of the philosophers who had so seduced Augustine during his early years [9.8 -9.9].

### **Christian Mystical Union at Ostia (9.10)**

Not long before Monica’s death, and while they were still waiting for the boat that would take them back to Ostia, Augustine describes how he and his mother were looking out upon

a garden in the house where they were staying in Ostia. While they are reflecting on the joys of the next life, the two have a joint mystical experience.

Numerous attempts have been made to interpret the vision at Ostia, not all of which have been successful. Paul Henry, for one, has attempted to argue that Plotinian elements play a large part in the vision of Book 9. Augustine, he writes, not only used Plotinian language to describe the scene but adopts the same progression of ideas as Plotinus. Henry further maintains that, although Augustine translated standard Plotinian concepts into biblical language, the characteristics of the vision are identical to those in the highest Plotinian contemplation: God is the object of knowledge and the mode of this knowledge is the “vision of God in himself and by himself without any intermediary.” Concerning the relationship between the visions of Books 7 and 9, Henry argues that both owe their inspiration to certain sections of the *Enneads*, although he admits that the spirit of the two passages is quite different.

This interpretation has been supported by some of the most influential Augustine scholars of this century. John Burnaby, for example, maintains that the vision of Milan was “of exactly the same kind” as the vision at Ostia. “There is no grounds,” he writes, “for the claim that the intervening ‘purgation’ and reception into the Church gave to the so-called ecstasy at Ostia a ‘Christian’ quality lacking to the earlier experience”. The general consensus up until recently, then, has been to view the vision at Ostia as little more than a successful rehash of the vision at Milan—both being inspired by the Neo-Platonic thought of Plotinus.

One author who has chosen to take a more interesting look at the vision at Ostia is Colin Starnes, who argues quite coherently for the unique character of this vision. According to Starnes, and in opposition to the traditional interpretation, the vision at Ostia is intended to be understood as specifically Christian in character, whereas the vision in Milan is a Neo-Platonic vision—one that all men can achieve through a consideration of nature. Although Starnes is essentially correct in arguing for the uniqueness of the vision of Ostia, he does not go far enough in his analysis of what makes this vision different from the one in Milan. Certainly, the end of both visions is essentially the same. As Starnes observes they arte both “the direct, though momentary, grasp of one and the same God, seen ‘in himself’-arrived at in both cases through the consideration of nature, and known in both cases to be the true goal and bliss of the soul.” It should not be at all surprising that Augustine views the end of the two experiences as being identical: we have already seen that for him philosophy and true religion can both lead the seeker of wisdom to one and the same promised land. The difference between the two, as we have also seen, lies not so much in the goal that is sought but in the way that it is sought. The reason why Augustine must continue his narrative is precisely because he wishes to distinguish between that type of vision that is the end-product of presumption (the vision at Milan) and that which is the end-product of confession (the vision at Ostia). The unique aspect of the vision, therefore, lies exclusively in the fact that it is the by-product of grace and is found only in a life of complete submission to the Church. An analysis of the visions in Book 7 and 9 makes it clear that Augustine’s aim in continuing his narrative past the conversion account in Book 8 is to offer yet another refutation of all philosophically-inspired attempts to attain happiness.

### **Comparison of Visions at Milan (7.10) and Ostia (9.10)**

MILAN	OSTIA
philosophical vision	Catholic vision
effect of the will	effect of grace

unmediated	mediated by Chris
individual vision	communal vision
economy of pride	economy of humility
use of Neo-Platonic language	use of biblical language
emphasis on the present	emphasis on the next life
direct but fleeting	direct but fleeting
results: greater despair	results: greater hope

We have already seen that the vision of Milan in Book 7 is inspired by Augustine's reading of the books of the Platonists, and, based upon this, he attempts to attain mystical union with God through the force of his own will alone. The entire account is written in the first person, emphasizing the solitary nature of the experience ("I was admonished;" "I entered;" "I saw"). We have also seen that Augustine places this vision in Book 7 squarely in the economy of pride: he receives the books of the Platonists from an "extraordinarily conceited person;" the writings of the Platonists themselves are replete with self-glorifying thought and ideas; and he describes himself at the time of this experience as filled with pride.

The vision at Ostia, on the other hand, takes place after Augustine has begun to read Paul seriously for the first time after he has inscribed himself within the Church, and after he has completely rejected the belief that one can rest in God through the exercise of reason alone. In the aftermath of his conversion in the garden of Milan, which he now interprets as the gratuitous acts of a merciful God, he no longer seeks a life of fame and wealth, but simply to follow god's will by living in relative obscurity within the Church, "I was able totally," he writes "to set my face against what I willed and to will what you willed.... And I decided in your sight that ....I would diligently withdraw from a position where I was making use of my tongue in the talking shop." The pride of Augustine in Milan has thus given way in Book 9 to a humble acknowledgment of his own moral infirmity and need for divine assistance. Thus, whereas Henry sees the aim of the vision at Ostia, like the one in Book 7, as an attempt at mystical union with God without the help of an intermediary, Starnes more correctly observes that the vision at Ostia is precisely a vision of the mediator. Certainly, there is no question in Augustine's mind that without the assistance of Christ he would not have been able to ascend to God.

It has also been noted that in opposition to the individual character of the vision at Milan, the vision at Ostia is communal in character, being shared by both Augustine and his mother. The role of Monica in this experience should certainly not be underestimated. Indeed, in Augustine's early writing she typically is used to represent the Church. If this is also the case in the Confessions, and there is no reason to believe that it is not, then the vision at Ostia should be seen as an attempt at union with God that is founded upon a shared faith grounded in the authority of the Church. Whereas the frequent use of "I" in the earlier experience highlights Augustine's pride and arrogance, the use for the plural, "we," ("we raised ourselves higher," "still we went upward;" we talked;" "we sighted") in Book 9 emphasizes instead his newfound subservience to the Church.

The fact that the later episode focuses almost exclusively on the joys of the next life, while the vision at Milan emphasizes the joys of the present also serves to bear out the fundamental differences between the two accounts. Whereas Augustine's aim in Milan was to seek beatitude here and now through the exercise of his will, at Ostia he and Monica are completely concerned with the joy they will experience upon seeing God face to face in heaven. The Christian visio dei, as opposed to that of the philosophers, can best be described as a vision of a vision--a fleeting glimpse of the full vision of God that awaits

the elect after death. Man's ultimate felicity, Augustine finally came to realize, must be postponed until after he has thrown off the burdens of earthly existence. And yet Augustine clearly perceives the earthly visio dei of the Christian to be of such an intensity that, if it were to go on forever, it would be virtually indistinguishable from the joys of heaven. Though neither the Christian nor the Neo-Platonist can sustain this vision for more than a brief period in this life, the Christian is left with something that the Neo-Platonist is not—the satisfaction that, as a result of his faith in Christ, he will be able to experience the bliss of eternal knowledge of God after death.

Despite the brevity and transient nature of the experience at Ostia, the moral results of this vision differ completely from that of the vision in Milan. As in the former vision, Augustine's soul ascends upward towards "that region of never-failing plenty," where he briefly intuits the bliss of heavenly existence, though barely touching it with the "whole strength of [his] hearts' impulse." The entire experience is described as "a moment comprehension" (momentum intelligentiae) and ends as suddenly as it began with Augustine's returning to his normal state. This time, however, the experience does not end in ever greater misery and despair, but rather a greater sense of peace and hope. As opposed to the first vision, in which he is pulled away from God by the weight (pondus) of his own carnal habit, the vision at Ostia reinforces his belief that the goods of the world, over which he had previously lusted, are nothing compared to the joy of resting in God for all eternity.

### **The Death of Monica (9.11 - 9.13)**

Shortly after their experience at Ostia, Monica falls into a fever and dies at the age of 56. Of course, Augustine is saddened by the death of his mother, but, unlike with the death of his friend [4.4], he is not inconsolable. His faith has given him a strength and a larger perspective that he did not have in 375. He has complete confidence that his mother is resting securely in God and that he will join her eventually in the next life.

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