

## AUGUSTINE

One of the decisive periods in the official suppression of paganism in Africa occurred during the years 399-401. A Roman mission arrived in Carthage in 399 with authority to close the temples. In the same year religious riots erupted that caused at least sixty deaths. By 401 the Catholic bishops in Council at Carthage had sent an embassy to Rome to appeal for even more legislation to uproot the remnants of idolatry. Among these bishops was Augustine of Hippo~ the outstanding genius of the Western Church, who even in short history of the Church deserves a chapter to himself.

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Augustine was born in 354 in a small town, Thagaste, in Latin Africa ( now part of modern Algeria). His father, a man of slender means was a convert to Christianity late in life, while his mother, Monica, was a lifelong devout Christian.

At the cost of great sacrifice on the part of his parents, he managed to secure an education, which took him to Madaura first and finally to Carthage. It was narrow, exclusively literary, and consisted of the intense study of works of Vergil, Cicero and a

few other Latin classics. It left him ignorant of philosophy, science, and Greek. While a student in Carthage he plunged into the sensual excitements of the terming city and was soon enthralled with a girl who bore him a son, Adeodatus; she remained his concubine for the next fifteen years. At the same time he underwent a kind of religious conversion: While reading Cicero's Hortensius, he was suddenly stirred by a passionate desire for wisdom. But where could he find it? Since he was reared in a Christian home, he naturally opened the Bible; but he soon found himself repelled by the clumsy translation, which offended his cultivated literary taste. Besides, the history of "God's people" with its record of violence and its image of a vengeful God seemed in contradiction with the God of Jesus Christ. In his bewilderment he turned to the Manichaeans, whose rejection of the Old Testament and dualistic interpretation of the problem of evil ( they attributed evil to a supreme principle) soothed his sense of guilt about his own sexual aberrations.

All the while he pursued his successful career as a professor of rhetoric, at Carthage first and then at Rome, where influential friends brought him into

touch with high imperial officials. This led to his appointment in 384 as professor of rhetoric to the court of the Emperor at Milan, the Western capital at the time.

His stay at Milan proved to be decisive for his intellectual and spiritual history. By the time he arrived there in the autumn of 384, he had become disillusioned with the Manichees and their doctrinaire claim to absolute certainty. He still believed truth might be attainable, but not in their simplistic fashion. Coming to Milan in this mood of uncertainty, he soon fell under the spell of the formidable Ambrose, chosen bishop eleven years before in a clamorous election by the people. The young professor began to attend the cathedral services and was greatly impressed by the prelate's powerful presentation of the Catholic faith, his easy familiarity with current intellectual trends, and his cogent answers to the Manichaean criticism of the Old Testament.

Augustine's circle of influential friends at Milan introduced him to the Neo-Platonic movement, which attracted many Christian intellectuals of the day. They found in this system a remarkable affinity with their faith. He studied Plotinus intensively and

was able thereby to shake off a lingering materialism and to reach the concept of a purely spiritual reality.

The philosophy of Plotinus combined a profound sense of the spiritual unity of all things with an awareness of their innumerable gradations as emanations of a unique spiritual being. Thus each manifestation of the divine good was linked with all other manifestations to make the universe a continuous active whole, each stage of being deriving its awareness from a higher stage and in turn communicating it to an inferior one. The sublimity of this philosophy swept Augustine off his feet and decisively converted him from a literary career to a career in philosophy. He might have stopped there had it not been for the influence of St. Paul, who now also began to preoccupy his thoughts. It was the great apostle who helped him to realize that philosophy was not enough to overcome the moral contradictions of our nature; God alone incarnate in the flesh and revealed in the Scriptures could do so.

But still Augustine hesitated to seek Catholic baptism and make the renunciations it entailed.

His divided soul would give him no rest, however, and finally in a moment of anguish, hearing a child's voice cry out, "take and read," he reached for a copy of Paul's epistles, opened them at random and glanced down: "no drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness," he read, "and no wrangling or jealousy. Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ"; it was all finally settled in that moment; his doubts disappeared, his soul flooded with light and certainty.

Abandoning his plans for marriage (he had already dismissed his poor mistress), his public career, his hopes of financial security and social prestige, he retired to a country villa-Cassiciacum, near Lake Como-and there with a little oddly assorted company of friends and relatives including his mother, Monica, led a simple life of prayer and contemplation and began to sketch out an ambitious program for a Christian philosophy while preparing himself for baptism. This he received at the hands of Ambrose on the night of April 24-2; (Holy Saturday), 387. He then prepared to return to Thagaste, his hometown, with his mother and friends in order to take up a quasimonastic kind of life. But Monica died in the

Roman seaport of Ostia, leaving him in the throes of uncontrollable grief. The bereaved little party finally arrived in Carthage in late 388; but death struck again, carrying off his son, Adeodatus.

A casual trip that he took a few years later to the ancient seaport of Hippo to seek a recruit for his "monastery" had an unexpected result. While attending the liturgy in the cathedral, he was seized by the congregation and brought before the bishop, Valerius, who ordained him on the spot. (This was not an unusual occurrence in those days.) So Augustine took up residence there, moved his community to the precincts of the cathedral in Hippo, and soon came to the fore as the leading spokesman for the Catholic community. In 393 he was honored with an invitation to address the African Catholic bishops at one of their councils. In 395 Valerius chose him as his co-adjutor, and a few years later Augustine succeeded him as bishop of Hippo. There he remained for thirty-five years, until his death.

There were some three hundred or more Catholic bishops in Africa at the time. Many, who were married men, could rival secular dignitaries

by their lavish displays of wealth. Augustine, in contrast, turned his episcopal house into a monastery, gathered his priests around him, and required them to take the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience to a strict rule. As bishops themselves later on, many of them disseminated his ideals throughout the Church in Africa.

The victory of Christianity in Africa dated back to the latter half of the third century. By the time of Augustine there were more than three hundred sees in Africa. But-sadly-the Church in Africa was torn by dissension between Catholics and Donatists, a schism that dated back to the time of Constantine and that occurred when some of the bishops refused to recognize a certain Caecilian as the legitimate bishop of Carthage on the grounds that he had been consecrated by a "traditor"-that is, one who had handed over the sacred Scriptures to the Roman persecutors under Diocletian. In spite of Constantine's effort to pressure the Donatists back into union with the Catholics, the schism lasted, and by Augustine's time the two Churches faced each other in almost every town. The bishop of Hippo threw himself energetically

into the controversy and by sermons and writings tried to heal the schism.

But at issue were two radically opposed conceptions of the nature of the Church: the Donatists claimed to be a pure Church, a Church of the elect, of the holy, of the martyrs, uncontaminated by and fiercely exclusive toward the world, an ark of refuge from evil society. By their practice of rebaptizing they claimed fidelity to the tradition of Cyprian and to true African Christianity as it was before Constantine.

The opposite tack was taken by Augustine and the Catholics who willingly acknowledged the co-existence of saints and sinners in their Church. A Church intended to embrace all of humanity could not be so sharply demarcated from the world, they argued. The final separation would only take place at the End. The Church's purpose was to be a sociological sign of God's presence in the world; its sacraments were holy, even if sometimes its ministers were not. Moreover, as Augustine was fond of pointing out, the Donatists were isolated from the worldwide Church, while the Catholics enjoyed communion with it by their agreement with overseas customs-such as the



Roman ban on rebaptizing-and by their willingness to communicate with the overseas churches, an attitude that gained them the favor of the Emperor.

Arguments had little effect, however. Finally recourse was had to coercion. It was an easy step to take in the climate of opinion at the time-but a sad step for the Catholic Church. The current Emperor, Honorius, was a devout Catholic and had recently used force to suppress paganism, while some of the Donatists themselves were prone to violence. So in June 405, the *Edict of Unity* was published, which ordered the dissolution of the Donatist Church.

Although Augustine had endorsed the policy of the Empire in using coercion to repress paganism, he did not at first favor using it against the Donatists. The possibility of having his Church filled with counterfeit Catholics was too frightening. But when experience proved that many of these forcibly converted Donatists later made good Catholics, he gradually changed his mind, and in the course of justifying persecution of the Donatists wrote the only full treatise found in the history of the early Church on the right of the

state to suppress non-Catholics-one that exercised tremendous influence on subsequent Church policy and provided a rationale for the medieval Inquisition.

The strands of his theology of persecution are numerous and subtly woven together: Augustine had a view of predestination that held that men were not ready to make free choice of salvation until God prepared them spiritually by many involuntary constraints and punishments as God dealt with his wayward children of the Old Testament· and so the persecution of the Donatists could be regarded as a divinely ordained castigation intended for their spiritual benefit. He believed that the majority of men, thanks to original sin, lived on such a low moral level that they could only be, motivated by fear-and in this sense he interpreted the parable of the wedding banquet where the master forces the unwilling guests to attend his supper. Another factor was his experience with many of the coerced Donatists who later expressed their gratitude at being brought to see the light.

As the bishop of Hippo, Augustine was bound to a treadmill of ceaseless activity: as judge in the

episcopal court arbitrating endless litigation, as administrator of the Church's vast property, as counselor of his priests, and as a leading member of the African hierarchy taking part in the great councils of the day. At the same time as the shepherd of his flock, he preached constantly before rapt and crowded congregations and left to posterity a collection of sermons that indicate his almost incredible knowledge of Scripture as well as a verbal dexterity that fascinated his uneducated audience and kept them interested even when he was expounding the most profound truths of the faith. Much of his success was due to an extraordinary sensitivity, by which he could identify with his people and so move them to identify completely with himself. With it all he managed to carry on a huge correspondence with a host of friends and acquaintances and to write innumerable treatises=thirty-three books alone between 395 and 410.

One of the most remarkable is his *Confessions*, a masterpiece of introspective autobiography, which he wrote shortly after becoming bishop. With marvelous literary artistry he charts the labyrinthine ways of his own spirit, and in a

fiercely honest scrutiny of his whole past life analyzes the motives behind his spiritual evolution. It is a book concerned not so much with ideas as with feelings-the affections that really shaped his personality, the sins, the temptations, the love affairs, the motives, the ecstasies, the intellectual excitements. Always present is the sense of the mysterious abyss, the almost infinite depths of one's being and its continual yearning for more, which he felt could only be explained by supposing its source in the ineffably mysterious and all-loving Creator of the Christian revelation.

Two other great works of this period are the *De Genesi ad litteram*, a vast commentary on the book of Genesis, and *De Trinitate*, which reveal his genius for speculation.

His book *The City of God* breathes the atmosphere of Gotterdammerung that pervaded the world as the Roman Empire began to crumble. On August 24, 410, Alaric, with his Gothic army, laid Rome to a terrible sack for three days. This disaster, without parallel in her history, left the Empire in a state of absolute shock; Augustine with his flock meditated on the meaning of it all and in a sermon wondered

aloud whether the end of the Empire was not at hand.

Later, in the same frame of mind, he began the huge *City of God*, which took thirteen years to write. With massive erudition and consummate artistry, he passes Christian judgment on the whole history, culture, and religion of pagan Rome and relates it to what he regards as the ultimate meaning of history itself.

History, he claims, can only be understood through the biblical revelation that discloses it as a continuing struggle between two cities, one made up of those who pursue only earthly goods and live under the curse of Adam. They constitute the City of Man and find their fitting symbol in the Roman Empire, which will probably decay, as signs already indicate, and as all other empires have. There is another city, however, destined to last forever: the City of God, whose history parallels the City of Man; the City of God embraces all those souls who live only as pilgrims in the midst of the world and have placed their hopes only in God.

Here and now, however, the two cities are not discernible as completely separate, nor can they be

simply identified with any particular groups. The dividing line between them is invisible because ultimately it has to do with each man's commitment to final values. Rather, they are eschatological realities that overlap in history and will only be separated from each other at the end of time. The empirical Church, in particular, is not identical with the City of God; but in spite of the ambivalence the empirical Church shares with all human constructs, its mission is to act as a sociological sign of God's love for the world.

The sack of Rome drove many of its inhabitants to seek refuge in Africa. Among them was a theologian of genius, Pelagius, who came to Carthage with his disciple, Celestius, after spending some thirty years in Rome as a fashionable lecturer on religious and spiritual matters. In the cultivated and cosmopolitan atmosphere of Rome, Pelagius had disseminated his very personal ideas on free will, grace, and original sin without much opposition. But when he arrived in Africa he almost immediately ran afoul of Augustine, who found these theories scandalous, heretical, and in direct contradiction with his own views on these matters. Fresh from victories over the Donatists, the

bishop of Hippo jumped into the fray again.

The central idea of Pelagius was an intense conviction about human freedom: the certitude that man was in full control of his own moral destiny. However deeply wounded he was in his physical and spiritual condition by Adam's fall, it did not mean that man had lost his freedom; in spite of, the evil influences of sin, he could out of his own resources choose the good. God's help was limited mainly to external means-the Commandments, the teaching and example of Christ, etc.-so that one could observe God's Commandments without sinning if one so chose. Celestius, his disciple, even denied the necessity of infant baptism.

Augustine, on the other hand, was profoundly impressed by the moral weakness of men and the deeply rooted character of their evil tendencies. It was clear proof for him that the whole human race was more intimately involved than Pelagius would allow in Adam's fall-that is, they shared his guilt and through him were deprived of the gifts originally bestowed to complete his faculties. Thus, Augustine taught, all humanity lost the gifts of

immortality, immunity from physical decay, and strong inclination to virtue. Instead ~an was now subject to death and sickness, darkened in mind and inclined toward sin. Henceforth he could not avoid sin without God's grace, which the bishop thought of as an interior experience of delight in spiritual things as God's own way of moving our will to choose the good.

This grace of God working in the very interior of our will is irresistible. But, Augustine argued, it does not take away our freedom, for the acts it elicits from our will are elicited with our consent. Only those who receive this grace are saved; those who do not are damned. Why some receive it and others do not is a mystery hidden in the inscrutable justice of God-the mystery of predestination.

While his opponent, Pelagius, moved to the Holy Land, where he found the bishops more receptive to his views, Augustine in Africa rallied the bishops to condemn the main teachings of Pelagius in 416. This stand was ratified by Pope Zosimus in his *Epistula tractoria* of 418. Nevertheless, the controversy was carried on by Julian, the bishop of Eclanum, who regarded



Augustine's teaching as Manichaeism. The controversy was also furthered by the so-called semi-Pelagians, found in the monasteries of southern Gaul, who approached the Pelagian heresy by their doctrine that the first beginnings of a good will can originate in man's own volition. They also denied the Augustinian predestination to hell.

The forensic triumph of Augustine, however, was all but total; his writings on grace were recognized as the best and most skillful interpretation of the Church's tradition on this matter and won him international renown, though a few of his ideas, such as his fatalistic theory of predestination, were not accepted. Posterity later ratified this judgment by granting him the title "Doctor Gratiae" (Teacher of grace). The Council of Orange (529) embodied the substance of his doctrine in the following propositions: . As a result of Adam's trespass, both death and sin were transmitted to all his descendants. Man's will has been so vitiated by original sin that he can only love God if prompted and assisted by grace. . Baptismal grace enables all Christians with the help of Christ to do what is necessary for salvation.. In every good action, even the first

impulse comes from God. But the council did not ratify his fatalistic theory of predestination to hell.

Augustine lived long enough to see the total collapse of Roman rule in Africa and the ruin of his diocese. In 429 and 430 the Vandals came pouring in; churches were burned, virgins and ascetics tortured and violated, bishops and clergy slaughtered, and his own city of Hippo packed to the walls with refugees. In the midst of all the turmoil and panic, Augustine fell ill with a fever; he asked to be left completely alone so that he could pray, and after several days of agony, he died. He was buried on August 28, 430.

A year later Hippo was taken and sacked.