

“Fahrenheit 452:”
Augustine as a Companion on the Journey

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I sometimes have a daytime reverie, in which I imagine myself as one of the long-pursued, harried, yet intrepid persons, who are portrayed in the indelible scene at the end of the disturbing film, “Fahrenheit 451.” Who that has viewed that screen narrative can at all forget the beleaguered company’s strangely exalted striding back and forth in a snowy forest? It is there they have come to call out, from the rich stores of memory, chapters from many of the world’s priceless, but now sadly proscribed, books. They hope, of course, that by so doing, they may save those works from barbarian bonfires.

In this article, I will try to explain just why, if I were ever in that parlous state, the golden volume I would certainly carry within me and proclaim, in the hope of passing it on to a future world both free and redeemed, would be none other than the Confessions of Saint Augustine. For, among all the mighty numbers of luminous saints, and countless gifted, sacred writers, who have arisen through the centuries; among all those who have helped to shape and give direction to our embattled civilization; it is Augustine, who combined both sanctity and luminous intellect in the fullest measure, who has most continuously worked changes in the lives of all who search for wisdom and peace. That noteworthy influence, deriving from his persuasive eloquence and the stirring narrative of his life, is still found among diverse persons in our world, arguably as doleful in its prospects as Augustine’s own.

Such a capacity to shape ideas and character, a millennium and a half after he inhabited this earth, would be reason enough to “make his works our study and delight.” Indeed so. But I would like to add my very personal note to the broad chorus of opinion that has, through the ages, commended Augustine’s works as worthy of thoughtful examination (a host, it should be noted, that

has at times included impassioned detractors). For I wish to say why it is Augustine whom I am most pleased to consider, among those who blissfully dwell in the City of God, my most intimate friend.

Let me turn, first of all, to that feature of Augustine's works, especially evident in the pages of the Confessions, that I have always found irresistible: his blending, often in one serene meditation, of a profound descent into the depths of the human soul, and the most fervent of prayers. Note, for example, how the saint joins a soul-searching query to a heart-felt evening offering in the following prayer: "Even so, Lord; even so. Whither do I call Thee, since I am in Thee? Or whence canst Thou enter into me? For whither can I go beyond heaven and earth, that thence my God should come into me, Who hath said, 'I fill heaven and the earth'?" THE CONFESSIONS, trans. Edward B. Pusey, Book One. 1

We are at the beginning of Augustine's masterpiece of biography and analysis, and even here it may be seen how that subtle doctor was able to bring countless souls, in every age, to assent to the tenets of his indelibly etched and dearly-bought faith. But in the same place, there are also posed those questions that mark Augustine, not only as one of the primary thinkers of the Western world, but also as the man who most memorably longed for that which lay "beyond the utmost bounds of human thought."

It was, of course, his very pursuit of that quest that enabled Augustine to bequeath such an enduring form of inquiry to the Western mind. In his confident proclamation of both the bright splendor, and the dispiriting limits, of the human mind, the great Church Father anticipated, with his ceaseless probings, some of the most trenchant speculative philosophies of the Middle Ages.

Indeed, one seems to have already entered the bracing precincts of medieval thought, when he or she encounters Augustine's judgments on the exalted place of the divinely-bestowed faculty of reason in the unfolding of human destiny. That dignity is never mentioned, without his reminding us how intimately it is bound up with man's original fall from grace. And so he writes: "And that in this

faith it might advance the more confidently towards the truth, the truth itself, God, God's Son, assuming humanity without destroying his divinity, established and founded this faith, that there might be a way for man to man's God through a god-man." CITY OF GOD, trans. M. Dods, Book Eleven, Chapter 2. 2

Here I would like to pause, and return to that sylvan setting of my fond remembrance. For I sometimes wonder if I might not have been questioned by my fellow-fugitives from that tyrant state, about my choice of the Confessions for the long and strenuous task of preservation. Why choose that work, among all the others I might have selected? They would likely have pointed out that we could not hope to save all the worthwhile books. Why was I striving to commit that golden volume to mind?

I think I would have begun by reminding my companions that I was attempting to send into the future those very pages that have most enduringly fixed the "chambers of memory," in Augustine's irreplaceable words, within the imagination of the West. It was, after all, he who wrote: "For even while I dwell in darkness and in silence, in my memory I can produce colors if I will, and discern betwixt black and white, and what others I will; nor yet do sounds break in and disturb the image drawn in by my eyes....For these too I call for, and forthwith they appear." THE CONFESSIONS, Book Ten. 3

And having brought such an inspired mental journey to mind, I would add that Augustine takes us far beyond that, to the indispensable place of language in the unfolding of genuine spiritual life. For did he not also say: "To Milan I came, to Ambrose the bishop, known to the whole world as among the best of men, Thy devout servant; whose eloquent discourse did then plentifully dispense unto Thy people the flour of Thy wheat, the 'gladness' of Thy 'oil,' and the sober inebriation of Thy 'wine.' " ? THE CONFESSIONS, Book Five. 4

But what would I presume to say, if they were to reply, albeit in charitable terms, that Saint Augustine, for all his unquestionable merit and lasting impress on the course of literary form,

philosophy, and theology, was, nonetheless, an implacable defender of a dogmatic creed. Was he not, therefore, a precursor of all inquisitors, not excluding those who had forced us to flee to the forest?

I think that I would proclaim to my companions, in the saint's defense, that no one has been as responsible as has Augustine, that man of profound faith, for the genesis of so many impassioned and deeply-wrought volumes, throughout the entire course of Western spiritual history.

In fact, he is the unsurpassed author of seminal works that have masterfully set out, for all time, those piercing questions which are at once a heritage and a burden of our race. In sum, I would affirm, far more books have come to light from a knowledge of his singular life, than were ever proscribed by him.

I would further credit Augustine with the distinction of being, in effect, the first of the great Western psychologists, a writer whose exemplary record of introspection has itself been the formal cause of so many other such works, in the centuries since he wrote.

And, to this encomium, I would add yet another: that of his promotion, if only by example, of the art and craft of philosophical investigation. Without the model Augustine supplied, of a relentless delving into the very meaning of existence, I think one would have to question whether or not the world would have witnessed the advent of the long and fruitful vocations, in the realms of thought, of Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, or Blaise Pascal; or, in quite different form and intent, those of Rousseau, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

Finally, I would remind them that Augustine casts a giant shadow still, most markedly over the paths of troubled moderns. Over four decades ago, William Barrett declared that: "I for one am personally convinced that man will not take his next great step forward until he has drained to the lees the bitter cup of his own powerlessness." 5

How can we doubt that so impassioned a cri de coeur, from one of the most candid, unflinching observers of the erratic course of twentieth-century philosophical inquiry, descends in a direct line

from Augustine, the truest exemplar of the examined life in all of Christian annals? And does that piercing declaration not also indicate the way in which so many thoughtful persons have been saved, by his example, from the most seductive traps of our epoch: triviality and futile spleen?

Here, then, is the ripe fruit of Augustine's sagacity, no small part of which we may credit to his headlong approach to the stages of the spiritual life. As Robert Speaight once pointed out: "Unlike so many theologians and moralists, Augustine meets us on the plane of the imagination." 6 Because of that spirited effort, he sets before us an example of moral courage that is, perhaps, the most lasting benediction of the Confessions.

And only when I had done with that defense, calling out Saint Augustine's words in the deepening night, would I add that there is yet another temperature: "Fahrenheit 452," the degree at which a great book and its author light a flame in the hearts of countless people, for all time to come. I shall now attempt to indicate how Augustine performs that task for all those who inhabit our world.

II

Even at the very beginning of the Confessions, it is possible to see why Augustine's story of the progress of his soul's journey has always possessed such an enduring interest. For here is no tale of facile triumphs and walls miraculously tumbling. On the contrary, this saint, with a singular candor, reveals the dark forest of his confused wandering with a power rivaling that of Dante: "But I, poor wretch, foamed like a troubled sea, following the rushing of my own tide, forsaking Thee, and exceeded all Thy limits; yet I escaped not Thy scourges. For what mortal can?" THE CONFESSIONS, Book Two. 7

Surely, there is here a message fated to lodge in the souls of all those who roam at large, in modern deserts of doubt and despair. It was, for a certainty, a man living at the very commencement

of our errant age, and one of the most far-seeing of modern prophets, Miguel de Unamuno, who affirmed that: “Peace of mind, reconciliation between reason and faith-this, thanks to the Providence of God, is no longer possible. The world must be as Don Quixote wishes it to be, and inns must be castles, and he will fight with it, and will, to all appearances, be vanquished, but he will triumph by laughing at himself, and by making himself the object of his own laughter.” 8

Who cannot feel compassion when viewing such travail, especially when it afflicts a mind as valiant and unrelenting as that of Unamuno? Can he have meant that, in this stage of civilization, there is no longer a rock of refuge?

Must we therefore lapse into pitiable self-mockery? His sober judgment, be it noted, was penned in a modern world still smugly proud of its vaunted “progress” and “enlightenment.” We come after, having entered a new century, and are better able to judge the matter than were his myopic contemporaries.

In particular, we, the singularly blessed, those of us, that is, who are able to read Saint Augustine’s Confessions with the eyes of faith, may find ourselves gratefully lifted from the “slough of despond,” as we traverse with that unique spiritual writer the steps by which he rose, until the glad day when he took hold of his heavenly inheritance.

Here is Saint Augustine’s deathless recording of the way Divine Grace laid siege to his capacious soul: “ ‘Blessed be the Lord, in heaven and earth’Thy words had stuck fast in my heart, and I was hedged round about on all sides by Thee. Of Thy eternal life I was now certain, though I saw it in a figure and as ‘through a glass.’ ” THE CONFESSIONS, Book Eight. 9

There can be few better expressions in Christian literature of the uncertain state of all who bear within them a growing certainty of God’s presence, but who are nonetheless acutely conscious of their distance from the fullness of felicity.

I think that one of the most certain signs of Augustine's unfailing attention to the religious education of his flock is the way he has of soaring in thought to the heavens.

For those distant realms signified to Saint Augustine, as they did much later to Immanuel Kant, the unfathomable and boundless Love of the Creator-God: "For true it is, O Lord, that Thou madest heaven and earth; and it is true, too, that the Beginning is Thy Wisdom, in which Thou createdest all." THE CONFESSIONS, Book Twelve. **10**

What can be the reason for the daunting power of Augustine's writing, most convincing whenever he delineates the paths that the human soul must take to its heavenly home? We can, first of all, recognize the unique place that he occupies in the long and rich history of Christian thought and spirituality.

For this saint lived at a time not far removed from the beginning of the Western mystical tradition. Moreover, Augustine's era was also a time when ancient patterns of mental and social life were losing their hold, "an age of flight," wrote Herschel Baker, "when all men were seeking desperately a sanctuary." **11**

And how did Augustine respond to such deep stresses in his society? WE need search no further than the imperishable record of his life, in order to see an example of one of the Chrch's sorely needed saints answering the aching, imperative needs of such an age. Looking beyond the wreckage of the sadly disintegrating Mediterranean world, he fixed his gaze upon "That Love that moves heaven and the other stars," as did Dante long after:

"And when our discourse was brought to that point...we, raising up ourselves with a more glowing affection towards the self-same, did by degrees pass through all things bodily, even the very heaven, whence sun and moon and stars shine upon the earth; yea, we were soaring higher yet, by inward musing, and discourse, and admiring of Thy works; and we came

to our own minds, and went beyond them, that we may arrive at that region of never-failing plenty, where ‘Thou feedest Israel forever with the food of Truth.’ ” THE CONFESSIONS, Book Nine. 12

At this juncture, one may well pause to wonder how we sorely-beset travelers on a dim planet might hope to aspire, to the mystic heights so incomparably described in that classic passage. Is Saint Augustine a true companion on the journey, one who marks the trail ahead, and then waits for us to join him at the next bend in the road? Without a doubt, he is. The evidence for that judgment lies in the very structure of the Confessions, by means of which the questing reader is artfully led to see the progress of Augustine’s soul from darkness to light and wisdom.

I think it is for that reason that the Confessions is not only arguably the greatest of all personal histories, containing some of the most stirring and dramatic events outside the parables of Sacred Scripture. It is also a priceless summa of Catholic teaching, on the paths that must be taken in order to attain eternal life.

Notes

1

The Confessions – The City of God – on Christian Doctrine, by Saint Augustine, Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 18, Robert M. Hutchins, editor-in-chief, William Benton, publisher (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) All quotations from Saint Augustine are drawn from this edition, hereafter cited as Augustine.

2

Augustine 323.

3

Augustine 75.

4

Augustine 33.

5

Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy.
(1958; Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1962) 272

6

“St. Augustine (354-430),” Saints and Ourselves: Personal Portraits of Favorite Saints by Twenty-four Outstanding Catholic Authors, ed. Philip Caraman, S. J. , first and second series (1953; Garden City NY: Doubleday Image Books 1958) 26.

7

Augustine 9.

8

“Don Quixote in the Contemporary European Tragedy,” The Tragic Sense of Life (1912; English trans., J. E. C. Flicht, 1921; New York: Dover Publications, 1954) 327.

9

Augustine 52.

10

Augustine 105.

11

“Augustine and the Medieval View of Man: The Glory of God,” The Image of Man: A Study of the Idea of Human Dignity in Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, first ed. (1947; New York: Harper Torchbooks, Academy Library, 1961) 159.

12

Augustine 68.