

Saint Augustine

SAINT OF THE DAY

28_08_2020



One of the greatest geniuses in the history of thought, the ecclesiastical writer most quoted in the Catechism, the man of faith capable of attracting an innumerable number of people to Christ, one of the first four Doctors of the Church, would have been like a pile of talents thrown to the wind had he not agreed to accept the Grace of God. This was manifested through various saints, starting with his mother, St Monica (331-387), who offered constant prayers for her son's conversion, for which she had sown seeds through education. St Augustine (354-430) wrote in his *Confessions*: "From my earliest

childhood, I had suckled with my mother's milk the name of my Saviour, Your Son; I kept it in the recesses of my heart; and all those who came to me without that Divine Name, though it might be elegant, well written, and even full of truth, did not take me away”.

Augustine spent his youth moving several times, for study and work, between his native Tagaste (in Algeria) and Carthage (in Tunisia). It was during his studies of rhetoric in Carthage that he met the woman from whom his son Adeodatus was born, when he was just eighteen years old, and who was his concubine for about 15 years. In that period the passions of the flesh, the intoxication of literary success and the desire to excel prevailed. His restless search for the truth initially led him to Manichaeism, a dualistic religion that erroneously saw in Evil - and not only in Good - an original divine principle: it went so far as to deny man's freedom; and its followers, who boasted of perfection in public, ended up indulging in all kinds of sins.

For a long time he was one of the foremost Manichean exponents, though he never received initiation. At the same time he was crossed by almost opposite thoughts about the Holy Scriptures: on the one hand he found some passages absurd and defined the faith of his mother as “a childish superstition”, on the other hand he considered the arguments of the Manicheans against the Church to be very weak. He himself would later summarize the truth of the Bible with nine Latin words: *Novum in Vetere latet et in Novo Vetus patet* (“The New Testament is hidden in the Old, while the Old is revealed in the New”). His disenchantment with Manichaeism peaked in 383 when he was able to meet its leader, who answered his profound questions with empty rhetoric. However, he did not immediately detach himself from them and in the same year he went to Rome to teach. He was then offered a chair in Milan thanks to the favour of Quintus Aurelius Simmachus, a pagan who trusted in the oratory art of Augustine to counter the fame of Bishop Ambrose (340-397). He obtained the opposite effect. The biblical wisdom of Ambrose and his affable humility gradually drove Augustine away from error.

He gradually began to understand that the truth he so passionately sought was not an object to be dominated but a divine Person to be accepted, who had become incarnated among men in the fullness of time, and who had said of Himself: “I am the Way, the Truth, the Life”. Jesus Christ. Three more years went by, due to his inability to free himself from his passions, but his search continued to be sustained by the arrival in Milan of his mother (385) and by the old sage Saint Simplicianus. In 386, at the height of his spiritual battle, he finally heard from the voice of a boy or girl, an unfamiliar refrain: “Take, read” (*Confessions* VIII, 12). He understood that it was a divine call. He opened at

random a book with the letters of St Paul and his eyes fell on a passage ([Rom 13:13-14](#)) exhorting him not to follow the desires of the flesh and to clothe himself instead with Jesus Christ. It was the definitive spark for conversion, which was followed by the spiritually rich retreat at Cassiciacum.

On 25 April 387, during the Easter Vigil, Augustine received Baptism from

Ambrose. Four months later came the earthly death at Ostia of Saint Monica, that is, of the one “who gave birth to me in her body in the temporal light and in her heart in the eternal light”. This was followed by his return to Africa, his life together with friends dedicated to prayer and penance, his priestly ordination by popular acclaim, the foundation of a monastery that became a fertile breeding ground of vocations for the African Church. He was made coadjutor for the elderly Valerius and then succeeded him as Bishop of Hippo (395-430). He admirably refuted the heresies of Donatism, Pelagianism and Arianism, as well as Manichaeism. He addressed the relationship between freedom and grace and engaged with the question of evil, which is not an original principle but “absence”, deprivation of the Supreme Good (God), due to Satan's rebellion and then man's disobedience.

He explained that faith and reason are “the two forces that lead us to know”

and summarized his thought in two famous formulas: “Believe in order to understand” (*Crede ut intelligas*), because the act of faith illuminates man's path in search of the truth; and at the same time “understand in order to believe” (*Intellige ut credas*), because correct reason helps to see the beginning and reach the ultimate end, coinciding in God. As the Vandals began the siege of Hippo, Augustine entered the kingdom of He whom he had described as follows: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

Learn more:

[All the writings](#) of Saint Augustine

Ad salutem humani, encyclical of Pius XI for the 15th centenary of the death of St Augustine (in Italian and Latin)