

The Confessions of St Augustine - his journey out and back,

To finding God in himself

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Fr Brian Lowery, Prior of Convento S. Agostino, San Gimignano, Italy, was invited to Clare Priory, England to talk on "The Confessions of St Augustine". (3rd - 5th April 2009).

FIRST TALK

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start out our weekend retreat on the *Confessions of St. Augustine* listening to what someone else said about the book. That comes from the great mystic, St. Teresa of Avila who had a tremendous feeling for St. Augustine and as a young girl was a student at a school of Augustinian nuns in Spain. She says in her *Autobiography*:

At this time they gave me the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*. It seems the Lord ordained this, because I had not tried to procure a copy, nor had I ever seen one. I am very fond of Saint Augustine, because the convent where I stayed as a lay person belonged to his Order, and also because he had been a sinner. For I found great consolation in sinners whom, after having been sinners, the Lord brought back to himself. It seemed to me I could find help in them, and that since the Lord had pardoned them, He could pardon me. But there was one thing that left me inconsolable, and that was that the Lord called them only once, and they did not turn back and fall again; whereas in my case I had turned back so often that I was worn out from it. But by considering the love He bore me, I regained my courage, for I had never lost confidence in his mercy; in myself I lost it many times.

(Autobiography 9,7)

The *Confessions* have been a personal inspiration to many other readers and listeners as well, for over 1600 years. The book traces the route of the famous conversion of St. Augustine as he himself wrote about it. Augustine saw his conversion as a kind of a road, a road of the heart. He said as much in one of the several times that he compared himself to the prodigal son: "It is not on our feet or by movement in space that we go from you or return to you" (I,18,28). That is, to turn your back on God and go off to a far place, like the prodigal son did, you don't need chariots, ships or even feet, You just need to do it in your heart. To turn back to God, however, you don't need chariots, ships or even feet, you just need to do it in your heart. That's what the *Confessions* are all about.

Our plan is to stop at some of the key passages along the route of the *Confessions* in the short time we have and to read some of Augustine's most pertinent thoughts about his conversion; and perhaps about our own conversions, too, that are going on at this very moment. Amid those pages we will read about what he would call his sinful past and how his freedom grew ever more diminished as his habits became stronger. We will also

discover a mysterious and subtle presence of God, which Augustine recognized only years later after he had become a Christian, with which God little by little worked on his heart and led him back to him.

This mysterious presence, this active closeness of God in one's life despite all appearances, is one of the main reasons for his writing the *Confessions*. He wanted us to know that God never leaves us, no matter how far we go from him. He is the Hound of Heaven. God is all the time working in all sorts of ways to bring us to himself. Augustine wanted to encourage his readers and listeners on their own roads, not by preaching a sermon to us or handing us a treatise on theology but by showing the effect of divine grace in the story of another human being like ourselves. Today the power of stories to help understand the Christian life is more recognized than ever before. Stories teach us "the heart of the matter". For they effectively dramatize the fact that God is for us and his grace can transform us. The *Confessions* are the "story of a soul", to use the words of another Teresa, Therese of Lisieux. They are also a story of God and how he is constantly at work seeking us.

I ask you to bring your book with you to our sessions. Underline it if you want. Write in it if something strikes you. For that is how the *Confessions* will become a friend, and you will be able to return to it easily and often in the future. By the way, it is good to read them slowly. For every word of Augustine is a foot deep and should not be glided over.

MEDITATION

So let's now begin the book. Go to the very beginning, that is, to BOOK ONE, CHAPTER ONE, PARAGRAPH ONE. I'll start with a little tip. The first five chapters of BOOK ONE make up a kind of introductory meditation by the author as he prepares himself to write such a challenging work. It's a marvellous meditation but a bit difficult. So, many people get discouraged at this point. There's no story yet. It is my experience that the number of those curious persons who have picked it up and then put it down again, unfinished, is greater than those who have persevered to the end. Perhaps they were fooled by the word, "Confessions." This book is not like the "Confessions of a Housewife," the "Confessions of a Spy," or the "Confessions of a Courtesan." But we're not going to put it down. Let's read:

Great are you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is your power, and of your wisdom there is no number. And man desires to praise you. He is but a tiny part of all that you have created. He bears about him his mortality, the evidence of his sinfulness, and the evidence that you resist the proud. Yet this tiny part of all that you have created desires to praise you. You so excite him that to praise you is his joy. **For you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.** (I,1,1)

"You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." This is the most famous line in all of Augustine's works. If one knows anything Augustine ever wrote, it is this. I'm sure you have heard it before. Notice how much it tells us about ourselves. Augustine says that we are made for God. Actually he says that we are in motion and going towards God from birth. Therefore, we are fundamentally restless and

will continue to be so. Restlessness is not a bad thing, he says. That's what makes us searchers in life. Restlessness keeps us unsatisfied and yearning for more. That "more" is God, because we are made for him. Our real rest will come only when we are finally united with him. Someone once said that, after the Bible, nothing has ever better described the human condition than this passage in the *Confessions*.

Did you notice how often Augustine uses the word, "you"? That is because he is speaking to God and not to us directly. The book is actually a long prayer. "You" means God. The *Confessions* is his song of praise and thanksgiving for the mercy of God that he concretely discovered in his own personal story. Augustine "confesses", or better "professes", God's goodness and love. That's what the title, *Confessions*, means. That's enough now for this introductory meditation. Maybe some day you can return to it and read it all.

BOYHOOD

It's time now to go the story line that begins with Chapter 6. We find him when he was an infant. Augustine starts off telling us how as a baby he made his needs and wants known to his parents by crying and frantically gesticulating, and then goes on to show how he later learned to talk by imitating the sounds his parents made. Naturally, he said, he didn't remember all this. Others told him about it and he himself had observed the behaviour of babies. In one passage he tells about how he used to be breast-fed and the role that God played in that:

Thus for my sustenance and my delight I had a woman's milk. Yet it was not my mother or my nurses who stored their breasts for me. It was yourself, using them to give me the food of my infancy according to your ordinance and the riches set by you at every level of creation. It was by your gift that I desired what you gave and no more, and by your gift that those who suckled me willed to give me what you had given them. (I,6,7)

It may seem exaggerated to ascribe to God such an ordinary human activity as breast feeding. But for Augustine it was not. For him it amounted to divine providence.

Providence, according to him, is something all pervasive. It penetrates the spaces of a person's life just as God himself penetrates the spaces of the whole universe. It works night and day right from the beginning of life, because God is the creator.

Here we can detect a deep and abiding conviction of Augustine's, namely that God is always and everywhere present to us, providing for us in all our needs. God's providence is especially active along the road of our personal history. He said it many times in the *Confessions* about his own road: "You were with me", he would say (X,27,38; X,40,65) "You were always there"(II,2,4)

Let's now continue on with the story.

(I, 9) He tells that he didn't really like going to school;

O God, my God, what emptiness and mockeries did I now experience. For it was impressed on me as right and proper in a boy to obey those who taught me, that I might get on in the world and excel in the handling of words to gain honor among men and deceitful riches. I, poor wretch, could not see the use of the things I was sent to school to learn. But if I proved idle in learning, I was soundly beaten. For this procedure seemed wise to our ancestors; and many, passing the same way in days past, had built a sorrowful road by which we too must go, with multiplication of grief and toil upon the sons of Adam.

Greco-Roman education was noted for its severity: memorization and strict discipline. Spare the rod and spoil the child. And there were beatings too! Augustine never spoke well of his teachers. He said he would tremble at the thought of them. Do you remember the fresco at San Gimignano that shows the schoolmaster taking a stick to a little boy who hadn't done his lessons? Augustine said in the *Confessions* that the first prayer he ever uttered was when he asked God to keep the hand of the schoolmaster off of him: Yet, Lord, I observed men praying to you; and I learned to do likewise, thinking of you (to the best of my understanding) as some great being who, though unseen, could hear and help me. As a boy I fell into the way of calling upon you, my help and my refuge; and in those prayers I broke the strings of my tongue - praying to you, small as I was but with no small energy, that I might not be beaten at school.

He felt some resentment about this. His parents seemed to approve the beatings. He knew they were ambitious and wanted him to succeed so that he could pull their family ahead. His family, too, had its conflicts:

Yet my parents seemed to be amused at these torments inflicted upon me as a boy by my masters, though I was no less afraid of my punishments or zealous in my prayers to you for deliverance. But in spite of my terrors I still did wrong by writing or reading or studying less than my set tasks.

You can see that Augustine was a very normal boy, and his family had its normal share of dysfunctions. That's one of the things I like about Augustine. He wasn't born a saint and he didn't come from a pious and exemplary family. There's hope for us yet!

(I, 11) He goes on to tell us that he was never baptised as a child:

Even as a boy, of course, I had heard of an eternal life promised because the Lord our God had come down in his humility upon our pride. And I was signed with the sign of his cross and seasoned with his salt as I came new from the womb of my mother who had great trust in you.

The "sign of his cross" and the "salt" were two of the stages of the catechumenate.

He continues:

When I was still a child, I fell gravely ill with some abdominal trouble and was close to death. You saw, Lord - for you were even then guarding me - with what earnest faith I besought the piety of my own mother, and of the Church which is the mother of us all, that I might receive the baptism of your Christ, my Lord and my God. The mother of my flesh was in heavy anxiety, since with a heart chaste in your faith she was ever in deep travail

for my eternal salvation, and would have proceeded without delay to have me consecrated and washed clean by the sacrament of salvation, while I confessed you, Lord Jesus, unto the remission of sins. But I made a sudden recovery. This caused my baptismal cleansing to be postponed.

In those times baptism was put off until after adolescence. The sacrament of reconciliation had not undergone much development yet and it could be received only once. So they left space for the storms of youth to pass before the commitment of baptism. Augustine almost was baptised when a sickness made it urgent, but he got better and it was never administered.

(I, 13) Note how he hated grammar and maths. Rather he loved to read stories: To this day I do not quite see why I so hated the Greek tongue that I was made to learn as a small boy. For I really liked Latin - not the rudiments that we got from our first teachers, but the literature that we came to be taught later. For the rudiments - reading and writing and figuring - I found as hard and hateful as Greek.

(I, 19) He says he was a bit of a rascal; he always wanted to win in games and come out first, and was not above lying to achieve these aims:

I stole from my parents' cellar and table, sometimes because I was gluttonous myself, sometimes to have something to give to other boys in exchange for implements of play which they were prepared to sell although they loved them as much as I. Even in games, when I was clearly outplayed I tried to win by cheating, from the vain desire for first place. At the same time I was indignant and argued furiously when I caught anyone doing the very things I had done to others. When I was caught myself, I would fly into a rage rather than give way.

(I, 20) Now let's go to the conclusion of **BOOK ONE** and his narration of his childhood. After dwelling on his early life, telling us of his hurts and struggles as a boy, the games he played, and the dreaming he did, Augustine offers this reflection:

Yet, Lord, I should have owed thanks to you, my God and the most excellent Creator and Ruler of the universe, even if it had been your will that I should not live beyond boyhood. For even then I was. I felt. Even so early I had an instinct for the care of my own being; in my interior sense I kept guard over the integrity of my outward sense perception, and in my small thoughts upon small matters I had come to delight in the truth. I hated to be wrong, had a vigorous memory, was well trained in speech, delighted in friendship, shunned pain, meanness and ignorance. In so small a creature was not all this admirable and reason for praise? Yet all these were the gifts of my God. For I did not give them to myself. All these were good and all these were I. Therefore, he who made me is good and he is my Good: and in him I shall exult for all the good qualities that even as a boy I had. (I, 20)

In this passage Augustine expresses his thanks to God for everything he was as a young boy despite the struggles and the pain. He gives us many reasons for being grateful: "For even then I was. I felt. Even so early I had an instinct for the care of my own being. ... I had come to delight in the truth. I hated to be wrong, had a vigorous memory, was well trained in speech, delighted in friendship, shunned pain, meanness and

ignorance. All these were good and all these were I."

This healthy affirmation of life becomes a beautiful canticle to the creator at the end of Book One in the *Confessions*. It reminds me of the famous canticle of St. Francis ("Praise be my Lord God for our brother, the sun ... praise be my Lord for our sister the moon"), only it is more psychological, more Augustinian. In this declaration about his early life we can see the person of Augustine as he himself knew it: his exceptional intelligence, his vigor and love of life, his great capacity for friendship, his passion for truth. And all these he considered to be gifts of God. "For I did not give them to myself. All these were good and all these were I".

These interior gifts of God to Augustine were part of the plan that God had for him. They would help him along the road of his own conversion because from within they would enliven him and lead him ahead with their own original force. I like to call these inborn qualities "INNER PROVIDENCE". We have already used the word, "providence" before, when we spoke of the baby at the breast. Now we use it more concretely when we affirm God to be present to Augustine in his natural gifts.

Perhaps we can better understand what I am talking about if we take a look at one of those personal qualities that Augustine lists, namely the love of truth. "I had come to delight in the truth", he said. "I hated to be wrong." This is one of his most evident gifts. It was part of that famous restlessness. This love of truth was like a burning passion leading him beyond all the easy answers and further on to ask the real questions. He had to know the essential of things, what doesn't change, what doesn't disappoint, what doesn't deceive. It was not just a question of intelligence. By nature Augustine could not be satisfied with anything this side of the whole truth. In fact, he could not be satisfied with anything less than God.

Sometimes he went down wrong paths on this pursuit of truth and stayed there for a while. He had an ongoing fascination with astrology and horoscopes. He got trapped by a sect for over 14 years. He was even tempted by skepticism and said that a person who has experienced a bad doctor is afraid of trying even a good one. But all along God kept moving him ahead from within stoking that burning passion for truth and would not permit him to give up.

Romano Guardini in his book, *The Conversion of Augustine* says that Augustine had an deep "predisposition to religion," an innate quality in certain people by which: a person of Augustine's make-up cannot flourish in what is known as "the world," neither in what concerns the senses, nor in the achievements of the mind or culture. Everywhere he is bound to knock against their limitations, to sense what lies beyond them. Beneath the world's greatest profundity, he is aware of the plumbless depths of the divine, of peaks towering mysteriously higher than any heights the human mind can scale. Even when he doesn't want to, he senses how in all "these" things, "the others" push their way to the fore, capturing above all the heart; behind the known he senses the unknown, which appears to

be the truly real - so much so that it threatens to leave all else far behind, often at the cost of great sacrifice. (pp.39-40)

This inner attraction would give Augustine no rest. It continually drew him on to ask and search. The same can be said of the other qualities on his list: his memory, his love of life, and his capacity for friendship.

Now a question to all of us: What gifts did God put into your personality? What it is it that helps you to seek and maybe find God? Is it a passion for truth as it was for Augustine? Or maybe a compassion for others? Perhaps a practical nature that rejects nonsense? A special understanding of the human heart? A desire to improve humanity? A love of spiritual beauty? Extraordinary courage? A delight in friendship? Or many other possibilities of God's inner Providence for you?

It's very important to fight the temptation of saying "There's nothing. I'm not special." We are all special. God did not make a mistake when he created us. Providence operates mysteriously in each of us in a unique and personal way. The trick is to find out just how it is working in you. It is a serious task to know ourselves. The discovery of it is immensely energizing.

Naturally this personality of ours presents lots of obstacles too. That was true for Augustine. We see the obstacles throughout the *Confessions*. But for now let's finish on this positive point of divine providence within each one of us.

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SECOND TALK

PLIGHTS AND PREDICAMENTS

In this session we are going to look at Augustine's plights and predicaments, or better, his perilous, spiritual state as a young man between 16 and 20 years of age. If we are talking about a conversion, we need to know what it was he was converting from. And Augustine describes his situation brilliantly. He is probably more popularly known for what he was converted from than what he was eventually converted to, By that I mean his earlier life with its youthful sexual wanderings and brash arrogance is more fascinating to most people than his later life as a monk, mystic and bishop. Someone once said he was a saint that had his cake and ate it too.

Let's go to **BOOK TWO** of the *Confessions*. Here he is 16 years old and in full adolescence. His father has taken him out of school, so that he can save up and send him to a better school. It will be a idle year for the young lad; and you can imagine what an idle

year can mean for a sixteen-year-old. This is a good place to begin looking at his plights and predicaments.

SPONTANEOUS PRAYERS

Before we do that, let's read the opening of Book Two. It is a prayer that is typical of many wonderful moments in the *Confessions*. I call these moments "spontaneous prayers" because they are prayers that seem to burst out in scattered places throughout the book of the *Confessions*. In these special passages Augustine changes tense from the past, where he is telling us of what once happened, to the present where he breaks out into prayer as if stirred directly by God. This is the reason God seems so close when you read the *Confessions*. Something is going on on those pages. God and Augustine are in conversation, and we are let in on it. I said earlier that the whole book is a prayer, but these moments are even more ardent prayers. Let's read this opening spontaneous prayer:

Now I want to call to mind the foul deeds I committed, those sins of the flesh that corrupted my soul, not in order to love them, but to love you, my God. Out of love for loving you I do this, recalling my most wicked ways and thinking over the past with bitterness so that you may grow ever sweeter to me; for you are a sweetness that deceives not, a sweetness blissful and serene. I will try now to give a coherent account of my disintegrated self, for when I turned away from you, the one God, and pursued a multitude of things, I went to pieces. (II, 1)

Augustine is about to describe what he most disliked about himself at the age of 16 and the web of evil that held him fast. In this opening prayer he says he is doing this not in order to love those things, but "to love you, my God. Out of love for loving you I do this, recalling my most wicked ways and thinking over the past with bitterness so that you may grow ever sweeter to me".

SENSUALITY

He goes on to describe himself like this:

My one delight was to love and be loved. But in this I did not keep the measure of mind to mind, which is the luminous line of friendship; but from the muddy concupiscence of the flesh and the hot imagination of puberty mists steamed up to becloud and darken my heart, so that I could not distinguish the white light of love from the fog of lust. Both love and lust boiled within me, and swept my youthful immaturity over the precipice of evil desires to leave me half drowned in a whirlpool of abominable sins.

Your wrath had grown mighty against me and I knew it not. I had grown deaf from the clanking of the chain of my mortality, the punishment for the pride of my soul: and I departed further from you, and you left me to myself. And I was tossed about and wasted and poured out and boiling over in my fornications: and you were silent. (II, 2)

This is a great description of the experience of an adolescent and his struggles with affectivity and identity. Some of his words jump right up at us, like: "mists that steamed up to becloud and darken my heart", "the clanking of the chain of my mortality," "wasted," "tossed about", "boiling over", and the "silence" of God.

Augustine goes on to say that the sensual pleasures he found at that time had an unexpected effect on him. They brought displeasure as well as pleasure, which ended up ruining everything. He felt disgust along with delight:

Nor did I escape your scourges. No mortal can. You were always by me, mercifully hard upon me, and besprinkling all my illicit pleasures with certain elements of bitterness, to draw me on to seek for pleasures in which no bitterness should be. And where was I to find such pleasures save in you, O Lord, You who use sorrow to teach, and wound us to heal, and kill us lest we die to you.

Earlier he had said to God: "And you were silent." But I wonder. Was God really silent? It seems to me that he was speaking quite loudly. He was saying "Be careful, don't stop here. You really won't like it. Keep looking".

This introduces another form of providence, another way of God's being always there. I call it **NEGATIVE PROVIDENCE**. (If you remember, the kind of providence we spoke of last time was **INNER PROVIDENCE**.) In this kind of Providence, God does not let a person remain in the delights of sin. For that is really the worst place to be. Sin has a way of causing its own punishment. It brings about its own downfall by its negative effects. Augustine experienced the negative effects, the displeasure along with the pleasure, and couldn't get comfortable.

THE PEARS

Let's go to another episode in BOOK TWO that illustrates Augustine's plights and predicaments. It's the famous episode of Augustine and his pals stealing pears from a neighbour's orchard in the middle of the night:

There was a pear tree near our vineyard, heavy with fruit, but fruit that was not particularly tempting either to look at or to taste. A group of young blackguards, and I among them, went out to knock down the pears and carry them off late one night, for it was our bad habit to carry on our games on the streets till very late. We carried off an immense load of pears, not to eat - for we barely tasted them before throwing them to the hogs. Our only pleasure in doing it was that it was forbidden.

Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart. Yet in depths of the abyss you had pity on it. Let that heart now tell you what it sought when I was thus evil for no object, having no cause for wrongdoing save my wrongness. The malice of the act was base, and I loved it - that is to say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me - not the thing for which I did the evil, simply the evil. My soul was depraved and hurled itself down from security in you into utter destruction, seeking no profit from wickedness but only to be wicked. (II, 4)

(II, 6) Augustine wants to know the reason for this useless theft. He asks:

What was it then that in my wretched folly I loved in you, O theft of mine, deed wrought in that dark night when I was sixteen? (II, 6)

The pears had no value. The motive for robbery could not have been any of the usual ones: money, the pleasures of taste, etc. If it had been a horse or a pocketbook that he had robbed, we could understand such remorse. If it had been strawberries in season, so too. But little rock hard pears?. Augustine's self accusations seem all out of proportion to such an innocent act. But not for him. That small action revealed the condition of his heart:

So once again what did I enjoy in that theft of mine? Of what excellence of my Lord was I making perverse and vicious imitation? Perhaps it was the thrill of acting against your law - at least in appearance, since I had no power to do so in fact, the delight a prisoner might have in making some small gesture of liberty - getting a deceptive sense of omnipotence from doing something forbidden without immediate punishment. I was that slave, who fled from his Lord and pursued his Lord's shadow. O rottenness, O monstrousness of life and abyss of death! Could you find pleasure only in what was forbidden, only because it was forbidden? (II, 6)

There's a very important insight here. He says he felt "the delight a prisoner might have in making some small gesture of liberty - getting a deceptive sense of omnipotence from doing something forbidden without punishment". Imagine the scene. There is the convict. The walls are this thick with solid bars in the one window way up high. Or put him on a galley ship. His leg is chained to the deck as he rows with his fellow prisoners. All he can do is use a hand to do something like this when the guard is not looking

Augustine says he had the desire for "omnipotence". That means being like God. Could such a desire ever exist in a sixteen-year-old boy? Strange as it seems, yes! A person of any age can want to be like God, or even to be God, his own God. He would never say it that way. Nevertheless, one can unconsciously deny the relationship of creature to Creator and place himself where the Creator should be, namely at the center of the wheel, as the pivot of the universe, with an importance that belongs only to God.

I've frequently wondered about the **NT** story of the ten lepers: why did the nine not return to thank Jesus for healing them? The only thing I can come up with is that they simply were unable to. They couldn't thank because thanking means admitting a debt. Admitting a debt means depending on another person and not being the source of one's own well being. It would mean sacrificing one's pride, while one who can thank humbly knows his or her own right place. Pride does not have room for gratitude.

What Augustine is pointing out with this quasi parable is a distortion of the human heart that tempts everyone: wanting to be more than they are. It appears early in the book of Genesis where the first human beings gave in and ate the one forbidden fruit when they heard the words: "You will be like God." (3, 5) We are talking about a fundamental flaw in human nature, call it the web of original sin if you wish, and Augustine recognized it at

work that midnight when he and his pals robbed the worthless pears. He ends Book Two with another spontaneous prayer:

Who can unravel that complex twisted knottedness? It is unclean. I hate to think of it or look at it. I long for you, O Justice and Innocence, Joy and Beauty of the clear of sight. I long for you with unquenchable longing. There is sure repose in you and life untroubled. He that enters into you, enters into the joy of his Lord and shall not fear and shall be well in him who is best. I went away from you, my God, in my youth I strayed too far from your sustaining power, and I became to myself a barren land. (II, 10)

CARTHAGE

We'll move on now to **BOOK THREE**, Augustine is about 18 years of age. He is back at his studies, now pursuing them at Carthage. Carthage was the capital of Roman North Africa, a university town, and an important seaport: You know what university towns and seaports can be for a young man. Let him tell us about his life there:

I came to Carthage, where a cauldron of illicit loves leapt and boiled about me. I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love, and from the very depth of my need hated myself for not more keenly feeling the need. I sought some object to love, since I was thus in love with loving; and I hated security and a life with no snares for my feet. For within I was hungry, all for the want of that spiritual food which is yourself, my God: yet (though I was hungry for want of it, I did not hunger for it. I had no desire whatever for incorruptible food, not because I had it in abundance but the emptier I was, the more I hated the thought of it.

Here is the sensuality for which Augustine is so well known. It is truly a predicament. For he is getting more and more immersed in the sexual scene. He is giving in and developing habits from which it will be most difficult to break off in the future. He said in another place of the *Confessions*: "The enemy held my will; and of it he made a chain and bound me. Because my will was perverse it changed to lust, and lust yielded to became habit, and habit not resisted became necessity". (VIII, 5)

A little further on he reminds us again of negative providence, only this time he gets more concrete and specific about it:

O my God, my mercy, with how much bitterness did you in your goodness sprinkle the delights of that time! I was loved, and our love came to the bond of consummation. I wore my chains with bliss but with torment too. For I was scourged with the red hot rods of jealousy, with suspicions and fears and tempers and quarrels. (III, 1)

Earlier he had said that his illicit pleasures carried with them displeasures that would ruin the experience. Now he becomes more specific, speaking of "red hot rods of jealousy, suspicions and fears and tempers and quarrels". This reminds me of the soap operas on television. They usually involve illicit loves that result in jealousy, suspicions, fears, tempers and quarrels. So you see there's nothing new under the sun.

DEATH OF FRIEND

Finally for this morning, in **BOOK FOUR** there is the event of the death of a friend at the very early age of twenty years:

During the period in which I first began to teach in the town of my birth, I found a very dear friend, who was pursuing similar studies. He was about my own age, and was now coming, as I was, to the very flowering-time of young manhood. He had indeed grown up with me as a child and we had gone to school together and played together. (IV, 4,7)

Death then intervened:

But you are ever close upon the heels of those who flee from you, for you are at once God of vengeance and Fount of mercy, and you turn us to yourself by ways most wonderful (*miris modis*). You took this man from the life of earth when he had completed scarcely a year in a friendship that had grown sweeter to me than all the sweetness of the life I knew. (IV, 4,7)

Referring to this death of his friend, Augustine says to God: "You turn us to yourself by ways most wonderful (*miris modis*)". What does he mean by this? What can the premature death of a dear friend have to do with Augustine's turning back to God? Actually very much. Augustine uses a two-word phrase, *miris modis*, "ways most wonderful", more than once in the *Confessions* to express his marvel at how God can work in unexpected ways to bring us back to him. What was doing we can discover reading further:

My heart was black with grief. Whatever I looked upon had the air of death. My native place was a prison house and my home a strange unhappiness. The things we had done together became sheer torment without him. My eyes were restless looking for him, but he was not there. I hated all places because he was not in them. They could not say "He will come soon", as they would in his life when he was absent. I became a great enigma (*magna quaestio*) to myself and I was forever asking my soul why it was sad and why it disquieted me so sorely. And my soul knew not what to answer me. (IV, 4, 9)

The principal effect of this negative experience of the death of his friend was that he began to question himself. He says "I became a great enigma (*magna quaestio*) to myself. I was forever asking my soul why it was sad". And it is just that questioning that would become a flicker of light deep within him, enough to lead him beyond himself and the many vain concerns of a 20 year old man towards the more urgent questions of life.

So we can widen the range of the **NEGATIVE PROVIDENCE** that we spoke about before to include also the experience of loss. Through the suffering he felt at the death of his friend, Augustine was led to question, no small advance in the life of a person. He would eventually come to this conclusion: "Blessed is the man that loves you, O God, and his friend in you, and his enemy for you. For he alone loses no one who is dear to him, if all are dear in God, who is never lost". (IV, 9)

NEGATIVE PROVIDENCE can also include disappointments in life. Augustine tells us about how hoped-for advancements did not turn out as he expected. People let him down

many times. He had been promised a learned expert, a certain Faustus, to answer all his doubts about the Manichaean sect he was trapped in, but the man turned out to know less than he did, and he never got his questions answered.

These may have seemed to be negative experiences, but Augustine saw later that God's hand was in them. Negative providence has a way of disconnecting us from old ways of thinking and feeling. It sets us looking for something that cannot be lost, something that doesn't disappoint, something that doesn't leave us half filled. This happens when people die, let us down or go out of our lives; when goals and achievements we dreamt about don't turn out to be what we had hoped for. We all have our stories about loss and disappointment. But I wonder if we see in these things the providential presence of God, moving us ahead to question, to seek out our true goods that can't be lost and don't disappoint? In negative providence God seems to be saying: "Don't stop here, keep looking. There's more. I am awaiting you at the end"

So for now we'll leave Augustine amid all his predicaments: his own particular sensuality and its concomitant problems, the universal human web of original sin, his disorientation and his sadness. This afternoon we will see his story further unfold, as God is there guiding it.

Brian Lowery OSA

THIRD TALK

WAY OF CONVERSION

As we have moved through the *Confessions of St. Augustine* and begun to follow his road of conversion, we left Augustine in the midst of a number of plights and predicaments and wondered how God was going to get him out of them to be free for conversion. As the book continues on, Augustine himself will tell us of a mysterious presence of God in his life, an active presence he only discovered later when he was writing the *Confessions* and looking back at his earlier years. He found that God was always close by him whether he was aware of it or not:

I had become more wretched and you more close to me. Your right hand was ready to pluck me from the mire and wash me clean, though I knew it not ((VI, 16).

I dwelt upon these things and you were near me. I sighed and you heard me. I was wavering uncertainly and you guided me. I was going the broad way of the world and you did not forsake me (VI, 5).

Though I knew it not, you were listening. And when in silence I sought so vehemently, the voiceless contritions of my soul were strong cries to your mercy. You knew what I was suffering and no one else knew it (VII, 7).

How was God near him? In many ways. Some we have seen already when we talked about **INNER PROVIDENCE**, or those inborn God-given personal qualities that would enable him to surface from underneath it all and go looking for God. We also saw it in **NEGATIVE PROVIDENCE**, by which he was goaded on to not remain where he was but to ask questions and to seek for what could truly give him lasting happiness. All this can be understood as the presence of God actively bringing Augustine forward in his story of salvation.

Now I would like to talk about another kind of presence, another form of providence, and I'd like to call it **OUTER PROVIDENCE**. Outer, because it came from outside of Augustine. It, too, was a way of God's being "always there". This type of providence could be found in certain people, things, circumstances, and events that came into Augustine's life, as if sent by God, and did God's work for him.

HORTENSIVS

The first example of outer providence is found in a **book**. Let's go back to when Augustine was studying at Carthage. While he learned the art of public speaking, he was given works to read by eminent public speakers. One of these was a book by Cicero, called *Hortensius*. It changed Augustine's life. Let's hear him say how:

I was studying the books of eloquence. For in eloquence it was my ambition to shine, all from a damnable vaingloriousness and for the satisfaction of human vanity. Following the normal order of study I had come to a book of one Cicero, whose tongue practically everyone admires, though not his heart. That particular book is called Hortensius and contains an exhortation to philosophy. Quite definitely it changed the direction of my mind, altered my prayers to you, O Lord, and gave me a new purpose and ambition. Suddenly all the vanity I had hoped in I saw as worthless, and with an incredible intensity of desire I longed after immortal wisdom. I had begun the journey upwards by which I was to return to you.

My father was now dead two years; I was eighteen and was receiving money from my mother for the continuation of my study of eloquence. But I used that book not for the sharpening of my tongue. What won me in it was what it said, not the excellence of its phrasing.

How did I then burn, my God, how did I burn to wing upwards from earthly delights to you. But I had no notion what you were to do with me. (III, 4)

This time providence presents itself in the form of a book. A pagan author writes to encourage the pursuit of philosophy. His little book somehow finds itself in the hands of Augustine and wakes him up to a whole new set of desires. While before he was solely interested in the twist of a word or a clever speaking technique, now he is on fire for reality, the real truth of things. He will never be the same. He has set out to know truth. Have you ever had your life changed, at least a little, by a book? Some people have.

Cicero spoke of the importance of philosophy with its pursuit of wisdom for its own sake. He lights a fire in a young reader who up to then was interested in merely the beauty of good style. Upon finishing the *Hortensius*, Augustine is no longer satisfied with mere eloquence and begins his own search for wisdom. The search will eventually lead him to God.

We can call this reading of the *Hortensius* the actual beginning of Augustine's conversion. Note how he alludes to the story of the *prodigal son*, to whom he is constantly comparing himself, when he says: "I had begun the journey upwards by which I was to return to you". In the biblical parable the forelorn young man far off in a distant country finally decides to go home and says to himself: "I will rise up and return to my father". Augustine decides to rise up, but he didn't know yet that he was returning to the Father. That is obvious when he says: "I had no notion what you were to do with me".

We have already seen the passion for truth in the young Augustine, which we called **INNER PROVIDENCE**. But that passion needed to be awakened by something or someone. How many times certain gifts come to life only later! Young or old, so many people are not aware of the riches they have within them. That book did the job, and we call it **OUTER PROVIDENCE**. God does much of his work through other people like us. Providence can make an instrument even of a Roman philosopher.

MONICA

It is interesting to note that, as enthusiastic as he seemed about Cicero, Augustine couldn't be fully taken by him:

But the one thing that delighted me in Cicero's exhortation was that I should love and seek and win and hold and embrace not this or that philosophical school but Wisdom itself, whatever it might be. The book excited and inflamed me. In my ardour the only thing I found lacking was that the name of Christ was not there. For with my mother's milk my infant heart had drunk in, and still held deep down in it, that name according to your mercy, O Lord, the name of your son, my saviour; and whatever lacked that name, no matter how learned and excellently written and true, could not win me wholly.

How strange to see how much the name of Christ meant to Augustine, despite how far he had wandered in his life. That was because of Augustine's mother, Monica. She had made a deep impression on him as a child as she spoke with him about Christ and prayed with him. After that the name of Christ remained fixed in his heart. Augustine was not untouched by a Christian culture, even though he was not baptized. Here is a second example of outer providence. This time it is found in a person, his mother. She was sent into Augustine's life by God to accomplish his work by planting a seed of the love of Jesus Christ that would survive the years. She did even more for him at other times. As did many other people who can be found in the Confessions.

TRANSFERRAL TO ROME

Next comes a **circumstance** into Augustine's life that we can also call outer providence. This took the form of a disconcerting mess that he had to put up with as a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and made him want to move away. His students were most unruly and insubordinate, much like what we may remember from the sixties in the world's universities, with the sit-ins and the love-ins, the occupying of presidents' offices, etc. He couldn't stand it and decided to leave Africa and go to Rome to find a better living situation. Augustine says the reasons were his own, but later as he was writing the *Confessions*, he saw that it was really God working behind the scenes to make him uncomfortable and anxious to move. Let's see how he expresses himself:

(V, 8) It was by your action upon me that I was moved to go to Rome and teach there what I had taught at Carthage. How I was persuaded to do this. I shall not omit to confess to you, because therein your most profound depths and your mercy ever present are to be meditated upon.

My reason for going to Rome was not the greater earnings and higher dignity promised by my friends - though at that time these considerations certainly influenced me. The principal and practically conclusive reason was that I had heard that youths there pursued their studies more quietly and were kept within a stricter limit of discipline. For instance, they were not allowed to come rushing insolently into the school of one who was not their own master, nor indeed to enter it at all unless permitted. At Carthage the license of the students is gross and beyond all measure. They break in impudently and like a pack of madmen play havoc with the order which the master has established for the good of his pupils.

... And so I decided to go to a place where, as I had been told, such things were not done.

Note how he says, "it was by your action upon me that I was moved to go to Rome". That's what he believed. Behind it all was the hand of God who was planning something important for him:

Why I left the one country and went to the other, you knew, O God, but you did not tell either me or my mother. She indeed was in dreadful grief at my going and followed me right to the sea coast. There she clung to me passionately, determined that I should either go back home with her or take her to Rome with me. But I deceived her with the pretence that I had a friend whom I did not want to leave until he had set off with a fair wind. Thus, I lied to my mother, and such a mother; and so got away from her. ...

She would not return home without me, but I managed with some difficulty to persuade her to spend the night in a place near the ship where there was an oratory in memory of Saint Cyprian. That night I stole away without her. She remained praying and weeping.

He left for the distant land for his own reasons, namely to escape the dastardly students of Carthage and to gain better career opportunities in Italy. Augustine liked to think he was writing the script of his own drama, while in truth it was God who was writing it. For in Italy there were some persons that God intended to be his instruments for Augustine's

conversion, much like Monica had been in Africa. One was St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan. Another was named Simplicianus. And still others were African friends who were living in Milan. We will see shortly how they helped Augustine. I like to think of God as a playwright. He had good things planned for Augustine on the Italian peninsula. But he had to get him there somehow. And so he simply put into his life an unpleasant situation that he would want to get away from as far as possible. That we can call **OUTER PROVIDENCE**. When you have found yourself in a messy situation or when something unpleasant happens to you, have you ever thought that the hand of God might be in it, leading you to something better?

We'll finish up the passage with his mother. If Augustine didn't know what was going on at the time, neither did she:

And what was she praying for, O my God, with all those tears but that you should not allow me to sail! But you saw deeper and granted the essential of her prayer. You did not do what she was at that moment asking, that you might do the thing she was always asking.

Monica had been praying ten years now for the conversion of her son, but lately she was praying that he not leave Africa. Regarding her desire that he stay in Africa with her, God chose not to satisfy that prayer in order to be able to satisfy her deepest prayer that he be converted. There's a useful lesson in all this. How often do we not understand God's behaviour in the face of our prayers? When God does not grant what they ask, some people say "God did not answer my prayer." But he did answer. He said "No". That is because he wants to grant a greater good, even if he has to refuse our smaller ones. Monica still had to learn that God's ways are not our ways:

The next morning she was frantic with grief and filled your ears with her moaning and complaints because you seemed to treat her tears so lightly. ... She did not realize what joys you would bring her from my going away. She did not realize it, and so she wept and lamented. ... But when she had poured out all her accusation at my cruel deception, she turned once more to prayer to you for me. She went home and I to Rome.

AMBROSE

(V, 12) In Rome another unpleasant situation arose. The students were quiet enough. The only problem was that when it came time to pay their teacher, they all went off to another teacher. Augustine found himself with empty pockets:

I began diligently to set about that for which I had come to Rome, namely the teaching of rhetoric. First I gathered some few at my home, and by them I began to become known. And then I learned that Rome had its drawbacks which I had not had to suffer in Africa. For it is true that the riotous incursions of blackguardly youngsters did not happen here. But, so I was warned, "at a given moment a number of students plan to cheat their master of his fees and go off to some other master".

(V, 13) And so he moves on again, this time to Milan:

When, therefore, a message from Milan came to Rome, to the prefect, asking for a professor of rhetoric for that city and arranging for public funds to cover his journey, I applied for the post with support from men far gone in the follies of the Manichees - the purpose of my journey being to be quit of them, though neither nor I realized it. The prefect Symmachus approved of a public oration I delivered for the occasion and sent me.

So Augustine is able to advance his career. He received a very important post. It was the chair of rhetoric in the court of the Roman Emperor. Milan was at that time the capital of the Empire. And Augustine becomes an influential official. But unbeknownst to him God is working behind the scenes. In Milan Augustine is going to meet Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, who would be instrumental in his conversion:

So I came to Milan, to the bishop and devout servant of God, Ambrose, famed among the best men of the whole world, whose eloquence did then most powerfully minister to your people the fatness of your wheat and the joy of your oil and the sober intoxication of your wine. All unknowing I was brought by God to him, that knowing I should be brought by him to God. That man of God received me as a father, and as bishop welcomed my coming. I came to love him, not at first as a teacher of the truth, which I had utterly dispaired of finding in your Church, but for his kindness to me.

“All unknowing I was brought by God to him, that knowing I should be brought by him to God” is the wonderful way in which Augustine speaks of the salvific role Ambrose was about to play for him. It happened when he began to go to the cathedral to listen to Ambrose preach. He had heard that Ambrose was a great orator. But so was Augustine a great orator. Competition!:

I attended carefully when he preached to the people, not with the right intention, but only to judge whether his eloquence was equal to his fame or whether it flowed higher or lower than had been told me. His words I listened to with the greatest care. His matter I held quite unworthy of attention

(V, 14) Little by little the truth of what Ambrose began to affect him:

Thus I did not take great heed to learn what he was saying but only to hear how he said it. That empty interest was all I now had since I dispaired of man's finding the way to you. Yet along with the words, which I admired, there also came into my mind the subject matter, to which I attached no importance. I could not separate them. And while I was opening my heart to learn how eloquently he spoke, I came to feel, though only gradually, how truly he spoke.

Ambrose's homilies had a great impact on Augustine. They answered many of the questions that had been nagging Augustine for a long time, like: how do you explain the contradictions that are found throughout Scripture? Or how can we conceive of a purely spiritual God with no material qualities mixed in? Or, aren't we sacrificing our intellectual integrity when we choose to believe by faith? So Augustine is brought to a point where he can see the truth of the Catholic faith and he decides to leave the Manichees. What he actually does is to stop frequenting their meetings and to re-enter the catechumenate of the

Church (remember, he had been signed with the sign of Christ as a child) and just wait and see:

I decided that I must leave the Manichees. For in that time of doubt, I did not think I could remain in a sect to which I now preferred certain of the philosophers. Yet I absolutely refused to entrust the care of my soul to the philosophers, because they were without the saving name of Christ. I determined then to go on as a catechumen in the Catholic Church - the church of my parents - and to remain in that state until some certain light should appear by which I might steer my course.

NEO-PLATONISTS

One of the important leads Augustine picked up from St. Ambrose as he preached was to read the works of the school of Neoplatonist philosophy. For he learned from Ambrose that they could indeed help him to find new categories of thought that would liberate him from his material-bound mentality and allow him to conceive of God more spiritually. This he did and had a great breakthrough. And so we have yet another example of **OUTER PROVIDENCE**, again in the form of a book.

Now, finally, he could see God in his real transcendence. The reading of the books of the Neoplatonists led him to his first direct encounter with God as he describes in the following famous passage:

Being admonished by all this to return to myself, I entered into my own depths, with you as guide; and I was able to do it because you were my helper.

I entered, and with eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw your unchangeable light shining over that same eye of my soul, over my mind. It was not the light of everyday that the eye of flesh can see, nor some greater light of the same order, such as might be if the brightness of our daily light should be seen shining with a more intense brightness and filling all things with its greatness. Your light was not that, but other, altogether other, than all such lights. Nor was it above my mind as oil is above the water it floats on, nor as the sky is above the earth. It was above because it made me, and I was below because made by it. He who knows the truth knows that light, and he who knows that light knows eternity. Charity knows it.

O eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity! You are my God. I sigh to you by day and by night. (VII, 10)

Guardini calls this an authentic mystical experience, a definitive moment in Augustine's journey. Augustine spoke of God as a light. "It was not the light of everyday that the eye of flesh can see. ... Your light was not that, but other, altogether other, than all such lights. ... Nor was it above my mind as oil is above the water it floats on, nor as the sky is above the earth. It was above because it made me, and I was below because made by it" . He had come to the truth that he had been secretly seeking all his life.

A note of interest: Fr. Tom Martin, an Augustinian of our Midwest Province, a fine

Augustinian scholar and a friend of Clare, recently died too young, at the age of 65. The passage we just read were the last words of St. Augustine he ever heard. Just after his sister had read it to him, he ended a six-month long battle and gave over his soul to God.

(VII, 17) Lest it appear that everything is fine now and we can end the Confessions right here with BOOK SEVEN, Augustine goes on to say:

And I marvelled to find that at last I loved you and not some phantom instead of you. Yet I did not stably enjoy my God, but was ravished to you by your beauty. Soon I was torn away from you again by my own weight, and fell again with torment to lower things. Carnal habit was that weight. Yet the memory of you remained with me and I knew without doubt that it was you to whom I should cleave, though I was not yet such as could cleave to you. ,, Thus in the thrust of a trembling glance my mind arrived at That Which Is. Then indeed I saw clearly your invisible things which are understood by the things that are made; but I lacked the strength to hold my gaze fixed., and my weakness was beaten back again so that I returned to my old habits, bearing nothing with me but a memory of delight and a desire for something of which I had caught the fragrance but which I had not yet the strength to eat.

As you can see, all is not well yet. His vision of God is not stable. He keeps falling back to earth because of the weight of his sinful habits. Those predicaments that we met this morning are still influencing him. This passage leaves us suspended, between two conversions. On the one hand, there is the intellectual conversion, already accomplished. But there still needs to come a moral one. Augustine now consciously seeks the true God as he really is, but is unable to embrace God because of his sin. You can hear the anguish in his words. What a frustration!

And that's where we are going to leave Augustine for now. At the end of Book Seven he says he felt like a man standing on a wooded hill. He can see the place he wants to go to, but he cannot see the way to get there.

Brian Lowery OSA

FOURTH TALK

THE CONVERSION

Now we finally come to the account of Augustine's conversion, after getting to know his plights and predicaments and the mysterious, positive presence of God in his life. That brings us to **BOOK EIGHT**

Book Eight opens with another one of those spontaneous moments that we talked about, where he switches from the past tense to the present and bursts into prayer:

Let me, O God, remember with thanks to you and confess your mercies upon me. Let my bones be pierced through with your love, and let them say: "You have broken my bonds. I will sacrifice to you the sacrifice of praise". How you broke them I will now narrate, and all who adore you will say: "Blessed by the Lord in heaven; great is his name."

"You have broken my bonds". This is a quote from Psalm 115, 16. Every time we sing that psalm in our liturgy of the hours at San Gimignano I think of Augustine and his final liberation in Book Eight of the *Confessions*.

The state of his heart he describes like this:

But in my temporal life all was uncertain. My heart had to be purged of the old leaven. The way, our Saviour himself, delighted me; but I still shrank from walking a way so strait.

and

I had now found the pearl of great price, and I ought to have sold all I had and bought it. But I hesitated still. (VIII, 1)

Augustine, the great hesitator. He will forever be famous for putting off his conversion. Most of us can identify with that.

BOOK EIGHT contains two episodes that act as a preparation for the famous conversion scene in the garden of Milan, with the fig tree, the voice of the child, the tears, etc. Both are conversations with friends and both conversations involve the conversions of other people.

(VIII, 2) The first conversation was with Simplicianus, a priest of Milan, whom Augustine used to go to for advice:

So I went to Simplicianus, who had begotten Ambrose, now bishop, into your grace, and whom indeed Ambrose loved as a father. I told him all the wanderings of my error. But when I told him that I had read certain books of the Platonists which had been translated into Latin by Victorinus, one time professor of rhetoric in Rome – who had, so I heard, died a Christian – he congratulated me for not having fallen upon the writings of other philosophers which are full of vain deceits, according to the elements of this world, whereas in the Platonists God and his Word are everywhere implied.

(VIII, 5) The impact of this story on Augustine was powerful:

Now when this man of yours, Simplicianus, had told me the story of Victorinus, I was on fire to imitate him: which was indeed why he told me. He added that in the time of the emperor Julian, when a law was made prohibiting Christians from teaching literature and rhetoric, Victorinus had obeyed the law, preferring to give up his own school of words rather than your word, by which you make eloquent the tongues of babes. In this he seemed to me not only courageous, but actually fortunate because it gave him the chance to devote himself wholly to you. I longed for the same chance, but I was bound not with the

iron of another's chains, but by my own iron will. ... I no longer had the excuse which I used to think I had for not yet forsaking the world and serving you, the excuse namely that I had no certain knowledge of the truth. By now I was quite certain. But I was still bound to earth and refused to take service in your army. I feared to be freed of all the things that impeded me, as strongly as I ought to have feared the being impeded by them.

I was held down as agreeably by this world's baggage as one often is by sleep; and indeed the thoughts by which I meditated upon you were like the efforts of a man who wants to get up but is so heavy with sleep that he simply sinks back into it again. There is no one who wants to sleep always. For every sound judgement holds that it is best to be awake. Yet a man often postpones the effort of shaking himself awake when he feels a sluggish heaviness in the limbs, and settles pleasurably into another doze though he knows he should not, because it is time to get up.

Similarly I regarded it as settled that it would be better to give myself to your love rather than go on yielding to my own lust. But the first course delighted and convinced my mind. The second delighted my body and held it in bondage. For there was nothing I could reply when you called me: "Rise, you who sleep. Arise from the dead: and Christ shall enlighten you." And whereas you showed me by every evidence that your words were true, there was simply nothing I could answer save only laggard, lazy words: "Soon." "Quite soon." "Give me just a little while." But "soon" and "quite soon" did not mean any particular time. And "just a little while" went on for a long while.

Augustine was disgusted with his own delay. A well known person was able to take the step; and he wasn't. Augustine becomes the "patron saint of procrastinators". You know what procrastination means: postponing, putting off to tomorrow what you should do today. In Augustine's own well known phrase: "Give me chastity, but not yet." (VIII, 7)

(VIII, 6) The second conversation was with Ponticianus, an African friend who worked in the imperial court:

On a certain day - Nebridius was away for some reason I cannot recall – there to Alypius and me at our house one Ponticianus, a fellow countryman of ours, being from Africa, a holder of an important post in the emperor's court. There was something or other he wanted of us and we sat down to discuss the matter. As it happened he noticed a book on our gaming table by which we were sitting. He picked it up, opened it and found that it was the apostle Paul, which surprised because he had expected that it would be one of the books I wore myself out teaching. Then he smiled a little and looked at me, and expressed pleasure but surprise too at having come suddenly upon that book, and only that book, lying before me. For he was a Christian and a devout Christian.

He then told them the story of the conversion of Anthony of the Desert. After that he told them a recent experience of his own:

On one occasion he and three of his companions – it was at Treves, when the emperor was at the chariot races in the circus – had gone one afternoon to walk in the gardens close by the city walls. Two strolled on and came to a certain house, the dwelling of some

servant of yours, poor in spirit, of whom is the kingdom of God. There they found a small book in which was written the life of Anthony. One of them began to read it, marvelled at it and was inflamed by it. ... He looked at his friend and said to him: "Tell me please, what is the goal of our ambition in all these labours of ours? Have we any higher hope at court than to be friends of the emperor? And at that level, is not everything uncertain and full of perils? But if I choose to be a friend of God I can be one now." He said this, and all troubled with the pain of the new life coming to birth in him, he turned back his eyes to the book. He read on and was changed inwardly, where you alone could see, and the world dropped away from his mind. ... Being now your servant, he said to his friend: "If you have no will to imitate me, at least do not try to dissuade me". The other replied that he would remain his companion in so grate a service for so great a prize. So the two of them, now your servants, built a spiritual tower at the only cost that is adequate, the cost of leaving all things and following you.

(VIII, 7) The effect of this story on Augustine was even more powerful than the previous one:

This was the story Ponticianus told. But you, Lord, while he was speaking, turned me back towards myself, taking me from, behind my own back where I had put myself all the time that I preferred not to see myself. And you set me there before my own face that I might see how vile I was, how twisted and unclean and spotted and ulcerous. I saw myself and was horrified; but there was no way to flee from myself. If I tried to turn my gaze from myself, there was Ponticianus telling what he was telling. And again you were setting me face to face with myself, forcing me upon my own sight, that I might see my iniquity and loathe it. I had known it, but I had pretended not to see it, had deliberately looked the other way and let it go from my mind.

Augustine had deceived himself all these years. But now, with the story of Ponticianus in his ears, he couldn't any longer. He had to look himself straight in the eye:

Thus was I inwardly gnawed at. And I was in the grip of the most horrible and confounding shame, while Ponticianus was telling his story. He finished the tale and business for which he had come; and he went his way, and I to myself. What did I not say against myself, with what lashes of condemnation did I not scourge my soul to make it follow me now that I wanted to follow you! My soul hung back. It would not follow, yet found no excuse for not following. All its arguments had already been used and refuted. There remained only a trembling silence. For it feared as very death the cessation of that habit of which in truth it was dying.

There is a phrase that jumps out from this passage and makes us take notice. It is that "trembling silence" that Augustine felt in that moment. This expresses the profound fear that he must have been experiencing. More precisely, he says it was like the fear of dying: not a physical death, but something that seemed very similar, dying to himself.

At this point Augustine uses a special vocabulary when he speaks of those moments when he was drawing close to the truth and God was drawing close to him. He used words

like "anxiety," "terror," "dread," "panic," "quivering," "trembling," and "horror." Because in those moments that was just what he was experiencing.

(VIII, 8) At this point Augustine bursts into tears:

In the midst of that great tumult of my inner dwelling place, the tumult I had stirred up in my own soul in the chamber of my heart, I turned to Alypius, wild in look and troubled in mind, crying out: "What is wrong with us? What is it that you heard? The unlearned arise and take heaven by force, and here we are with all our learning, stuck fast in flesh and blood! Is there any shame in following because they have gone before us? Would it not be a worse shame not to follow at once? ... There was a garden attached to our lodging, of which we had the use, as indeed we had of the whole house: for our host, the master of the house, did not live there. To this garden the storm in my breast somehow brought me, for there no one could intervene in the fierce suit I had brought against myself, until it should reach its issue: though what the issue was to be, you knew, not I: but there I was going mad on my way to sanity, dying on my way to life, aware how evil I was, unaware that I was to grow better better in a little while. So I went off to the garden, and Alypius close on my heels: for it was still privacy for me to have him near, and how could he leave me to myself in that state?

(VIII, 11) Let us hear how Augustine describes his fear for the last time:

Thus I was sick at heart and in torment, accusing myself with a new intensity of bitterness, twisting and turning in my chain in the hope that it might be utterly broken, for what held me was so small a thing! But it still held me.

And you stood in the secret places of my soul, O Lord, in the harshness of your mercy redoubling the scourges of fear and shame lest I should give way again and that slight tie which remained should not be broken but should grow again to full strength and bind me closer even than before.

For I kept saying within myself: "Let it be now, let it be now," and by the mere words I had begun to move towards the resolution. I almost made. Yet I did not quite make it. But I did not fall back into my original state, but as it were stood near to get my breath. And I tried again and I was almost there, and now I could all but touch it and hold it. Yet I was not quite there. I did not touch it or hold it. I still shrank from dying unto death and living unto life. The lower condition which had grown habitual was more powerful than the better condition which I had not tried.

The nearer the point of time came in which I was to become different, the more it struck me with horror. But it did not force me utterly back nor turn me utterly away, but held me there between the two.

Next Augustine uses the very clever rhetorical technique of personification to describe his last steps. He has the virtue of Continenace speak to him and show him examples of how continence is possible for people to live. But she adds that it is not his own power that

is needed right now but God's power. For Augustine, good intellectual that he was, was used to doing most things for himself. He wanted conversion now, but he wanted to do it himself. That last step had to be his. And so all he found was his weakness and his incapacity to give up his past habits. Let's hear how she tells him that:

In the direction towards which I had turned my face and was quivering in fear of going, I could see the austere beauty of continence, serene and indeed joyous but not evilly, honourably soliciting me to come to her and not linger, stretching forth loving hands to receive and embrace me, hands full of multitudes of good examples. With her I saw such hosts of young men and maidens, a multitude of youth and of every age, gray widows and women grown old in virginity, and in them all Continence herself, not barren but the fruitful mother of children, her joys, by you, Lord, her Spouse.

And she smiled upon me and her smile gave courage as if she were saying: "Can you not do what these men have done, what these women have done? Or could men or women have done such in themselves, and not in the Lord their God? The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand upon yourself and so not stand at all? Cast yourself upon him and be not afraid. He will not draw away and let you fall. Cast yourself without fear. He will receive you and heal you."

The message is Christ: "Cast yourself upon him and be not afraid. He will not draw away and let you fall." Augustine had to give up one last resistance before he could make the final step: his pride, his intention to achieve conversion himself.

Good old faithful Alypius is right there by him:

And Alypius stayed by my side and awaited in silence the issue of such agitation as he had never seen in me.

(VIII, 12) Now let us finish with Augustine's own words of how he surrendered to Christ:

(Read VIII, 12)

Now we have come to the end of our weekend retreat. We have read a lot of Augustine's *Confessions* and may be a bit tired from vicariously living the strains of his conversion story. But the experience of seeing God "always there" effectively in so many ways can lift us up. I think Augustine had us in mind when he wrote his book. He knew that we could not be that different from him. And he knew that the same God would be "always there" in our lives too. Listen to what he says in Book Ten:

When the confession of my past sins - which you have forgiven and covered up, giving me joy in you, changing my life by faith and your sacrament - when these confessions are read and heard, they stir up the heart. It no longer lies in the lethargy of despair and says "I cannot," but keeps wakeful in the love of your mercy and the loveliness of your grace, by which every weak man is made strong, since by it he is made conscious of his weakness. As for the good, it rejoices them to hear of sins committed in the past by men now free

from them: not because these things are sins, but because they were and no longer are.
(X,3,4)

After reading the *Confessions* the heart cannot say "I cannot," but draws strength from Augustine's example. The weak take courage. The strong rejoice and continue along their road to God, only now more certain than ever that they can arrive. That's our story too.

What would Augustine wish that we take away with us from our reading of the *Confessions*? Many things obviously. He worked hard on the book. However, I am convinced that he would want us to understand that just as God was "always there" in his life, so is God "always there" in ours. He is there in the inborn gifts he gave us by which we are drawn to seek him. He is there in the pain of wrongdoing, in the sorrow of loss and in the confusion of disappointment. He is there, too, in so many people that enter into our lives, as well as situations and circumstances. Upon reflection, we too can say "You were always there".

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