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## The Argument of St. Augustine's "Confessions"

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## The Argument of St. Augustine's "Confessions."

The great religious classic of the centuries between Paul and Luther is *Augustini Confessiones*. The high valuation which was ever placed upon this book of Augustine's is attested by the many editions and translations of it which have issued from the presses.<sup>1)</sup> For brevity's sake we refrain from quoting the warm praise which Dr. Walther bestowed upon this work.<sup>2)</sup>

St. Augustine's *Confessions* constitute an autobiography in the form of a prayer. He begins by saying: "Great art Thou, Lord, and greatly to be praised, and great is Thy excellency, and Thy wisdom is beyond measurement or comprehension." At every turn he assures us that he is speaking in the presence of God. Again and again he declares that men may smile at his frankness, but that God will be patient with the poor sinner. He never ceases to sing the praises of God for provision, care, election, conversion and preservation. In all literature there is nothing similar to St. Augustine's *Confessions*. He frequently tells God that he is opening his heart to his heavenly Father and that he is speaking of his sins, not to arouse interest in his biography, but in order to praise God's mercy and truth and *to lead others to repentance and to faith in that same gracious and merciful God.*<sup>3)</sup>

Very near the beginning of the first book he writes: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is disquieted until it rests in Thee."<sup>4)</sup> There is perhaps no sentence of any Church Father that is

1) The cheapest edition of which we know is the one edited by Car. Herm. Bruder, Ph. D., and published by C. Tauchnitz of Leipzig. A very good edition by a German scholar is that by Karl von Raumer, published at Guetersloh. This edition contains German introductions, Latin summaries, and German notes, together with pertinent Latin quotations from other writings of St. Augustine. The print is clear and large, there is a good index, and there are very few misprints. The best edition, however, according to our opinion, is that offered in the series of the Cambridge Patriotic texts, of which the general editor is A. J. Mason, D. D., published at Cambridge by the University Press. Dr. John Gibb, Professor of Church History of Westminster College, Cambridge, and William Montgomery, D. D., are subeditors of this edition. The English introduction and notes are excellent. The solutions of some textual difficulties in most cases are very happy. However, this last edition is expensive. The Tauchnitz text sells for less than one dollar, whereas the Cambridge edition costs something like six dollars.

2) *Lehre und Wehre*, III, p. 376.

3) In all, there are thirteen books, but the last three contain an exposition of Genesis. The autobiography is completed in the first ten books.

4) "*Fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.*"

more frequently quoted. Thereupon he speaks of his life even before his birth, according to that sentiment expressed by David: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." He calls attention to the temper, jealousy, and impatience that is often noticeable in very young children. Then he declares: "The so-called innocence of little children consists in their inability to do harm, not in their sinlessness."<sup>5</sup>)

In speaking of the schools which he attended, he tells us of the cruel punishment visited upon those boys who did not know their lessons. He conceived such a horror of this species of punishment that, though he was not what we call a Christian child, he nevertheless appealed to God in some fashion to save him from these chastisements, the very thought of which filled him with terror. He wails out that his parents had no mercy on him, but laughed when he complained of the sharp correction which he had received at school.

Latin was his mother tongue, and after he had learned to read, he just devoured Latin narratives, especially the *Aeneid* of Vergil. But since it was his parents' intention to make of him a good speaker, perhaps an influential lawyer, he was forced to learn the Greek language also, — and how he did hate that strange language! Augustine never became interested in Greek writers.<sup>6</sup>)

Of the higher education which he received later he writes that his teachers warned their pupils to beware of the least mistake in language, but said ne'er a word against the much more serious faults of moral corruption.<sup>7</sup>)

His mother Monica was a faithful Christian woman; his father Patrick was a pagan and seems to have been given to occasional intemperance, marital infidelity, and paroxysms of anger.<sup>8</sup>) There can hardly be a doubt that African blood coursed in the parents' veins. During his boyhood Augustine fell sick, and since he had heard of the value of Baptism, he requested to be baptized. His mother was willing to have him baptized; but upon his recovery this parent thought best to postpone his baptism, since she feared that during the years of adolescence he might fall into sins which were considered more harmful to a baptized member of the Church

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5) "*Ita imbecillitas membrorum infantilium innocens est, non animus infantium. Vidi ego et expertus sum zelantem parvulum: nondum loquebatur, et intuebatur pallidus amaro aspectu collactancum suum. Quis hoc ignorat? Expiare se dicunt ista matres atque nutrices nescio quibus remediis. Nisi vero et ista innocentia est, in fonte lactis ubertim manante atque abundante, opis egentissimum, et illo adhuc uno alimento vitam ducentem, consortem non pati.*" (Lib. I, c. VII.)

6) Lib. I, c. XIV.

7) *Ib.*, XVI.

8) *Ib.*, Lib. IX, c. IX.

than to one who had not as yet made profession of the Christian religion.

As he grew older, he joined other boys and perpetrated all manner of sinful pranks. Concerning this he recalls two things: the one that he took pleasure in doing something that was forbidden; the other thing which he recalls of those years is that he was not satisfied to brag about those evil deeds which he had actually committed, but among his associates he also boasted of even more shameful deeds, which he had not committed.

He became infatuated with the theater. Instead of deploring his own folly, he wept over the imaginary troubles of the actors. His morals became more and more corrupt. All about him he saw people who were in difficulties because of illicit love affairs with young women, and in his sinful folly he wished to get into the same difficulties. Withal he was burning with ambition to shine in the world. After studying the works of Cicero and translations of parts of Plato, he determined to give some attention to the sacred Scriptures; but he declares that his bloated and blatant pride failed to find any pleasure in these writings. He thought the style of the holy writers deficient in polish and eloquence.

He was impatient with the demand that he ought to believe; he wanted to understand; he wanted all, also religious, tenets proved as we prove that three plus seven make ten. He was offended by the demand that in simple, childlike faith he should accept the teaching of the Bible. His pride rebelled against the command to believe—he wanted to see scientific proof. But it was just this rationalism which engulfed him in all manner of foolish superstitions. He consulted astrologers, and finally came under the influence of that ridiculous sect known as Manicheans. After spending nearly nine years in this sect, he discovered that the Manicheans knew neither science nor religion. Thereupon he became a skeptic and despaired of ever finding the truth. At this time he was teaching rhetoric at Carthage. The students of Carthage were so boisterous and inconsiderate that he longed for a change. He was told that he might go to Rome and teach rhetoric there, where the students were more polished. He decided to go there. With deep shame and contrition he confesses to deceiving his mother and lying to her in order to prevent her from following him to Rome.<sup>9)</sup>

Having come to Rome, he found the youth more polished, but also more deceitful; they cheated him out of his fees. At this time a delegation came from Milan in Northern Italy, requesting that a teacher of rhetoric be sent there. A public examination, or test,

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9) His father was converted shortly before he died, at which time Augustine was about seventeen years of age.

was arranged, and St. Augustine won the appointment. He went to Milan and taught rhetoric. There he found that celebrated bishop of the early Church St. Ambrose. The eloquence of St. Ambrose had been made much of, and in order to discover whether all was true that he had heard of Ambrose, he went to hear him and found the reports fully justified. He therefore frequented the preaching services of St. Ambrose, not to learn the truths which he proclaimed, but to enjoy listening to a good speaker. But, lo, little by little, while giving attention to the preacher's wonderful command of language, the truths themselves which Ambrose taught touched his soul and aroused his conscience.<sup>10)</sup>

At this time he was joined by his mother. He tells us that his mother had become convinced that before she left this world she would see her son Augustine a true and faithful Christian. She based her conviction upon the fact that she had had a dream which assured her that her son would finally be won over to her faith. Another reason for her feeling so secure in this confidence was the fact that years ago, when she had gone to a Christian minister (this was not Ambrose) to ask him to speak to Augustine about his religion, this man had told her that it was useless to speak to him as long as he had not discovered the deceptions of the Manichean sect. When Monica continued to plague this man and to weep, this bishop had said to her, "Go in peace. A child of such tears cannot be lost."<sup>11)</sup>

It is highly interesting and instructive to read what Augustine tells of his spiritual struggles and his quest for truth. He was still plagued with all manner of superstitions. He went to the *matematici*, the astrologers of those days. They offered no sacrifices, but studied the stars and wished to explain a man's morals and fortunes by referring to the planet which was in control of the heavens at the time of that person's birth. After he had been warned by a physician to give up that foolish and superstitious investigation, he came to a better understanding of the whole matter. Later he simply wished to find an *excuse for sin*, telling the sinner that the cause of his lapse lay in the stars and not in his character. Space will not permit to relate a number of very interesting occurrences which he narrates of himself and his friends.

The miseries of Augustine increased. He told his friends that he could scarcely endure the distress of his soul any longer. In the mean time he had become a catechumen of Ambrose. What Ambrose preached now appeared to him to be well founded; but the illicit

10) "*Et dum cor aperirem ad accipiendum quam diserte diceret, pariter intrabat et quam vere diceret, gradatim quidem.*"

11) "*Vade a me! Ita vivas, fieri non potest, ut filius istarum lacrimarum pereat.*" (Lib. III, cap. XII.)

connection which he, Augustine, maintained with a young woman held him in its fetters. True, he now discarded the woman who had borne him an illegitimate son, called Adeodatus, but he formed another *liaison*. He learned that the way to truth is not through intellectual inquiry, but through repentance of sin and faith in the Savior, followed by a life in accordance with the will of the Good Shepherd. The uneasiness of his heart waxed so violent that he could not work. He retired to the country, where a friend offered him a temporary refuge. He now read the Scriptures assiduously with a friend. One day he went out into the garden. The turmoil within him became so intense that he threw himself upon the ground. Then it was that he heard a voice saying, "*Tolle, lege; tolle, lege.*" (Lib. VIII, cap. 12.) It seemed to be the voice of a boy or a girl at play. Repressing the inclination to weep, the conviction seemed forced upon him that it was a divine command to open the Bible and to read whatever he might find. He returned to his friend Alypius, took up the Bible lying there, and opened it at Rom. 13, 13. 14: "Not in rioting," etc. These words suddenly infused into his heart the light of divine truth; God's grace had delivered him. He arose and told his friend that he had now become firm in his determination to become a Christian. After further instruction he, together with his son Adeodatus, was baptized.

For some reason he then, together with his mother, brother, and son, undertook to return to Africa. On the way, at Ostia, his mother fell sick of a fever. When her death seemed imminent, they asked her whether, in case she died there, she wished her body to be buried next to her husband in Africa. She replied: "Bury this body of mine anywhere. Let its disposal not trouble you in the least. This only I would ask of you, that, wherever you may be, you remember me at the altar of the Lord."<sup>12</sup>) These words are quoted by the Romanists in support of their doctrine of purgatory, but without any valid reason. On this point those classic paragraphs in the Smalcald Articles should be read. (*Triglot*, p. 464 ff.) The words of Monica say nothing about purgatory, say nothing about reading Mass for the dead. It is a simple request that her sons remember her when they attend Holy Communion. The Romanists practise here what all sects have practised — they set aside clear, distinct, and unmistakable words of Scripture and inject into other words much more than those plain words actually mean. Since there is nothing in the canonical books of Scripture which speaks of purgatory or of masses for the dead, they quote this incident from the *Confessions* of Augustine; and

12) "*Ponite, inquit, hoc corpus ubicumque; nihil vos eius cura conturbet. Tantum illud vos rogo, ut ad Domini altare memineritis mei ubiubi fueritis.*" (Lib. IX, c. XI.)

since even this quotation does not support their position, they add their own interpretation, expecting their readers to forget everything except the interpretation which they have imposed upon these words. As for St. Augustine's saying anything concerning purgatory, Luther, who knew the writings of Augustine very well, tells us: "*Augustinus schreibt nicht, dass ein Fegfeuer sei, hat auch keine Schrift, die ihn dazu zwingt, sondern laesst es in Zweifel hangen.*"<sup>4</sup> The only passage which we found in St. Augustine's writing concerning prayers for the dead is the following in his *De Civitate Dei*, (Lib. XXI, c. 24): "*Badem itaque causa est, cur non oretur tunc pro hominibus aeterno igne puniendis, quae causa est, ut neque nunc, neque tunc oretur pro angelis malis; quae itidem causa est, ut quamvis pro hominibus, tamen iam nec nunc oretur pro infidelibus impiisque defunctis. Nam pro defunctis quibusdam, vel ipsius Ecclesiae, vel quorumdam piorum exauditur oratio; sed pro his, quorum in Christo regeneratorum nec usque adeo vita in corpore male gesta est, ut tali misericordia iudicentur, digni non esse, nec usque adeo bene, ut talem misericordiam reperiantur necessariam non habere.*"

It is true, St. Augustine prays for his departed mother and asks every one of his readers to pray for her. But he wishes this prayer to be understood to be offered for gifts which have already been received, just as we, who have even now complete forgiveness, nevertheless pray for forgiveness. In this sense Augustine wishes the prayers for his mother to be understood. He writes: "*Et credo quod iam feceris quod te rogo, sed voluntaria oris mei approba, Domine.*" (Lib. IX, c. XIII.) The thought that his prayers or the prayers of others should help Monica from purgatory was entirely foreign to St. Augustine.

One question which troubled Augustine no little before his conversion was: *Unde malum?* Whence is evil? He tells us that he happened upon this question while trying to solve the mystery of the universe. He made an attempt to visualize all things, God and all creatures, visible and invisible. And then he said to himself: There are only two things: God and what God has created, the Creator and the creature. ("*Ecce Deus, et ecce, quae creavit Deus.*") And now he said: God is good, perfectly good, and this Good One created nothing but good things. The question therefore arises, Whence is evil? "*Ubi ergo malum? Et unde, et qua huc irrepsit? Quae radix eius et quo semen eius?*" And then there occurred to his mind the possibility that there is no evil at all, the very thing that the Christian Scientists think is so new and has been taught first of all by Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. Augustine thought of this Eddyism in his day, and many philosophers before him and many since him have thought of it. Concerning evil he therefore asked the question: "*An omnino non est?*" But he goes on to ask another question, Why,

therefore, do we fear it and beware of it when it does not exist at all?" *"Cur ergo timemus at cavemus, quod non est?"* And he comes to the conclusion which many Christian Scientists have overlooked: If I fear without cause, certainly that fear itself is an evil, which unnecessarily pricks and tortures my heart." (*"Et tanto gravius malum, quanto non est, quod timeamus, et timemus."*) Many a poor soul in our modern enlightened age would have escaped the snare of Mrs. Eddy if it had known what Augustine knew so well more than a thousand years ago and expressed thus: *"Idcirco aut est malum, quod timemus, aut hoc malum est, quia timemus."*

And thus Augustine shows that it is true what the apostle taught long before him: "In the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God," 1 Cor. 1, 21. The teaching of Holy Writ is foolishness to man in his natural condition. Much labor, time, energy, money, and learning have been wasted in endeavors to make unconverted people recognize the truth of Holy Writ, all because men did not see that the natural man receiveth not the things of God; they are foolishness unto him. It is God's decision that men must be saved, not by the argumentation of learning, but by "the foolishness of preaching," namely, the preaching of the Cross, whereby man is regenerated through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus, the Savior. To this new creature all that before his conversion seemed the greatest foolishness now appears the highest wisdom. A man does not become a Christian because he is intellectually convinced of the truth of something in the Bible, but by way of repentance and faith.

While the *Confessions* of Augustine constitute a valuable storehouse of data for the historian of Church and State, for the educator, for the sociologist, for the philosopher, and for the philologist, its chief value is found in its religious teaching. The entire book is just what Augustine intended it to be, a crushing testimony against the sinner at the bar of God's justice and a victorious witness for the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Every word of it confirms the Scriptural truths that the world by wisdom knows not God, but that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. Augustine did not answer the question which no one else has ever answered, *Unde malum?* Idle curiosity alone wants that question answered. But Augustine does answer the question, *Unde bonum?* To this question he gives the same answer that Jesus gives John 3, 16. That counts! *Augustini Confessiones* appeal to all "with tears": "We pray you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God; for He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him," 2 Cor. 5, 20, 21.

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