

Saint Augustine

Bishop of Hippo - Doctor of the Church

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Saint Augustine! O great is the veneration which popes, councils, and the whole Church have paid to the memory of this glorious saint through every succeeding age since his time: that Pope Leo X ordered that his feast should be observed with the same honors as that of an Apostle; and he is recognized as a model of true penitents, a triumphant champion of the Faith, the equal of any philosopher, and the first of theologians, supreme Doctor of Grace.

He was born on 13th November, in the year 354, at Tagaste, a small town of Numidia in North Africa, not far from Hippo, but at some distance from the sea, which he had never seen till he was grown up. His parents were of good position, but not rich; his father, Patricius, was an idolater, and of a violent disposition; but by the example and prudent conduct of Saint Monica, his wife, he at length learned the humility and meekness of the Christian religion, and was baptized a little before his death in 371. She bore him several children; Saint Augustine speaks of his brother Navigius, who left a family behind him, and of a sister who died an abbess. At the wish of his mother and with the consent of his father, he was entered in his infancy among the catechumens, Baptism itself being deferred, according to a common custom of the time; but in early youth, he fell into grave sin and until the age of thirty-two led a life morally defiled by license and intellectually by Manichaeism. Of this time, up to his conversion and the death of Saint Monica, he speaks at large in his Confessions, a book written for “a people curious to know the lives of others, but careless to amend their own”; written not indeed to satisfy such curiosity, but to show forth to his fellows the mercy of God and His ways as exemplified in the life of one sinner, and to endeavor that no one should think of him above that which he confessed himself to be. He therefore divulged all the sins of his youth in the nine first books and, in the tenth, published the many imperfections to which he was still subject, humbly begging the intercession of all Christians on his behalf.

Sending this book to Count Darius, he tells him that, “The caresses of this world are more dangerous than its persecutions. See what I am from this book: believe me who bear testimony of myself, and regard not what others say of me. Praise with me the goodness of God for the great mercy He has shown in me, and pray for me that He will be pleased to finish what He has begun in me, and that He never suffer me to destroy myself.” By the care of his mother, he was instructed in the Christian religion, and taught to pray. He was made a catechumen, by being marked with the sign of the cross and blessed salt being put in his mouth; and whilst still a child, falling dangerously ill, he desired Baptism and his mother got everything ready for it; but he suddenly grew better, and it was put off. This custom of deferring Baptism for fear of sinning under the obligations of that sacrament, Saint Augustine very properly condemns; but the want of a sense of its sanctity and the sacrileges of Christians in defiling it, by relapsing into sin, is an abuse, which no less calls for our tears. The church has long since forbidden the baptism of infants ever to be deferred but it is one of

the principal duties of pastors to instruct the faithful in the obligations which the sacrament lays them under, and to teach them to value and to preserve the grace which they received by it.

“And so I was put to school to learn those things in which, poor boy, I knew no profit, and yet if I was negligent in learning I was whipped: for this method was approved of by my elders, and many that had trod that life before us had chalked out unto us these wearisome ways...” Augustine thanks God that, though the persons who pressed him to learn had no other end in view than “penurious riches” and “ignominious glory,” yet divine Providence made a good use of their error, and forced him to learn for his great profit and manifold advantage. He accuses himself of often studying only by constraint, disobeying his parents and masters, not writing, reading, or minding his lessons so much as was required of him; and this he did, not for want of wit or memory, but out of love of play. But he prayed to God with great earnestness that he might escape punishment at school, for which dread he was laughed at by his masters and parents. Nevertheless, “we were punished for play by them that were doing no better; but the boys’ play of them that are grown up is named business”!

“Who is he that, weighing things well, will justify my being beaten when I was a boy for playing at ball, because by that play I was hindered from learning so quickly those arts with which, when grown up, I should play far worse?” “No one does well what he does against his will,” he says, and takes notice that the master who corrected him for a small fault “if overcome in some petty dispute by a fellow-teacher, was more envious and angry than the boy ever was when outdone by a playfellow at ball.”

He liked Latin very well, having learned that language from his nurses, and others with whom he conversed; but not the Latin “which the first masters teach; rather that which is taught by those who are called grammarians.” While he was little, he hated Greek, and, for want of understanding it sufficiently, Homer was disagreeable to him; but the Latin poets became his early delight.

Augustine went to school first in his own town; then at Madaura, a neighboring city, where he studied grammar, poetry, and rhetoric. When he was sixteen years old, his father made him return to Tagaste, and kept him a whole year at home. During this time, the young man fell into bad company, and gave himself up to games and diversions. His passions grew unruly and were indulged, but his father took no care of his growing up in virtue, provided he was eloquent. His mother indeed implored him to keep himself free from vice; “which,” says he, “seemed to me but the admonitions of a woman, which I was ashamed to obey; whereas they were Your admonitions, O God, and I knew it not. By her You did speak to me, and I despised You in her.”

He went to Carthage towards the end of the year 370, in the beginning of his seventeenth year. There he took the foremost place in the school of rhetoric and applied himself to his studies with eagerness and pleasure; but his motives were vanity and ambition, and to them he joined loose living, though Vincent the Rogatist, his enemy from the break away Donatist schism and heresy, acknowledges that he always loved decency and good manners even in his irregularities. Soon he entered into relations with a woman, irregular but stable, to whom he remained faithful until he sent her from him at Milan in 385; she bore him a son, Adeodatus, in 372. His father, Patricius, died in 371; but Augustine still continued at Carthage and, by reading the Hortensius of Cicero, his mind was turned from rhetoric to philosophy.

He at length grew weary of the books of the heathen philosophers because Christ was not mentioned in them, whose name he had sucked in, as it were, with his mother’s milk, and retained

in his heart. He undertook therefore to read the Holy Scriptures; but he was offended with the simplicity of the style, and could not relish their humility or penetrate their spirit. Then it was that he fell into the error of the Manichees, that infirmity of noble mind troubled by the “problem of evil,” which seeks to solve the problem by teaching a metaphysical and religious dualism, according to which there are two eternal first principles, God, the cause of all good, and Matter, the cause of all evil. The darkening of the understanding and clumsiness in the use of the faculties, which wait on evil-living helped to betray him into this company, which he kept till his twenty-eighth year; and pride did the rest. “I sought with pride,” he says, “what only humility could make me find. Fool that I was, I left the nest, imagining myself able to fly; and I fell to the ground.”

His vanity was flattered by the Manichees, who claimed to try everything by the test of bare reason, and scoffed at all those who paid deference to the authority of the Catholic Church, as if they shackled reason and walked in bonds. It was by this familiar trick that he was seduced and caught in the nets of the Manichees, who promised to show him everything by demonstration, and calling faith weakness, credulity, and ignorance. “They said that, setting aside imperious authority, they would lead men to God and free them from all error by reason alone.” Writing afterwards to a friend, he said, “You know, my dear Honoratus, that upon no other ground we adhered to these men. What else made me, rejecting for almost nine years together the religion which was instilled into me in my childhood, a follower and diligent hearer of these men, but their saying that we are overawed by superstition, and that faith is imposed on us without reason being given: whereas they tie none to believe, except upon the truth being first examined and cleared up? Who would not have been inveigled by such promises? Especially a young man desirous of truth and, by reputation among learned men in the schools, already proud and talkative. They derided the simplicity of the Catholic faith, which commanded men to believe before they were taught by evident reason what was truth.”

Saint Augustine frequently teaches, in his other works, that this is the general method of false teachers and a usual cause of wreck of faith.

For nine years Augustine had his own schools of rhetoric and grammar at Tagaste and Carthage, while his devoted mother, spurred on by the assurance of a holy bishop that “the son of so many tears could not perish,” never ceased by prayer and gentle persuasion to try to bring him to conversion and reform. After meeting the leading Manichaean teacher, Faustus, he began to be disillusioned about that sect, and in 383 departed to Rome, secretly, lest his mother should prevent him.

After a serious illness, he opened a school of rhetoric there, but finding the scholars were accustomed frequently to change their masters in order to cheat them of their salary for teaching, he grew weary of the place; and it happening that orders were sent from Milan to Symmachus, prefect of Rome, requiring him to send thither some able master of rhetoric, Augustine applied for the post; and, having given Symmachus proofs of his capacity, was chosen by him and sent.

At Milan, he was well received and the bishop, Saint Ambrose, gave him marks of his respect. Augustine was very desirous of knowing him, not as a teacher of the truth, but as a person of great learning and reputation. He often went to his sermons, not so much with any expectation of profiting by them as to gratify his curiosity and to enjoy the eloquence; but he found the discourses more learned than those of the heretic Faustus and they began to make impression on his heart and mind; at the same time he read Plato and Plotinus: “Plato gave me knowledge of the true God, Jesus Christ showed me the way.” Saint Monica, having followed him to Milan, wished to see him

married, and the mother of Adeodatus returned to Africa, leaving the boy behind; but neither marriage nor single continence followed. And so the struggle, spiritual, moral, intellectual, went on.

He found the writings of the Platonic philosophers bred pride in his soul, making him have a mind to seem wise and leaving him full of his punishment, instead of teaching him to bewail his own misery. Finding nothing in them about the mystery of man's redemption or Christ's incarnation, he with great eagerness betook himself to read the New Testament, especially the writings of Saint Paul, in which he then began to take great delight. Here he found the testimonies of the Old Testament illustrated, the glory of Heaven displayed, and the way clearly pointed out which leads thither; here he learned that which he had long felt, that he had a law in his members warring against the law in his mind, and that nothing could deliver him from this body of death but the grace of Jesus Christ. He perceived an infinite difference between the doctrine of him who styled himself the last of the apostles, and that of those proud philosophers who esteemed themselves the greatest of men.

Augustine himself was now convinced of the truth and excellence of that virtue which the divine law prescribes in the Catholic Church, but was haunted with an apprehension of insuperable difficulties in its practice, that kept him from resolutely entering upon it. And so, by listening to Saint Ambrose and reading the Bible he was convinced of the truth of Christianity, but there was still wanting the will to accept the grace of God. He says of himself: "I sighed and longed to be delivered, but was kept fast bound, not with exterior chains but with my own iron will. The Enemy held my will, and of it he had made a chain with which he had fettered me fast; for from a perverse will was created wicked desire or lust, and the serving this lust produced custom, and custom not resisted produced a kind of necessity, with which as with links fastened one to another, I was kept close shackled in this cruel slavery. I had no excuse as I pretended formerly when I delayed to serve You, because I had not yet certainly discovered Your truth: now I knew it, yet I was still fettered... I had nothing now to reply to You when You said to me, 'Rise, you that sleep, and rise up from the dead, and Christ shall enlighten you'... I had nothing, I say, at all to reply, being now convinced by Your faith, except lazy and drowsy words: 'Presently', 'by and by', 'let me alone a little while longer'; but this 'presently' did not presently come; these delays had no bounds, and this 'little while' stretched out to a long time."

He had been greatly impressed by hearing the conversion of the Roman neo-Platonist professor, Victorinus, related by Saint Simplician, and soon after Pontitian, an African who had employment in the Emperor's court, came one day to pay a visit to Augustine and his friend Alipius. Finding a book of Saint Paul's epistles lying on the table, he took occasion to speak of the life of Saint Antony, and was surprised to find that his name was unknown to them. They were astonished to hear of miracles so well attested done so lately in the Catholic Church, and did not know, before Pontitian mentioned it, that there was a monastery full of fervent religious outside the walls of the very city in which they lived, under the care of Saint Ambrose. Pontitian then went on to speak of two gentlemen who had been suddenly turned to the service of God by reading a life of Saint Antony. His words had a powerful influence on the mind of Augustine, and he saw, as it were in a glass, his own filthiness and deformity.

In his former half desires of conversion he had been accustomed to beg of God the grace of continence, but was at the same time in some measure afraid of being heard too soon. "In the first dawning of my youth," says he, "I had begged of You chastity, but by halves, miserable wretch that I am; and I said, 'Give me chastity, but not yet awhile', for I was afraid lest You should hear me too

soon, and heal me of the disease which I rather wished to have satisfied than extinguished.” He was ashamed and grieved to find his will had been so weak, and directly Pontitian had gone he turned to Alipius with these words: “What are we doing to let the unlearned start up and seize Heaven by force, whilst we with all our knowledge remain behind, cowardly and heartless, wallowing in our sins? Because they have outstripped us and gone on before, are we ashamed to follow them? Is it not more shameful not even to follow them?”

He got up and went into the garden. Alipius, astonished at his manner and emotion, followed, and they sat down as far as they could from the house, Augustine undergoing a violent inward conflict. He was torn between the voice of the Holy Ghost calling him to chastity and the seductive memory of his former sins, and going alone further into the garden he threw himself to the ground below a fig-tree, crying out, “How long, O Lord? Will You be angry for ever? Remember not my past iniquities!”

And seeing himself still held back, he reproached himself, miserably: “How long? How long? Tomorrow, tomorrow? Why not now? Why does not this hour put an end to my filthiness?” As he spoke these things and wept with bitter contrition of heart, on a sudden he heard as it were the voice of a child singing from a neighboring house, which frequently repeated these words, ‘Tolle lege! Tolle lege!’ “Take up and read! Take up and read!” And he began to consider whether in any game children were wont to sing any such words; and he could not call to mind that he had ever heard them. Whereupon he rose up, suppressing his tears, and interpreted the voice to be a divine admonition, remembering that Saint Antony was converted from the world by hearing a particular passage of the gospel read. He returned to where Alipius was sitting with the book of Saint Paul’s epistles, opened it, and read in silence the words on which he first cast his eyes:

“Not in rioting and drunkenness; not in chambering and impurities; not in contention and envy; but put you on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.”

All the darkness of his former hesitation was gone. He shut the book, and with a serene countenance told Alipius what had passed. Alipius asked to see the passage he had read, and found the next words to be: “Him that is weak in faith, take unto you”; which he applied to himself, and joined his friend in his resolution. They immediately went in, and told their good news to Saint Monica, who rejoiced and praised God, “who is able to do all things more abundantly than we desire or understand.” This was in September 386, and Augustine was thirty-two.

He at once gave up his school and retired to a country house at Cassiciacum, near Milan, which his friend Verecundus lent to him; he was accompanied by his mother Saint Monica, his brother Navigius, his son Adeodatus, Saint Alipius, two cousins, and several other friends, and they lived a community life together under the direction of Saint Monica. Augustine wholly employed himself in prayer and study, and his study was a kind of prayer by the devotion of his mind therein. Here he sought by austere penance, by the strictest watchfulness over his heart and senses, and by humble prayer, to control his passions, and to prepare himself for the grace of leading a new life in Christ and becoming in Him a new creature.

“Too late,” he prayed, “have I loved You, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved You! You were with me, and I was not with You; I was abroad, running after those beauties which You had made; those things which could have no being but in You kept me far from You. You have called, You have cried out, and have pierced my deafness. You have enlightened, You have shone forth, and my blindness is dispelled. I have tasted You, and am hungry for You. You have touched

me, and I am afire with the desire of Your embraces.” From the conferences and conversations which took place during these seven months, Saint Augustine drew up his three dialogues, Against the Academicians, Of the Happy Life, and Of Order.

Among the bad habits he had contracted was that of swearing. Later, urging others to refrain from it, he set before them how he had overcome that habit. “We also were formerly given to that low and vicious custom: we once swore; but from the time that we began to serve God, and understood the evil of that sin, we were seized with great fear, and by fear we restrained it. You say you do it by habit; but above all things watch over yourselves that you may never swear. A more inveterate habit requires the greater attention. The tongue is a slippery member, and is easily moved. Be then the more watchful to curb it. If you refrain today, you will find it more easy to refrain tomorrow. I speak from experience. If your victory be not complete tomorrow, it will at least be more easy by the victory of the day before. The mischief dies in three days. And we shall rejoice in our advantage and in our deliverance from such an evil.”

In another sermon he says, “I know it is difficult to break your habit; it is what I found myself; but by fearing God we broke our custom of swearing. When I read His law I was struck with fear; I strove against my habit, I invoked God my helper, and He helped me. Now nothing is more easy to me than not to swear.”

During the early days of his conversion, God as he tells us, “by His grace brought down the pride of his spirit, and laid low the lofty mountains of his vain thoughts, by bringing him daily to a greater sense of that misery and bondage from which he was delivered.”

He was baptized by Saint Ambrose on Easter-eve in 387, together with Alipius and his dearly loved son Adeodatus, who was about fifteen years of age and was to die not long afterwards. He was still at Milan when the relics of Saints Gervase and Protase were discovered, and was witness to certain miracles that were wrought on persons touching them, but in the autumn, he resolved to return to Africa.

Accordingly, he went on to Ostia with his mother and several friends, and there Saint Monica died in November 387. To her life and last days, Augustine devotes six moving chapters of his Confessions. He returned for a short while to Rome, refuting Manichaeism there, and went on to Africa in September 388, where he hastened with his friends to his house at Tagaste. There he lived almost three years, disengaged from all temporal concerns, serving God in fasting, prayer, good works, meditating upon His law and instructing others by his discourses and books. All things were in common and were distributed according to everyone’s needs; Saint Augustine himself reserved nothing, which he could call his own, having alienated the very house in which they lived.

He had no idea of becoming a priest, but had good reason to fear that attempts would be made to make him a bishop. He therefore carefully avoided going to any cities in which the sees were vacant, for fear of being chosen; but in 391, having occasion to go to Hippo, there being then a bishop there, he went thither. Valerius, bishop of the city, had mentioned to his people the necessity of ordaining a priest for the service of his church, and so, when Saint Augustine came into the church, they presented him to Valerius, desiring with great earnestness that he might be forthwith ordained priest. Saint Augustine burst into tears, considering the great dangers that threatened him in that charge, but was obliged in the end to acquiesce, and was ordained. By this time, he was a new man, even more conspicuous for his piety than for his great learning, and he now employed his friends to beg of Valerius some respite, in order to prepare himself in solitude for the exercise of his

office. He made the same request himself, by a letter, which tacitly condemns the presumption of those who without a holy fear and true vocation intrude themselves into the ministry.

Valerius seems to have granted him this respite till the following Easter, for his first recorded sermons coincide with that time. Augustine removed to Hippo and in a house adjoining the church established a sort of monastery, modeled on his household at Tagaste, living there with Saint Alipius, Saint Evodius, Saint Possidius, and others “according to the rule of the holy Apostles.”

Valerius, who was a Greek, and had, moreover, an impediment in speaking, appointed him to preach to the people in his own presence, as was customary for bishops to do in the East, but till that time was unusual in the West; more unusual still, he was given permission to preach “on his own” knowing that the instruction of the flock was a principal duty of the pastoral charge, he from that time never interrupted the course of his sermons till his death. We have nearly four hundred extant, though many were not written by him but taken down by others as he delivered them.

During these early days he vigorously opposed the Manichaeans and the beginnings of Donatism, as well as effected such domestic reforms as the abolition of feasting in the chapels of the martyrs (a debased survival of the primitive love-feast) and of family fights as a public amusement: “I used appeal and persuasion to the utmost of my ability to extirpate such a cruel custom from their minds and manners. I thought I had done nothing while I only heard their acclamations and raised their delight and admiration. They were not persuaded so long as they could amuse themselves with giving applause to the discourse, which they heard. But their tears gave me some hope, and showed that their minds were changed. When I saw them weep, I believed this horrible custom would be abolished. It is now eight years ago and upwards and, by the grace of God, they have been restrained from attempting any such practice.”

In the sermons which fill the fifth volume of his works, this father inculcates assiduous meditation on the last things; for “if the Lord’s day (or last judgment) may be at some distance, is your day (or death) far off?” He enforces the necessity of doing penance; “For sin must be punished either by the penitent sinner or by God, his judge; and God, who has promised pardon to the penitent sinner, has nowhere promised him who delays his conversion a tomorrow to do penance in.”

He frequently speaks of alms-deeds, and claims that the neglect of them is the cause of the loss of the greatest number that perish, seeing Christ mentions only this crime in the sentence both of the elect and the reprobate at the last day. He often mentions Purgatory, and recommends prayer and the Sacrifice for the repose of the faithful departed. He speaks of holy images and of the respect due to the sign of the cross. He relates miracles wrought by it, and by the relics of martyrs. He often speaks of the honor due to the martyrs, as in most of his sixty-nine sermons On the Saints, but he remarks that we build altars and offer sacrifice to God alone, not to any martyrs. He addresses himself to Saint Cyprian and others to implore their intercession. “All the martyrs,” he says, “that are with Christ intercede for us. Their prayers never cease, so long as we continue our sighs.”

Saint Augustine preached always in Latin, though among the peasants of the country in certain parts of his diocese some understood only the Punic tongue, and these he found it difficult to furnish with priests.

In 395, he was consecrated bishop as coadjutor to Valerius, and succeeded him in the see of Hippo on his death soon after.

He established regular and common life in his episcopal residence, and required all the priests, deacons, and subdeacons that lived with him to renounce property and to embrace the rule he established there; nor did he admit any to holy orders who did not bind themselves to the same manner of life. His biographer, Saint Possidius, tells us that the clothes and furniture were modest but decent, and not slovenly. No silver was used in his house, except spoons; dishes were of earthenware, wood, or stone. He exercised hospitality, but his table was frugal; nor was wine wanting, but the quantity was regulated, which no guest was ever allowed to exceed. At meals, he preferred reading or literary conferences to secular conversation. All his clerks who lived with him ate at the same table and were clothed out of the common stock. Thus, in the words of Pope Paschal II (1099-1118), "The regular mode of life recognized in the early Church as instituted by the Apostles was earnestly adopted by the blessed Augustine, who provided it with new regulations." He also founded a community of religious women among whom, on the death of his sister, the first abbess, there was a dispute about the succession; in dealing with this, he addressed to them a letter on the general ascetic principles of the religious life. This letter, together with two sermons on the subject, constitutes the so-called rule of Saint Augustine, which is the basis of the constitutions of many canons regular, friars, and nuns.

Saint Augustine committed to overseers among his clergy the entire care of his temporalities, and took their accounts at the end of the year, and he entrusted to the management of others the building of the hospitals and churches which he erected. He never would receive for the poor any estate or present when the donation seemed a prejudice to an heir. He employed the revenues of his church in relieving the poor, as he had before given his own patrimony, and Possidius says that he sometimes melted down part of the sacred vessels to redeem captives: in which he was authorized by the example of Saint Ambrose. In several of his letters and sermons, mention is made of the custom he had got his flock to establish, of clothing all the poor of each parish once a year, and he was not afraid sometimes to contract considerable debts to help the distressed.

Nor did his zeal and charity for the spiritual welfare of others have bounds. "I do not wish to be saved without you," said he to his people, like another Moses or Saint Paul. "What shall I desire? What shall I say? Why am I a bishop? Why am I in the world? Only to live in Jesus Christ: but to live in Him with you. This is my passion, my honor, my glory, my joy, and my riches."

There were few men endowed by nature with a more affectionate and friendly soul than Saint Augustine; but his tender and benevolent disposition was heightened by the supernatural motive and powerful influence of charity and religion, of which his letters and the history of his life furnish many examples. He conversed freely with infidels, and often invited them to his table; but generally refused to eat with Christians whose conduct was publicly scandalous and disorderly, and was severe in subjecting them to canonical penance and to the censures of the Church. He never lacked courage to oppose iniquity without respect of persons, though he never forgot the rules of charity, meekness, and good manners. He complains that some sins were by custom become so common that, though he condemned them, he dare not oppose them too violently for fear of doing much harm and no good should he attempt to extirpate them by excommunication; yet he trembled lest he should be guilty of remissness.

He scarcely ever made any visits other than to orphans, widows, the sick, and other distressed persons, and he observed the three rules of Saint Ambrose: never to make matches for any persons, lest they should prove unhappy; never to persuade any to be soldiers; and never to dine out in his

own city, lest invitations should become frequent and he should be drawn into intemperance and much loss of precious time.

The letters of great men are generally interesting both for illustrating their history and throwing light on their minds. Those of Saint Augustine are particularly so. Several are so many excellent and learned treatises, and contain admirable instructions. In his fifty-fourth to Januarius, he says that they do well who communicate daily, provided it be done worthily and with the humility of Zaccheus when he received Christ under his roof; but that they are also to be commended who sometimes imitate the humble centurion and set apart only Sundays and Saturdays or other days for communicating, in order to do it with greater devotion. He explains the duties of a wife towards her husband in his letter to Ecdicia, telling her that she ought not to wear black clothes, seeing this gave him offence, and she might be humble in mind in rich and gay dress if he should insist upon her wearing such. He tells her she ought, in all things reasonable, to agree with her husband as to the manner of educating their son, and leave to him the chief care of it. He severely chides her for having given goods and money to the poor without his tacit consent, and obliges her to ask his pardon for it, whether his unwillingness to allow her extraordinary charities proceeded from a prudent care to provide for their son, or from an imperfect motive.

In like manner did he impress upon husbands the respect, tender affection, and consideration which they owe to their wives. There is a good example of Saint Augustine's modesty and humility in his discussion with Saint Jerome over the interpretation of a text of Galatians. Owing to the miscarriage of a letter Jerome, not an easily patient man, deemed himself publicly attacked. Augustine wrote to him: "I entreat you again and again to correct me confidently when you perceive me to stand in need of it; for though the office of a bishop be greater than that of a priest, yet in many things Augustine is inferior to Jerome."

He grieved at the violence with which the controversy between Saint Jerome and Rufinus was carried on, and wrote concerning it: "Could I meet you both together in any place I would fall down at your feet, I would weep as long as I were able, I would beseech as much as I love you, sometimes each for himself, then each one for the other, and for many others, especially the weak for whom Christ died." He always feared the deceit of vain-glory in such disputes, in which men love an opinion, as he says, "Not because it is true, but because it is their own, and they dispute, not for the truth, but for the victory."

Throughout his thirty-five years as bishop of Hippo Saint Augustine had to defend the Catholic faith against one heresy or another. First, it was Manichaeism, in which the most spectacular event was the public conference in 404 with one of their leaders, Felix. He was not so learned as Fortunatus, whom Saint Augustine had formerly confuted, but he had more cunning; nevertheless, he closed the discussion by publicly professing the Catholic faith, and anathematizing Manes, the founder of the Manichaean error, and his blasphemies.

The heresy of the Priscillianists was akin to some of the Manichaean principles, and at that time infected several parts of Spain. Paul Orosius, a Spanish priest, made a voyage into Africa in 415 to see Saint Augustine, and gave occasion to the saint's work Against the Priscillianists and Origenists, in which he condemns the errors of those who taught the human soul to be of a divine nature, and sent into the body in punishment of former transgressions.

The Jews he confuted by a treatise in which he shows the Mosaic law was to have an end, and to be changed into the new law. The neighboring city of Madaura was full of idolaters. Their good will he

gained by rendering them important public service and doing them good offices. Their grateful feelings towards him he improved to their advantage, and induced them to embrace the faith of Christ.

When Rome was plundered by Alaric the Goth in 410, the Pagans renewed their blasphemies against the Christian religion, to which they imputed the calamities of the Empire. To answer their slanders, Saint Augustine began his great work *Of the City of God* in 413, though he only finished it in 426.

More serious trouble was given by the Donatists, whose chief errors were that the Catholic Church by holding communion with sinners had ceased to be the Church of Christ, this being confined within the limits of their sect, and that no sacraments can be validly conferred by those that are not in the true Church. These Donatists were exceedingly numerous in Africa, and reckoned five hundred bishops. At Hippo the number of Catholics was very small, and the Donatists had such sway there that, a little before Saint Augustine came thither, Faustinus their bishop had forbidden any bread to be baked in that city for the use of Catholics and was obeyed, even by servants who lived in Catholic families. Indeed, the majority of Christians in Africa were at that time infected with the errors of the Donatists, and they carried their fury to the greatest excesses, murdering many Catholics and committing all sorts of violence. By the learning and indefatigable zeal of Saint Augustine, supported by the sanctity of his life, the Catholics began to gain ground; at which the Donatists were so exasperated that some preached publicly that to kill him would be doing the greatest service to their religion, and highly meritorious before God. Augustine was obliged in 405 to invoke the civil power to restrain the Donatists about Hippo from the outrages, which they perpetrated there, and in the same year, the Emperor Honorius published severe laws against them.

Augustine at first disapproved such measures, though he afterwards changed his opinion, except that he would not countenance a death-penalty. A great conference between the two parties at Carthage in 411 marked the beginning of the decline of these heretics, but almost at once, the Pelagian controversy began.

Pelagius is commonly called a Briton, but as Saint Jerome refers to him as “big and fat, a fellow bloated with Scots porridge,” he has been claimed for Ireland; he rejected the doctrine of original sin and taught therefore that Baptism was simply a title of admission to Heaven and death not a result of the fall, and that grace is not necessary to salvation. In 411, he left Rome for Africa with his friend Celestius, and during the very next year, their doctrines were for the first time condemned by a synod at Carthage. Saint Augustine was not at this council, but from that time, he began to oppose these errors in his sermons and letters.

Before the end of that year, he was persuaded by the tribune Saint Marcellinus to write his first treatises against them. This, however, he did without naming the authors of the heresy, hoping thus more easily to gain them; he even praised Pelagius by name. “As I hear, he is a holy man, well exercised in Christian virtue: a good man, and worthy of praise.” But Pelagius was fixed in his errors and throughout the series of disputations, condemnations, and subterfuges that followed, Saint Augustine pressed him and his followers relentlessly. Through the corruption of human nature by sin, pride being motive-power of our heart, men are born with a propensity to Pelagianism, of principles that flatter our own strength, merit, and self-sufficiency. It is not therefore to be wondered at that this heresy found many advocates: and the wound, which Pelagius caused, would certainly have been much deeper had not God raised up this Doctor of Grace to be the defense of the truth.

He was a trumpet to call up the other pastors, and the soul of their deliberations, councils, and endeavors to extinguish the rising flame. To him is the Church indebted as the chief instrument of God in overthrowing this heresy. From it sprang Semi-Pelagianism, against which Saint Augustine wrote two books, one entitled *On the Predestination of the Saints*, the other *On the Gift of Perseverance*, showing that the authors of this doctrine did not really recede from the principles of Pelagius himself.

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine, with the most sincere humility and contrition, lays open the errors of his conduct; in his seventy-second year, he began to do the like for his judgment. In this work, his *Retractations*, he reviewed his writings, which were very numerous, and corrected with candor and severity the mistakes he had made, without seeking the least gloss or excuse to extenuate them. To have more leisure to finish this and his other writings, and to provide against a troublesome election after his death, he proposed to his clergy and people to choose for his coadjutor Heraclius, the youngest among his deacons, but a person of great virtue and prudence, and his election was confirmed with great acclamation in 426.

But in spite of this precaution, Augustine's last years were full of turmoil. Count Boniface, who had been the imperial general in Africa, having unjustly incurred the suspicion of the regent Placidia and being in disgrace, incited Genseric, King of the Vandals, to invade the African provinces. Augustine wrote a wonderful letter to Boniface, recalling him to his duty, and the Count sought a reconciliation with Placidia, but could not stay the Vandal invasion. Saint Possidius, now Bishop of Calama, describes the dreadful ravages by which they scattered horror and desolation as they marched. He saw the cities in ruin and the houses in the country razed to the ground, the inhabitants being either slain or fled. Some had perished by the sword; others had become slaves. The praises of God had ceased in the churches, which had in many places been burnt. Mass was said in private houses, or not at all, for in many parts there were none left to demand the sacraments, nor was it easy elsewhere to find any to administer to those who required them. The bishops and the rest of the clergy who had escaped were stripped of everything, and reduced to beggary; and of the great number of churches in Africa, there were hardly three remaining (namely, Carthage, Hippo, and Cirta) whose cities were yet standing.

Amidst this desolation, Saint Augustine was consulted by a bishop named Quodvultdeus, and afterwards by Honoratus, Bishop of Tabenna, whether it was lawful for bishops or other clergy to fly upon the approach of the barbarians. Saint Augustine's answer to Quodvultdeus is lost; but in that to Honoratus he refers to it, and affirms that it is lawful for a bishop or priest to fly and forsake the flock when he alone is aimed at by name, and the people are threatened with no danger, but left quiet; or when the people are all fled, so that the pastor has none left who have need of his ministry; or when the same ministry may be better performed by others who have no need of flight. In all other cases, he says, pastors are obliged to watch over their flock, which Christ has committed to them, nor can they forsake it without crime.

He more than any mourned the miseries of his country, when he considered not only the outward calamities of the people, but also the ruin of a multitude of souls that was likely to ensue, for the invading Vandals were heretical Arians as well as barbarians. Count Boniface fled to Hippo, which was the strongest fortress in Africa, and Saint Possidius and several neighboring bishops took refuge in the same place.

The Vandals appeared before it about the end of May 430, and the siege continued fourteen months.

In the third month, Saint Augustine was seized with a fever, and from the first moment of his illness knew that it was a summons of God to Himself. Ever since he retired, death had been the chief subject of his meditations; and in his last illness, he spoke of it with great cheerfulness, saying, "We have a merciful God."

He often spoke of the joy of Saint Ambrose in his last moments, and of the saying of Christ to a certain bishop in a vision mentioned by Saint Cyprian. "You are afraid to suffer here, and unwilling to go hence: what shall I do with you?"

"What love of Christ can that be," he wrote, "to fear lest He, whom you say you love, shall come? Brethren, are we not ashamed to say we love, when we add that we are afraid lest He come?" In this last illness, he asked for the penitential psalms of David to be written out and hung in tablets upon the wall by his bed; and as he there lay, he read them with tears.

The strength of his body daily and hourly declined, yet his senses and intellectual faculties continued sound to the last, and he calmly resigned his spirit into the hands of God on August 28, 430, after having lived seventy-six years and spent almost forty of them in the labors of the ministry. Saint Possidius adds, "We being present, the Sacrifice was offered to God for his recommendation, and so he was buried," in the same manner as Saint Augustine says was done for his mother.

Whilst the saint lay sick in bed, by the imposition of his hands he restored to health a sick man, and Possidius says, "I know, both when he was priest and when he was bishop, that being asked to pray for certain persons that were possessed, he poured out supplications to our Lord, and the evil spirits departed from them."

The height of the sanctity of this illustrious doctor was derived from the deep foundation of his humility, according to what he himself lays down: "Do not attempt to attain true wisdom by any other way than that which God has enjoined. This is, in the first, second, and third place, humility; and thus would I answer so often as you ask me. Not that there are not other precepts; but unless humility go before, accompany, and follow after, all that we do well is snatched out of our hands by pride. As Demosthenes, the prince of orators, is said to have replied when asked which of the rules of eloquence was to be observed first: The manner of address, in other words, the delivery. Which second? Delivery. Which third? Nothing else but Delivery. So, if you should ask me about the precepts of the Christian religion, I should answer you, Nothing but humility. Our Lord Jesus Christ was made so low in order to teach us this humility – which certain most ignorant science opposes."
