Penguin Classics

SAINT AUGUSTINE

CONFESSIONS

THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

FOUNDER EDITOR (1944–64): E. V. RIEU

Editor: Betty Radice

ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, the great Doctor of the Latin Church, was born at Thagaste in North Africa, in A.D. 354. The son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, he was brought up as a Christian, and at the age of sixteen went to Carthage to finish his education for the law. In 375 on reading Cicero's *Hortensius* he became deeply interested in philosophy. He was converted to the Manichean religion, some of whose tenets he continued to hold after he had founded his own school of rhetoric at Rome, in 383. At Milan he was offered a professorship and came under the influence both of Neoplatonism and of the preaching of St Ambrose. After agonizing inward conflict he renounced all his unorthodox beliefs and was baptized in 387. He now returned to Africa and formed his own community; but in 391 he was ordained priest against his wishes, as invading Vandals were besieging Hippo.

For thirty-four years St Augustine lived in community with his cathedral clergy. His written output was vast; there survive 113 books and treatises, over 200 letters, and more than 500 sermons. Two of his longest works, his *Confessions* and *City of God*, have made an abiding mark not only on Christian theology but on the psychology and political philosophy of the West since the Dark Ages. He died in 430 as invading Vandals were besieging Hippo.

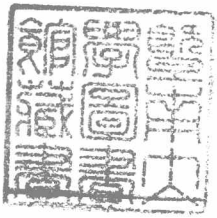
R. S. PINE-COFFIN is a Roman Catholic and was born in 1917. He was educated at Ampleforth and Peterhouse, Cambridge.

SAINT AUGUSTINE
CONFESSIONS

Translated with an Introduction by

R. S. PINE-COFFIN

古典



PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

—

First published 1961
Reprinted 1964, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974,
1975 (twice), 1976, 1977, 1978

—

—

Made and printed in Great Britain
by Cox & Wyman Ltd
London, Reading and Fakenham
Set in Monotype Bembo

Contents

faith and keeps itself intact from the love of the world – Man was made in the likeness of God in that he was given the gift of reason by which he might understand God's truth – His rule over the animals is a symbol of this and of the power of spiritual judgement given to the Church – The plants given to man for his food represent works of charity which nourish the soul

On the seventh day God rested, as we too shall rest in eternity when our work in the world is done

Introduction

THE life of Saint Augustine has a special appeal because he was a great sinner who became a great saint, and greatness is all the more admirable if it is achieved against odds. From his own account we know that he lived a life of sin until the age of thirty-two, and even after he was intellectually convinced of Christian truth he was prevented from accepting the faith by weakness in dealing with sexual temptation. In the *Confessions* he paints so black a picture of his past that the reader may easily lose sight of the good qualities which he certainly possessed as a young man. Whether he was a greater sinner than others living in the notorious city of Carthage we cannot tell, but whatever his vices, they were not without compensating virtues. Some of the most striking passages in the book are those in which he writes of his mother, and it is clear that he was always a good and affectionate son, although he may not have appreciated Saint Monica's true worth until after his own conversion. On her deathbed she told him that she had never heard him speak a harsh word against her, and this is not hard to believe, for whatever other sins he felt himself bound to confess, unkindness to others was not one of them. He showed unusual loyalty, too, to the mistress whom he kept for so many years, and he was truly fond of Adeodatus, the son whom she bore him. Outside his own family he also had a remarkable gift for making friends. This was in itself a danger, for as a boy it was his love of their company that led him to rob an orchard. Later, in adolescence, simply to win their admiration, he used to boast of sins which he had not committed, and it was most probably by their influence and example that he became a regular spectator at the theatre and learned to enjoy the cruel sport of the arena.[1] Yet he did not always allow his friends to lead him into adventures which he would not have undertaken by himself, and it is a point in his favour that he refused to take

[1] Saint Augustine's insistence upon the wickedness of the theatre needs some explanation. The morality of plays drawn from mythology was often repugnant to Christians. Even worse were the obscene performances given during the pagan festivals, at which the loves of the gods were realistically mimed before audiences of both sexes.

part in the activities of the rowdies who made it their business to scandalize newcomers to the schools at Carthage. Add to this the obvious fact that he was a serious and studious youth and it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that the terms in which he writes of his sinful past are unnecessarily harsh. Perhaps his training as a teacher of rhetoric accounts for this. He was, after all, trying to make out a case against himself before an audience which was predisposed to believe him a saintly man. When he wrote the *Confessions* he already had a considerable reputation for sanctity, and one of the reasons why he wrote was to persuade his admirers that any good qualities he had were his by the grace of God, who had saved him so often from himself.

Of all the sins which he wished to confess there was one which was at the root of all the others. It was not an isolated act or a repeated habit, but a condition of mind which was part of his life and provided him with a ready excuse for doing what his conscience told him to be wrong. For when, as a young man, he became curious about the world and its origin and started his search for the truth, instead of turning to God in simple faith he accepted the theories by which the Manichees explained away these problems. As a catechumen he had received some instruction, but he had no clear idea of what Christians believed. As literature, the Scriptures compared poorly with the polished prose of Cicero and he thought them fit only for the simple-minded. He was too conceited to study them and his reason could not accept the discrepancies and contradictions which he thought they contained. He could not account for the presence of evil in a world created by a God who was good, nor could he understand that God is a spiritual Being. In his perplexity he turned to the Manichees, whose specious reasoning seemed to supply the answers to these problems as well as a system of morals which permitted the blame for sin to be cast elsewhere than on the sinner. The dangers of these beliefs were still very present to Saint Augustine when he wrote the *Confessions*, for it was only ten or twelve years since he had escaped from them himself. In the meantime he had written at least five books against the Manichees and no man was better qualified to do so than himself. The *Confessions*, of course, cannot be considered as simply another work of controversy. They are far too personal for that. But as he wrote them Saint Augustine was conscious above all

else that the Manichees were wrong and that only the mercy of God had saved him from this evil.

He was only eighteen when he first allied himself with the Manichees. Their founder Manes, or Mani, a fanatic who regarded himself as the Paraclete, had been crucified in Persia in 277. His religion spread rapidly both during and after his lifetime, and when Saint Augustine came under its influence a century later, there were groups of Manichees throughout the Roman world, especially in North Africa. By this time they were a proscribed sect and were obliged to practise their religion in secret, but numerically they were strong and their doctrines, with various modifications, survived into the Middle Ages. Manes did not entirely reject Christianity, but since he held that its teaching was only partially true, he supplemented it by borrowing from other religions and adding his own theories. He alleged that there were inconsistencies in the Scriptures and that the text was corrupt and therefore untrustworthy. In particular he denied the virgin birth and Christ's crucifixion, since the flesh was tainted with evil and any association with it was unworthy of God.

This belief was derived from the fundamental doctrine of Manicheism, which was that in the beginning there were two independent principles described as Good and Evil or Light and Darkness. The evil power invaded the kingdom of the good power and in part captured it, so that the two became mixed. Matter was therefore composed partly of good and partly of evil, both being present in a given substance in a greater or smaller degree. Good and evil were permanently in conflict because the captive particles of good or light were always struggling to escape from the evil or darkness which enveloped them. In flesh of all sorts very few traces of the light-element were present, and for this reason meat was not to be eaten by a good Manichee. Light was present in greater quantities in vegetable matter, which could therefore be eaten. The light-particles were freed from imprisonment when the elect, or higher order of Manichees, ate these foods, but it was wrong for a member of the sect to cut down a tree or even pluck fruit, or to commit any other act of violence harmful to the good elements in plants. These operations were to be performed by the wicked on behalf of the Manichees, that is, by those who were considered as lost souls and belonged to neither the higher nor the lower order of the sect. The elect were supposed to be

particularly scrupulous and to avoid either doing violence to the good elements or taking any action which might assist the powers of darkness. They were forbidden to marry, because the act of procreation was construed as collusion with these powers. For the lower order of the sect, called 'hearers' or 'aspirants', the rules were less strict, but they were expected to serve the elect and to give food to no one but them, since to do so would be to deliver the good elements into the hands of the devil.

It seems incredible that a man of Saint Augustine's intellectual calibre could have been taken in by these fantastic theories, but the Manichees' plausible explanation of the problem of evil and his own inability to think of God except as a material being combined to win him over. At first he was convinced by these arguments and even influenced others to accept them. Although he never rose to a higher degree than that of aspirant, he remained with the sect for nearly ten years, during which he carried out the duties expected of its junior members. But before the end of this period serious doubts had begun to trouble him. He was assured that Faustus, a leading figure among the Manichees, would be able to settle all his problems, but when this Solomon proved incompetent, he at length determined to remain a Manichee in name only, while he waited for something better to turn up.

Once he had made this decision his mind was open to other influences. He was introduced to the philosophy of the Neo-Platonists and their books helped him towards a conception of the spiritual nature of God. At the same time he began to understand that evil results from man's misuse of free will. This was the beginning of conversion. He listened with greater attention to the sermons of Saint Ambrose, to which he had first been attracted only by professional interest in the preacher's reputation as a fine speaker. He learned how to approach the Scriptures and how to look for the spiritual meaning behind the literal sense. He went on to read Saint Paul's Epistles, where for the first time he heard of God's mercy and grace and learned to think of Christ as the Redeemer and no longer simply as a specially gifted teacher. Finally there came the decisive moment when the truth became so clear to him that he could no longer reject it.

Saint Augustine's decision to accept the faith is of course the central

point of the *Confessions*. After it he continues the narrative in order to include his baptism and the beginning of the return journey to Africa, during which his mother died. This takes us to the end of Book IX, but at this point the biographical part of the book comes to an end. In Book X Saint Augustine examines his ability, at the time of writing, to deal with temptation in its various forms, and Books XI – XIII are an exposition of the first chapter of Genesis. This apparent lack of cohesion between the two parts of the work has been the subject of much debate. Though it is generally agreed that Book X was a later interpolation, inserted to satisfy readers who were naturally curious to know how the faith had changed Saint Augustine's life, there is less agreement about the purpose of Books XI – XIII. The traditional explanation is that they are no more than an appendix, but this avoids the issue, since appendixes are normally added for a definite purpose.

Some commentators are content to point out that the first nine books describe Saint Augustine's search for the truth, while the last three contain his thoughts upon its meaning after he has found it. Others see a connexion between the pattern of the *Confessions* and Saint Augustine's method for the instruction of catechumens. In his work *De catechizandis rudibus*, written only four or five years after the *Confessions*, he suggests that the catechist should first point out to the convert that God has always taken good care of him and then proceed to instruct him in the Scriptures, starting with the story of the creation. This plan of instruction clearly corresponds with the arrangement of the *Confessions*, and the suggestion is that Saint Augustine is applying the method to his own case in retrospect. Another view, more recently put forward,[1] is that Saint Augustine's original plan was to write a complete exposition of the faith as it is derived from Scripture, but found it too lengthy a task and abandoned it after he had dealt with the first chapter of Genesis. The story of his own early life and errors was intended merely as a preamble. The evidence in support of this theory is taken chiefly from certain passages[2] in the text where the author implies that he is hastening to complete the narrative part of his work in order to devote himself to other more important matters.

[1] Courcelle, Pierre. *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin*. Paris (Boccard), 1950.

[2] e.g. in Book IX, chapter 4, and Book XI, chapter 2.

Probably there is some truth in all these explanations, although it is hard to believe that the *Confessions* as we have received them are only the beginning of a longer work, projected but never finished. Whatever his precise plan may have been, it is unlikely that Saint Augustine would have been content merely to repudiate his early errors. His logical mind would require, not only that falsehood should be demolished, but also that the truth should be made apparent. If he was to confess his errors, he must also confess the true beliefs for which he had renounced them, and the foundation of these was to be found in the book of Genesis. What better answer could be made to the Manichean theory of the twin powers of good and evil than God's own statement that he made heaven and earth and that he saw what he had made and found it very good? Saint Augustine was satisfied that this was all that was needed to reduce the fundamental principle of Manicheism to absurdity.[1]

If this was how the work was planned, the pattern of the *Confessions* becomes clear. In the first place it is a confession of the writer's sin and error, in the second a recognition of God's goodness and truth. These two purposes are complementary and the title of the book covers both. In the third place, because he has been saved from error and the truth has been made clear to him, Saint Augustine offers praise to God and thanks him for his mercy. He is led from confession of sin to confession of faith and finally to confession of God's glory. The first words in the book, '*Magnus es, Domine, et laudabilis valde*', are the key to the whole.

There has been no lack of English translators of the *Confessions*. The first to attempt the task was Sir Tobie Matthew, the courtier and diplomat, whose version was published anonymously and without imprint at Saint-Omer in 1620. It contained a long and controversial introduction to which the next translator, William Watts, Rector of St Alban's, Wood Street, took objection on the ground that it was 'so arrantly, partially Popish'. He began his own translation, which was published in London in 1631, as a Lenten devotion, but, he tells us, 'I quickly found it to exercise more than my devotion: it exercised my skill (all I had): it exercised my patience, it exercised my friends too, for 'tis incomparably the hardest taske that ever I yet undertooke.'

[1] See Book XIII, chapter 30.