

SAINT AUGUSTINE

CONFESSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

IN 397 A.D., Aurelius Augustinus, the Catholic bishop of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba, Algeria), a seaport on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, had every reason to feel an old, sick man. By August, he was confined to his bed by a series of debilitating inflammations:

As for my spirit [he wrote to a friend] I am well, through the Lord's good pleasure. . . . pray for me, that I may not waste my days, and that I may bear my nights with patience. (*Letter* 38.1)

A man of forty-three, he saw life, on looking back, to have been broken at many points. Eleven years previously, in 386, in distant Milan, God had set him free. Of that he still had no doubt. On Easter day, April 24th, 387, he had "put on Christ," by receiving baptism at the hands of Ambrose, the Catholic bishop of Milan. Early Christian baptism was a formidable rite of renewal. To do justice to his imminent "twice-born" status, Augustine had, in the previous summer, vowed to adopt a life of permanent celibacy—no easy thing in a man accustomed, since he was nineteen, to sleeping, loyally if with evident pleasure, with a common-law wife. At the same time, he had condemned himself to relative poverty, by resigning from his post as an officially sponsored teacher of the much sought-after public-relations skill of rhetoric in the court-city of Milan. Resolutely chaste, if still pained by sexual memories, Augustine had settled down, in 387, at the age of thirty-three, to the shabby-genteel existence of an independent intellectual.

The life-style that Augustine had chosen at that time was one that had always enjoyed considerable prestige, because associated with the philosopher, the man of wisdom. It had been a natural and eminently feasible choice for a man of his background. It was a relief to be out of a job. Roman society was more like nineteenth-century Russia than

our own, highly professional age: It was a society of "gentlemen," who would stoop to the time-consuming constraints of a fully professional career only when driven to it, by fear of poverty and a hunger for public office. It was more dignified to be at leisure. Augustine had made a natural choice, also, for a devout lay person, in a Catholic church that had barely begun to develop stable monastic institutions and that had, as yet, no form of professional training whatsoever for its clergy. To be a clergyman, even a bishop, was regarded as a form of public service to the Christian community, that was sincerely admired, but from a safe distance, by many committed lay Christians. It was not identified, in itself, with any superior measure of spiritual perfection. Indeed, many lay Catholics of Augustine's background (without being in any way anticlerical) sincerely feared that the run-of-the-mill duties of a priest would interfere with their own, more sheltered quest for God.

This was how Augustine had been in 387. Looking back a decade later, in 397, he saw those as an oasis of innocence regained: "Now my mind was free from the cares that gnawed it." (IX.i) But those days had passed. Augustine had returned to Africa; and the Catholic Church in Africa needed priests, not intellectuals. In 391, he was forced by the Catholics of Hippo to become their priest. He wept throughout the entire ceremony. Ordination meant the death of the life that he had chosen for himself. In 395, he became Catholic bishop of Hippo. Officially, at least, Catholicism was the sole established religion of the Empire. A Catholic bishop was forced to be a public figure. He had to be an effective public speaker—which was why the congregation of Hippo was so anxious to grab Augustine for themselves. Acclaimed as leader by his flock, decried and resented by influential religious enemies, relentlessly scrutinized by all, the bishop was furthermore constrained, by his office, to act as judge in the equivalent of a small-claims court, run for the benefit of the Christian community. Its sessions kept Augustine busy until well into the afternoon, at a time when the office of the Roman civil governor was firmly shut for the siesta. Despite these public services, the bishop, as yet, had little political clout. Augustine was frequently kept waiting in the governor's antechamber, only to find that his petitions were denied. The intellectual who remembered days given over to leisurely philosophical dialogues in a country villa within sight of the glistening Alps had been led back, by God, to face, in a faction-ridden North African seaport, all that he had feared most, for himself and in himself, when he had been a star figure in Milan: and this, the modern reader should remember, was not sexual temptation, but the far more serious temptation of *ventosa tempora*, of the "wind-filled times" of a public

man, condemned to exercise power in the mercilessly lit state of a Roman city.

A chasm as sharp as that between hectic, ever-flowing time and the solid stillness of eternity now appeared to have opened between Augustine's present state and the life that he had put in order, between 387 and 391, so as to be close to his newly found God. Only the departed, it now seemed to him, could hope to stand still, to enjoy that eternity. Only they could experience the fullness of the presence of God, the taste of which, in Milan and elsewhere, had filled Augustine, for short, decisive moments, with a liberating sweetness. His mother, Monica, had passed on, to "enter into the joy of the Lord," all of ten years ago—taken by malaria in the seaport of Ostia, at the end of 387. (IX.viii–xiii) His dearest friend of that time, Nebridius, was now with God, "drinking his fill of wisdom, all that his thirst requires, happy without end." (IX.iii) And—a black hole in Augustine's life of which he draws for us only the sharp edges—his son, Adeodatus, was now dead, at a little over sixteen. All that remained of the boy was a book, "called *de Magistro* [*On the True Master*]: it is a dialogue between him and me. . . . His great intelligence filled me with a kind of awe. . . . But You took him early from this earth." (IX.vi)

This was the man—a man who had every reason to think that his past had dropped from him, leaving him with a future blocked by the mounting cares of public office—who now turned to write an utterly unexpected book. He entitled it with care: *Confessionum libri tredecim*, "Confessions in thirteen books." It is the book that we now know as the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. It would have struck late Roman readers as a book almost without parallel in the literature to which they were accustomed. But they would have recognized, instantly, a literary work of art.

Each book of the thirteen books of the *Confessions* was carefully constructed as a single whole. Though most probably written by hand (for the style was meticulous and the subject matter unusually intimate), it was composed so as to be read aloud. Each book was written as if it were a single speech, even if it was read through, as we would do, in silence. The chapter headings that now break up the text, like so many canal locks blocking the flow of a mighty river, would have appeared only as numbers inserted in the margins of the manuscript. Each book would have taken approximately one hour to "perform." Those who first heard it would have found themselves listening to a stunning, yet disturbingly "modern" piece of Latin verbal music. Echoes of the Christian Scriptures, most especially of the Old Testament Psalms, could be heard, winding in and out of the more accustomed

classical phrases of a master-rhetor in the old tradition—as so many haunting refrains from a still-exotic world, like the snatches of Slavonic folk tunes that play such an important role in the great Czech and Russian symphonies of this century. In the *Confessions* we listen no longer to a teacher of rhetoric, his voice trained to the rhythms of Cicero and Vergil, but to a Catholic bishop at prayer, creating a new sacred rhetoric, from a heart now filled with the Christian Bible.

It is a singular merit of this translation that Frank Sheed strove to retain the oratorical, even “oratorio-like,” quality of Augustine’s Latin by dictating his translation by word of mouth. And even Sheed marked only a small number of the Biblical citations that fill the text with a strange music of their own. The standard Latin edition numbers almost a thousand such quotations. For, as Catholic bishop, Augustine did not simply know “about” the Bible, or preach “on” the Bible. He prayed out of it every day, using especially the book of Psalms, which he believed to be the direct, personal prayers of King David, and so the model of all Christian, as they had been of all Jewish, prayer. In a society where books were far more rare than they are today, and powers of memory were greatly prized as a result, Augustine had installed an “inner Bible” in his mind. Its phrases had, by 397, become part of his “thought flow.” What he did in the *Confessions* was to break down the boundary between prayer and literature. He brought to a Latin world, used to compositions modelled on the great speeches of Cicero, the new, sweet sound of a sacred language that had long echoed in the Christian churches and that was not part of his own heart.

For this reason, the title of the book, *Confessions*, summed up a program in itself. The word did not mean what it has come to mean for a modern person. It was not the confession only of sins—and of interesting sins at that, as in the words of Lord Byron:

As Saint Augustine in his fine *Confessions*,
Which make the reader envy his transgressions.
(Byron, *Don Juan* xlvii.375)

The word was taken from the Psalms. It summed up, for Augustine, the one true way in which every human being should talk to God, as this had been shown by King David at his prayers. Impassioned, insistent, even downright argumentative, the words of David were those of the one, divinely inspired master of prayer known to Augustine. They provided Augustine with a model portrait of the inner world of the true servant of God, compared with which his own, brilliant, but purely human prose (in his opinion) limped far behind. And for King David, to confess also meant to praise: to praise God

for His being; to praise Him for His mighty acts of mercy and deliverance; to lay before Him a whole life, not only personal sins, but also those agonizing, unsolved problems that showed the extent of human ignorance and the ease with which the human mind could be misled by false solutions.

Augustine's back is turned to us throughout the *Confessions*. His attention is elsewhere. He is speaking with his God. The pronoun *tu*—"Thou," "You"—occurs in 381 out of the 453 paragraphs of the *Confessions*. Praising, questioning, "confessing" sins in the modern sense, Augustine's prose works magic with us. It brings an invisible God almost unbearably close. Readers can feel that they have stumbled, unawares, on the most intimate of all scenes—a human being (themselves quite as much as Augustine) brought with joy and trembling into the presence of God, their judge and their friend.

Of the thirteen books written in this manner, only the first nine are what we would call an autobiography. They take Augustine from his birth, in 354, in Thagaste—modern Souk Ahras (Algeria), in the dry plateau south of Hippo—to his baptism in Milan, in 387, and the death of his mother, Monica, at Ostia, at the end of that year. The next ten years are passed over, and, from book ten to the end, as we shall see, we are with Augustine the bishop in his study in Hippo, as he examines his present weaknesses and bends, in deep meditation, over an open Bible.

In the first nine books, the scene is clearly set. We are in Roman North Africa—in Thagaste, for a short time in Madaura (Mdaurouch, Algeria), and, later, in Carthage (I–V.viii). From 383 onwards, we are in Rome (V.ix–xiv), Milan (VI–IX.vii), and, finally, at Ostia (IX.viii–xii). In the fourth century A.D., Roman North Africa (called, simply, in a manner calculated to confuse us moderns, "the province of Africa" and its inhabitants, *Afri*, "Africans") was very much part of a Mediterranean, Roman world. Italy and Africa looked inwards to each other across a short stretch of sea in a manner that they have not done since the Middle Ages, when the countries now known to us as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia became Arabic-speaking and Muslim. Nor was this the "Africa" of modern usage. The Sahara desert, an ocean of burning sand as wide and, at the time, as trackless as the Atlantic, isolated the Mediterranean coastline of Roman North Africa almost entirely from the sub-Saharan world of West and Central Africa, from which African Americans claim their heritage.

Clinging to the coast, covering an area roughly equivalent to the inhabited parts of modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, Roman North Africa was very much a world of its own. Berber farmers, from

the highlands of what are now Algeria and Morocco, had brought the plateau to life. The Carthaginians had studded the coast with trading cities. Hippo was the Punic name for "port." Augustine would hear Punic, a Semitic dialect of the ancient Phoenicians, spoken by the peasantry of the region. The Romans had brought a Latin culture that flourished as in few other provinces. Bathed in a bright, southern light, "light, the queen of colors, suffusing all the things I see," (X. xxxiv) Africa was sheltered at that time from barbarian invasions and civil war. Augustine grew up in a province that had remained a little larger than life and that was, in many ways, more Roman than Rome itself. It turned out young men, reared in their local schools and finished off in style at Carthage, who were more than usually keen to show off their exuberant command of Latin culture, in the well-trying and ever-profitable careers of rhetoric and law. Rome and Milan (or at whatever temporary capital a restless court happened to reside) were their goals; and Latin, a Latin burned into their memories (as we will see in book I of the *Confessions*) by relentless grammatical drilling, followed by memorization and the dramatic reenactment, in self-composed speeches, of whole tracts of Cicero and Vergil—was the language that got them there. A classical Latin culture, geared to performance and learned in a manner as intensive as any modern drama school or musical conservatory, was as universal (and, frequently, as made to serve a cold-blooded careerism) as a modern computer language among successful young executives.

Augustine, we should have no illusion, was one of that group—all the more so as his parents, Patricius and Monica, though by no means paupers, were petty gentfolk, who had to scrape to pay the high fees demanded by the great rhetors of Carthage. (II.iii) A late Roman reader of the *Confessions*, knowing the hard choices faced by young men on the make from the provinces, would have been less shocked than we are by the twists and turns of Augustine's early life. It was a Catholic family. Patricius, though originally a pagan, increasingly deferred to Monica's religious views. (I.xi and IX.ix) But it was not a modern Catholic family, not even the sort of Catholic family that Augustine the bishop would have wished it to be. Even for Monica, in the 360s and 370s, a career came first. Augustine was neither baptized when young (I.xi) nor married off when evidently ripe for matrimony, in his late teens. (II.ii) Baptism was considered too precious a sacrament to waste on a young boy with many sins ahead of him; and a wife, drawn from a small provincial town, would have been an impediment to him, once his career succeeded. The son of a good Catholic mother, Augustine was simply allowed to run wild, like a vigorous, unpruned vine. (II.i)

By 372, the issue of sex, at least, was satisfactorily solved. Augustine settled down with a "concubine," that is, with the Roman equivalent of a common-law wife. Adeodatus was conceived, accidentally, it appears, in 373, and Augustine, a nineteen-year-old father, entered into a thirteen-year-long relationship that was entirely monogamous, to which he was entirely faithful, and which, by the social conventions of his time, was entirely innocent. What was much less innocent was the manner in which this relationship came apart in 386. It was sacrificed to his career, with the full support of his mother and, apparently, of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. By that time, Augustine had almost made it to the top. "I was all hot for honors, money, marriage." (VI.vi) In Roman society all three went together. Further promotion, maybe even a provincial governorship, was in the offing, and the way to it was a fully legitimate marriage to a Catholic heiress. The nameless woman returned to Africa, protected, at least, by the Church, through becoming a nun:

She . . . was torn from my side as a hindrance to my forthcoming marriage. My heart which had held her very dear was broken and wounded and shed blood. (VI.xv)

Augustine, the bishop (no longer a young careerist), had his own views on a man who did that sort of thing:

if he takes a woman only for a time, until he has found another who better suits his rank and fortune; and if he marries another woman, because she is of the same class as himself, this man commits adultery in his heart, not to his upper-class bride, but to the woman with whom he had lived without offering marriage. (*On the Good of Marriage* 5.5)

But, of course, in a success-driven world, people did just this the whole time. If Augustine had not eventually decided, with great difficulty, to become celibate, if he had made that advantageous match in 386, as most people took for granted that a man in his position would do, we might still know a little of him. A speech here might have come down to us, a treatise there, on grammar, even on philosophy; even an inscription might have turned up to inform the modern archaeologist of his name as a governor of some Roman province. The inscription would almost certainly, in the florid manner of the age, have praised him for his high regard for culture. A mandarin-like figure, serving a mighty empire that drew heavily on the ambitions of young provincials for whom high Latin culture was a passport to power, Aurelius Augustinus of Thagaste would have enjoyed success in a way entirely intelligible to any Roman of his time. But that man would not have been Augustine, Catholic bishop of Hippo; nor could

we have guessed that he was the same man as the Augustine that we shall soon come to know in the *Confessions*.

For the *Confessions* is a very strange book. It was written to instill into those who first heard it a sense of how the most familiar landmarks in their world—education, careers, conventional sexual and marital arrangements, even current notions of religious and philosophical truth—were, in fact, profoundly unfamiliar. They were positively topsy-turvy if seen, as from an unexpected viewing point, with the quiet eyes of Augustine's God.

It is this God Whom we meet in the very first lines of the *Confessions*:

For Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee. (I.i)

God is a looming presence. His very existence instilled in all human hearts (and, indeed, in the hearts of all His creatures, in the hearts of the angelic hosts quite as much as in Augustine) a restless yearning, a sense of being, somehow, forever out of place. This was a sense as universal as the law of gravity, as ancient persons understood that law: that is, not as a law of attraction, so much as a desire for completeness, as fierce and as unfailing as the homing instinct of a bird; a wish to come to rest in the source of one's being. The heart fretted for God much as the flames of a fire flickered upwards, straining to rejoin the distant light of the stars, or a stone sank, with mute satisfaction, into the embrace of the earth. (XIII.ix) But why, in human beings, beings endowed with free will, did this take so long? This, and not the obvious facts of a career, had become, for Augustine, the true stuff of autobiography. The *Confessions* is not a book about what had happened in Augustine's past. It is a book about why what should have happened took so long to happen.

Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee! For behold Thou wert within me, and I outside [but] . . . Thou didst touch me, and I burn for Thy peace. (X.xxvii)

Because of this, of course, the *Confessions* can never end. As Augustine saw himself in 397, and wished others to see him, the first nine books, which ended in 387, represent no more than the first, hesitant smouldering of a fire, heavily slaked down by so many conventional assumptions about what constituted success and happiness for a young man, compounded by a fair share of personal weaknesses (concern for being loved and popular being the most amiable, but certainly the most treacherous among them). The fire had, at long last, begun to crackle after 386. It had blazed up at the time of his baptism, in 387. Now it burned steadily, if still all too slowly, in the

heart of the Catholic bishop. Only in heaven would it explode into that blaze of love, which all beings, human and angelic alike, had been made to enjoy, in the first dawn of creation. And so we leave Augustine, poring over the opening lines of the book of *Genesis*. It is not the way we would end an autobiography. But, along with many of his most intellectually daring Christian contemporaries, Augustine was convinced that the book of *Genesis* was not any book. It was an intricately coded message, sent by God to mankind, through the alien Hebrew words of Moses (available to Augustine, of course, only in Latin translation). The account of the creation was a series of fascinating, yet authoritative verbal hints, demanding to be deciphered by patient meditation (somehow like a vastly compressed message "beamed in" from a space probe), which confirmed the mind's deepest yearning for some ultimate time of rest, some "seventh day" of a glorious work brought to completion, "the peace of repose, the peace of Thy Sabbath, the peace that has no evening." (XIII.xxxv)

Hence each book of the *Confessions* provides a glimpse of a thoroughly familiar topic or set of topics (often topics on which Augustine now had to offer an opinion, for his flock, as a Catholic bishop) seen from an unexpected, and often startlingly unconventional, angle. What mattered, most often, was the slow growth of love. Just because love was so strong a force in human beings, it was twisted with terrible ease from its true end. The early books of the *Confessions* are littered with failed experiments, misplaced and partial attempts to do justice to the fierce momentum towards truth and love that God had placed in every heart. For that reason, it is an account of a life in which Augustine the writer had been brought to see in himself, with the serenity of great distance, what God had always seen, with stern but loving eyes. Of the near-miss marriage, which had evidently had its full share of affection and loyalty before the cold debacle in Milan, he can now say:

You, O God, saw me far from You . . . showing amidst much smoke
some small spark of honor. (IV.ii)

Not surprisingly, it is the growth of Augustine's "heart" that holds the center of attention for large parts of the *Confessions*; and it has held our attention ever since. This is because the *Confessions* is a history of the schooling of the heart in love. It was a hard school. Love of anything or anybody to the exclusion of God came all too easily, but passed as easily as it came. God had taught him that by 397. Those whom Augustine had loved most intensely, in his youth, are precisely those who have no name. There was his friend in Thagaste, at whose unexpected death "My heart was black with grief"

(IV.iv); and, of course, his concubine, after whose departure from Milan, "there was first burning and bitter grief; and after that it festered, and as the pain grew duller it only grew more hopeless." (VI.xv) Those who had come close enough to Augustine to shake his heart in that manner did not need a name. It was the wound that mattered—a further lesson to the heart, before it could be set right by the healing caress of God's own hands.

In his extraordinary capacity to evoke and analyze intimate and complex feelings, Augustine comes closest to our modern sensibility. But we must never forget the alien intensity of Augustine the late antique philosopher, and the trenchancy of Augustine the Catholic bishop. We meet a man from one and a half thousand years ago in these pages; and no matter how passionately, and with what skill, Augustine wished his readers to identify with him in praising God, as a man of the later Roman empire, he could not have foreseen readers as puzzlingly unlike himself as we are, in culture, geographical location, and historical experience. We must realize that we also would appear very odd indeed to the bishop of Hippo. We must extend to him the courtesy (a sincere courtesy, untouched by condescension) of not expecting him to be like us in every point.

Feeling was analyzed with such fineness in the *Confessions* because it was to be trained. Only a stern sense of service, backed by a healthy sense of danger, could adapt such vigorous loves to their true use. There is no suppression of emotion in the older Augustine, but a great concern that it should no longer be wasted. To take one revealing example: Augustine had loved the theater shows of Carthage, in his first days as an amorous young man about town. (III.i-ii) Nothing as discreet as the modern cinema, they were great "happenings," celebrations of tragedy, pathos and frank sensuality as fully public, and as unquestioned a part of the life of a great city as is the more innocent Rose Bowl parade today. But what the shows had done to him, Augustine the bishop now insisted, had not been to make him more hot for sex: it was worse than that; they had turned a nascent capacity for compassion into mere sentimentality, a vehicle of vicarious grief held at a safe distance from the heart. That was the pity of it. It mattered greatly to the bishop of Hippo, leader of a congregation where piety, in the Early Christian manner, was considerably more "theatrical" than our own, where outbursts of weeping were normal and fully public acts of compassion to the poor were greatly valued, that the God-given gift of tears should not be wasted on mere theater.

Augustine believed this with a tenacity that only a philosopher in the tradition of Plato could command. Feelings with which we moderns identify most readily were only a small part of the deeper pain associ-

ated with the slow growth to adulthood of a thinking mind. We who, I suspect, tend to be distressed about personal issues, such as sexual attraction, competitiveness, popularity, and envy, have to make some effort, as we read the *Confessions*, to share, with Augustine, the deeply impersonal passion for truth itself that runs through the book. We do not often stretch our minds to ponder, not the existence of God (an issue to which Augustine gave little or no attention), but the exact nature of God's relation to the physical world and the precise manner in which His eternity intersects with our existence in time. We are quite prepared (more prepared, indeed, than were our less psychologically oriented grandparents, who found Augustine's unveiling of negative qualities in childhood and of strong sexual drives in adolescence somewhat upsetting) to worry, with Augustine, as to exactly why a teenager should steal pears. But when Augustine wrestles, for pages on end and with evident intensity, with the problem of the origin of evil, we tend to grow uncomfortable. The mind sags at such thoughts. But almost all of books six and seven of the *Confessions*, and much more besides, were written to bring upon the reader just such a feeling of acute intellectual discomfort.

Augustine remained to the end of his life an unreconstructed ancient philosopher. He believed that human beings should take their lives in hand, and that no training of the self could hope to succeed if it were not grounded in reality—that is, in as true a view as was possible for humans to attain of the nature of God, of the universe, and of the human person. The philosopher was the man who lived by truth: He had put his life in order in the light of a higher reality, which the conventional wisdom of his contemporaries had evaded or blurred.

For this reason, a large part of the *Confessions* is about the emergence of that true view. We should remember the religious world in which Augustine grew up. A boy from a Catholic family, he was untempted by paganism. He believed that, somehow, no wisdom that did not carry the "name of Christ" could be entirely true. (III.iv) The intellectual drama of his adolescence and young manhood, from 373 onwards, consisted in repeated attempts to stretch his mind and heart to a view of God that was rooted in truth, and not in a series of facilitating fictions.

O Truth, Truth, how inwardly did the very marrow of my soul pant for You . . . (III.vi)

The religious movement known to us as Manichaeism attracted him not because it was an "exotic" religion. The Christian world was wider at that time than it is now. It stretched to the banks of the

Tigris, where Mani (216–277) had received visions and had sent his followers to all Christians, to reveal to them the deeper meaning of the Gospels and of the letters of Saint Paul. In the Manichaean system, Jesus was the bearer of Truth to a ruined world; and the Manichaeans of Carthage grappled seriously, if in a series of myths of the origin of the cosmos that Augustine later found to be mere fantasy, with the agonizing and seemingly permanent tension between good and evil in each person. From book three onwards, we are made to feel the terrible, alluring power of an imagined religious universe. Augustine does not spare us the claustrophobic horror of a religious mind caught, for lack of any other way of understanding the nature of evil, in a world in which God was trapped and impotent. Only by God's failure to be present in the material world as an active force could the power of evil be explained. Evil matter weighed upon the soul in an imagined universe of vast dimensions in which God had been exiled to the very margins—a faraway, luminous being, driven out by a gigantic cosmic catastrophe.

We follow Augustine as he thought himself out of this dilemma, in Rome and Milan, like a man gasping for air. At last, in the summer of 386, he broke free. A few nameless books, written by nameless "Platonists translated from Greek into Latin," were lent to him by a nameless intellectual—"a certain man—an incredibly conceited man." (VII.ix) (Books that really changed Augustine's mind, like the friends whose departures had really cut into his heart, remain nameless: a source of much fruitful frustration to the modern scholar, but characteristic of the whole tone of Augustine's narrative of this crucial time.) Within a month or so, the system which we now know as the Catholic Platonism of Augustine slipped into place. No more gripping summary of it can be read than in chapter nine onwards of book seven of the *Confessions*. He had stumbled on a truth so profound, so dazzlingly obvious once realized and so universal that it had been shared by total non-Christians. The "books of the Platonists" in question may well have been a few of the *Enneads* of Plotinus, a pagan philosopher who had taught in Rome (205–270), or works of Plotinus' pupil, Porphyry (233–ca. 305), a bitter critic of Christianity. Yet Augustine never doubted that such men had seen God. They had experienced a truth that cut across all religions. But to do justice to that momentary glimpse, to make the lightning flash of the realization of the presence of God stand still was a different matter. Augustine wished to put his life in order to enjoy a God set free, at last, from the trap of evil. He came to think (instinctively in 386 and with utter clarity by 397) that those who wished to see God must face the weight of evil in themselves. This was a weight which only Christ could lift

from the soul; and this could only happen through baptism into the Catholic Church.

Augustine only tells us the high points of his remarkable itinerary. It was an ancient, not a modern, person's form of a conversion to Catholicism. Seen by Augustine, at that time, it was a decision to join truth and religion, to support the metaphysical certainties according to which pagan sages believed that a wise man's life might be lived (with great religious seriousness but without the support of a specific religious institution) by a sacramental rite without which, so Christians of his age believed in an uncompromising manner, no life pleasing to God could so much as begin. This is what had led to his baptism at the hands of Ambrose, in a baptistery whose ruins have recently been found beneath the present fabric of the great Gothic cathedral of Milan.

So it is with truth that we end the *Confessions*. Surprisingly enough, the books that have attracted least interest in modern readers are those on which Augustine's contemporaries would have fastened with the greatest avidity. It was, after all, important to know what Augustine, the former Manichee and star rhetor, was like, now that he had become, for good or ill, Catholic bishop of Hippo. For this reason, Augustine skipped over the uncertain years between 387 and 397: He was now a "candelabrum" set up in the Catholic church, in an office he could not abandon. It was also comforting for many to be told the truth. Augustine was not the only well-educated convert of his age. He lived within a whole network of spiritual friends. They were men and women who, like himself, had followed unfamiliar paths and had made a new life for themselves in middle age. We know many of them. Paulinus, a Gallic aristocrat, had retired to Nola to live as a monk, along with his wife, in a continent marriage. Their friend, Sulpicius Severus, a thoroughly alienated lawyer, wrote the model biography of a Roman staff officer turned saint, the *Life of Saint Martin*, in the same years as the *Confessions*. Paulinus and Augustine corresponded. The tone of their letters already resembles that of the *Confessions*. Later ages came to regard these persons as saints, as marmoreal pillars of a new Catholic order. At the time, however, they were peculiarly vulnerable men and women. They faced the pain of self-exile, the loss of friends, sharp criticism and misplaced adulation, theological choices of unexpected complexity, and the shame of continued temptation. Augustine showed rare charity—a charity which his magnificently ego-centered style of self-analysis often causes us to overlook—in exposing himself to them, in terms of his own weaknesses and unsolved problems, for their comfort. People such as these, middle-aged converts to a new life, frequently

isolated in stolid Catholic communities that did not share their idealism, were the first readers of the *Confessions*.

In book ten, Augustine told such readers how his temptations had continued. They were muted, now, but all the more real for being seen with microscopic precision. His friend, Alypius (now installed as Catholic bishop of Thagaste) had once roared with the crowd at the sight of blood spurting from the wound of a dying gladiator in Rome: "he drank deep of the savagery." (VI.viii) (The incident is a reminder to us somewhat queasy moderns that many ancient Christians had far heavier burdens on their consciences than sexual pleasure and found such scenes more shocking by far than promiscuity.) But why, if such passions had totally died away from the soul of the convert, did the bishop still find that his attention wandered, as he sat at his desk, so that his eye rested on a spider grappling with a fly, in the miniature amphitheater of a dusty window? It was a subdued reminder, very different from the cruel voice of the crowd, of weaknesses which would only drop from us at the end of time. (X.xxxv) The self remained forever a puzzle.

As for the allurement of sweet scents, I am not much troubled. . . . At least so I seem to myself; perhaps I am deceived. For that darkness is lamentable in which the possibilities in me are hidden from myself: so that my mind, questioning itself upon its own powers, feels that it cannot lightly trust its own report: because what is already in it does for the most part lie hidden, unless experience brings it to light . . . (X.xxxii)

In the ensuing books, Augustine let his friends see him doing what he had once seen Ambrose do in Milan. It was what he, now, did as a Catholic bishop.

No one was forbidden to approach him . . . but when we came into him we often saw him reading and always to himself. . . . his eyes travelled across the page and his heart sought into the sense . . . (VI.iii)

The Scriptures were now Augustine's way to God. Only in them could the fleeting vision of God enjoyed by the Platonists become a reality. For God still spoke to each soul through them. The technique of commentary that we moderns label (and tend to dismiss) as "allegorical exegesis" was, for those who practised it, a long-drawn-out, controlled ecstasy of the mind. It involved a perpetual effort to open the heart, through patient reading, so as to catch the full resonance of God's voice, which had once spoken to His servant Moses and which now spoke the same truths, if in a softer voice, to every soul. It was by such an approach that many Early Christians sought to make the