

At the end of August, the Church celebrates the memorials of St. Monica (August 27) and her son, St Augustine (August 28). St Monica was always a very devout Catholic but her husband (Patricius – Patrick in English) was a pagan. Although he was apparently a difficult husband, Monica’s virtue won him over and he was baptized Catholic before his death.

Now St Augustine (born in North Africa in the year 354 A.D. and died in 450) certainly did not start out as *Saint* Augustine. His mother had him instructed in the faith and when he was a boy he did take to it somewhat and it would have an effect on him later on. But by the time he was 17, probably with the (at least implicit) approval of his dad, Augustine started following his passions which of course, like for all of us, were corrupted by original sin. He took up womanizing and other various sorts of revelry and pleasure seeking. However, Augustine also had a very sharp mind and even as a young man vigorously sought the truth about nature, man, the purpose of life, the question of evil and so on. Although his main interest was in (say) philosophy, he had learned rhetoric (the art of argumentation or persuasive speaking) and made his living teaching rhetoric.

His persistent desire for truth was probably his saving characteristic. Initially, however, it led him into the popular errors of his time, especially Manichaeism. Manichaeism (founded by a guy named Mani – hence the name) was a mixture of all sorts of things – Zoroastrianism, Babylonian folklore, Buddhism, etc. Augustine was initially a very committed disciple of it, diving into it more and more and teaching it to others as well. But his relentless seeking of truth, of really boring down on things, of reconciling and unifying all things, eventually led him to question it. Things didn’t fit, didn’t add up, they didn’t square with observable reality and he began to ask questions. The other Manicheans would say to him: wait for Faustus (the head Manichean of the time), he will answer all of your questions (Faustus was apparently “the great knower”). Well Faustus finally came and Augustine posed his questions. Faustus responded with rhetoric and Augustine, deeply disappointed, immediately recognized him as a huckster. He rejected Manichaeism and moved to Milan, Italy.

In Milan he discovered a bishop named Ambrose – none other than the future St Ambrose, Father and Doctor of the Church, a very intelligent man who was well versed in many subjects, including the physical sciences. Augustine would go to Mass, listen intently to Ambrose’s homilies, and then ponder what he had heard. Maybe this was what he had been seeking all along. His conversion had begun. One day during this time, the time of his conversion, he became deeply sorrowful, even overwrought, by all of his past sins. He went out into a garden and even wept over them, saying to God: “How long, Lord? Will You be angry with me forever?” Then he heard a child’s voice say: Take and read, take and read.” He tried to think of some game where kids would say this but there was nothing of the sort. He ran into his house, picked up Sacred Scriptures and read the first thing he came to: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence,” which is from Romans 13: 13-14. Augustine said he didn’t need to read any further, his soul was infused with light.

St Augustine, much to the joy of his mother who had wept, prayed, and pleaded with the Lord for his conversion for 20 years, was baptized and received into the Church by none other than his mentor, St Ambrose. Augustine would go on to be ordained to the priesthood and eventually made Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. But that is far from the end of the story. St Augustine became one of the, if not the, greatest teachers of the faith in the entire history of the Church. Fr John Hardon, who was perhaps the greatest theologian ever produced by our own country, said he believes that St Augustine was the most brilliant mind in the entire history of the Church – which is no small statement. St Jerome, also a Father and Doctor of the Church, was a contemporary of St Augustine but also his senior. St Jerome, who was actually known for a bit of short-temperedness and not known for being loose with compliments, said that Augustine “established anew the ancient Faith.” St Anselm, a Doctor of the Church who lived 600 years after Augustine, said of his own writings: I have not said anything contrary to St Augustine and nothing that St Augustine has not already said! A priest-theologian once said that if someone says they have read all that St Augustine ever wrote, he knows they don’t know Augustine, so prolific was his writings and sermons. It is, of course, impossible to quantify but St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas (who came 800 years after Augustine) probably account for at least half of all of our Catholic doctrine

– the definitive teachings of the Church; and Aquinas drew heavily on Augustine. A person does not do that without knowing the mind of God, lessons Augustine learned by sitting at the feet of the Master.

St Augustine's writings are generally fairly easy to read; although it might help, you don't generally need a background in philosophy or theology to read his writings. Two of his most well-known books are: "The Confessions" and "City of God." If you are looking for good Catholic reading (and I hope you are) that take up the serious questions of life, of man, of death, of reality, these would be excellent choices. I read The Confessions even before going to seminary so it is fairly readable. "The Confessions" is not just St Augustine telling all of his sins, even though he does touch on that as well. It's not just an autobiography, even though it is partially that too. It is more of an exploration of the inner life of man and his struggle to unite with God.

One of the things that was happening during Augustine's life was the downfall of the Roman Empire. The empire was being invaded frequently and there was much chaos throughout Roman territory – perhaps not entirely unlike our own times. Some of the Roman pagans blamed the Catholics (perhaps also not entirely unlike our own times) and Augustine was asked to write a response to this. The book "City of God" was the result. In this book, Augustine contrasts two cities – the "city" of man, of worldliness, so to speak, and the "city" of the true and sincere followers of Christ. It is a great theological work but is still quite readable.

St Augustine was not, of course, the creator of Revelation; he was an expositor of it. He took what God revealed and explained it, opened it up (if you will), and applied it to life. Augustine is the one who said, for example, that regular food is taken in and changed into ourselves; with the Eucharist, the opposite happens; we take "It" in and "It" changes us into Him (Jesus). A person could spend considerable time with just this one statement, allowing it to lead to a deeper self-examination (do I receive in such a way so as to allow this to happen), as well as a deeper appreciation of the Holy Eucharist. Augustine gave clarity and importance to the teaching authority of the Church. He once said: I would not know that the Eucharist is the person of Jesus except that the Church has told me so; that's it, period. No need to chase around this, that, or the other. The Church has declared it, it is true beyond question. The classical definition of evil comes from St Augustine: evil is the privation (absence) of some good that should be there. It sounds simple once somebody says it but ask yourself if you could have come up with that! I know I wouldn't have. As with the Eucharist and the Church, Augustine's rather simple definition/explanation of what evil is gives a person much to contemplate. Do I want the misery of being separated from all goodness for all eternity? St Augustine also brings out the importance of acceptance of mystery – mystery meaning: we can have some understanding but not complete understanding (God cannot be completely comprehended). Augustine was once trying to really grasp the Trinity as he walked along an ocean-front beach, perhaps experiencing some frustration at not really being able to fully grasp it. As he continue to walk along he saw a boy with a small bucket scooping up water from the ocean and pouring it into a hole. When he asked the boy what he was doing, the boy replied that he was going to pour the whole ocean into this hole. Augustine told him that he couldn't possibly do that. Then the little "boy" looked up at him and said: and neither can you grasp the Trinity; and with that the boy disappeared.

It is hard to articulate and appreciate just how much St Augustine has contributed to understanding what God has revealed. But in all likelihood, there would be no St Augustine without St Monica. Standing behind the entire treasury left by St Augustine, is a good, holy, simple mother pleading with the Lord for his conversion. Augustine once said to his mother that the two of them could be together if only she would give up this insistence on the Lord, His Church – give up Catholicism. Monica let him know in no uncertain terms that they could be together if he laid down his paganism/atheism and embraced the one true faith. What a great example of genuine love. St Monica practiced our Lord's great summary of the commandments, and in the right order: 1) love God, and 2) love neighbor. She did not love her own desires first and foremost; if she had she would have yielded to Augustine's condition that she give up the faith. No, instead she loved her son (desired the true good for him) by loving God above all else and thus desiring Heaven for her son. Did St Augustine learn the faith from St Ambrose? In a certain and very real sense – yes. But his mother was his first teacher, especially by her example of self-denial. Mothers, take note!

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*