

Confessions

St. Augustine

St. Augustine, Aurelius Augustinus, was a Roman born in Tagaste, Numidia in North Africa in 354 AD. He is widely regarded as being the most influential figure in the early Catholic church. *Confessions*, written in 397 AD, is a personal account of his conversion to the Christian faith. For more, see:

www.ccel.org/a/augustine/confessions/confessions.html



Augustine and a boy on the seashore at Hippo
Bennozo Gozzoli, 1465

Book I

"Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and infinite is thy wisdom." And man desires to praise thee, for he is a part of thy creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that thou dost resist the proud.

For the vessels which thou dost fill do not confine thee, since even if they were broken, thou wouldst not be poured out. And, when thou art poured out on us, thou art not thereby brought down; rather, we are uplifted.

Book II

Thus thou mayest gather me up out of those fragments in which I was torn to pieces, while I turned away from thee, O Unity, and lost myself among "the many." For as I became a youth, I longed to be satisfied with worldly things, and I dared to grow wild in a succession of various and shadowy loves. My form wasted away, and I became corrupt in thy eyes, yet I was still pleasing to my own eyes--and eager to please the eyes of men.

But where could I find such pleasure save in thee, O Lord--save in thee, who dost teach us by sorrow, who woundest us to heal us, and dost kill us that we may not die apart from thee.

To whom am I narrating all this? Not to thee, O my God, but to my own kind in thy presence--to that small part of the human race who may chance to come upon these writings. And to what end? That I and all who read them may understand what depths there are from which we are to cry unto thee. For what is more surely heard in thy ear than a confessing heart and a faithful life?

Behold with what companions I walked the streets of Babylon! I rolled in its mire and lolled about on it, as if on a bed of spices and precious ointments. And, drawing me more closely to the very center of that city, my invisible enemy trod me down and seduced me, for I was easy to seduce.

Book III

Thus it is that thou dost act, O Lord God, for thou lovest souls far more purely than we do and art more incorruptibly compassionate, although thou art never wounded by any sorrow.

Book IV

In my public life I was striving after the emptiness of popular fame, going so far as to seek theatrical applause, entering poetic contests, striving for the straw garlands and the vanity of theatricals and intemperate desires. In my private life I was seeking to be purged from these corruptions of ours by carrying food to those who were called "elect" and "holy," which, in the laboratory of their stomachs, they should make into angels and gods for us, and by them we might be set free.

During those years I taught the art of rhetoric. Conquered by the desire for gain, I offered for sale speaking skills with which to conquer others.

It is good to confess to thee and to say, "Have mercy on me; heal my soul; for I have sinned against thee"--not to abuse thy goodness as a license to sin, but to remember the words of the Lord, "Behold, you are made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing befall you."

Book V

Accept this sacrifice of my confessions from the hand of my tongue. Thou didst form it and hast prompted it to praise thy name. Heal all my bones and let them say, "O Lord, who is like unto thee?" It is not that one who confesses to thee instructs thee as to what goes on within him. For the closed heart does not bar thy sight into it, nor does the hardness of our heart hold back thy hands, for thou canst soften it at will, either by mercy or in vengeance, "and there is no one who can hide himself from thy heat." But let my soul praise thee, that it may love thee, and let it confess thy mercies to thee, that it may praise thee.

But thou forsakest nothing that thou hast made. The unrighteous stumble against thee that they may be justly plagued, fleeing from thy gentleness and colliding with thy justice, and falling on their own rough paths. For in truth they do not know that thou art everywhere; that no place contains thee, and that only thou art near even to those who go farthest from thee. Let them, therefore, turn back and seek thee, because even if they have abandoned thee, their Creator, thou hast not abandoned thy creatures. Let them turn back and seek thee--and lo, thou art there in their hearts, there in the hearts of those who confess to thee. Let them cast themselves upon thee, and weep on thy bosom, after all their weary wanderings; and thou wilt gently wipe away their tears.

There had just come to Carthage a certain bishop of the Manicheans, Faustus by name, a great snare of the devil; and many were entangled by him through the charm of his eloquence. Now, even though I found this eloquence admirable, I was beginning to distinguish the charm of words from the truth of things, which I was eager to learn. Nor did I consider the dish as much as I did the kind of meat that their famous Faustus served up to me in it.

For thou art great, O Lord, and thou hast respect unto the lowly, but the proud thou knowest afar off. Thou drawest near to none but the contrite in heart, and canst not be found by the proud, even if in their inquisitive skill they may number the stars and the sands, and map out the constellations, and trace the courses of the planets.

For it is by the mind and the intelligence which thou gavest them that they investigate these things. They have discovered much; and have foretold, many years in advance, the day, the hour, and the extent of the eclipses of those luminaries, the sun and the moon. Their calculations did not fail, and it came to pass as they predicted. ... And men who are ignorant in these matters marvel and are amazed; and those who understand them exult and are exalted. Both, by an impious pride, withdraw from thee and forsake thy light. They foretell an eclipse of the sun before it happens, but they do not see their own eclipse which is even now occurring. For they do not ask, as religious men should, what is the source of the intelligence by which they investigate these matters.

Book VI

And yet I was wandering about in a dark and slippery way, seeking thee outside myself and thus not finding the God of my heart. I had gone down into the depths of the sea and had lost faith, and had despaired of ever finding the truth.

Book VII

As I increased in years, the worse was my vanity. For I could not conceive of any substance but the sort I could see with my own eyes.

Being thus gross-hearted and not clear even to myself, I then held that whatever had neither length nor breadth nor density nor solidity, and did not or could not receive such dimensions, was absolutely nothing. For at that time my mind dwelt only with ideas, which resembled the forms with which my eyes are still familiar, nor could I see that the act of thought, by which I formed those ideas, was itself immaterial, and yet it could not have formed them if it were not itself a measurable entity.

Book XIII

Of thy eternal life I was now certain, although I had seen it "through a glass darkly." And I had been relieved of all doubt that there is an incorruptible substance and that it is the source of every other substance. Nor did I any longer crave greater certainty about thee, but rather greater steadfastness in thee.

I could not be satisfied with the life I was living in the world. Now, indeed, my passions had ceased to excite me as of old with hopes of honor and wealth, and it was a grievous burden to go on in such servitude. For, compared with thy sweetness and the beauty of thy house--which I loved--those things delighted me no longer.

Of a certainty, all men are vain who do not have the knowledge of God, or have not been able, from the good things that are seen, to find him who is good. But I was no longer fettered in that vanity. I had surmounted it, and from the united testimony of thy whole creation had found thee, our Creator, and thy Word--God with thee, and together with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God--by whom thou hast created all things.

Book IX

But thou, O Lord, art good and merciful, and thy right hand didst reach into the depth of my death and didst empty out the abyss of corruption from the bottom of my heart. And this was the result: now I did not will to do what I willed, and began to will to do what thou didst will.

How sweet did it suddenly become to me to be without the sweetness of trifles! And it was now a joy to put away what I formerly feared to lose. For thou didst cast them away from me, O true and highest Sweetness. Thou didst cast them away, and in their place thou didst enter in thyself--sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood; brighter than all light, but more veiled than all mystery; more exalted than all honor, though not to them that are exalted in their own eyes. Now was my soul free from the gnawing cares of seeking and getting, of wallowing in the mire and scratching the itch of lust. And I prattled like a child to thee, O Lord my God--my light, my riches, and my salvation.

Nor were the good things I saw now outside me, nor were they to be seen with the eyes of flesh in the light of the earthly sun. For they that have their joys from without sink easily into emptiness and are spilled out on those things that are visible and temporal, and in their starving thoughts they lick their very shadows. If only they would grow weary with their hunger and would say, "Who will show us any good?" And we would answer, and they would hear, "O Lord, the light of thy countenance shines bright upon us." For we are not that Light that enlightens every man, but we are enlightened by thee, so that we who were formerly in darkness may now be alight in thee. If only they could behold the inner Light Eternal which, now that I had tasted it, I gnashed my teeth because I could not show it to them unless they brought me their heart in their eyes--their roving eyes--and said, "Who will show us any good?"

...

Then my mother said: "Son, for myself I have no longer any pleasure in anything in this life. Now that my hopes in this world are satisfied, I do not know what more I want here or why I am here. There was indeed one thing for which I wished to tarry a little in this life, and that was that I might see you a Catholic Christian before I died. My God hath answered this more than abundantly, so that I see you now made his servant and spurning all earthly happiness. What more am I to do here?"

I do not well remember what reply I made to her about this. However, it was scarcely five days later--certainly not much more--that she was prostrated by fever.

And so on the ninth day of her sickness, in the fifty-sixth year of her life and the thirty-third of mine, that religious and devout soul was set loose from the body.

I closed her eyes; and there flowed in a great sadness on my heart and it was passing into tears, when at the strong behest of my mind my eyes sucked back the fountain dry, and sorrow was in me like a convulsion.

Then I slept, and when I awoke I found my grief not a little assuaged. And as I lay there on my bed, those true verses of Ambrose came to my mind, for thou art truly,

"Deus, creator omnium,
Polique rector, vestiens
Diem decoro lumine,
Noctem sopora gratia;
Artus solutos ut quies
Reddat laboris usui
Mentesque fessas allevet,
Luctusque solvat anxios."

"O God, Creator of us all,
Guiding the orbs celestial,
Clothing the day with lovely light,
Appointing gracious sleep by night:
Thy grace our wearied limbs restore
To strengthened labor, as before,
And ease the grief of tired minds
From that deep torment which it finds."