

# AUGUSTINE

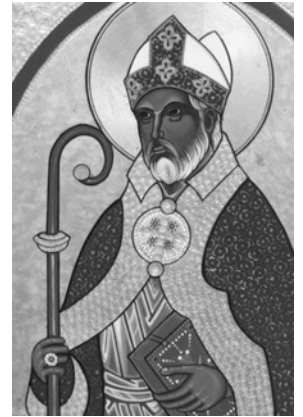
The Catholic Community at Connecticut College • October 20, 2007

*Augustine's never-ending search for truth gave his life a restlessness and intensity that was exhausting at times. He "gnawed within" as new experiences and ideas made him question answers that had previously satisfied him. Not surprisingly, Augustine's conversion to Christianity was slow and tortuous. But with the "light of certainty," his commitment was complete.*

Augustine (354-430), a brilliant philosopher and one of the most influential thinkers in Christian history, was born in Algeria to a Christian mother, St. Monica, and a pagan father. All we know of Monica is in Augustine's *Confessions*: she struggled with a violent husband, a meddling mother-in-law and a disrespectful son whose lifestyle appalled her. But she persevered and ultimately won her entire family to Christ.

Augustine taught at Carthage and Rome and then won a prestigious position in Milan. His studies of Plato led him slowly to Christianity. Intellect had kept him away – "He sought for wisdom, not submission to authority," one biographer said – but he ultimately decided Christianity gave him the answers he yearned for. He was baptized at the age of 33, quit his job and returned to Africa to be a priest and later a bishop.

Augustine's extensive writings cover topics from original sin to the morality of war. He grew pessimistic over time, making his philosophy hard to categorize. He thought unbaptized babies must go to hell, but he also is famous for his admonition to "love the sinner; hate the sin." He believed in predestination but also thought the Bible shouldn't be interpreted literally. For many, Augustine's struggle is more important than his beliefs. He challenges us to face the truth instead of seeking escape and to confront our individual responsibility for what we do with our lives.



**"Grant me chastity and temperance, but not yet."**

"In seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him. Lord, I would seek you, calling upon you – and calling upon you is an act of believing in you. ... My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me."

**"You made us for Yourself, O God,  
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."**

"The burden of the world weighed me down with a sweet drowsiness such as commonly occurs during sleep. The thoughts with which I meditated about you were like the efforts of those who would like to get up but are overcome by deep sleep and sink back again. No one wants to be asleep all the time, and the sane judgment of everyone judges it better to be awake. Yet often a man defers shaking off sleep when his limbs are heavy with slumber. Although displeased with himself he is glad to take a bit longer, even when the time to get up has arrived. ... I had no answer to make to you when you said to me 'Arise, you who are asleep, rise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.' ... [I] had no answer to give you except merely slow and sleepy words: 'At once, at once' — 'But presently' — 'Just a little longer, please.'"

**"Conquer yourself and the world lies at your feet."**

Augustine's feast day is August 28. Monica's is August 27.

# AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION

Augustine described his final conversion to Christianity this way in his autobiography, *Confessions*:

"I was suddenly asking myself these questions [about what was happening to me], weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard a sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take and read, take and read.'

At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed the flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall.

... I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: 'Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.' [Romans 13:13-14] I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."



**"Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand."**

"This is the very perfection of man: to find out his own imperfections."

"Christ is the teacher within us."

"God bestows more consideration on the purity of the intention with which our actions are performed than on the actions themselves."

"Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."

**"Whatever you do, do it well, and you have praised God."**

"Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours."

---

## QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

1. Augustine acknowledges that his conversion took a long time because he was focused more on understanding God than on having faith in God. What is your focus? Was there a moment in which you were finally and completely converted? How have you sustained that commitment?
2. Augustine had several mentors – his mother, Bishop Ambrose of Milan – who patiently provided direction and encouragement. Do you have such mentors? How can you develop them?
3. Monica didn't lose faith in Augustine. She stayed close to him, sometimes closer than he wanted her to be. Have you felt this way about your own parents?

## MORE INFORMATION

The Order of Saint Augustine: [www.augnet.org](http://www.augnet.org)

Augustine in Latin: [www.thelatinlibrary.com/august.html](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/august.html)

Augustine in English: [www.ccel.org/a/augustine](http://www.ccel.org/a/augustine)