25TH AUGUST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO PART 1

ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO was born in 354 at Thagaste, in modern-day Algeria, a province of the declining Roman Empire, His early studies in rhetoric were at Carthage. In 370 his father died, and shortly afterwards he moved to Rome to study. He originally intended to become a lawyer but gave that up in favour of rhetoric for its own sake, at which he excelled. The move to Rome was intended to further his career, but it was against Monica’s wishes. Later he re-located to Milan, which, at that time, was the imperial capital.

In Milan he came under the influence of Bishop St Ambrose, whose reputation as a rhetor attracted him to listen and learn purely from his art, but in time he fell under the bishop’s spell completely and began to re-evaluate his Christian upbringing in the light of the knowledge he had accumulated since his childhood.

What assists us to understand Augustine is that he was famously a man of flesh; a conscientious student he undoubtedly was and was shocked by the rowdy and disorderly conduct of students at first in Carthage, and later in Rome, where he recounts that they were even worse. Other than that, he seems to have lived the student life with relish. He famously took a concubine with whom he lived contentedly for 15 years, and a son was born of whom we know very little other than his early death. While struggling with his conscience and his search for a satisfactory belief system he tells us that he once [famously] prayed: ‘Dear God, please make me chaste, - but not yet!’ He had spent some time as a Manichean, believing in their version of dualism between good and evil, but having resorted to several authorities in that religion, he found their responses to his questions unsatisfactory, and the conversion scene in his garden is too well known to dwell on here. At the Easter vigil in 387 he was baptised, and shortly thereafter, on his way back to Africa St Monica sickened and died at Ostia.

 Augustine was ordained priest at Hippo in 391 and in 394 became bishop there, remaining until 430 when he died with the city surrounded by invading Vandals, but the final ‘push’ happened only several months after his death.

This is a simple outline of Augustine’s CV, but it tells you nothing of his lasting significance as theologian, philosopher, writer and mystic: He is arguably the greatest and most influential figure in the whole of western Christianity,

His writings fill 50 volumes; letters, sermons, various campaigns against what he saw as heresy, notably the Novatians, Montanists and Pelagians. His three principal works, however, that have remained current ever since they were written are his

* confessions [395,]’ the first ever in the genre of spiritual biography
* his treatise on the Trinity, which held pride of place in orthodox theology until last century, when it started to be shot at from many and varied theological quarters and probably his masterpiece, ‘City of God,’ which he wrote towards the end of his life.

Once Augustine settled at Hippo some of his friends joined him to live together with an informal rule. Later a so-called Augustine rule of life was designed in his name, which became very popular in the middle-ages.

He either personally knew or corresponded with virtually everybody of note in the Latin church of his day: he tells us in the Confessions that he never took either to Greek literature or the language, and although he read many Greek works in Latin translation, his consequent loss of Greek subtleties rather impaired his ability sometimes to quite comprehend and deal with the nuances of Byzantine doctrinal formulations; indeed there is a sense in which his work and its influence partly defines the growing separation between eastern and western Christianity.

Having written so much, it is important to note that towards the end of his life Augustine wrote a series of ‘retractions’ which sought to help readers deal with possible misunderstandings of his texts: bear in mind that by the time of his death Rome had been sacked and the empire was in process of final collapse; communications, which had been a strength of the Roman government, were at an end, and Augustine himself was quite isolated from the civilisation that he had adorned with such distinction.

Like Paul before him, such has been Augustine’s influence on later generations that many philosophers and theologians have made his works their own, and in so doing have handed down some serious misunderstandings both of works and the intentions behind them. A case in point is what has become the traditional view of ‘City of God,’ as seeking to advocate a flight from ‘the world,’ and the pursuit of God through the church when, in truth, the book is far more nuanced.

Like Athanasius’ hagiography of Anthony, Augustine’s ‘Confessions’ took off almost immediately, and was not overtaken in popularity by ‘City of God’ until the middle of the last century but to begin to know this most seminal of Christian saints it is advisable to read both books.

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26TH AUGUST THE CONFESSIONS OF AUGUSTINE – PART 2

THE CONFESSIONS is the very first spiritual biography of its kind, and still probably the finest. This alone would surely have placed Augustine in the ranks of the teachers of the church.

It is a confession in both Christian senses of the word; a confession of some illustrations of his wrong behaviour, and of his taking wrong paths; but it is also a magnificent confession of his faith. The fact that he wrote it when he had already been a bishop for 12 years displays very great courage, too, and faith in his readers.

In essence, the book is very largely an extended prayer to God, not always with language and concepts that we might employ today, but please don’t let that put you off reading it.

In outline, the first 7books are an account of his early peccadillos and mistakes

At book 8, there is the most searing account of his emotional and spiritual conflict prior to his total surrender and his decision to hand his will and his life over to the care of God through the external process of baptism, which was, both socially and culturally, a far more significant step to take than we might see it today. Incidentally, how a children’s game can be made to sound like ‘Take up and read’ is explained by the Latin: ‘Tolle; lege’, with both syllables pronounced in each word: if you repeat it a few times it could sound like a children’s game.

Book 9 is about his mother Monica from ch8.

Book 10 is the beginning of Augustine’s sometimes desperate quest to understand his relationship with God.

The second half of Book 10, which comprises more than 40 chapters, is his struggle to find boundaries between his reception of sensual pleasures, which he received with sophistication and delicacy; and his understanding that such gifts could become a serious distraction to worship and the love of God when taken purely for themselves. He was, for instance, clearly gifted with a good ear for music, but there is a passage that occurs in all readers in music history, in which he is almost at the point of forbidding music to himself and his church for fear that its beauty might distract from its purpose of bringing us to God. There are similar reflections in the areas of vision, the appetites, and aspects of friendship.

Unlike many of his contemporaries who were seeking asceticism by various paths, Augustine understood the value of God’s gifts of creation as orientating humans in the best possible environment for his worship and the performance of his will – an understanding that chimes with a good deal of contemporary liberal spirituality: the proper use of these gifts can be legitimately appreciated if they are stewarded and accepted to be God’s gifts and not one’s own.

Viewed in this spirit, this part of the book can be seen as offering various mental and spiritual tools for us: our giftings may be different from Augustine’s: and modern spirituality would, hopefully, receive and value all these benefits and our ability to receive cherish and share them rather more permissively than Augustine himself felt he needed to do for his own formation, but, nevertheless, if we look, we can find that he has set out a useful spiritual toolkit for our generation.

Another particularly useful insight Augustine flags up is the pursuit of mere curiosity; knowledge for its own sake and how it can ensnare the unwary. For somebody with Augustine’s enquiring mind, this was a big temptation, but the danger was exacerbated at a time when church doctrine was not yet established beyond peradventure, and with boundaries among theology, philosophy science and various other grey areas knowledge hardly touched on as yet, it was prudent to warn against what is too often a path into excessive pride or despair.

This is one aspect of moral theology; another one, which might shock us, is the idea that, as a baby Augustine was already steeped in sin, not of his doing, of course, but because, he was making demands with the – no doubt perfectly innocent – assumption that at that point in his life the world did, indeed, owe him a living: what he means is that we are all born radically selfish: Freud spoke of ‘His Majesty the baby.:’

There are passages in Augustine’s writings that show him astonishingly in touch with aspects of what became axioms of modern psychology, and those who see him as something of an impedance to advanced liberal thinking should look again. Perhaps, however, the most serious misinterpretation of his theological anthropology [understanding of God’s relationship with humanity] is his take on the fall and ‘original sin,’ an idea that had been around well before Augustine’s day.

According to Augustine, God had created Adam & Eve [humanity] ‘a little lower than the angels’ surrounding them with everything that would enable them to live and praise God and give him pleasure, and where there would be no such thing as sin nor death. By their disobedience, they had striven, like Satan and the fallen angels, to rival God, which engendered their fall into the world we know, in which, even in the finest spirits, the former relationship with God and with one another is terminally fractured. Abbot Thomas Keating puts the matter at its clearest when he suggests that fallenness subsists for each of us in the defects in our genetic inheritance, and the consequent emotional as well as physical damage that our parents perpetrate upon us willy-nilly, even with the best of intentions. The idea that fallenness subsists purely in the act of procreation is a seriously misguided understanding of a far more comprehensive and sensible doctrine.

Augustine understood perfectly well the need for socialisation, he believed that everybody has an innate need to love God which comes about mainly by love of ‘neighbour,’ which cannot be fulfilled merely in the satisfaction of material and emotional desires; and that, hence, the work of orientating the person away from self and towards God is paramount, and the earlier the process begins, the better. Augustine states that in his life his parents and teachers, whilst they cared for him, set him on a path to worldly success instead, with Monica being the shining exception, of course.

It must be quite impossible to read the first 7 books of the ‘Confessions’ carefully without being able to identify honestly and sometimes quite shockingly with Augustine’ self-revelations, and it’s probably his very honesty that, at base, should encourage us along our own path of life.

 Every spiritual biography since Augustine’s owes an incalculable debt to his: There have been some famous ones since, but even our own Christian ‘testimonies’ and the ‘sharing of experience strength and hope’ that lies at the base of all 12-step programmes of recovery from various addictive and other emotional states, would be the richer if speakers comprehended and emulated the depth and breadth of Augustine’s self-understanding.

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27TH AUGUST MONICA

ST MONICA was born in Roman North Africa of Christian parents, in 332, and died at Ostia, the port for Rome, on her way back home to Africa, accompanied by St Augustine, her illustrious son, in 387 the very year of his long-sought conversion of heart to the Catholic Church. Augustine gives her age as 56 and his own at 33.

All we are told about Monica comes from Augustine’s Confessions, the end of book 8 recounts her elation at the news of her son’s conversion; thereafter from book 9 ch8, mention of her death precedes the eulogy, which reads as a hagiography, displaying the standard literary properties of that genre.

A hagiography is, by its very nature, written by a person who has come to love and respect their subject, and there are enough sentimental songs about mothers, living or dead, to illustrate the intensity of a son’s emotions; where daughters are concerned these feelings can often be a good deal more complex. To know a little more about Monica – her importance in the emotional and spiritual life of one of the church’s greatest teachers and a philosopher of note – we need to discern not only the outline of her life, but some of its underlying pattern.

She was born into a Christian family, and she and her sister were entrusted to the care of an elderly and honoured retainer in quality of nanny and governess. Her upbringing appears to have been extremely strict, to the extent that the children were discouraged from drinking water except at mealtimes, on the ground that too much water as a child might generate a habit of drinking stronger stuff in adult life.

She was trusted to fill bottles from casks of wine down in the cellar, and, predictably, she started sneaking a few drops every day; a habit which became so serious that during a quarrel with a favourite servant Monica was taunted with drunkenness, although, as an insult thrown at her in anger, it is difficult to know how serious the problem actually was, but the Oxford Dictionary of Saints takes it at face value. At all events, from that moment on, Monica stopped drinking, a feat which, had the habit been a serious one, would have taken more than human willpower to eradicate for good.

She was given in marriage to a Pagan husband named Patricius who seems to have been kind but dissolute; unfaithful, short tempered and violent. The couple resided with her mother-in-law, who made life difficult for both parties, but intervened eventually to curb Patricius’ behaviour. Like many women in her position, Monica learnt how to neutralise the worst of his anger, and a year before his death in 370 Patricius and his mother both converted to Christianity, which Augustine attributes to Monica as agent.

Monica associated with a group of wives who frequently complained about domestic violence but being a woman of her time, she intervened to try to stop what she viewed as gossip; and occasionally did what she could to calm the quarrels that arose among these women in their restricted social setting.

She is famous for her long-suffering patient and persistently fervent and intense prayer for Augustine’s conversion into the Catholic Church, which occurred eventually not very long before her death. Like many mothers before and since, she also had plans for Augustine’s legitimate marriage, deploring his 15-year menage with his concubine and their illegitimate son Adeodatus –literally ‘given by/or/from God.’

One might wonder whether she might have become quite such a celebrity had her son not developed into the greatest teacher of the Latin church but she is venerated as the model of Christian motherhood, although modern social workers and counsellors might rather discern a familiar pattern of co-dependency: when Augustine decided to try Rome in order to progress his career as orator and teacher, Monica did everything she could to prevent his departure, clinging to him in tears and becoming frankly hysterical, to the extent that he had to lie in order to evade her before embarking; but she followed him anyway!

The fashionable tag ‘Let go; let God’ seems to have been no part of her spirituality, and it is defensible both on historical and psychological grounds that her hysteria might actually have retarded her son’s emotional development: Apart from his own son’s mother, his concubine, there is little or no mention of women in the ‘confessions,’ and the way he ‘dumped’ her was hardly mature or even just.

Augustine’s conversion had come about in the presence of several very close friends who had chosen to be baptised at the same time. He had further frustrated his mother’s plans for his marriage by resolving to live celibately from now on. Baptism in the church at this time involved handing your name in and waiting some time, and during this hiatus Augustine and his other newly converted friends accepted the use of another friend’s country house, where they lived together with an informal rule of life. During this time Augustine records the devotion and humility in which his mother served the whole company.

Like most hagiographies there an account of Monica’s last days in purple prose: it is reported that she remarked, on becoming ill, that there was nothing left for her to live for on Earth, since her life’s ambition, getting her son safely established as a Catholic, had been accomplished in a manner she couldn’t even have hoped for. Her story, then, has a happy ending, but it is Augustine’s story with a modern western interpretation.

A feminist might feel aggrieved if the sole reason for Monica’s veneration was that she happened to have played a significant part in the conversion of her son to her own faith; but nowadays she would be understood to be a deprived, and even abused child; who may have effected a largely unaided recovery from a potentially serious drink problem; was placed willy-nilly into an abusive marriage to a violent man who didn’t share her spiritual aspirations, and her son was the one thing of value she had left, so that she lavished what can only be termed a pathological obsession on her eldest son until he was well into his thirties.

Co-dependency is a condition of fairly recent coinage, and came about as the result of counsellors dealing with the reactive behaviour, both among men and women, to alcohol addiction, in the first instance, of a spouse or other close family member; but its application has been broadened a good deal since, to cover one person’s pathological [not necessarily sinful] compulsion to control another: indeed society may view such conduct as praise-worthy and even heroic if the object of the impulse is, in fact, behaving unacceptably. Monica’s skill in dealing with her husband’s behaviour might even be regarded as another facet of the same condition, though nowadays women in her situation might be encouraged to leave home, which, obviously, she would have been unable to do for any number of reasons.

It should be quite clearly understood nowadays that Jesus always intended that a conversion should be the free choice of the individual, otherwise the result is almost inevitably that what is enacted by force is a twisted and fearful image of God. History records, moreover, that outward compliance to such forced ‘conversion’ is almost never the ‘conversion of heart’ that Jesus seeks and prays for in each of us.

What we are witnessing in countries where a perversion of cultural Islam is forced on perfectly ordinary people is only a re-enactment of some such forced conversions by Christian rulers in the past wishing to bring about control by compliance, whatever their own rationale. The suffering Monica underwent would have been greatly mitigated had she ‘allowed’ God to act as freely as God does in such situations.

Monica, however, should stand proud as a role model for millions of women then and now who still suffer culturally stilted upbringing; forced marriage and domestic abuse.

There seems to have been little effort to celebrate her life until 1167, when her remains, together with other relics, were translated to Rome: her shrine is in San Agostino in that city.

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29TH AUGUST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO – PART 3

CITY OF GOD is a very different animal; for one thing, it is over a thousand pages of Latin originally, and the audio version would take nearly 48 hours to read straight off, but fortunately like much classical literature, it has helpful chapter headings and prefaces, not to mention that, for instance, at the beginning of ch18 he summarises for us what he’s already written.

I promised to write of the rise and progress and appointed end of the two cities one of which is God’s’ the other this world’s; in which, so far as mankind is concerned, the former is now a stranger. But, first of all, I undertook, in so far as his grace should enable me, to refute the enemies of the city of God who prefer their gods to Christ its founder and fiercely hate Christians with the most deadly malice.

These things I have done in the first ten books. In accordance with my three-fold promise I have treated distinctly in the four books that follow the tenth, of the rise of both cities. After that I proceeded from the first man down to the flood in one book which is the fifteenth of this work, from that again down to Abraham our work has followed both in chronological order. From the Patriarch Abraham down to the Israelite kings at which we close our sixteenth book, and thence down to the advent of Christ himself in the flesh which period the seventeenth book reaches.

The city of God in my way of writing seems to have run its course alone. Whereas it did not run its course alone in this age, for both cities in this age, for cities, in their course amid mankind certainly experienced chequered times together just as from the beginning. But I did this, in order that, first of all, from the time when the promises God began to be clearer, down to the virgin birth of him in whom those things promised were to be fulfilled; the course of that city that was god’s might be made more distinctly apparent without interpolation of foreign matter from the history of the other city. Although down to the revelation of the new covenant it ran its course not in light but in shadow

Now, therefore, I think fit to do what I passed by and show, so far as seems necessary, how that other city ran its course from the times of Abraham so that attentive readers may compare the two.

The sack of Rome in 410 set people back in a way perhaps akin to the shockwave created by 9.11: ‘this can’t have happened!’ By the end of his life, Italy and North Africa had been overrun by invaders who had had no investment in Roman life and culture: the Vandals who overran North Africa did acculturate, as can be seen from the very intricate mosaics found on archaeological sites there, but for Augustine and most educated people, this was the end of civilisation. Everybody was asking themselves ‘How did this ever happen’ once they had fully taken in that it had happened at all. Augustine’s intention in writing ‘City of god’ was to demonstrate in terms romans could understand, that their whole way of life and belief system had been flawed; Q E D!

One rather tedious obstacle to enjoying the book is Augustine’s constant lashing out at his opponents. As his best biographer, Peter Brown, asserts, by the end of his life Augustine had become so well established that he sometimes lost his light touch in dealing with opponents, and that this tended to stunt what otherwise should have been important and searching discussions on vital Christian topics. This was certainly the case when Augustine was dealing with the Julian of Eclanum, his Pelagian opponent, a young buck trying to get the better of the old man, but in the ‘City of God’ these asides are intended to provoke self-examination, rather in the sense that a modern psychotherapist might challenge a client by asking: ‘And does this [attitude/strategy/belief] work for you?’

In the first ten books Augustine is keen to point out to his pagan and other opponents that their mind-sets and worship of their gods simply hasn’t worked for them: they have been given no ethical guidance; no help during crises such as the very recent sack of Rome in 410, and that the gods’ own frequently venial and immoral behaviour sets not the least example, not to mention that their sacrifices to these gods are based in fear. He goes on to point out that well accepted episodes in their the history of Rome also set lamentable precedents for moral guidance and future behaviour, and that, by contrast, Christians are blamed for not adhering to standards of civil worship and sacrifice, whereas, in fact, the Christian God has frequently interceded to save the Romans from the very extremes of disaster, and that even when Alaric the Goth sacked Rome, as a Christian, he spared civilians and churches, and permitted them to be used as refuge by women and children which conduct far exceeded that of Roman conquerors.

This said, if you really have time to watch a classic philosopher and rhetor at work, laying about him with a hatchet on every aspect of Roman history, culture, morality, or lack of it, and religion, you won’t find a finer example. Augustine is not judging the pagan world, but simply trying to heal its peoples’ pointless superstitions and destructive beliefs.

He then goes into various philosophical and theological speculations of decidedly mixed interest to modern readers, including what he can glean about the punishments in Hell, something Dante built on nearly a thousand years later, but with rather more poetic imagination.

At the last book – Book 22, Augustine finally arrives at a vision of heaven as being a perpetual Sabbath rest, in the fullest understanding of God’s Sabbath:

All the organs and members of the incorruptible body which now we see to be suited to various necessary uses shall contribute to the praises of God, for in that life necessity shall have no place, but full, certain, secure everlasting felicity ; for all those parts of the bodily harmony which are distributed through the whole body within and without which I have just been saying elude our observation will then be discerned and along with the other great and marvellous discoveries which shall then kindle rational minds in praise of the great artificer, there shall be the enjoyment of a beauty which appeals to the reason.

What power of movement such bodies I have not the audacity rashly to define, as I have not the ability to conceive nevertheless I shall say that in any case both in motion and at rest they shall be as in their appearance seemly, for into that state nothing which is unseemly will be admitted.

One thing is certain: the body shall be forthwith wherever the spirit wills, and the spirit shall will nothing that is unbecoming to the spirit or to the body. True honour shall be there, for it shall be denied to none who is worthy nor yielded to any unworthy. True peace shall be there, when no one shall suffer opposition either from himself or any other. God himself, who is the author of virtue shall there be its reward for as there is nothing greater or better:

He has promised himself: ‘I will be your GOD AND YOU SHALL BE MY PEOPLE: I shall be their satisfaction; I shall be all that men honourably desire; life and health and nourishment; and plenty and glory and honour and peace and all good things.

Again, Dante, in his vision of paradise, picks up Augustine’s idea that, just as in Hell there will be degrees of punishment, in heaven there will be degrees of blessedness, but that nobody there will envy anyone else, because everyone will be content to be themselves in the kingdom, and the whole part of their blessedness will be an inability to desire anything other than what they have and what they are.

What a wonderful passage on which to meditate!

As we have already noted, Augustine’s intention in writing this book was not to threaten judgement, but to preach healing and wholeness: he lived in cities and wrote of Rome and the New Jerusalem that is the City of God. He understood the importance of earthly politics as being ‘the place where all earthly desires meet,’ and for that reason insisted that mere politics, however valuable, would never be able to fulfil humanity’s deepest spiritual need. The book is not an ethical system: Augustine insists: ‘Love and do what you will.’ Which sounds very much like situation ethics, which is, in all probability, precisely what Jesus himself was trying to teach us.

 ‘City of God’ is very much a book for our time.