WHEN THE SAINTS…

24TH of AUGUST BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE

27TH of AUGUST MONICA

28TH of AUGUST AUGUSTINE of HIPPO

**NOTE**  Nothing is definitely known about Bartholomew

Augustine is one of the most important saints in the church since Paul, so, rather than taking his life and the articles on his two most important books in one go, why not spread them over three days!

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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 Monica’s elation at the news of her son’s conversion; thereafter from book 9 ch8, where mention of her death precedes the eulogy, but which reads as a hagiography, displaying the standard literary properties of that genre.

Hagiographies are invariably 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. If we would like 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 own life, but some of its underlying pattern.

She was born to 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 meal times, for all that they may have been thirsty, on the ground that too much water as a child might generate a habit of drinking stronger stuff in adult life.

Monica 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’s 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, of course, 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 ménage 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 actually 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 regulum. During this time Augustine records the devotion and humility with which his mother served the whole company.

Like most hagiographies there is 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’s 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, the one thing of value she probably 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 the 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 a 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.

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

There seems to have been little effort to celebrate Monica’s 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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St AUGUSTINE of HIPPO was born in 354 in Thagaste, in modern-day Algeria, a province of the declining Roman Empire and studied rhetoric first at Carthage; in 370 his father Patricius died, and shortly afterwards he moved to Rome to study. At first he intended to become a lawyer, but gave that up in favour of rhetoric for its own sake, at which he excelled. Meaning to further his career he moved to Rome, against his mother Monica’s wishes, and afterwards to Milan, which, at that time, was the imperial capital. Here he came under the influence of Bishop St Ambrose, whose reputation as a rhetor attracted him; but in time he fell under his spell completely and began to re-evaluate his Christian upbringing in the light of the knowledge he had accumulated since his childhood.

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 his death in 430, with the city surrounded by invading Vandals, a tribe of Germanic origin who had been driven south through Iberia into and around north Africa: the name is unfortunate and inappropriate because, like most invaders, they soon adopted the sophisticated culture of their ‘hosts.’

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 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 to the Greek language, and although he read many Greek works in translation, his consequent loss of the subtleties of the Greek language limited his ability sometimes to quite comprehend and deal with nuances of Byzantine doctrine; indeed there is a sense in which his work and its influence partly defines the growing separation between Eastern and Western Christianity.

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THE CONFESSIONS is a one-off; 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 seven books are an account of his early sins 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’ – both syllables pronounced in each word – and if you repeat it a few times it makes sense. Book 9 deals with his mother Monica from ch8.

Book 10 is the beginning of Augustine’s sometimes desperate search to orientate himself with God: the second half – it’s more than 40 chapters long – 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, appetite and aspects of friendship.

Unlike many of his contemporaries pursuing asceticism by various paths, Augustine understands the value of God’s gifts, and of beauty, and that praise for his gifts and performances can be legitimately appreciated if they are understood and accepted to be God’s gifts and not one’s own. For this reason, 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: modern spirituality would, hopefully, receive and value God’s gifts, and our ability to receive and use them rather more permissively than Augustine himself felt he needed to, but, nevertheless, the tools are there for us.

Another particularly useful insight here is the danger of curiosity; knowledge for its own sake and where it can lead. For somebody with the kind of enquiring mind that Augustine had this was a big temptation, but there was always a danger, particularly at this time when doctrine was not yet established beyond peradventure, and with boundaries among theology, philosophy, science and various other gray areas of endeavour hardly touched on, there had to be limits to enquiry; again, a lesson for our own time.

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.’

Augustine understood perfectly well the need for socialisation; he believed that everybody has an innate need to love God, and that true fulfilment cannot reside merely in the satisfaction of material and emotional needs, 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 him. 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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CITY OF GOD is a very different animal; for one thing the audio version would take nearly 48 hours to read, but fortunately like much classically derived 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 more clear 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.

One difficulty that you might find rather tedious is that, even when he’s writing of the blessed and their reward, he can’t resist side-swipes at anyone and everyone who disagrees with him. 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 said, if you really have time to watch a classically-trained 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 anything better; but if not you can comfortably skip the first ten books!

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 whoever 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!