

Late have I loved you: St Augustine

On 28 August we celebrate the feast day of St Augustine.

St Augustine of Hippo is a hugely influential figure, both in Christian and secular Western thought. During his life, he was a bishop, a celebrated author and a Christian philosopher, and today he remains one of the most relatable saints. Much of this is owing to his autobiography.

Today, autobiographies are everywhere, with notable people detailing their struggles, failures and final redemption. But arguably the first was St Augustine's *Confessions*, written in the 5th century.

At the time *Confessions* was startling in its frank originality. In it, Augustine related his life story, his regrets, with retrospective insight and self-critique. It's a book that encompasses elements of autobiography, theology, and metaphysics.

He describes his origins in vivid detail. Augustine and his family were Berbers, an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa. He was born in the North African town of Thagaste in modern-day Algeria, on the fringes of the Roman Empire that was declining in its status as a global superpower. Roman historian Plinius records Thagaste as being an important Christian centre in Roman Africa.

As a youth, Augustine lived an excessive hedonistic lifestyle. He and his friends routinely stole, and boasted of sexual exploits.

Augustine recalls in the *Confessions* that as a boy he stole fruit not because he wanted it but because it was not allowed. This led him to the idea of original sin: his very nature was flawed. 'It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own error—not that for which I erred, but the error itself.' And because people are naturally inclined to sin, all are in need of the grace of Christ.

This original sin, he believed, was manifested in our desire to be cruel to others, and our constant anxieties, pride and egotism. According to Augustine, our lives are imperfect by definition because we are human.

Augustine worked as a teacher in Carthage and Rome and throughout his 20s, had numerous romantic relationships.



He was finally drawn to Christianity at the age of 31 through listening to the teaching of St Ambrose – whom he admired for his rhetorical prowess – and through the constant encouragement of his mother, St Monica.

Describing his conversion to Catholicism, Augustine recalls being prompted by hearing a child's voice say 'take up and read'. He opened a book of St Paul's writings and randomly read Romans 13: 13–14: let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

He moved to the small coastal town of Hippo where he was ordained, sold his family property and gave the money to the poor. He lived an austere monastic life and later became bishop. It was in Hippo Augustine spent the remaining thirty years of his life ministering.

Augustine was also something of a secular iconoclast. In his book *The City of God*, he criticised Rome and its values, taking issue with the idea that humans could be satisfied with wealth and status and possessions on Earth, or that society could ever be truly meritocratic or just. According to Augustine, people weren't influential and powerful or impoverished because they deserved to be: our world is inherently unjust and only real justice could be found in God's city.

By the time Vandals invaded North Africa in 430AD, Augustine had fallen ill. They sacked the town but spared his cathedral and library.

He was canonised and later recognised as a Doctor of the Church in 1298 by Pope Boniface VIII. Together with Gregory the Great, Ambrose, and Jerome, Augustine is one of the original four Doctors of the Church.

St Augustine is the patron saint of brewers, printers, and theologians.

Prayer of Saint Augustine

Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient, O Beauty so new.

Too late have I loved you!

You were within me but I was outside myself, and there I sought you!

In my weakness, I ran after the beauty of the things you have made.

You were with me, and I was not with you.

The things you have made kept me from you – the things which would have no being unless they existed in you!

You have called, you have cried, and you have pierced my deafness.

You have radiated forth, you have shined out brightly, and you have dispelled my blindness.

You have sent forth your fragrance, and I have breathed it in, and I long for you.

I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst for you.

You have touched me, and I ardently desire your peace.

Wednesday 26 August 2020

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