



## **The conversion of St Augustine.**

***St Augustine's decision to leave a life of licentiousness is considered one of the great turning points in Christianity. But a historian argues that the sin that he turned away from was not lust but greed and ambition.***

“Lord, grant me chastity and self-control – but not yet!” Many are familiar with the future St Augustine of Hippo’s prayer on the eve of his conversion to Christianity, but fewer know the story behind the prayer, and fewer still are clear on what Augustine was actually praying for. This is partly because to a

young Roman in the summer of 386, chastity was not the ascetic virtue it later became for the Church. Instead, it was a virtue of moral purity. Where sex was concerned, chastity represented the reproductive capacity of marriage, yoked with fertility to produce hearty Roman children. By no means did chastity imply abstinence, though it did imply restraint from extra- marital relations.

One can easily see how this became a shorthand for sexual abstinence when applied to Christians who had vowed to remain unmarried. But in 386 Augustine had taken no such vow. On the contrary, a Milanese heiress had accepted his proposal of marriage, and a glittering future lay before him thanks to her family’s wealth. Yet his good fortune had come at a cost. Augustine had for years lived with a concubine whom he dearly loved, and they had raised a son, Adeodatus, who was now in his teens. When the parents of his fiancée insisted as a condition of his engagement that he send his concubine away, it came as a painful wake-up call. “My heart, which clung to her, was cut and wounded and bleeding. And she went back to Africa, vowing ... that she would never know another man,” he wrote in his Confessions. As he later remembered the story, the time after her departure was one of emotional torment, made all the worse because his fiancée had not yet reached the legal age of marriage.

The prospect of a two-year waiting time before the planned wedding proved unbearable, and Augustine eventually decided to break his engagement. It is this crisis and the resulting spiritual awakening that create the frame for his conversion story. Following his earliest biographer, the monk-bishop Possidius, generations of scholars have imagined that what moved Augustine was a sudden call to live as a monk. But reading *The Confessions* carefully, we encounter not a rejection of marriage itself but of the morally untenable position caused by the ruthless social climbing that had led to his own engagement. To be sure, Augustine remembers that he and his friend Alypius had debated whether marriage or monasticism was a better way of life. But Augustine had won the argument, pointing to the example of his harmonious home life, and had persuaded his friend that marriage was the better path.

What he had missed, however, was the role of trust in that happiness. When the chance came to set aside his concubine and marry into one of the powerful clans who ruled Milan, Augustine put on a brave face and stepped forward. He seems to have believed that his happiness could be set aside and picked up again in another form. On the face of things, Augustine’s prayer for “chastity and self-control – but not yet!” has the sheepish tone of a playboy protesting that he isn’t quite ready to settle down. But the situation was more complicated. During the waiting period after sending the mother of his son away, he had taken a second concubine, on the theory that a warm bed would help him to wait out the two years. Like most elite men of his day, he had been taught to see low-status sex partners as disposable and perhaps interchangeable.

Yet in a plot twist worthy of *Love Island*, Augustine now learned an enduring truth: using empty sex to stem the pain of heartbreak doesn’t always work. The fact that replacing his bed-partner did not heal his sense of loss came to him as a revelation. His quandary now was whether or not to stick to the plan of meaningless sex followed by a marriage of convenience. Years after his conversion, when he had become both a monk and a Christian bishop, writing *The Confessions* gave Augustine an opportunity to look back with sympathy at his confused younger self. He also looked for moral lessons, and those he discovered were far-reaching. In his treatise *On the Good of Marriage* the mature Augustine argued against the common wisdom of sexual morality in his day, the double standard that allowed husbands to demand fidelity from their wives without reciprocating.

Not only did Augustine argue against the double standard, he also made the first Christian argument that an established extra-marital relationship should carry the same moral demands as the legal bond of marriage. To a modern sensibility, the view of sexual ethics shared by most of Augustine's contemporaries – both pagan and Christian – is disturbingly exploitative.

The harsh realities faced by low-status women were taken as unchallenged fact. Whether she was a slave or free, a concubine's role was to provide a service. Her status was less demeaning than that of a prostitute, and if she earned affection from her partner it might make her job easier, though it would not change her position or alter the transactional nature of the relationship. The male partner had no long-term obligation toward her or any children he might father. If he wanted children, he was expected to look for a wife, while his concubine's children remained legally fatherless. (If she was a slave, her children were the property of her owner, whether he was the father or not.)

But Augustine's view of both marriage and concubinage takes an entirely different approach. His moral reasoning begins with how human relationships can create a space to cultivate (or shy away from) virtue, especially the virtue of *fides* – faithfulness. When he sets out to define "what can be called a marriage", he begins not (as Roman law did) from the starting point of men of property begetting heirs, but from sexual faithfulness.

How, he asks in *On the Good of Marriage*, should a relationship in which "a man and a woman, neither of them married to anyone, have sex with each other not to have children, but merely to indulge in intercourse because they cannot control their lust" be classified? Asked whether such a relationship was a marriage, Augustine's contemporaries, would have answered with a firm and definitive "no". But he pushes ahead: "Doubtless it can indeed be labelled a marriage without absurdity, provided that they agree to maintain the relationship until one of them dies." He sees a consensus between the two partners, even if it is not the marriage-defining intent to produce heirs. Mutual faithfulness (*fides*) can exist, he argues, even outside of marriage. This is where Augustine's own experience comes in; he is clearly thinking back to his own spotty record. "If a man takes on some woman on a temporary basis, until such a time as he find another whom he can marry as his equal, worthy either of his rank or means" – here he is thinking about social class and about the power balance between men and women – "he is an adulterer at heart." Augustine goes out of his way to emphasise that it is the concubine, not his future wife, who is the aggrieved party. He knows his readers will be surprised by the idea that she is owed something, and he wants to emphasise the point.

One of the things Augustine seems to have learned in his years as a bishop was that low-status women had few options, and might be forced to accept a situation that was not what they would have chosen. So even when the man was unfaithful the woman's faithfulness had a value of its own. "Should she maintain sexual fidelity with him, and after he takes a wife she gives no thought to marriage herself and steels herself to refrain utterly from such sexual intercourse, I should not presume to call her an adulterer ... she is to be ranked higher than many married women."

The description echoes what he remembers in *The Confessions* about the mother of his son. In his treatise on marriage Augustine wants to share what he learned about the emotional reality of sexual relationships. He has broken with the Roman legal tradition that defined marriage according to the presence or absence of a man's intent to produce children. Instead, he suggests, a man's failure to have the right intention is irrelevant to what is right.

On this reading, the received view that Augustine was recoiling from sin when he decided not to marry is not wrong. But the sin that had tempted him was not sex; it was greed. What repulsed him, finally, was the ease with which he had been willing to betray the woman who ought (he later recognised) to have been his wife – the mother of his child – for a marriage of ambition. In the short term, Augustine's radical ideas about the sexual double standard were to have little influence on Christian practice; it would be centuries before they began to take hold. But his story has remained with us, and with it, the spark of an idea about sexual ethics.

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