

SAINT AUGUSTINE
CONFESSIONS



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

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ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, the great Doctor of the Latin Church, was born at Thagaste in North Africa, in AD 354. The son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, he was brought up as a Christian, and at the age of sixteen went to Carthage to finish his education for the law. In 375 on reading Cicero's *Hortensius* he became deeply interested in philosophy. He was converted to the Manichean religion, some of whose tenets he continued to hold after he had founded his own school of rhetoric at Rome, in 383. At Milan he was offered a professorship and came under the influence both of Neoplatonism and of the preaching of St Ambrose. After agonizing inward conflict he renounced all his unorthodox beliefs and was baptized in 387. He then returned to Africa and formed his own community; but in 391 he was ordained priest against his wishes, and five years later he was chosen bishop of Hippo.

For thirty-four years St Augustine lived in community with his cathedral clergy. His written output was vast; there survive 113 books and treatises, over 200 letters, and more than 500 sermons. Two of his longest works, his *Confessions* and *City of God*, have made an abiding mark not only on Christian theology but on the psychology and political philosophy of the West since the Dark Ages. He died in 430 as invading Vandals were besieging Hippo.

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The lights which God set to shine in the firmament on the fourth day are wisdom and knowledge given to men so that those who possess them also shine like lights in the world

On the fifth day God commanded the waters to bring forth moving creatures, that is, signs and sacraments by which men are convinced of the truth and are helped to overcome the temptations of the world – The winged things, which the waters were also commanded to produce, are the teachers who bring God’s message to man

On the sixth day the earth was told to produce the living soul, that is, the soul which lives because it has

*faith and keeps itself intact from the love of the world –
Man was made in the likeness of God in that he was
given the gift of reason by which he might understand
God's truth – His rule over the animals is a symbol of
this and of the power of spiritual judgement given to the
Church – The plants given to man for his food represent
works of charity which nourish the soul*

*On the seventh day God rested, as we too shall rest
in eternity when our work in the world is done*

Introduction

THE life of Saint Augustine has a special appeal because he was a great sinner who became a great saint, and greatness is all the more admirable if it is achieved against odds. From his own account we know that he lived a life of sin until the age of thirty-two, and even after he was intellectually convinced of Christian truth he was prevented from accepting the faith by weakness in dealing with sexual temptation. In the *Confessions* he paints so black a picture of his past that the reader may easily lose sight of the good qualities which he certainly possessed as a young man. Whether he was a greater sinner than others living in the notorious city of Carthage we cannot tell, but whatever his vices, they were not without compensating virtues. Some of the most striking passages in the book are those in which he writes of his mother, and it is clear that he was always a good and affectionate son, although he may not have appreciated Saint Monica's true worth until after his own conversion. On her deathbed she told him that she had never heard him speak a harsh word against her, and this is not hard to believe, for whatever other sins he felt himself bound to confess, unkindness to others was not one of them. He showed unusual loyalty, too, to the mistress whom he kept for so many years, and he was truly fond of Adeodatus, the son whom she bore him. Outside his own family he also had a remarkable gift for making friends. This was in itself a danger, for as a boy it was his love of their company that led him to rob an orchard. Later, in adolescence, simply to win their admiration, he used to boast of sins which he had not committed, and it was most probably by their influence and example that he became a regular spectator at the theatre and learned to enjoy the cruel sport of the arena.¹ Yet he did not always allow his friends to lead him into adventures which he would not have undertaken by himself, and it is a point in his favour that he refused to take

¹ Saint Augustine's insistence upon the wickedness of the theatre needs some explanation. The morality of plays drawn from mythology was often repugnant to Christians. Even worse were the obscene performances given during the pagan festivals, at which the loves of the gods were realistically mimed before audiences of both sexes.

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part in the activities of the rowdies who made it their business to scandalize newcomers to the schools at Carthage. Add to this the obvious fact that he was a serious and studious youth and it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that the terms in which he writes of his sinful past are unnecessarily harsh. Perhaps his training as a teacher of rhetoric accounts for this. He was, after all, trying to make out a case against himself before an audience which was predisposed to believe him a saintly man. When he wrote the *Confessions* he already had a considerable reputation for sanctity, and one of the reasons why he wrote was to persuade his admirers that any good qualities he had were his by the grace of God, who had saved him so often from himself.

Of all the sins which he wished to confess there was one which was at the root of all the others. It was not an isolated act or a repeated habit, but a condition of mind which was part of his life and provided him with a ready excuse for doing what his conscience told him to be wrong. For when, as a young man, he became curious about the world and its origin and started his search for the truth, instead of turning to God in simple faith he accepted the theories by which the Manichees explained away these problems. As a catechumen he had received some instruction, but he had no clear idea of what Christians believed. As literature, the Scriptures compared poorly with the polished prose of Cicero and he thought them fit only for the simple-minded. He was too conceited to study them and his reason could not accept the discrepancies and contradictions which he thought they contained. He could not account for the presence of evil in a world created by a God who was good, nor could he understand that God is a spiritual Being. In his perplexity he turned to the Manichees, whose specious reasoning seemed to supply the answers to these problems as well as a system of morals which permitted the blame for sin to be cast elsewhere than on the sinner. The dangers of these beliefs were still very present to Saint Augustine when he wrote the *Confessions*, for it was only ten or twelve years since he had escaped from them himself. In the meantime he had written at least five books against the Manichees and no man was better qualified to do so than himself. The *Confessions*, of course, cannot be considered as simply another work of controversy. They are far too personal for that. But as he wrote them Saint Augustine was conscious above all

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else that the Manichees were wrong and that only the mercy of God had saved him from this evil.

He was only eighteen when he first allied himself with the Manichees. Their founder Manes, or Mani, a fanatic who regarded himself as the Paraclete, had been crucified in Persia in 277. His religion spread rapidly both during and after his lifetime, and when Saint Augustine came under its influence a century later, there were groups of Manichees throughout the Roman world, especially in North Africa. By this time they were a proscribed sect and were obliged to practise their religion in secret, but numerically they were strong and their doctrines, with various modifications, survived into the Middle Ages. Manes did not entirely reject Christianity, but since he held that its teaching was only partially true, he supplemented it by borrowing from other religions and adding his own theories. He alleged that there were inconsistencies in the Scriptures and that the text was corrupt and therefore untrustworthy. In particular he denied the virgin birth and Christ's crucifixion, since the flesh was tainted with evil and any association with it was unworthy of God.

This belief was derived from the fundamental doctrine of Manicheism, which was that in the beginning there were two independent principles described as Good and Evil or Light and Darkness. The evil power invaded the kingdom of the good power and in part captured it, so that the two became mixed. Matter was therefore composed partly of good and partly of evil, both being present in a given substance in a greater or smaller degree. Good and evil were permanently in conflict because the captive particles of good or light were always struggling to escape from the evil or darkness which enveloped them. In flesh of all sorts very few traces of the light-element were present, and for this reason meat was not to be eaten by a good Manichee. Light was present in greater quantities in vegetable matter, which could therefore be eaten. The light-particles were freed from imprisonment when the elect, or higher order of Manichees, ate these foods, but it was wrong for a member of the sect to cut down a tree or even pluck fruit, or to commit any other act of violence harmful to the good elements in plants. These operations were to be performed by the wicked on behalf of the Manichees, that is, by those who were considered as lost souls and belonged to neither the higher nor the lower order of the sect. The elect were supposed to be

particularly scrupulous and to avoid either doing violence to the good elements or taking any action which might assist the powers of darkness. They were forbidden to marry, because the act of procreation was construed as collusion with these powers. For the lower order of the sect, called 'hearers' or 'aspirants', the rules were less strict, but they were expected to serve the elect and to give food to no one but them, since to do so would be to deliver the good elements into the hands of the devil.

It seems incredible that a man of Saint Augustine's intellectual calibre could have been taken in by these fantastic theories, but the Manichees' plausible explanation of the problem of evil and his own inability to think of God except as a material being combined to win him over. At first he was convinced by these arguments and even influenced others to accept them. Although he never rose to a higher degree than that of aspirant, he remained with the sect for nearly ten years, during which he carried out the duties expected of its junior members. But before the end of this period serious doubts had begun to trouble him. He was assured that Faustus, a leading figure among the Manichees, would be able to settle all his problems, but when this Solomon proved incompetent, he at length determined to remain a Manichee in name only, while he waited for something better to turn up.

Once he had made this decision his mind was open to other influences. He was introduced to the philosophy of the Neo-Platonists and their books helped him towards a conception of the spiritual nature of God. At the same time he began to understand that evil results from man's misuse of free will. This was the beginning of conversion. He listened with greater attention to the sermons of Saint Ambrose, to which he had first been attracted only by professional interest in the preacher's reputation as a fine speaker. He learned how to approach the Scriptures and how to look for the spiritual meaning behind the literal sense. He went on to read Saint Paul's Epistles, where for the first time he heard of God's mercy and grace and learned to think of Christ as the Redeemer and no longer simply as a specially gifted teacher. Finally there came the decisive moment when the truth became so clear to him that he could no longer reject it.

Saint Augustine's decision to accept the faith is of course the central

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point of the *Confessions*. After it he continues the narrative in order to include his baptism and the beginning of the return journey to Africa, during which his mother died. This takes us to the end of Book IX, but at this point the biographical part of the book comes to an end. In Book X Saint Augustine examines his ability, at the time of writing, to deal with temptation in its various forms, and Books XI–XIII are an exposition of the first chapter of Genesis. This apparent lack of cohesion between the two parts of the work has been the subject of much debate. Though it is generally agreed that Book X was a later interpolation, inserted to satisfy readers who were naturally curious to know how the faith had changed Saint Augustine's life, there is less agreement about the purpose of Books XI–XIII. The traditional explanation is that they are no more than an appendix, but this avoids the issue, since appendixes are normally added for a definite purpose.

Some commentators are content to point out that the first nine books describe Saint Augustine's search for the truth, while the last three contain his thoughts upon its meaning after he has found it. Others see a connexion between the pattern of the *Confessions* and Saint Augustine's method for the instruction of catechumens. In his work *De catechizandis rudibus*, written only four or five years after the *Confessions*, he suggests that the catechist should first point out to the convert that God has always taken good care of him and then proceed to instruct him in the Scriptures, starting with the story of the creation. This plan of instruction clearly corresponds with the arrangement of the *Confessions*, and the suggestion is that Saint Augustine is applying the method to his own case in retrospect. Another view, more recently put forward,¹ is that Saint Augustine's original plan was to write a complete exposition of the faith as it is derived from Scripture, but found it too lengthy a task and abandoned it after he had dealt with the first chapter of Genesis. The story of his own early life and errors was intended merely as a preamble. The evidence in support of this theory is taken chiefly from certain passages² in the text where the author implies that he is hastening to complete the narrative part of his work in order to devote himself to other more important matters.

¹ Courcelle, Pierre. *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin*. Paris (Boccard), 1950.

² e.g. in Book IX, chapter 4, and Book XI, chapter 2.

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Probably there is some truth in all these explanations, although it is hard to believe that the *Confessions* as we have received them are only the beginning of a longer work, projected but never finished. Whatever his precise plan may have been, it is unlikely that Saint Augustine would have been content merely to repudiate his early errors. His logical mind would require, not only that falsehood should be demolished, but also that the truth should be made apparent. If he was to confess his errors, he must also confess the true beliefs for which he had renounced them, and the foundation of these was to be found in the book of Genesis. What better answer could be made to the Manichean theory of the twin powers of good and evil than God's own statement that he made heaven and earth and that he saw what he had made and found it very good? Saint Augustine was satisfied that this was all that was needed to reduce the fundamental principle of Manicheism to absurdity.¹

If this was how the work was planned, the pattern of the *Confessions* becomes clear. In the first place it is a confession of the writer's sin and error, in the second a recognition of God's goodness and truth. These two purposes are complementary and the title of the book covers both. In the third place, because he has been saved from error and the truth has been made clear to him, Saint Augustine offers praise to God and thanks him for his mercy. He is led from confession of sin to confession of faith and finally to confession of God's glory. The first words in the book, '*Magnus es, Domine, et laudabilis valde*', are the key to the whole.

There has been no lack of English translators of the *Confessions*. The first to attempt the task was Sir Tobie Matthew, the courtier and diplomat, whose version was published anonymously and without imprint at Saint-Omer in 1620. It contained a long and controversial introduction to which the next translator, William Watts, Rector of St Alban's, Wood Street, took objection on the ground that it was 'so arrantly, partially Popish'. He began his own translation, which was published in London in 1631, as a Lenten devotion, but, he tells us, 'I quickly found it to exercise more than my devotion: it exercised my skill (all I had): it exercised my patience, it exercised my friends too, for 'tis incomparably the hardest taske that ever I yet undertooke.'

¹See Book XIII, chapter 30.

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Watts was followed by Abraham Woodhead, the Catholic writer, who published a translation of the first ten books in 1660. An anonymous version, now recognized as the work of Bishop Challoner, appeared in 1739; this also contained only Books 1-x. Next came E. B. Pusey's revision of Watts, published in 1838, which became the standard translation. Entirely new versions were produced in 1878 by W. H. Hutchings (Books 1-x) and in 1897 by C. Bigg (Books 1-1x), and in the last quarter of a century, to my knowledge, there have been at least five new translations, some of them published in the United States and not easily available in this country. Translators in other languages have also produced their quota. These facts alone are ample evidence of the continued and widespread interest in Saint Augustine, for few books have been translated so often into so many languages.

In preparing this translation I decided at the outset to use 'you' rather than 'thou'. Although the *Confessions*, as might be expected, are written in the form of prayer, it seemed to me that in a work of this length it would merely be tiresome to retain the conventional usage. For the sake of consistency I have also taken the liberty of changing 'thou' to 'you' in the quotations from Scripture. These are from the Knox version and are printed in italics.¹ I have also modified the English text of Knox, within strict limits, wherever Saint Augustine modifies the Latin text, that is, wherever he omits a phrase or adds words of his own. Some transposition of words in the English text has also been necessary for grammatical reasons, because Saint Augustine frequently combines passages from Scripture, not only with one another, but also with sentences of his own. In a small number of cases it has been impossible to quote the Knox version and I have had to content myself with giving the appropriate reference. The reasons for this are several. Too much stress need not be laid upon the first of them, which is that the text from which the saint quotes - presumably from memory - is earlier than the Latin version of Saint Jerome; this accounts for some variations in wording. In the second place, while it may be grammatically possible to combine two or more sentences as they are written in one language, it does not necessarily follow that they can be combined in the same way once

¹ I have used both Knox versions of the Psalms indiscriminately. The reference is to the Vulgate numeration.

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they have been translated independently into another idiom; here again the number of cases is small. Thirdly, in a few passages the meaning which Saint Augustine elicits from the sacred text does not correspond with that given in Knox. The most obvious example is his interpretation of Genesis 1: 1, 2 (see Books XI and XII). He may sometimes have been misled by an ambiguous Latin version, for whereas Knox translated from the Vulgate 'in the light of the Hebrew and Greek originals', Saint Augustine is known to have had a profound distaste for Greek and it is very doubtful whether he had any knowledge of Hebrew.

R.S.P.-C.

Dates of Events Recorded in the Confessions

- A.D.
- 354 13 November: birth of Augustine at Thagaste (now Souk-Ahras, south of Bône, in Algeria). He has at least one brother, Navigius, and two sisters, whose names are not recorded. His father, Patricius, a small landowner and official of the local government, is still a pagan, but Monica, his mother, is a devout Christian.
- 365-9 At school at Madaura (now Mdaurouch) about twenty miles from Thagaste.
- 369-70 He spends a year at home while his father saves money to send him to Carthage.
- 370 Conversion of Patricius.
- 371-4 Augustine studies at Carthage.
- 371 Death of Patricius.
- 372 Birth of Augustine's son Adeodatus.
- 375 Augustine teaches rhetoric at Thagaste.
- 376-83 Teaching in Carthage.
- 383 The voyage to Rome.
- 384 Augustine goes to Milan as professor of rhetoric and meets Ambrose.
- 385 Monica arrives in Milan.
- 386 February: the persecution of Justina.
June: discovery of the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius.
July: Augustine's talks with Simplicianus.
August: the episode in the garden and Augustine's conversion. He goes to Cassiciacum (now Cassago in Brianza, near Como).
- 387 March: he returns to Milan.
24 April, Holy Saturday: baptism of Augustine, Alypius, and Adeodatus.
Autumn: the journey to Ostia. Death of Monica.

At this point the narrative part of the *Confessions* ends. After his mother's death Augustine spent some months in Rome, returning to Thagaste in August 388. In the following year Adeodatus died. By now Augustine was living a monastic life, devoting himself to study and writing. In 391 he visited Hippo (now Bône) and was persuaded by the bishop, Valerius, to offer himself for ordination. This meant that he had to leave the

LIST OF DATES OF EVENTS

community at Thagaste, but he was permitted to found a new monastery near Hippo. In 396 he was consecrated assistant bishop of Hippo to aid the aged Valerius who died a year later. The care of the diocese now fell upon Augustine and was to occupy him fully for the rest of his life.

Besides his pastoral work Augustine was a powerful adversary of all heretics and enemies of the Church. Much of his prodigious literary output was devoted to this cause, but the importance of the *Confessions* (*Confessiones*), written in 397-8, is as a personal document and statement of faith. In 410 came the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths. This was the occasion which inspired Augustine to write *City of God* (*De civitate Dei*), his great work in twenty-two books, begun in 413 and completed in 426. The fall of the city after a thousand years, during which no foreign invader had penetrated its walls, was attributed by many to loss of faith in the pagan gods, whose cult had recently been largely suppressed by the joint emperors Gratian and Theodosius. The disaster was hailed as a direct consequence of the spread of Christianity, and this was a challenge which Augustine could not ignore. After disproving the claim that the prosperity of man depended upon the propitiation of a miscellaneous array of gods, he went on to define the Christian answer to the religious, philosophical, and political problems of the world and its government.

The *Confessions* and the *City of God* rightly belong to the great literature of the world. Augustine's numerous other works are read chiefly by theologians and scholars. In addition to a great many letters and sermons, of which about five hundred have been preserved, he wrote books on theology and philosophy, controversial works against the Manichees, Donatists, and Pelagians, and works of biblical exegesis.

In 428 the Vandals invaded North Africa and Hippo was under siege from May 430 to July 431. In the fourth month of the siege, on 28 August 430, Augustine died. In 497, when the Arian king of the Vandals, Thrasamund, forced the bishops to leave Numidia, they carried Augustine's remains with them to Sardinia. The island was repeatedly raided by the Saracens in the eighth century and during the incursion of 721-2, to save the body from desecration, Liutprand, king of the Lombards, sent envoys to ransom it. They brought it to Pavia in northern Italy, where it was re-interred in the monastery of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro.

BOOK I

I

CAN any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?¹ How magnificent His strength! How inscrutable his wisdom!² Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you *thwart the proud*.³ But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.

Grant me, Lord, to know and understand whether a man is first to pray to you for help or to praise you, and whether he must know you before he can call you to his aid. If he does not know you, how can he pray to you? For he may call for some other help, mistaking it for yours.

Or are men to pray to you and learn to know you through their prayers? *Only, how are they to call upon the Lord until they have learned to believe in him? And how are they to believe in him without a preacher to listen to?*⁴

*Those who look for the Lord will cry out in praise of him,*⁵ because all who look for him shall find him, and when they find him they will praise him. I shall look for you, Lord, by praying to you and as I pray I shall believe in you, because we have had preachers to tell us about you. It is my faith that calls to you, Lord, the faith which you gave me and made to live in me through the merits of your Son, who became man, and through the ministry of your preacher.

¹ Ps. 144: 3 (145: 3). In references to the Psalms the number according to the Vulgate is given first. This is followed by the Authorized Version number in brackets. ² Ps. 146: 5 (147: 5). ³ 1 Pet., v. 5. ⁴ Rom. 10: 14.

⁵ Ps. 21: 27 (22: 26).

How shall I call upon my God for aid, when the call I make is for my Lord and my God to come into myself? What place is there in me to which my God can come, what place that can receive the God who made heaven and earth? Does this then mean, O Lord my God, that there is in me something fit to contain you? Can even heaven and earth, which you made and in which you made me, contain you? Or, since nothing that exists could exist without you, does this mean that whatever exists does, in this sense, contain you? If this is so, since I too exist, why do I ask you to come into me? For I should not be there at all unless, in this way, you were already present within me. I am not in hell, and yet you are there too, for *if I sink down to the world beneath, you are present still.*¹ So, then, I should be null and void and could not exist at all, if you, my God, were not in me.

Or is it rather that I should not exist, unless I existed in you? For *all things find in you their origin, their impulse, the centre of their being.*² This, Lord, is the true answer to my question. But if I exist in you, how can I call upon you to come to me? And where would you come from? For you, my God, have said that you *fill heaven and earth,*³ but I cannot go beyond the bounds of heaven and earth so that you may leave them to come to me.

Do heaven and earth, then, contain the whole of you, since you fill them? Or, when once you have filled them, is some part of you left over because they are too small to hold you? If this is so, when you have filled heaven and earth, does that part of you which remains flow over into some other place? Or is it that you have no need to be contained in anything, because you contain all things in yourself and fill them by reason of the very fact that you contain them? For the things which you fill by containing them do not sustain and support you as a water-vessel supports the liquid which fills it. Even if they were broken to pieces, you would not flow out of them and away. And when you pour yourself out over us, you are not drawn down to us but draw us up to yourself: you are not scattered away, but you gather us together.

¹ Ps. 138: 8 (139: 8).² Rom. 11: 36.³ Jer. 23: 24.

You fill all things, but do you fill them with your whole self? Or is it that the whole of creation is too small to hold you and therefore holds only a part of you? And is this same part of you present in all things at once, or do different things contain different parts of you, greater or smaller according to their size? Does this mean that one part of you is greater and another smaller? Or are you present entirely everywhere at once, and no single thing contains the whole of you?

4

What, then, is the God I worship? He can be none but the Lord God himself, for *who but the Lord is God? What other refuge can there be, except our God?*¹ You, my God, are supreme, utmost in goodness, mightiest and all-powerful, most merciful and most just. You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present amongst us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you. You are unchangeable and yet you change all things. You are never new, never old, and yet all things have new life from you. You are the unseen power that brings decline upon the proud. You are ever active, yet always at rest. You gather all things to yourself, though you suffer no need. You support, you fill, and you protect all things. You create them, nourish them, and bring them to perfection. You seek to make them your own, though you lack for nothing. You love your creatures, but with a gentle love. You treasure them, but without apprehension. You grieve for wrong, but suffer no pain. You can be angry and yet serene. Your works are varied, but your purpose is one and the same. You welcome all who come to you, though you never lost them. You are never in need yet are glad to gain, never covetous yet you exact a return for your gifts. We give abundantly to you so that we may deserve a reward; yet which of us has anything that does not come from you? You repay us what we deserve, and yet you owe nothing to any. You release us from our debts, but you lose nothing thereby. You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you.

¹ Ps. 17: 32 (18: 31).

Who will grant me to rest content in you? To whom shall I turn for the gift of your coming into my heart and filling it to the brim, so that I may forget all the wrong I have done and embrace you alone, my only source of good?

Why do you mean so much to me? Help me to find words to explain. Why do I mean so much to you, that you should command me to love you? And if I fail to love you, you are angry and threaten me with great sorrow, as if not to love you were not sorrow enough in itself. Have pity on me and help me, O Lord my God. Tell me why you mean so much to me. *Whisper in my heart, I am here to save you.*¹ Speak so that I may hear your words. My heart has ears ready to listen to you, Lord. Open them wide and *whisper in my heart, I am here to save you.* I shall hear your voice and make haste to clasp you to myself. Do not hide your face away from me, for I would gladly meet my death to see it, since not to see it would be death indeed.

My soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it. It is in ruins, but I ask you to remake it. It contains much that you will not be pleased to see: this I know and do not hide. But who is to rid it of these things? There is no one but you to whom I can say: *if I have sinned unwittingly, do you absolve me. Keep me ever your own servant, far from pride.*² *I trust, and trusting I find words to utter.*³ Lord, you know that this is true. For have I not *made my transgression known to you?* Did you not *remit the guilt of my sin?*⁴ I do not wrangle with you for judgement,⁵ for you are Truth itself, and I have no wish to delude myself, for fear that my malice should be self-betrayed.⁶ No, I do not wrangle with you, for, *if you, Lord, will keep record of our iniquities, Master, who has strength to bear it?*⁷

But, dust and ashes though I am, let me appeal to your pity, since it is to you in your mercy that I speak, not to a man, who would simply laugh at me. Perhaps you too may laugh at me, but you will

¹ Ps. 34: 3 (35: 3). ² Ps. 18: 13, 14 (19: 12, 13). ³ Ps. 115: 10 (116: 10).

⁴ Ps. 31: 5 (32: 5). ⁵ See Jer. 2: 29. ⁶ See Ps. 26: 12 (27: 12).

⁷ Ps. 129: 3 (130: 3).

relent and have pity on me.¹ For all I want to tell you, Lord, is that I do not know where I came from when I was born into this life which leads to death – or should I say, this death which leads to life? This much is hidden from me. But, although I do not remember it all myself, I know that when I came into the world all the comforts which your mercy provides were there ready for me. This I was told by my parents, the father who begat me and the mother who conceived me, the two from whose bodies you formed me in the limits of time. So it was that I was given the comfort of woman's milk.

But neither my mother nor my nurses filled their breasts of their own accord, for it was you who used them, as your law prescribes, to give me infant's food and a share of the riches which you distribute even among the very humblest of all created things. It was also by your gift that I did not wish for more than you gave, and that my nurses gladly passed on to me what you gave to them. They did this because they loved me in the way that you had ordained, and their love made them anxious to give to me what they had received in plenty from you. For it was to their own good that what was good for me should come to me from them; though, of course, it did not come to me from them but, through them, from you, because you, my God, are the source of all good and *everywhere you preserve me.*² All this I have learned since then, because all the gifts you have given to me, both spiritual and material, proclaim the truth of it. But in those days all I knew was how to suck, and how to lie still when my body sensed comfort or cry when it felt pain.

Later on I began to smile as well, first in my sleep, and then when I was awake. Others told me this about myself, and I believe what they said, because we see other babies do the same. But I cannot remember it myself. Little by little I began to realize where I was and to want to make my wishes known to others, who might satisfy them. But this I could not do, because my wishes were inside me, while other people were outside, and they had no faculty which could penetrate my mind. So I would toss my arms and legs about and make noises, hoping that such few signs as I could make would show my meaning, though they were quite unlike what they were meant to mime. And if my wishes were not carried out, either because they had not been understood or because what I wanted would have harmed me, I

¹ See Jer. 12: 15. ² 11 Kings (2 Sam.) 23: 5.

would get cross with my elders, who were not at my beck and call, and with people who were not my servants, simply because they did not attend to my wishes; and I would take my revenge by bursting into tears. By watching babies I have learnt that this is how they behave, and they, quite unconsciously, have done more than those who brought me up and knew all about it to convince me that I behaved in just the same way myself.

My infancy is long since dead, yet I am still alive. But you, Lord, live for ever and nothing in you dies, because you have existed from before the very beginning of the ages, before anything that could be said to go before, and you are God and Lord of all you have created. In you are the first causes of all things not eternal, the unchangeable origins of all things that suffer change, the everlasting reason of all things that are subject to the passage of time and have no reason in themselves. Have pity, then, on me, O God, for it is pity that I need. Answer my prayer and tell me whether my infancy followed upon some other stage of life that died before it. Was it the stage of life that I spent in my mother's womb? For I have learnt a little about that too, and I have myself seen women who were pregnant. But what came before that, O God my Delight? Was I anywhere? Was I anybody? These are questions I must put to you, for I have no one else to answer them. Neither my father nor my mother could tell me, nor could I find out from the experience of other people or from my own memory. Do my questions provoke you to smile at me and bid me simply to acknowledge you and praise you for what I do know?

I do acknowledge you, Lord of heaven and earth, and I praise you for my first beginnings, although I cannot remember them. But you have allowed men to discover these things about themselves by watching other babies, and also to learn much from what women have to tell. I know that I was a living person even at that age, and as I came towards the end of infancy I tried to find signs to convey my feelings to others. Where could such a living creature come from if not from you, O Lord? Can it be that any man has skill to fabricate himself? Or can there be some channel by which we derive our life and our very existence from some other source than you? Surely we can only derive them from our Maker, from you, Lord, to whom living and being are not different things, since infinite life and infinite being are

one and the same. For you are infinite and never change. In you 'today' never comes to an end: and yet our 'today' does come to an end in you, because time, as well as everything else, exists in you. If it did not, it would have no means of passing. And since your years never come to an end, for you they are simply 'today'. The countless days of our lives and of our forefathers' lives have passed by within your 'today'. From it they have received their due measure of duration and their very existence. And so it will be with all the other days which are still to come. But you yourself are eternally the same. In your 'today' you will make all that is to exist tomorrow and thereafter, and in your 'today' you have made all that existed yesterday and for ever before.

Need it concern me if some people cannot understand this? Let them ask what it means, and be glad to ask: but they may content themselves with the question alone. For it is better for them to find you and leave the question unanswered than to find the answer without finding you.

7

Hear me, O God! How wicked are the sins of men! Men say this and you pity them, because you made man, but you did not make sin in him.

Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth. Who can show me what my sins were? Some small baby in whom I can see all that I do not remember about myself? What sins, then, did I commit when I was a baby myself? Was it a sin to cry when I wanted to feed at the breast? I am too old now to feed on mother's milk, but if I were to cry for the kind of food suited to my age, others would rightly laugh me to scorn and remonstrate with me. So then too I deserved a scolding for what I did; but since I could not have understood the scolding, it would have been unreasonable, and most unusual, to rebuke me. We root out these faults and discard them as we grow up, and this is proof enough that they are faults, because I have never seen a man purposely throw out the good when he clears away the bad. It can hardly be right for a child, even at that age, to cry for everything, including things which would harm him; to work himself into a tantrum against people older than himself and

not required to obey him; and to try his best to strike and hurt others who know better than he does, including his own parents, when they do not give in to him and refuse to pander to whims which would only do him harm. This shows that, if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.

I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy. This much is common knowledge. Mothers and nurses say that they can work such things out of the system by one means or another, but surely it cannot be called innocence, when the milk flows in such abundance from its source, to object to a rival desperately in need and depending for his life on this one form of nourishment? Such faults are not small or unimportant, but we are tender-hearted and bear with them because we know that the child will grow out of them. It is clear that they are not mere peccadilloes, because the same faults are intolerable in older persons.

You, O Lord my God, gave me my life and my body when I was born. You gave my body its five senses; you furnished it with limbs and gave it its proper proportions; and you implanted in it all the instincts necessary for the welfare and safety of a living creature. For these gifts you command me to acknowledge you and *praise you and sing in honour of your name*,¹ because you are Almighty God, because you are good, and because I owe you praise for these things, even if you had done nothing else. No one but you can do these things, because you are the one and only mould in which all things are cast and the perfect form which shapes all things, and everything takes its place according to your law.

I do not remember that early part of my life, O Lord, but I believe what other people have told me about it and from watching other babies I can conclude that I also lived as they do. But, true though my conclusions may be, I do not like to think of that period as part of the same life I now lead, because it is dim and forgotten and, in this sense, it is no different from the time I spent in my mother's womb. But if *I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me*,² where, I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant, ever innocent? But I will say no more about that time, for since no trace of it remains in my memory, it need no longer concern me.

¹ Ps. 91: 2 (92: 1). ² Ps. 50: 7 (51: 5).

The next stage in my life, as I grew up, was boyhood. Or would it be truer to say that boyhood overtook me and followed upon my infancy – not that my infancy left me, for, if it did, where did it go? All the same, it was no longer there, because I ceased to be a baby unable to talk, and was now a boy with the power of speech. I can remember that time, and later on I realized how I had learnt to speak. It was not my elders who showed me the words by some set system of instruction, in the way that they taught me to read not long afterwards; but, instead, I taught myself by using the intelligence which you, my God, gave to me. For when I tried to express my meaning by crying out and making various sounds and movements, so that my wishes should be obeyed, I found that I could not convey all that I meant or make myself understood by everyone whom I wished to understand me. So my memory prompted me. I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they had named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name which they gave to it, and their actions clearly showed what they meant, for there is a kind of universal language, consisting of expressions of the face and eyes, gestures and tones of voice, which can show whether a person means to ask for something and get it, or refuse it and have nothing to do with it. So, by hearing words arranged in various phrases and constantly repeated, I gradually pieced together what they stood for, and when my tongue had mastered the pronunciation, I began to express my wishes by means of them. In this way I made my wants known to my family and they made theirs known to me, and I took a further step into the stormy life of human society, although I was still subject to the authority of my parents and the will of my elders.

But, O God my God, I now went through a period of suffering and humiliation. I was told that it was right and proper for me as a boy to pay attention to my teachers, so that I should do well at my study of grammar and get on in the world. This was the way to gain the

respect of others and win for myself what passes for wealth in this world. So I was sent to school to learn to read. I was too small to understand what purpose it might serve and yet, if I was idle at my studies, I was beaten for it, because beating was favoured by tradition. Countless boys long since forgotten had built up this stony path for us to tread and we were made to pass along it, adding to the toil and sorrow of the sons of Adam.

But we found that some men prayed to you, Lord, and we learned from them to do the same, thinking of you in the only way that we could understand, as some great person who could listen to us and help us, even though we could not see you or hear you or touch you. I was still a boy when I first began to pray to you, my Help and Refuge. I used to prattle away to you, and though I was small, my devotion was great when I begged you not to let me be beaten at school. Sometimes, for my own good, you did not grant my prayer, and then my elders and even my parents, who certainly wished me no harm, would laugh at the beating I got – and in those days beatings were my one great bugbear.

O Lord, throughout the world men beseech you to preserve them from the rack and the hook and various similar tortures which terrify them. Some people are merely callous, but if a man clings to you with great devotion, how can his piety inspire him to find it in his heart to make light of these tortures, when he loves those who dread them so fearfully? And yet this was how our parents scoffed at the torments which we boys suffered at the hands of our masters. For we feared the whip just as much as others fear the rack, and we, no less than they, begged you to preserve us from it. But we sinned by reading and writing and studying less than was expected of us. We lacked neither memory nor intelligence, because by your will, O Lord, we had as much of both as was sufficient for our years. But we enjoyed playing games and were punished for them by men who played games themselves. However, grown-up games are known as 'business', and even though boys' games are much the same, they are punished for them by their elders. No one pities either the boys or the men, though surely we deserved pity, for I cannot believe that a good judge would approve of the beatings I received as a boy on the ground that my games delayed my progress in studying subjects which would enable me to play a less creditable game later in life.

BOOK I

Was the master who beat me himself very different from me? If he were worsted by a colleague in some petty argument, he would be convulsed with anger and envy, much more so than I was when a playmate beat me at a game of ball.

10

And yet I sinned, O Lord my God, creator and arbiter of all natural things, but arbiter only, not creator, of sin. I sinned, O Lord, by disobeying my parents and the masters of whom I have spoken. For, whatever purpose they had in mind, later on I might have put to good use all the things which they wanted me to learn. I was disobedient, not because I chose something better than they proposed to me, but simply from the love of games. For I liked to score a fine win at sport or to have my ears tickled by the make-believe of the stage, which only made them itch the more. As time went on my eyes shone more and more with the same eager curiosity, because I wanted to see the shows and sports which grown-ups enjoyed. The patrons who pay for the production of these shows are held in esteem such as most parents would wish for their children. Yet the same parents willingly allow their children to be flogged if they are distracted by these displays from the studies which are supposed to fit them to grow rich and give the same sort of shows themselves. Look on these things with pity, O Lord, and free us who now call upon you from such delusions. Set free also those who have not yet called upon you, so that they may pray to you and you may free them from this folly.

11

While still a boy I had been told of the eternal life promised to us by Our Lord, who humbled himself and came down amongst us proud sinners. As a catechumen, I was blessed regularly from birth with the sign of the Cross and was seasoned with God's salt, for, O Lord, my mother placed great hope in you. Once as a child I was taken suddenly ill with a disorder of the stomach and was on the point of death. You, my God, were my guardian even then, and you saw the fervour and strength of my faith as I appealed to the piety of my own mother and to the mother of us all, your Church, to give me the baptism of

Christ your Son, who is my God and my Master. My earthly mother was deeply anxious, because in the pure faith of her heart, she was in greater labour to ensure my eternal salvation than she had been at my birth. Had I not quickly recovered, she would have hastened to see that I was admitted to the sacraments of salvation and washed clean by acknowledging you, Lord Jesus, for the pardon of my sins. So my washing in the waters of baptism was postponed, in the surmise that, if I continued to live, I should defile myself again with sin and, after baptism, the guilt of pollution would be greater and more dangerous. Even at that age I already believed in you, and so did my mother and the whole household except for my father. But, in my heart, he did not gain the better of my mother's piety and prevent me from believing in Christ just because he still disbelieved himself. For she did all that she could to see that you, my God, should be a Father to me rather than he. In this you helped her to turn the scales against her husband, whom she always obeyed because by obeying him she obeyed your law, thereby showing greater virtue than he did.

I ask you, my God - for, if it is your will, I long to know - for what purpose was my baptism postponed at that time? Was it for my good that the reins which held me from sin were slackened? Or is it untrue that they were slackened? If not, why do we continually hear people say, even nowadays, 'Leave him alone and let him do it. He is not yet baptized'? Yet when the health of the body is at stake, no one says 'Let him get worse. He is not yet cured.' It would, then, have been much better if I had been healed at once and if all that I and my family could do had been done to make sure that once my soul had received its salvation, its safety should be left in your keeping, since its salvation had come from you. This would surely have been the better course. But my mother well knew how many great tides of temptation threatened me before I grew up, and she chose to let them beat upon the as yet unmoulded clay rather than upon the finished image which had received the stamp of baptism.

These temptations were thought to be less of a danger in boyhood than in adolescence. But even as a boy I did not care for lessons and I disliked being forced to study. All the same I was compelled to learn

and good came to me as a result, although it was not of my own making. For I would not have studied at all if I had not been obliged to do so, and what a person does against his will is not to his own credit, even if what he does is good in itself. Nor was the good which came of it due to those who compelled me to study, but to you, my God. For they had not the insight to see that I might put the lessons which they forced me to learn to any other purpose than the satisfaction of man's insatiable desire for the poverty he calls wealth and the infamy he knows as fame. But you, who *take every hair of our heads into your reckoning*,¹ used for my benefit the mistaken ideas of all those who insisted on making me study; and you used the mistake I made myself, in not wishing to study, as a punishment which I deserved to pay, for I was a great sinner for so small a boy. In this way you turned their faults to my advantage and justly punished me for my own. For this is what you have ordained and so it is with us, that every soul that sins brings its own punishment upon itself.

13

Even now I cannot fully understand why the Greek language, which I learned as a child, was so distasteful to me. I loved Latin, not the elementary lessons but those which I studied later under teachers of literature. The first lessons in Latin were reading, writing, and counting, and they were as much of an irksome imposition as any studies in Greek. But this, too, was due to the sinfulness and vanity of life, since I was *flesh and blood, no better than a breath of wind that passes by and never returns*.² For these elementary lessons were far more valuable than those which followed, because the subjects were practical. They gave me the power, which I still have, of reading whatever is set before me and writing whatever I wish to write. But in the later lessons I was obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways. I learned to lament the death of Dido, who killed herself for love, while all the time, in the midst of these things, I was dying, separated from you, my God and my Life, and I shed no tears for my own plight.

What can be more pitiful than an unhappy wretch unaware of his

¹ Matt. 10: 30. ² Ps. 77: 39 (78: 39).

'Give me chastity and
continence, but not yet'

The son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, Saint Augustine spent his early years torn between conflicting world-views. The *Confessions*, written when he was in his forties, recounts how, slowly and painfully, he came to turn away from his youthful ideas and licentious lifestyle to become one of Christianity's most influential thinkers. A remarkably honest spiritual autobiography, the *Confessions* also addresses fundamental issues of Christian doctrine, and many of the prayers and meditations it includes are still an integral part of the practice of the faith today.

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Translated with an Introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin



Cover: Detail from *The Conversion of St Augustine* by Fra Angelico, in the Musée d'Art Thomas Henry, Cherbourg (photo: Giraudon/Bridgeman Images)

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