

INTRODUCTION TO AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS:¹

The uniqueness of Augustine's *Confession* has been expressed recently by Charles Taylor and Pope Benedict XVI. Taylor said that "[i]t is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought." Benedict XVI explained in one of his Wednesday weekly audiences that "because of the attention paid to interiority and psychology, Augustine's *Confessions* is a unique model in Western and non-Western literature, even including nonreligious literature, right through to modern times. The focus on spiritual life, on the mystery of self, on the mystery of God that hides in the self, is an extraordinary thing without precedent and remains, so to speak, a spiritual 'vertex.'" Augustine has a special place among the world's great books, especially as it relates to interiority and understanding one's own narrative within the larger context of the cosmos. Autobiographical in character, it is not an attempt to tell the story of all the years of the writer's life, least of all of the outward events of those years. But no writer ever went deeper into his own character and deeds, passed keener judgments upon himself, or revealed himself more fully and more humbly to others. It may be asserted also that no writer of his own life's story had such wealth of thought and feeling to draw upon as had Augustine. For this reason, his book is not only a most penetrating psychological study and a unique document for understanding the spiritual and ascetical life, but it is also a storehouse of thought for the philosopher and the theologian, and for others as well.

In brief, the thirteen books of St. Augustine's *Confessions* were written by a man who had great emotional powers along with great powers of intellect and will, who had lived a life of conscious depravity as a quasi-pagan and had turned to a life of austerity as a Catholic, who had genius in philosophy, theology, and psychology, who was a pioneer in scriptural studies, who was extraordinary as a master of language, and who had strong personal attraction to others and marked qualities of leadership.

His work is rightly called *Confessions*, the plural. Augustine's book, in fact, is a threefold confession. It is a confession of sins, a confession of faith, and a confession of praise. Everything he sees about himself and everything that he finds within himself provide evidence for God's existence and nature. Everything that he has done, even his sinful deeds, and everything that has been done to him proclaim to him the existence and power of God, "maker and ruler of all things, but of sins only the ruler." By God's grace he finds God, and by God's grace he is united to God. Hence Augustine rightly confesses not only his evil deeds, exceedingly great in thought, word, and deed, but also his belief and trust in God, his gratitude to God, and his praise of God.

The following selections of Augustine's *Confessions* are taken from Books I and VIII. These two chapters are also read in Theology 101. To appreciate its greatness it is necessary for the reader to read slowly and carefully, and to obey the injunction of the prayer "to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." To become familiar with St. Augustine's *Confessions* is to make it one's own, to some extent at least, an inexhaustible source of intellectual stimulation, of esthetic delight, of moral help, and of spiritual enlightenment.

¹ Part of this introduction was adapted from John K. Ryan's translation of the *Confessions*.

THE CONFESSIONS

AUGUSTINE

(EXCERPTS)

Book I Early Years

i(1) ‘You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps. 47: 2): great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable’ (Ps. 146:5). Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being ‘bearing his mortality with him’ (2 Cor. 4: 10), carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you ‘resist the proud’ (I Pet. 5:5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

‘Grant me Lord to know and understand’ (Ps. 118: 34,73,144) which comes first – to call upon you or to praise you, and whether knowing you precedes calling upon you. But who calls upon you when he does not know you? For an ignorant person might call upon someone else instead of the right one. But surely you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known. Yet ‘how shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe without a preacher?’ (Rom. 10: 14). ‘They will praise the Lord who seek for him’ (Ps. 21: 217).

In seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him. Lord, I would seek you, calling upon you—and calling upon you is an act of believing in you. You have been preached to us. My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son, by the ministry of your preacher.

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v (5) Who will enable me to find rest in you? Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself? What are you to me? Have mercy so that I may find words. What am I to you that you command me to love you, and that, if I fail to love you, you are angry with me and threaten me with vast miseries? If I do not love you, is that but a little misery? What a wretch I am! In your mercies, Lord God, tell me what you are to me. ‘Say to my soul, I am your salvation’ (Ps. 34: 3). Speak to me so that I may hear. See the ears of my heart are before you, Lord. Open them and ‘say to my soul, I am your salvation.’ After that utterance I will run and lay hold on you. Do not hide your face from me (cf. Ps. 26: 9). Lest I die, let me die so that I may see it.

vi (6) The house of my soul is too small for you to come to it. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins: restore it. In your eyes it has offensive features. I admit it, I know it; but who will clean it up? Or to whom shall I cry other than you? ‘cleanse me from my secret faults, Lord, and spare your servant from sins to which I am tempted by others’ (Ps. 31: 5). ‘I believe and therefore I speak’ (Ps. 115: 10). ‘Lord you know’ (Ps. 68:6). Have I not openly accused myself of ‘my faults’, my God, and ‘you forgave me the iniquity of my heart’ (Ps. 31: 5). I do not ‘contend with