

Preface

St. Augustine, Dad, and Me

ONE THING THAT CONVERTS to Catholicism are often asked is how their families took the change. My own parents were not happy, and my late father especially engaged me in many long conversations about my decision that were difficult and painful. One thing that perhaps bothered him a great deal was that I claimed to be following the path of Augustine, whom my father had always admired, if from a certain theological distance, as a lifelong Protestant. What made our distance greater was the territory we shared.¹

In the history of theology it is fair to say that, next to Thomas Aquinas, there is probably no other figure in the history of theology who has played such an outsized role in exploring the faith once for all delivered unto the saints than Augustine of Hippo. The twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said that the history of Western thought was merely a series of footnotes to the thought of Plato. The great historian of dogma Jaroslav Pelikan applied this equally to Augustine and noted that, like Aristotle, Dante, or Goethe, Augustine is one of those figures who is a kind of encyclopedia of thought in and of himself. His bibliography includes more than one hundred separate titles, and we have hun-

dreds of sermons from him recorded by stenographers. An old saying is *Mentitur qui se totum legisse fatetur*: He lies who says he's read all his works. But even to read a few is to enter into the mind and heart of a genius. In the *Confessions*, probably his most beloved work, we meet a man who is not one of those plaster-of-paris saints that we sometimes find in our children's books. John Henry Newman once said that if anybody wrote his biography, he wanted a real down-right account. In *Confessions* we encounter a man who has written such a tale of himself.

But while popular and brilliant and relatable, it is probably not even his greatest work. Augustine's oeuvre is littered with masterpieces. Pelikan noted that if Augustine had only written one book of half a dozen or more, he would be remembered. *Confessions*, *City of God*, *On the Trinity*, *On Free Choice of the Will*, *On Christian Doctrine*, any one of his commentaries on Genesis, the Psalms, on John—these are sheer brilliance in the service of faith that created echoes and arguments down through the centuries and will do so until time is no more.

From Benedict of Nursia, Boethius, and Gregory the Great to Abelard, Anselm, Bonaventure, and Aquinas; from the Council of Trent, Calvin, and Luther to Pascal, Descartes, and Rousseau, Pelikan observes, we see that almost all of the interesting and powerful ideas, whether right or wrong, can be traced back to the North African bishop.² I think we could easily add to the list in modern times, particularly Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. My own academic specialty, the thought of soon-to-be St. John Henry Newman was certainly of an Augustinian cast in many ways. While Newman was very much formed by the Eastern Fathers, my colleague Mark McNroy showed that in discussing *theosis*, or deification, the process by which we become not just good but gods—a doctrine many attribute solely to the East—Newman's single most quoted Father was St. Augustine.³ One of the most famous episodes in his history of his religious opinions, the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, is when Newman has been given an article on the Donatists—and reads it with little

interest except for some words of St. Augustine: *Securus iudicat orbis terrarum*; The whole earth judges surely. Judges surely, that is, what is the true Catholic Church. The phrase echoed in his own mind as he thought about his own claim that the Anglican Church was truly the Catholic Church in England.

This topic is where the history of Augustine's influence on the whole Church meets his influence on me. Of the Protestant Reformation, B. B. Warfield, the nineteenth-century Princeton Presbyterian theologian declared it, "inwardly considered . . . just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the church."⁴ Whether this is really accurate or not, it was and is certainly a point of view widely held and probably best represents my first impressions. My father, a Protestant and graduate of Moody Bible Institute, did not talk of many figures before Luther and Calvin, but he did talk about Augustine, pronouncing it as they do the old Spanish town in Florida, St. Au-gus-TEEN. (I, like the young Augustine, having a nose for what the smart people say, pronounced it Au-GUS-tin.) What he found in reading *The Confessions* was a man who lived *coram Deo*—before the face of God, trying not to hide himself as we, imitating our parents in the Garden of Eden, do.

I still have my father's copy of the *Confessions*, most likely purchased when he was at Moody in the 1950s. It is a paperback copy of the translation by John Henry Newman's friend Edward Pusey, with an introduction by the Jesuit Harold C. Gardiner. What my father wrote in the front and back covers is as follows: "Every work shall be brought into judgement, every prayer, every impulse given." The first part of this line is a quotation from Ecclesiastes 12, verse 14. There is a star before the words and an underline. Underneath my father wrote:

How strange that the Holy Spirit should sovereignly choose to use a verse, rather two verses, which were direct commands to Christians in the "saving" of Augustine. Strange too

is that such a climactic conversion should see the Church plunge into at least 1000 years of darkness following it. The Judgement seat of Christ will bear me out, but my guess is that Augustine was a saved man before his “conversion” to Catholicism. You can, if you want to, believe that God offered Augustine salvation only in or through the Roman Catholic Church. I don’t believe it. There are too many “whosoEVERS” in the Bible that makes it false reasoning.

You can hear in these words of my father what Warfield was talking about when he described a triumph of Augustine’s teaching on grace over his teaching on the Church—the separation of Augustine’s understanding of grace and scripture from his understanding of the Church, the sacraments, and indeed the nature of salvation. But Augustine did not separate his teaching in such a way, which explains the fact that Augustine did indeed say his own conversion came in August 386 after reading Romans 13:13–14, a passage directed at Romans who were Christians already. While his conversion happened in the garden, it was a turning that found completion in baptism at the Easter vigil in 387. He did not consider faith as simply interior acceptance of Jesus as Lord and savior as an individual, but as a gift given permanently in the Church that was only fulfilled in hope and love. He did not consider faith alone as the essence of salvation, but “faith working through love,” as St. Paul put it in Galatians 5:6. He took St. Cyprian’s line as his own—“Outside the Church there is no salvation”—though allowing that some in the Church would not be saved and that some number outside the bounds of the Church would. It was Augustine who helped the Church understand that the validity of sacraments was not tied to the worthiness of the priest—Christ is the true minister and the sacraments work *ex opere operato*, because they have been done and not because the one doing them is a miracle worker or even a holy man. Augustine taught strongly the doctrine of a purgatorial fire after death for those in Christ whose sins were forgiven but who had not been fully made holy in this life.

All of these things, I came to believe, were not only not opposed to his doctrine of grace, but were requisite parts of it. God's grace is sovereign and acts in the Church not on the basis of the holiness of individual priests or bishops but instead on the basis of the simplest fidelity in performing the rites. It acts to make people part of the body of Christ by baptism—not on the rather shaky foundation of whether one really meant it when he prayed to the Lord for salvation. It is God's grace that he does indeed complete the work he began in his servants even if they die still somewhat curved in on themselves through sin—that's Augustine's image, by the way: *incurvatus in se*. True penance is not a series of penitential acts but a letting go of what holds us bent in over ourselves. For many today, that is a technological problem since we are so often bent in over our smartphones. Of course that's what I could never quite get about my father's insistence on writing things like "Every work shall be brought into judgment"; what exactly does judgment mean if there is no purgation? Simply a note that we have often sinned and then a declaration that our sins have been paid for? But then wouldn't the declaration of the sins be a painful affair designed to fully sanctify us? We often get away with sins in an external way, but they disfigure our minds and hearts, bending us in upon ourselves, smartphone or no. One might say that in the act of death there is a purgation, but many people die without any long struggle in which such a thing could happen. No, Augustine's doctrine of purgatory is part of his doctrine of grace, which is intimately connected with his doctrine of the Church.

That other comment of my father's—the one about how odd it is that Augustine's conversion seemed to be the precursor to a thousand years of darkness—I also find to be partly true. In light of the failures of the Church and the symbolically pregnant burning of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris a few days before I wrote this, I also find it very significant. The darkness is not, as my father seemed to believe, simply that the Catholic Church *in toto* went off the rails and became apostate. The Church's weakness was palpable after a

century of controversy with the followers of Arius over the nature of Christ, in which large sections of the bishops, priests, and people had failed in the great challenge of Christ, who asked, “But who do you say that I am?” But it is also true that that darkness was caused by the failure of the Roman Empire. Scholars call the time in which he lived “late antiquity.” And afterward, there was indeed a set of “dark ages”—though not because of Christianity directly. Certainly, the Christianity after the end of Roman persecution was a different thing as a sociological reality, as the Church now dealt with many converts who were only half-converted. This is not strictly related to Catholic distinctives; such a process happens whenever Christians are too merged in the world around them and their motives for conversion are too mixed up with worldly gain.

It was, however, a distinctively non-Protestant institutional reality that was responsible for keeping alive what was of value in the ancient world. The famous book *How The Irish Saved Civilization* really has less to do with Irishness than it does with the monks who kept the wisdom for a later day. Perhaps Augustine’s greatest work, *The City of God*, finished in 426 when he was seventy-two, looked at the common argument made after the sack of Rome by Vandals in 410 and the general overrunning of the empire by Germanic tribes, many of whom still held the Arian heresy, that Christianity was what had weakened the Empire. He argued, instead, that it is what made the empire strong and that it was paganism and moral corruption that made the empire weak. He proposed that Christians had a better view on what history was than the Romans did, since they understood that the history of the world was a battle between two cities with two different loves. The City of Man is what the New Testament calls negatively the “world,” which is dominated by the false desires of the flesh—not just the libido we’re used to thinking about, but what he calls the *libido dominandi* or lust for domination—and tempted by the devil. It is the city founded by Cain. The City of God is that heavenly commonwealth that has

loved God and his revelation and responded to it. It is only finally and fully present in the afterlife, but we can experience it in part in this age in the Church insofar as we live according to his commands. It is the city founded by Abel the just. Augustine saw the darkness descending in his own time and urged his readers not to be fooled by the material and technological progress of his time into thinking that the City of God has come in full, nor to place our hopes in princes or progress of any kind. The end of the world may be with a whimper or a bang, but it will not be the crowning of a world in which “you’ve got to admit things are getting better, better all the time.” Our human history, as that noted Augustinian John Ronald Reuel Tolkien put it, is ultimately a “long defeat.” While we have a duty to work toward the good of our earthly home, we have to remember that it is not our final home.

Indeed, at the time of his death Vandals had laid siege to the city of Hippo. They called off the siege briefly but later returned to burn the city, leaving only Bishop Augustine’s cathedral and his library intact. That to me is more emblematic of the truth of the situation: what happened was that Augustine’s faith (meaning Catholic faith) and his works (meaning his writings) were what kept the candles burning during the ages of upheaval. I think there is much that we, who live in something as grand and as decaying in many ways as the Roman Empire, could learn from St. Augustine about faith, politics, and the vagaries of history.

I think my father was wrong about the fixed shape of the Church. Though there is much that is not of divine origin and thus malleable, Catholic teaching about the nature of the Church, faith, and works, the sacraments, grace in general, and monasticism are not the reason for the Dark Ages. Instead, they were the concrete reasons why the Church can survive Dark Ages, even our own, and retain continuity. The enemy of faith and civilization is not the Catholic Church but the idea that God’s grace is not sufficient to enable human beings to obey and to flourish and to become holy.

In this my father and I agreed with each other and St. Augustine. Any other notion of grace but one that is moving us toward Christian perfection is a false one. Today, Catholics and Protestants too often want to make grace out to be less powerful than it is. They would rather relax the standards and celebrate the resulting comparative high achievements. Augustine's story is one that teaches us the opposite. That God is always around us, calling us to himself—not simply to an easy life of belief in him and a half-hearted struggle. He is calling us to hear him and do heroic things. Augustine's many thoughts about creation, time, and eternity in the later books of the *Confessions* are filled with profundity, but I am moved at his ending, in which he describes that peace of God into which we are all called. All of our lives are indeed under judgment, as my father noted, because we are called to be whole and entire, purged of sin and standing upright, *coram Deo*, before the face of God and living in the reality of that mysterious and infinitely good, true, and beautiful presence. "What man will give it to a man to understand this? What angel will give it to an angel? What angel to man? From you let it be asked. In you let it be sought. At your door let us knock for it. Thus, thus is it received, thus it is found, thus is it opened to us" (13, 38, 53).⁵



Our lead article does take on the problem of time that Augustine was so fascinated by. We are proud to publish **Stephen D. Lawson's "Only Through Time Time is Conquered: A Theological Reflection,"** an essay for which Lawson won the 2016 Louise and Richard Goodwin Writing Prize for Excellence in Theological Writing. Lawson's article probes the approaches taken to time and death by the ancients, in whose cyclical patterns death simply gobbled up everything, and the moderns, who have tried to make the infinite simply an accumulation of the finite. Neither idea solves everything; both leave us with time as tragedy. It is only in Christ that an approach to the problem can be made. "The doctrine of the Incarna-

tion, when fully developed, reveals the true nature of the infinite, not as an empty space that hems humanity in behind and before, but as the fullness of divine act. Only in the Christian ‘myth’ of the Incarnation is the radically transcendent nature of God’s infinite time revealed—and precisely for this same reason the radically immanent, for God’s infinity and creaturely finitude are not in competition.” Because they are not in competition, one can see in Christ the only way to act with a true “apocalyptic finality”: not through death but through love. “The Christian answer to the problem of suffering in history is nothing other than the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection, of God’s revelation of himself as infinite and infinitely merciful, infinitely loving, and infinitely life.”

How to live out the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection in times when death and evil do seem more final than love is a perennial problem. **Helena M. Tomko’s “On Dark Nights in Dark Times: Catholic Inner Exile Writing in Hitler’s Germany”** looks at the witness of three writers (Reinhold Schneider, Theodor Haecker, and Edith Stein) seeking to survive the Third Reich when they could do very little to resist the outward onslaught and thus attempted to carve out an interior space in which to listen to the One whose mysterious answer to suffering seemed very dark. It is perhaps not surprising that they turned to the writing of a saint famous for exploring that answer as it is made available to human experience. “Their respective reflections on St. John of the Cross and the phenomenon of the dark night offers one example of convergence, as each thinker attests to a fortifying wisdom attained beyond the ‘clear insight of natural understanding’ in the ‘dark knowledge’ of faith.” Tomko gives an illuminating tour of the history of conflict about whether such a turn to the interior life (“inner exile” or “emigration”) was or should be a model for those under terror. Her examination of these writers is a persuasive argument that such an exile may not be optimal, but when it is the only course possible it can preserve what is good and right under modern dictatorship just as it did under the ancient. The key is in

understanding that preservation of the divine life in the soul is the first step in any true resistance to spiritual and physical slavery: “The vilification of ‘inwardness’ and denigration of the soul’s inner workings, far from emancipating human action, risks spiritual and moral mutiny, nothing less than the deadening of listening hearts and the surrendering of shackled minds.”

The sifting through historical examples of Christian fidelity in order to figure out what to do now is a characteristic of Christian wisdom. While history may not repeat itself, it does, as Mark Twain observed, tend to rhyme. We are thus proud to present **Augustine Thompson, OP’s “The Soul You Lose May Be Your Own: Historical Considerations on Theology and Culture.”** Father Thompson, an eminent and award-winning historian of the Italian Middle Ages and biographer of St. Francis, here wittily and provocatively looks at the history of theology from the viewpoint of a historian:

What can a historian provide for those engaged in this kind of risky business? Certainly not a method, since history itself deals with the most radically particular of objects, individual human actions and events—so much so that Aristotle declared that it was no science at all—but we can say something about the ways in which cultural realities conditioned and formed theologians’ relation to what went on around them and provide, if not a method, a variety of real-world conditions in which the theologian had to perform his task.

Always alive to the reality that the past is a different place, Father Thompson nevertheless looks with a critical eye from the fourth century down to our own, noting that true theology has always been liturgical, moral, and geared toward salvation—something seen vividly in the monastic theology of the first millennium:

If theology is ultimately sterile unless it bears fruit in sanctification and conversion of life, then the monks have much to teach us. And I, for one, cannot imagine a genuine theology

that does not arise out of the act of praising God, which arises out of the Church's liturgical life, and is its servant. When that life is compromised and its focus strays from God, the theological reflection it fosters is nothing but idolatry, worship of self or of the group.

Theology is experiential, then, but an experience of a certain sort that depends on a community with spiritual faculties alive to God. Thompson proposes no solutions for our day, but his perceptive commentary on Augustine, Aquinas, Melchior Cano, and the *nouvelle théologie*, will benefit the theologian, the pastor, and individual believer.

Thompson, no surprise, highlights Augustine's theology based on the lived experience of Christianity in the Roman Empire as found in *City of God*. **Gao Yuan** looks at the influence of the Doctor of Grace in a different empire in **"The Biography of St. Augustine in the Catholic Encounter with China."** St. Augustine's story was an influential tool for the successful Catholic (and Protestant) missions to China, most famously and successfully under the Jesuits Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci in the Ming Dynasty, because it showed an example of an intellectual dealing with philosophical and pagan beliefs by completing and correcting them with Catholic faith. If Augustine could take what is true in pagan classics and Platonic philosophy, Chinese Christians argued, you can take what is true in Confucian and Buddhist beliefs and still correct them with Catholic faith, too. Yuan argues that even after the Cultural Revolution, Augustine has still been useful: "With official ties broken, all Catholic bishops would be assigned by the Chinese government and those nominated by Rome were refused. Frozen in stalemate, Augustine was considered a fitting bridge amid contemporary Sino-Vatican tensions."

It is commonplace of many elite writers that fantastic literature of the sort that Tolkien wrote is simply "escapism." While Tolkien himself responded to such critics in his "On Fairy-stories," **Jon**

Mentxakatorre Odriozola's "**J. R. R. Tolkien: The Philosophical Basis of Sub-Creative Words**" (the Spanish original of which, "**J. R. R. Tolkien: el fundamento filosófico de la palabra sub-creadora**,"⁶ we are publishing alongside the translation) explains further why Tolkien's fantastic literature is based not on a principle of escapism but of attachment to reality. Odriozola examines Tolkien's beliefs about how words hold reality and how the stories and mythologies are true or false not insofar as they refer to modern scientific fact or history, but insofar as they bear witness to the reality that undergirds creation.

Therefore, myths and fairy stories become vehicles of truth as long as they are consistent with the web of sense plaited over perceived beings. That is to say, Tolkien shows that the creation of a secondary world through the poetic word consists in the exploration or narrative unfolding of the semantic structure contained in it: that mythopoeia is the particular way of telling and participating in the truth of reality through its apprehension and singing in the beauty of speech.

Our final article, by **D. Marcel DeCoste**, involves the truth-telling act of sacramental confession and its place in a literary confession of sorts. "**Confessing Compassion: Waugh's Penitential Performance in *Sword of Honour***" is a complement to his earlier *Logos* article, "Contested Confessions: The Sins of the Press and Evelyn Waugh's False Penance in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*" (Summer 2018). While *Pinfold* was a subtle literary *j'accuse*, DeCoste argued, *Sword of Honour* is actually a *je m'accuse* in which the author, via the characters of Aphorpe, Ludovic, and most prominently the protagonist Guy Crouchback, actually does confess to spiritual sins. "For it is here that he most openly admits to sins against his faith, particularly to his having put first the war effort, and then his writing, ahead of the Christian call to service." But Waugh's depiction is not simply of sin but the hope of redemption as seen in the end of

Guy Crouchback's story and, perhaps, his own: "If Crabbe is right in viewing the trilogy as 'the story of Guy's spiritual progress from exile to participating member of the faith,' then this healing pilgrimage is made possible only by its ultimately confessional character and extends, through the completion of arguably his greatest work, to the character and aspirations of Waugh himself."

David Paul Deavel

Editor

Notes

1. This preface is a reworking of parts of a Lenten talk at the Church of St. Agnes in St. Paul, MN, on March 8, 2019. Those interested in listening to the talk can find an audio file embedded at <https://anchor.fm/brandon-l-wanless/episodes/Dr--David-Deavel--St--Augustine-e3hs4j/a-ac807i>.
2. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Foreword," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), xii–xiv.
3. Mark McNroy, "Before Deification was Eastern: Newman's Ecumenical Retrieval," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Nimmo, Matthew Levering and Martin Westerholm, April 17, 2018.
4. Quoted in Pelikan, "Foreword," xiv.
5. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960).
6. The Spanish version of the article retains the original style and has not been conformed to *Chicago Manual of Style*.