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A Man For Our Times

St. Augustine and His Heritage

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By Way of Introduction

Today we talk a lot about cyberspace, sending messages across continents and oceans at the press of a key, communicating with people we have never seen, though we may have heard much about them. Can you imagine what it would be like to catch messages this way from famous people in history, who have already crossed into eternal life? What insights they could give us about themselves, their times, their customs, their ways of thinking. I think it would be fascinating to hear in such a way from people like Cicero, Caesar, Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, St. Francis, Lincoln, and many others like them. It was this idea that led me to want to chat with Saint Augustine on my computer, to conduct the following 'interview' with this man, who has probably had more influence on the Western Church than any other person, except perhaps St. Paul. The answers Augustine gives to my questions are based mainly on his autobiographical work, the Confessions, as well as on the first biography written about him within seven years of his death by his friend of forty years, Possidius. There was so much to talk about, so much to ask, that I had to limit my questions. But I have tried not to miss anything really important and relevant, especially for young people. My first group of questions deals with his life from childhood, through conversion, to his ordination as a bishop, along with his main activities in that pastoral service. The second group of questions deals with some of the major characteristics of his spirit--what drove him--and with his spirituality, that is, his unique view of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. For this second part I have used other sources than those mentioned above, and specifically Augustine's homilies and other writings.

To complement these first two parts of this booklet I have added two others. Part III treats of the Augustinian Order, which was founded in 1244 so that, among other things, the spirit and spirituality of Augustine might be brought into the modern world and be made available to all peoples. Part IV offers a small sampling of the wonderful men and women of the Augustinian Order who have contributed so much to the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to the good of the Church and of our world down through the centuries and into our own times.

I

**Augustine:
The Struggle for Identity,
Conversion, and Service to Others**

1. All of us are interested in our family and our roots. Augustine, could you tell us something about your own family and your roots?

My mom and dad were both native to the town of Thagaste (modern-day Souk-Ahras, Algeria), which was located some fifty miles south of the large seaport city of Hippo Regius (today's Annaba, Algeria), located in North Africa on the southern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. This entire territory belonged to the Roman Empire, and was called Numidia [today, this area is divided into two nations: Algeria and Tunisia]. Latin was the common language, but Punic was spoken by many others who had had no chance at a real academic education. Our town was beautifully located on a rather high hill, and produced grain and olive oil in abundance, as was common in that area.

When I was born in Thagaste on November 13, 354 AD, my mother, Monica, was about 23 years of age. She was a devout Christian Catholic, as was her entire family. My father, Patrick --I'm not sure how old he was-- was one of the ten members of the Municipal Council of Thagaste. At that time he had no particular religious beliefs. As a matter of fact, he was the only member of our household who was not a Catholic. By the standards of the time we were a lower middle-class family, not lacking in necessities, enjoying some of the comforts of life, but far from being wealthy.

I shouldn't forget to tell you that I had a brother and a sister also. This is jumping ahead a bit, but my brother Navigius was with me during a crisis time later in my life in Italy. My sister was a wonderful lady, who eventually became the superior of a convent of Nuns in Hippo while I was bishop in that city.

2. What subjects were you expected to study in school in those days? Did you have any problems with your studies in elementary or high school?

When I went to the local school in Thagaste in my early years we were expected to learn the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. We also began the study of the "classics": Virgil, Caesar, Terence, and a few others. When I was about eleven or twelve, my parents sent me to Madaura, about twenty miles south of Thagaste, where there was a more advanced school [something like your high schools] and a university. There I continued my study of literature and rhetoric. I know you don't use this word 'rhetoric' too much today, but it was most important for us in our times. Essentially, rhetoric was the study of the art of public speaking, being able to write well and give a convincing talk about important matters, much like you do on your debate teams. Don't forget, we had practically no personal books then, so our memories were pushed to the limit by our teachers. Some of the students could recite all of Virgil or Cicero. When I was fifteen, my dad brought me back to Thagaste: he was trying to save enough money so he could send me to the very best university in Numidia, the University of Carthage.

You asked me about problems in school. Let me tell you some of them. In grade school the teachers loved to beat us, if we didn't study to their liking. We were very much afraid of

being whipped, but that's what happened when we didn't live up to their expectations in our reading, writing, and studying. I don't know why it was, but I disliked very much the study of the Greek language. Maybe it was because I was forced to study it. Really, that's one of the great difficulties in studying any foreign language. My teachers threatened me with terrible punishments if I didn't study, so in trying to avoid those I did learn something about Greek, though very little. What a difference with the study of Latin! This I loved. It was the language that had been spoken to me at home and at school and by my playmates from the beginning of my life, so naturally it came to me much more easily. A natural desire and curiosity really are a better way to learn than by fear or compulsion. And of course, like all healthy kids, we liked to play games rather than study, and we were punished for this too by adults who, by the way, played their own kinds of games.

One thing I could never understand was how teachers and other adults seemed to obey so strictly the rules of grammar which they learned in school, and yet ignored the rules of everlasting salvation which they learned from God. An error in grammar or pronunciation seemed worse to them than breaking God's rules and hating another human being. How can you understand something like that?

3. As you were growing up, how did you get along with the other kids around you?

I already told you how we liked to play games, which is typical of all kids of that age. What I didn't tell you – something I'm not at all proud of--is this: many, many times I lied to my parents and my teachers, because I wanted to play games or go to the open air theater and imitate what I saw on the stage. I stole food and money from my parents, either out of greed or so I would have something to trade with the other boys in exchange for some of the nice things they had. I hate to say it, but I also often cheated at our games, because winning had become so important for me. And yet I couldn't stand it when I caught others cheating me! If my friends caught me in the act of cheating, I would react by losing my temper, rather than admit my fault. As you can well understand, I was not a graceful loser.

4. Did you experience any peer pressure to do things that weren't right?

I sure did. One of the worst experiences I ever had happened when I was sixteen, at home in Thagaste. And it bothered me for years afterwards. I loved to hang out with the guys, but this led me to do some bad things with them. One night a band of us went off to a nearby orchard and shook down a pear tree of all its fruit. We didn't want the fruit – we had better fruit at home. But we took away an enormous quantity of pears, which we then threw to the pigs. Why? I guess our real pleasure that night was in doing something that was forbidden. As I looked back on that act more than twenty-five years later I kept asking myself, Why did I do that? I think I must have been trying to imitate God's powers, but in a very perverse way. I was rejecting God's laws and trying to make up my own, as though I had the power to be like God and do just that. I am sure I would not have committed this act of vandalism by myself: I needed the company of my friends! And I was ashamed to hold back when they said, "come on! Let's do it!". There was a lot of peer pressure in my time, just as there is today. And how often it led us to act against our conscience and to do what we knew was wrong!

5. Did you belong to any church as you were growing up?

As I have said already, my mother was a Catholic, and a devout one at that. In fact the whole household, with the exception of my father, was Catholic and firmly believed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. From the time I was an infant my mother taught me to love the name of Jesus, and this love remained with me throughout my life, even during those many years when I wandered away from the Catholic Church. I was considered a catechumen and was regularly blessed with the sign of the cross. But my mother never had me baptized as a child. Unfortunately, putting off baptism was a common enough practice in North Africa in those days. When I became sick to death as a young boy, mom was ready to have me baptized, but then I suddenly recovered and she put it off. Why? She was afraid that because of my youth I would be open to committing many sins in the future, and these would be even worse if done after baptism. But my mother was deceived: that kind of thinking doesn't really make sense. It's like saying: "Let him alone, let him go on sinning. He is not yet baptized". In other words, I should be left free to commit more sin, and bring my spiritual life to the brink of eternal loss. Strangely enough, we never take this attitude toward a physically sick person. No, people don't wait till you are almost dead to take you to the doctor: they do it as soon as possible, so the illness can be caught and corrected quickly. How I wish such consideration had been given to my spiritual health in my youth!

6. **College is often our first time to really be on our own, away from our parents. Could you tell us something about your early days at the University of Carthage, which was a good 200 miles from your hometown of Thagaste?**

My father died when I was 16 years old. A wealthy friend of the family, Romanianus, helped my mother so she could send me off to the University at Carthage. But it was my dear mother who supported me while I was there. During my time in Carthage I fell passionately in love, became very attracted to the theater, and was quite a skeptic. I still went to Mass, but I must admit that I spent more time looking for the pretty girls in church than praying to God. I fell in with a group of young men, who called themselves the "Wreckers". They were very much into violence, and though I enjoyed their company, I kept my distance from their acts of violence and the awful way they harassed and hazed newcomers. I needed them as friends, but I found I could resist taking part in their bad actions. Though I was finally overcoming that terrible peer pressure that had overwhelmed me when I was younger back in Thagaste, I still didn't have the courage to be a leader myself.

7. **Did your relationship with God change at all after you went to Carthage?**

As I just indicated above, I went over the edge in sinfulness when I got to Carthage. I strayed far from the God of my youth. I almost found my way back when I read a book by Cicero called Hortensius. That book taught me to love wisdom itself and to search for it relentlessly, holding on to it firmly when I discovered it. However, one thing I couldn't find in that book: nowhere did it mention the name of Christ. So I made up my mind to read the Scriptures, which I knew spoke about Jesus. Unfortunately, I wasn't ready for the simple Latin style in which they were written. Their style was so poor that they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with Cicero. I was too proud to accept their simplicity and without sufficient insight to understand their content. And then I fell in with the Manichees, a sect that had begun in Persia [modern day Iran] during the third century, and which was a mixture of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and some Christian teachings.

8. **What did the Manichees have to offer you that you thought was special? What was your mom's reaction to your joining them?**

Quite frankly I was all mixed up concerning some things about my faith, especially about the origin of evil and how God could be a purely spiritual being. I just couldn't get to the bottom of these matters. The Manichees had their own solution for these problems. They taught that there were really two gods, constantly at war with one another, and that the kingdom of light (good) had been penetrated by the kingdom of darkness (evil). It was up to us to try to bring about a separation of these two powers by an ascetical lifestyle and the observance of other 'laws'. But what really won me over to them was their appeal to reason. They said that they could solve all my human problems by the use of reason. They also made fun of the Bible, pointing out that it was full of contradictions. Naturally, as a young college kid, I was especially impressed by their appeal to reason. I fell for it, and joined them, thinking I was really going to find my God. Bad mistake! I was totally deceived by them!

My mother took a very dim view of my belonging to the Manichees and not going to the Catholic church any more. In fact, when I came home from college, her first reaction was to throw me out of the house. She considered me to be spiritually dead. But through an unusual dream she had and through speaking with a local bishop, she agreed once again to allow me to eat at the same table with her. She allowed me back in the house, even though I insisted that she was all wrong about the Catholic faith and that eventually she would see things my way, as a Manichee. Was I ever confused!

9. What were your favorite subjects in college?

That's easy. I studied law and I was determined to be a success in this field. But I was also at the top of the class in the study of rhetoric. I was going to fulfill my parents' desire that I learn to be a persuasive speaker. It's not hard to see how that desire fitted in with my study of law.

10. We understand that you lived with a girl while you were in college and that you had a son with her. Please tell us something about this.

This may be somewhat difficult for a 21st century person like yourself to grasp, but in my time—the fourth century—it was not unusual for a young man to have a mistress before entering into a more permanent marriage arrangement. One of the reasons for this was the very complicated way in which such 'permanent' marriages were carried out. For one thing, marriage had to be among social equals if one wanted to get anywhere, and as you may know, there were several different classes in society at that time. I must have been in my first year in college when I found this girl, whom I began to live with for no special reason except that I became passionately attached to her. True, she was not my social equal, but over the course of the years I came to love her very much. I was faithful to her and to her alone for over fourteen years, until we had to break up to allow for that 'permanent' kind of marriage I mentioned before. Early on in our relationship we had a child together. He had not been in our plans, but once he was with us we loved him ever so much. We called him Adeodatus, 'given by God'. He was an extremely intelligent young man, of great promise, but he was torn from me by death while still in his teens.

11. After graduation from the University in 375, what did you do? Did you ever get to teach in the University?

When I finished my studies at Carthage, I returned home to Thagaste and opened my own school of rhetoric. I was very happy there for a year or so, but then the sudden death of a close friend seriously depressed me. Everywhere I looked I was reminded of the wonderful times my friend and I had had together. So quite literally I ran away from Thagaste to get away

from all these memories. I went back to Carthage, where I taught for the next six years. But I wasn't really happy there either, and I knew I had to move on if I wanted to be successful in my career.

12. Where did you go to teach after Carthage?

From Carthage I journeyed to Rome. I had heard the students there were much more disciplined than those at Carthage, and my Manichean friends told me that their counterparts in Rome would be very helpful in my climb up the ladder of success. I had to run away from my mother at that time, as she was begging me not to leave Carthage. But I was determined to get away, so one night I sailed after lying to my mother, telling her I was just going to see a friend off on that ship. She was wild with grief when she discovered the truth. But as I look back on all this I recognize God's loving hand in it all. If I hadn't made that trip to Rome, which eventually led me to a high position of teaching in Milan, the Emperor's capital, I never would have met Ambrose. And Ambrose was to have a tremendous influence on my conversion to the Catholic faith.

13. Were you still sincerely searching for the truth all this time? And if so, how did this search affect your relationship with God.

By the time I left Carthage, I had become totally disillusioned with the Manichees. They promised things they could not do. Their chief bishop, Faustus, finally came to Carthage, but he was unable to resolve many of the doubts that had crept into my mind about the teachings of the Manichees. In the providence of God, Faustus' inability to help me became the means by which I was finally freed from following their teachings. I was still very friendly with many Manichees, but I gave up on their helping me find answers to the problem of evil, to God's purely spiritual nature, and to a better understanding of the Scriptures. However, I did keep searching. I got involved with astrologers, with the philosophers known as the Academics or Sceptics, and thanks to Ambrose in Milan, I even began to believe that the Catholic faith might be able to offer me some good answers. But I really wasn't ready to jump into some other faith after having been burned for so long by the Manichees. In fact, I was almost looking for mathematical proof of things which could not be seen with human eyes, but only with the eyes of faith in God.

14. What were some of the circumstances that made you start thinking about the Catholic Church once again?

Ambrose, who was bishop of Milan was the most important link for me. He was a great speaker, and so I often went to church just to hear the wonderful way he preached. But you know, the strange thing was that, together with his fine style of speaking, the impact of what he was saying began to get inside my mind also. He showed me an entirely new way of looking at the Scriptures, especially those of the Hebrew Scriptures. He taught me about the spiritual and figurative meaning of many texts which had been a huge obstacle to me before, because I had tried to take them literally.

There was a second source that had a great influence on me also. I began to read some books of the Neo-Platonists, which were of tremendous help to me in understanding how God could really be of a purely spiritual nature, that is, without any material attachments such as the Manichees had taught. The way the Manichees had put it, God was changeable. But I quickly realized that a god who is changeable is no god at all.

And I cannot forget my dear mother, who came to join me in Milan. Through her prayers, tears, counsel, and example I was also helped in getting another view of things.

But probably one of the most influential things that immediately affected me was a meeting with Simplicianus, an elderly priest of Milan, who had been Ambrose's mentor. He told me about the great Roman rhetor, Victorinus, whom I very much looked up to. Victorinus had converted to the faith at the height of his career, and because the law at that time forbade any Catholics holding teaching positions in literature, he had had to resign his teaching chair at the university. He gladly gave up this position so that he might be faithful to Christ. Victorinus' example made me ask over and over: Why can't I do that?

15. When did your conversion take place?

The way I describe it in my Confessions [ch.8], it may have seemed like a very sudden event. But as I have been explaining all along, it was happening gradually in my mind and heart ever since I became convinced the Manichees could not answer my questions. I was finally able to make the decision to embrace the Catholic faith after the visit of a good friend from Africa, Ponticianus. He came to my home – which I was sharing with my friends Alypius and Nebridius – and told Alypius and me about several conversions and monasteries of dedicated Christians right there in Milan, which I had never heard about. This was the occasion that God used to bring me to the brink of saying 'yes' to the Church's teachings, which I had already come to believe. I was in a state of mental and spiritual anguish because I felt so utterly helpless. I guess my pride had kept me from ever really feeling that way before and throwing my trust on God. But a child's voice chanting "*Take up and Read*", which I heard while in the garden of my house, made me run for the book of St. Paul's letters, which I had been reading and open to the passage which read: "*Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites*" [Rom.13,13]. I didn't have to read any further. The light of confidence flooded my heart and dispelled all darkness of doubt. It was early August of the year 386. I was 31 years old.

16. When you finally found God, the ultimate Truth, in your conversion and baptism, what were your intentions and how did you put them into effect?

When I finally made that great leap of faith, I found real peace in my heart. I can hardly begin to describe the joy that I experienced reflecting on God's marvelous providence in leading men and women to salvation. But, you know, there was more to my conversion than just being baptized in the Church. I had proposed for myself an ideal, that is, to be a totally dedicated 'servant of God', what you would call today a 'religious'. But that ideal really delayed everything, because it flew in the face of three principal goals which I had set for myself after college: wealth, prestige, and a woman's love. Thanks especially to some experiences in Milan before my conversion, I was able to overcome my desire for wealth and prestige, because I could finally see how these things could never really make me happy. But I was very much a slave to the caresses of a woman and for the longest time couldn't imagine how I could live without such a companion. I just couldn't make the break: I was literally at war with myself, one part of me wanting to make the break, the other totally opposed to it. It was only by the grace of God that I was finally able to do this. You might say I went through a double conversion at one and the

same time: to the Catholic faith and to dedicating my life to the service of the Lord. How I actually accomplished this service is a wholly different story.

17. I think I can appreciate what that twofold conversion must have cost you. But do tell us something about what you did to try to make this service of the Lord a reality.

Together with my great friend Alypius and my son Adeodatus, I was baptized by Bishop Ambrose in Milan at the Easter Vigil, April 24, 387. Shortly afterwards I set out to return to North Africa. While we were waiting for a ship in Ostia, the seaport of Rome, my dear mother fell ill with a severe fever and died, totally at peace with God and ever so grateful to the Lord for my conversion. In 388 I finally got back to my hometown of Thagaste. There with some friends and a few fellow citizens who wanted to serve God as I did, we established a small community on my parents' property. We used to spend a lot of time in prayer, fasting, meditation, and helping others. In the three years I was with this group, we had some wonderful discussions among ourselves, and these led me to write some books, as well as to instruct those who came to the house seeking help for their faith.

One day I had to make a trip to Hippo, and while I was attending Mass at the cathedral church, the bishop, Valerius, told the people of his great need for a priest to help him in preaching the gospel. Unfortunately, my reputation had preceded me, and though at first I resisted strenuously, the people literally laid hold of me and dragged me before the bishop. After I realized the bishop's great need of a priest, I gave in to his wishes and allowed him to ordain me. And that was the beginning of an entirely new kind of life for me, a life of ministry of the Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. That was the year 391. About four or five years later I was ordained a bishop, and when Valerius died—I think it was in 396—I became the bishop of Hippo.

Right after my ordination as a priest I founded a monastery in the garden of the cathedral church and began to live there with other servants of God who, like myself, wanted to follow the rule and way of life originally established in the first Christian community in Jerusalem. We had no other desire than to live together in harmony and to be one in mind and heart, as we journeyed towards God. This is the very ideal expressed in the Acts of the Apostles, ch.4,32-35.

18. What was it like being a bishop in those days in Roman North Africa?

Before I say anything more, I think I should remind you that Christianity had only been allowed public status since the year 313, when the Emperor Constantine had conquered Rome and had been baptized as a Catholic. Before that time Christians had suffered the worst kinds of persecution at the hands of many tyrant emperors of Rome. So we had experienced freedom of speech, as it were, for only about eighty years when I became a bishop.

Really I think the main task of the bishop then was to speak up for our young faith, to defend it against many different sects and ideas, and to try to spell out more clearly what the Church really stood for and believed. In this regard, as you probably know, I spent a lot of time writing books to clarify our beliefs, and I took advantage of every opportunity possible to speak to the people in church to help them understand their faith and encourage them to live it. In all of this I had a great advantage: I had been trained from my youth in the finest schools, so that I knew how to speak and write persuasively. I also had read almost all the classical works and had studied the Sacred Scriptures as thoroughly as possible after my ordination as a priest. You may

almost say that I knew the Scriptures by heart and I used them very frequently in my homilies and other works.

But the bishop in those days was also a kind of judge. Christians would bring their differences to him and accept his judgment in deciding their cases. Personally, I always tried to help both sides understand God's law better through their litigation, but I spared no words when I found one or the other acting unjustly. Of course, I also had to deal with the civil authorities and intervene for my people in their various needs. I tried to do this in such a way that the authorities would understand I wasn't trying to force them, but rather appeal to their good judgment. On the other hand, there were times when I was made to wait for long periods of time outside the office of the one in charge. And even when I finally got in to plead a case, my plea would often not be heard or taken seriously, and I would not get the response I was hoping for.

19. Could you tell us some of the main problems you ran up against during those early years as the spiritual leader of your people?

If I were to give you a satisfactory answer to this question, I could easily fill several thick volumes. Let me just say that I faced some very difficult times as a bishop. In the beginning of my pastoral service I found that the Catholics were in a minority in Hippo and in many other parts of North Africa. The dominant religion was that of the Donatists, who claimed they were the only pure stock of Christianity. In fact, they claimed that the only true Christians were those Donatists who lived in North Africa. They had no idea whatsoever of the universal nature of the Church. What they were claiming was that the bishops and priests who had allowed the sacred books to be burned during the times of persecution could not perform any of the sacraments in a valid, worthwhile way. Their baptisms, ordinations, Eucharists, and rites of reconciliation were all simply ineffective. In other words, they were saying that these bishops and priests could not do the work of Christ because they had sinned. They were really saying that the bishops and priests were the ones who gave grace through the sacraments. In this they were way off base, as it is Jesus Christ who gives us his grace through the sacraments, regardless of whether the minister is worthy or not.

So I had to spend a lot of time and energy showing these people how they were not teaching what Jesus had taught. In a way I was too successful. The Donatists had a group of violent followers who were called "Circumcellions", who were nothing but thugs and terrorists. They didn't hesitate to attack Catholic bishops and priests, rob them of their goods, throw acid in their eyes, and kill others. They almost caught me in an ambush, but by the providence of God, my carriage driver took a different road home that day, and so I avoided being seriously injured or even killed.

During my thirty-five years as a bishop I also had to defend the faith against my old friends, the Manichees, who had deceived me for so many years. And after that I had serious problems with the Arians and the Pelagians. But I'll let you study these things on your own.

20. You were a bishop only about fourteen or fifteen years when Rome was invaded and sacked by the Vandal tribes from northern Europe in 410. How did this affect you and your people in Hippo?

For a lot of people this event seemed to them a foreshadowing of the end of the world. They just couldn't imagine the Eternal City of Rome falling to a barbarian tribe in this fashion. Many of the more wealthy in the city fled south, coming as far as our city of Hippo and to other places in North Africa. Not a few appealed to me to write something explaining that the fall of Rome did not come about – as the pagans were saying – because Rome had abandoned its own gods for the Christian God. That challenge was the beginning of my book, The City of God, which I wrote over a period of thirteen years between 413 and 426. This is without doubt the longest of the many books I wrote. I never dreamed it would become as popular as it has. I understand it is still being read centuries later and can be found in almost any language.

21. We are well aware that you wrote a tremendous number of books in your lifetime. What were the main topics of these books? How did you ever find the time for this in the midst of your many other tasks?

As I look back I can almost ask myself the same question: how did I ever find the time? Well, probably it was because I could get along with very little sleep at night. Though I would be busy with the affairs of the Church during the daytime hours and often into the evening, I could always find some peace in the late hours of the night and the early hours of the morning. And I was fortunate enough to have some good secretaries at hand who would take notes while I paced up and down in my room and dictated my thoughts. It was the same with the homilies I preached in Hippo, Carthage, and in many other cities throughout North Africa. I always prepared my thoughts ahead of time but rarely wrote them down. But the secretaries would situate themselves throughout the church, again take notes of what I said, and then refer their completed product to me for my correction.

As for the subjects of my writing, well, I wrote about almost anything that referred to our faith. Don't forget, as I have mentioned already, the faith was just getting started and a lot of people were confused and asking questions. They would often send me their questions and beg me to write and answer their difficulties. I did this at times in letters of reply, but at other times I would write pamphlets or books, depending on the importance of the matter. I'm not going to give you a list of my works here, but maybe we can list a few of the more important ones at the end of this interview.

22. What ever happened to that monastery you founded in Hippo after Valerius ordained you a priest? Did you found any other religious houses in your time?

That monastery, as I mentioned earlier, was in the garden of the cathedral church. I lived there myself from 391 to about 396, and I was the only priest; all the rest of my companions were laymen. When I became bishop of Hippo in 396 I did not think it was a good idea to stay there because as bishop I would have to receive visitors constantly and this could easily disturb the peace and quiet which should prevail in a religious house. That's really the reason why I moved to the bishop's house. Quite frankly, I also turned the bishop's house into a religious community. But this particular community was one of clerics, not laymen, who lived with me there and followed the same style of life I had established in the garden monastery.

Though I didn't found any other religious communities myself, many of my brothers from that garden monastery became bishops and founded monasteries in their own territories. These monasteries also followed the same kind of life we had been leading in Hippo, a style of life based on the Acts of the Apostles [4,31-35].

Interestingly enough, my dear sister founded a monastery of nuns in Hippo after I moved there as a priest. She was the superior of that religious community for many years until her death.

23. The Vandal armies surrounded Hippo around June, 430. How did this affect you and your people?

Well you can just imagine how it would have affected us. They put us under siege: we couldn't leave and others could not enter. They had already done terrible things to all the cities they conquered: burning, torturing, killing, destroying the churches as well as other buildings. I must admit that I shed a lot of tears in prayer before God, mainly seeking forgiveness for my sins and those of others. I did everything I could to help my people during this terrible time of trial. I prayed with my fellow bishops that, if it were not God's will to deliver us from our enemies, that he would at least make all of us strong in accepting his will.

This fascinating chat with Augustine about his active life ends here. Earlier we had had a chance to question him also about his character and spirituality, and that section will follow . Three months after the Vandals began their siege of Hippo, Augustine was stricken with what was to be his final illness. He was confined to bed but remained sharp in mind and judgment until the very end. He died as he had lived, a poor man of God. It was August 28 of the year 430. He was 75 years old.

II

Augustine's Spirit and Spirituality

1. Augustine, several things seem to have characterized your struggle to lead a good Christian life: love for God and neighbor, an honest search for the truth, and a complete sharing of life with others in community. Could you tell us something about all this?

That's quite a question you have asked. Let me try to answer it without going into too much detail.

To begin with, love is the very center of our faith, because God is Love. When we love in a generous and outgoing fashion, without thinking about ourselves, we are honoring God in ourselves and in others. Some people have been upset with me because they think I have not put enough emphasis on the love we owe to God. But really in this respect I am much like St. Paul in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians, where he speaks only about love of one's neighbor. Why does he do that? Because it's easy for us to claim we love God, and just as easy for us to deceive ourselves about this love because it's so hard to prove. But love of our neighbor requires concrete actions that can be seen and witnessed. If we hate our neighbor or act unjustly toward that person, we give evidence that we don't really love God. So, even though love of God is the very first commandment given to us, the very first way in which we prove we are keeping that commandment is through love of our neighbor. Looking at things this way is simply being honest with ourselves.

And that brings me to the second part of your question. An honest search for the truth is actually what kept me going in my earlier days, when I was wandering far away from God. I thought I was entirely open to the truth, but I really wasn't: pride got in my way. But since I was never fully satisfied with the answers I was finding in those early days, I kept on searching for what would truly satisfy my restless mind and heart. Since I didn't know myself very well, I couldn't really find God. Once I began to learn the truth about myself, things cleared up a lot. Because God is really the ultimate truth we are all seeking.

Sharing with others in community always held a great attraction for me. Even before my conversion I had proposed a kind of community living to some friends, but it never even got out of the planning stages. In fact, it would have been more like a philosophical discussion group, for it had nothing to do with searching for God. As I see it now, sharing life with others in community is the surest way of reaching that love of God I was just talking about. Moreover, it gives us a wonderful opportunity to practice that unity which Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper: "*That they may be one, Father, as you are in me and I in you, that the world may believe you sent me*" [Jn.17,20]. Living together like this brings out the need we have for one another, helps us practice humility, and serves as a marvelous witness to the entire Christian people that Jesus' prayer can become a reality. A true community reflects the harmony and unity of the Holy Trinity itself. God is very much present in the unity of the members of such a community.

2. What did prayer mean for you?

Once I had come to know my God through faith, prayer became a natural response for me, a longing or yearning, a deep desire within me to be united with the One who alone can satisfy our restlessness and give us that happiness which our very nature seeks. As I put it in my

Confessions: “*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you*” [Conf.1,1]. When we read the Word of God, God speaks to us, but when we pray, we speak to God. However, there is no way we can pray and hope to get through to God unless the heart is deeply united with our thoughts and words. Sometimes I pray with words, other times in silence, but no matter how our prayer is carried out, the only way to reach God is to cry out with love, from the heart. It doesn’t do any good to make a lot of noise with our prayer, unless it is all coming from the heart. The ear of God is attentive to the human heart, not to a lot of words. I once counseled a Roman lady by the name of Proba that lengthy talk is not what is required in prayer, but rather a prayerful disposition. If we spend a lot of time in prayer – which is not a bad thing – we find ourselves knocking with a persistent and holy fervor at the heart of the one whose help we need. Sometimes we get discouraged because it seems God does not answer our prayers. My advice is this: “*Your Father will give you only what he knows is advantageous for you. You are well aware of what you want, but God knows what is good for you*” [Sermon 80,2].

3. You talk a lot about humility in your writings. But that’s a virtue a lot of people simply don’t understand today. Could you tell us why humility seemed so important to you and maybe help us at the same time understand why it is important for us?

After reading that interview about my life you should be able to understand why I think humility is so important. I was very conceited when I was young. That was my destruction in the days before my conversion. I was convinced I could find all the answers by myself, through my poor human reason, without any other help. I rejected the Scriptures because their style, which was not like Cicero’s, was beneath my dignity. I refused to listen to my mother, because I was sure I knew more than she did. I was sure I was a superior being and not in need of others. Pride kept me from what I was so desperately searching for: *the truth!* God can’t get through to a proud heart, because that heart is saying over and over that it has no need for God, and is therefore closed to God.

But it is also true that humility is a very misunderstood Christian virtue. A lot of people think it means refusing to stand up and be counted, or letting stronger people run our lives or run all over us! Humility is anything but that! Humility just means recognizing the truth, the truth about ourselves. It means knowing who we are, what we are, knowing that we are weak human beings, knowing that we need God to fulfill ourselves [Sermon 137,4,4]. It means recognizing and using the wonderful gifts that have been given to us by a loving God, and not letting them shrivel up and die from lack of use. When we do these things, we give honor to God. Moreover, did you ever think how impossible it is for a proud person to live peacefully with others? That person will always think him--or herself--right, want to dominate the others, bury them with his or her ways of doing things. If you want to live in harmony with others, humility is an absolute necessity, because where there is humility, there is also love.

4. Searching for God was a very important aspect of your spirituality. How would you recommend that we go about this today?

This is a topic closely related with what I have already said about prayer. But let me tell you first of all where I made some awful mistakes in my youth. I kept looking for God outside myself in the beautiful things of creation, and I never let those things lead me back to what is even more beautiful: the presence of God within me. To put this in other words: I did not know myself, I was literally running away from myself – and there was no way I could come to know God without first knowing myself [Conf.5,2; 10,27]. If you really want to find God, you have to let his Son Jesus lead you. Jesus is the teacher who lives within us through faith. When we read the Scriptures or even a good book, listen to a sermon or to the advice of a friend, it is through

Jesus, our interior Master, that what we read or hear will come to have real and lasting meaning for us.

But there's another way to find God, and that is in and through our fellow human beings. How many times I failed to realize that God was trying to get through to me through my mother, or my good friend Alypius, or Ambrose and so many others. God can even use our enemies to try to communicate with us and perhaps shake us up, as he did with me, through the Manichean leader Faustus. Each of us has been made God's temple. So I firmly believe that we should honor and serve God first of all by the love and concern we show for one another. It is by this love for our neighbor that our eyes will be purified so that we can see God.

5. You had a particular love for the poor and the downtrodden. Could you tell us how you showed this love in a practical way?

The Last Judgment scene in Matthew's gospel (ch.25) has always deeply impressed me. On that occasion Jesus stated very clearly: Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do to me! We do a lot of talking about love, but if we don't put that love into action, what good is it? It's empty and useless. Jesus has everything he needs, but in his little ones he is very needy. So "*take care of Jesus now as he lies out in the open. Tend to him in his hunger and as he suffers from the cold; tend to him in his need as a pilgrim*" [Sermon 25,8]. We all want justice to be done, but real progress in justice is only going to be realized where there is progress in love. Otherwise we are going to find ourselves cutting corners, or just trying to fulfill the bare essentials of the law. We need to practice towards the poor the same generosity that God practices towards us. In my community we always looked out for the poor, and when we didn't have enough money, we appealed to the people for help. There were times when I even ordered the chalices to be melted down, in order to ransom captives or provide for some very special needs of others.

6. Your greatest love was certainly for Jesus Christ. His teachings dominated your life after your conversion. How can we deepen our love for Jesus in our own times?

My mother taught me to love the name of Jesus from the time I was a small child, sitting on her lap, and listening to her talk about so many things in life. After my conversion I realized all the more the gift that Jesus has been for our human family. How could I not talk and write about him frequently? His ideas have dominated my writings and my homilies to my people, because he is the image of the Father: when we know him, we know our God. He taught us what true love was all about: not just pretty words, but selfless actions. And he taught us about true humility also, something I have already reflected on with you through another question you asked me. Just think about it for a minute. Jesus did not hesitate to become one like us in every way but sin. He didn't come among us boasting about how good or powerful he was, though he could have rightly done this. No, he accepted our humanity as it was, and taught us how to accept our call to be adopted sons and daughters of God.

But there is more. He taught us the meaning of forgiveness, the compassion of our Father, especially through that marvelous parable of the prodigal son. As you may know, I used that parable frequently when I wrote my Confessions, because that son who ran away from his father is me too! Jesus taught us the mercy of our Father by the merciful way he treated others who had sinned and asked for forgiveness. You asked me how people today can deepen their love for Jesus. My answer is simple: just reflect more often on the love, the humility, the

forgiveness and compassion, and the mercy of Jesus as he walked among us on earth. He is the only Way to the Father, he is the Truth itself, the reality we all seek, he is the Life that fills us so that we can be united with our Father, now and forever. Imitate Jesus and you will live forever!

7. **Friendship was one of the most important characteristics of your life, from the time of your youth until your death. Why was friendship so important to you, and why should it be important for all of us?**

Friendship is really one of the greatest values in my life. It's true, I simply could not live happily without friends, and I'm talking about truly warm, human relationships, where common concerns, joys, sufferings and other interests can be shared fruitfully. When I was younger I got attached to friends in a totally human way, but since then I have learned that something very important was missing from those friendships: the presence of God. The only authentic and lasting friendship we can enjoy is one that is made possible by God joining persons together in the bond of love. Friendship is important, even necessary, for everyone because that's the way God made us: God wants us to enjoy companionship and not be alone in this life. When I entrust my deepest thoughts to a faithful friend, I truly feel I am entrusting them to God, in whom that person dwells.

8. **Your love for the Church as the Whole Christ knew no bounds after your conversion. Could you tell us something about how you regarded the Church? This might be very helpful for our own understanding of the Church today.**

I guess the first thing to clarify is what I mean by the "Whole Christ". The whole Christ is nothing more than what St. Paul has said: Jesus Christ is the Head and we, the baptized, are his body. All faithful Christians throughout the world make up the Catholic Church, "*our true mother, the true spouse of so great a husband*" [Sermon 213,8]. And since the Father always loves his Son and all who are attached to him in this Church, there is no way we can honor and love God as our Father without likewise honoring and loving the Church as our mother. On the other hand, so close are the Father and our mother the Church bonded together, that we cannot offend one without offending the other. "*A person will have the Holy Spirit in the same measure in which he or she loves the Church of Christ*" [On John's Gospel, tr.32,8].

9. **What place does the Blessed Virgin Mary hold in your spirituality?**

Mary was very special to me after I began to study the Scriptures. I experienced a very close relationship with her in prayer and in word, through my preaching and through my writing. Because I see in Mary a perfect example of that very necessary humility which I have been talking about: she neither boasted nor put herself ahead of others because of her unique position as the mother of Jesus [S.51,18]. I see her also as a woman of tremendous faith, which we cannot help but admire and want to imitate. In fact she conceived Jesus first of all through her faith, before he became present in her womb [S.215,4]. In many of my homilies, especially those centered around Christmas, I taught the people over and over about Mary's unique privilege: she was a virgin before she conceived, a virgin while bearing her Son, a virgin in giving birth, and a virgin after Jesus' birth. There was no time in her life when she did not rejoice in this beautiful gift which God had given her, precisely because she was to be the mother of his Son [S.186,1; S.51,18; S.196,1; et al.].

Now it is true, we cannot imitate Mary as the mother of Jesus. But we can imitate her as his disciple. And really, being a disciple, a follower of her Son who is also God, is a far greater

blessing than having been his mother. Motherhood comes from a physical relationship. The disciple, however, is born from faith in the heart. But Mary also was redeemed by her Son and is a member of the Church, of which he is the Head. *“Mary is holy, Mary is blessed, but the Church is something better than the Virgin Mary . Why? Because Mary is part of the Church, a holy member, a quite exceptional member, the supremely wonderful member, but still a member of the whole body”* [S.72A,7]. This in no way detracts from the veneration and love we owe her. Rather it reminds us that she is indeed the one, exceptional member of our human race, the one to whom we can all look for guidance and help, the one who is closest to her Son and able to intercede for us in a most effective way.

10. One of the first things you did on returning to Africa was to establish a community of friends, whose object was to imitate that first Christian community we read about in the Acts of the Apostles. Was your foundation successful? Did it spread? Did it survive for long?

I had been toying with the idea of living in a community of friends for a few years before my conversion, but the kind of community I was thinking about then really had nothing to do with service of God or the Church [Conf. 6, 14]. It was rather to be a philosophical group, something like what the Greeks had been famous for. But at that time, I don't think I realized how many elements of the life I was proposing had been part of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, which I was later to read about in the Acts of the Apostles [4,31-35].

After my mother died in 387 in Ostia, the seaport of Rome, I spent a full year in and around Rome. I had plenty of opportunities to visit many monasteries which were thriving there, and I was very impressed. I had already decided to be a servant of God, so on returning to Thagaste, I gathered a few friends who had been traveling with me and a few other good men of the town who were of like ideals, and we established a Christian community. We meditated, we prayed, we fasted, we shared our thoughts, we performed good works for the people, and I began to write works that could be of service to the Church. We were trying to imitate the challenge of the Apostle: to be of one mind and one heart as we journeyed together toward God. We lived in great simplicity, shared everything in common, and gave to each what he needed. This community lasted about three years. After that, when I had been ordained a priest, many of its members moved to Hippo with me, where we set up our monastery in the garden which the bishop had given me, adjacent to the cathedral church. About ten of the members of this monastery eventually became bishops in North Africa. They so loved the kind of life we had been leading that they established similar religious monasteries wherever they had been sent as chief pastors.

Did all this last? Well, I've already spoken to you about the Vandals invading North Africa. The fact of the matter is that they destroyed all the monasteries they encountered and killed many of the priests and brothers living in them. The spirit of our Augustinian way of life may have survived in a few brave souls and also in my writings, but the physical reality was pretty well destroyed.

11. 814 years after your death, Pope Innocent IV gathered together several groups of religious and placed them under the guidance of your Rule of life. Ever since then this religious order, known as the Augustinians, has been proud to have you as its mentor and its spiritual guide. What advice would you like to leave with these men and women who desire to follow Jesus more closely in keeping with your spirituality?

I am pleased to know that the Rule of life we were following is still being used today. The principles that I wrote in that short Rule are still valid, because they are based upon the Scriptures, but you could hardly use all the examples I give there of how those principles are to be put into practice. You have to learn to adapt yourselves to the circumstances in which you find yourselves, without losing sight of the fundamentals which bind you together.

Really my advice to those who follow the way of life I had proposed for following Jesus is very simple: Work hard at being united in mind and heart as you journey toward God. There is nothing more essential for your life together. And the pillars upon which that kind of life can flourish are the formation of a community of faith and worship, sharing of possessions, simplicity of life, and above all humility which leads to love. Moreover, your life together is to do nothing more important than to honor God in one another, because you have become his temples through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Notes for Further Reference

The following references are intended to help teachers and students locate where particular issues in the interview are spoken about more at length. Works cited in these notes without author are the works, sermons, or letters of Augustine himself. Other reference works are listed below in an abbreviated form, and listed in full in the bibliography that follows on the next page.

Part I

1. See Brown, chs. 1-2
2. Conf., Bk.1, 9-18; Bk.2,3; Brown, ch.3
3. Conf., Bk.1,10;19
4. Conf., Bk.2, 4-9
5. Conf., Bk.1, 11
6. Conf., Bk.3, 1-4
7. Conf., Bk.3, 4-6
8. Conf., Bk.3, 6-12; Brown, ch.5
9. Conf., Bk.3, 3
10. Conf., Bk.4,2; Bk.6, 13+15; Brown, ch.13
11. Conf., Bk.4, 4-9
12. Conf., Bk.5, 8
13. Conf., Bk.5,3-7;10;14; Bk.6,4
14. Conf., Bk.5, 13-14; Bk.6, 1; Bk.7, 9-21;
Bk.8, 1-5
15. Conf., Bk.8, 6-12
16. Conf., Bk.6, 13+15; Bk.8, 1; 10-11
17. Conf., Bk.9, 6; Possidius, chs.2-3;4-5;8;
Sermon 355,1
18. Possidius, chs.6-7; 11; 19; Meer, passim
19. Possidius, chs.12-18
20. City of God, passim
21. Meer, passim
22. Possidius, ch.11; Sermon 355; Letter 211
23. Possidius, chs.28, 29, 31

Part II

1. **Love:**
Commentary on 1 John, passim.
On The Gospel of John, tr.17,8.
Pellegrino, ch.7, 165-183.
- Truth:**
Soliloquia; Conf. 10,26.
- Community:**
Rule; Conf., 6,14; Sermon 355;
Commentary on Ps.132.
2. **Prayer:**
Letter 130;
Ulanov, passim
Hand, passim
3. **Humility:**
Pellegrino, ch.2, 35-65
Tack, ch.7, 91-103
4. **Searching for God:**
Pellegrino, ch.1, 11-34
Tack, ch.4, 45-60
5. **Love for the Poor:**
Sermons 355-356
Comm. on Mt.25: Sermon 389,5
Possidius, ch.24
6. **Love for Jesus:**
Pellegrino, ch.5, 119-138
7. **Friendship:**
Conf., Bk.4,8-9
83 Miscell. Questions: q. 71
Tack, ch.3, 31-44
8. **Church:**
Pellegrino, ch.6, 139-164
Tack, ch.9, 123-135
9. **Blessed Virgin Mary:**
Sermons (cited in text)
10. **Monastic Community:**
Rule
Tack, chs.1-2, 3-29; ch.10,137-148
Bavel: Rule
Zumkeller
11. **Augustinians:**
Rule
Rano [both works cited]

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III

The Augustinians Serving the Body of Christ in the Spirit of St. Augustine

Roots!

Roots! How important they are for us so we can better understand and appreciate our origins, where we came from and how we got to where we are today. We feel the need to identify with those who have gone before us, see what influence they may have had on their world, and also indirectly on ourselves: our lives, characteristics, and activities. We need to recognize their mistakes so as not to repeat them, and rejoice in their successes so as to imitate them or do even better in our own times. We like to trace our origins as far back as we can, because it fascinates us to see how our ancestors lived and what challenges they faced in their daily lives.

What is true of our blood families is also true of the Augustinians, who are also a family, with roots going back to the 13th century. Tracing our origins has been made much easier for us than for many other families, because our history has been studied attentively and often recorded in detail for posterity by the work of many writers, as well as by the preservation of documents and letters that take us back over these past 750 years and more.

Unique Beginnings

No matter where the Augustinians live and work today – in schools, parishes, missions, or in other apostolates – history is involved, whether it be short or long range. The history of our present foundations leads us back to other times and places, until we find that all our present monasteries can be traced back to one single time and place: *the birth of the Order of St. Augustine* in Italy in March of the year 1244.

That's when it all really began for us. The Franciscans have St. Francis as their founder, the Dominicans St. Dominic. And every other religious group that has ever been founded in the Church has had a person or persons, who could be pointed out as their founder – all, that is, except the Augustinians. Our origins are truly unique. For it was the Pope, Innocent IV, who determined that various hermit groups already existing in Italy should be brought together under a common banner: *the Rule and spirit of St. Augustine*. In those medieval years there were many small religious groups in Italy and other nearby countries whose members had consecrated their lives to Christ and the service of the Church. But they carried out their mission principally through prayer and example. In fact they were often living a hermit style of life in the woods, well away from the main centers of population, and with very little pastoral activity unless the people happened to come to them for counsel or help. But the new times of the 13th century – the fact that the people were more and more moving from a purely agrarian way of life to life in the cities – were calling for something radically different among all Christians, and especially among those consecrated to God's service. These religious were in need of a higher level of education, better preparation for preaching, apostolic works that were more easily available to the people in the cities, and a more centralized government that would better utilize the talents of the men available.

Around 1242-43 several of these hermit groups decided to petition the Pope for help: "*Bring us together*", they asked him. "*Help us to be a greater force for good, because the more we are*

organized and united, the greater effect we can have in promoting gospel values.” Some of these hermit groups were already following the Rule of St. Augustine, so when Pope Innocent IV brought them all together, he also officially gave them all the Rule of St. Augustine. Moreover, he urged them also to follow the spirit of the religious life Augustine had established in the 4th and 5th centuries. In 1256 the number of religious who made up this new Order grew even more, as Pope Alexander IV joined several other groups of religious to the original branch of the Augustinians.

It is interesting to note a particular and lasting characteristic of the Augustinians of today, owing to the contemplative nature of so many of the groups that originally made up the Order. This characteristic is simply that the Augustinians have always fostered a contemplative spirit in their lives, along with their total dedication to very demanding apostolic works. In combining these two aspects of life—contemplation and the apostolate—they have continued to follow the lead of St. Augustine, who highly recommended in his City of God (19,19) a mixture of the active and contemplative lives.

Relationship with Augustine’s Communities in North Africa

Before we go any further, it might be a good idea to mention briefly how we are related to the communities Augustine founded in Hippo. Towards the end of our interview with Augustine [see above I,22-23; II,10], he told us about the life of these communities and also how the invading Vandals went about destroying churches and religious houses as they overran North Africa. Some of the monks were put to death and others were exiled. Some of the exiles fled to nearby parts of Europe, but we have no more mention of any specific monasteries that followed Augustine’s Rule until around the 11th century. The Arab invasion of North Africa in the 7th century also contributed to the elimination of any remnants of monasteries which may have survived the Vandals. What all of this tells us is that there is no physical link, but only a spiritual one, between Augustine’s communities and those established in the 13th century.

The Mission Spreads

It makes one marvel to see how quickly the newly established Augustinian Order spread to other countries in Europe: France, Germany, Spain, England. From these places and within the Order’s first fifty years of existence, Augustinian life also spread to Hungary, the Balkans, the Ukraine, Poland, Portugal, Ireland and other countries on the European continent.

Another time of rapid expansion followed on the European “discovery” of a new and bigger “world”: the Americas. Along with many other religious Orders, the Augustinians took part in the great missionary movement of the 16th century, prompted by this “discovery”. They founded monasteries in Mexico, Peru and other countries of South America, the Philippines, Japan, and China. Through these bold moves they set out to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to peoples who had never heard this good news before.

These new mission areas were so important that something more should be said about them. First of all, the conditions under which the friars were asked to live were very difficult and demanding. Although there were large monasteries in the main cities, most of the brothers were away from these locations for months at a time, while they took the good news to the simple people who lived far from any urban centers, either in the plains, in the jungle, or in the mountains. In Mexico the Augustinians contributed greatly to the establishment of universities of higher learning and to the education of the more simple people. In the mountains of Peru the newly conquered Incas had the greatest trust possible in the Augustinians who came to teach

them about Christianity. In 1564 the Augustinians became the very first missionaries to the people in the thousands of islands that make up the Philippines: they not only educated the people in the faith, but taught them very fundamental skills, such as road building and how to dig wells. In Japan the Order was quickly persecuted by some of the leaders of the country and many of the priests and brothers suffered martyrdom, together with the people they had brought to Christ by baptism.

Foundations in the United States

The roots of the Augustinians in the United States can be traced back to Ireland in the late 18th century. The Irish Augustinians themselves had been founded from England by the end of the 13th century, but they suffered severe set backs from the Protestant Reformation in the middle of the 16th century. The Irish were still under British domination when the Irish Augustinians decided to send two friars to this newly independent country of the United States. These two young priests came together for the first time in 1796 in Philadelphia and began raising funds to build St. Augustine's Church. George Washington and other distinguished leaders of the country contributed to the building of that first Augustinian foundation in this country. Old St. Augustine's, as it is known today, still stands where it was first built, though the original church was burned to the ground in 1844 during the terrible "Know Nothing" religious riots of the times. This church is now a national monument.

Two years before those riots, what we know today as Villanova University began its life as a collegiate seminary. This new venture was located on a large tract of farm land about ten miles west of Philadelphia. Long before this fortunate purchase, however, between 1796 and the 1840's, the Augustinians had served many area churches and done missionary work in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Massachusetts and Delaware. As other young men began to join the Order, new foundations were made, first in the areas already mentioned and then in Chicago, Detroit, other cities of the midwest, and in California. Probably the period of greatest physical expansion in the United States took place between 1920 and 1969. The original Province of St. Thomas of Villanova gave birth to two new provinces in this period: Our Mother of Good Counsel Province, with headquarters in Chicago (1941); and St. Augustine's Province in California, which was formed from the westernmost houses of the Order (1969). It is interesting to note that the Villanova Province was the first group of religious men in the United States to receive papal authorization to found a religious province(1796), but it was not the first to actually be established. Lack of numbers kept the Province from holding its founding Chapter until 1874. The Augustinians in the United States reached their greatest numbers in 1968, when there were in their ranks about 800 professed members in vows. About 500 of these were priests; the others were brothers and seminarians.

Purpose and Spirit

Behind every Augustinian foundation in every country there lies a common purpose and spirit, which is spelled out for us in the briefest style possible in the first lines of the Rule of life Augustine wrote for his followers sixteen centuries ago. Those lines read like this: "Before all else, live together in harmony and have one mind and one heart as you journey toward God. For this is the very purpose of your coming together". The very reason for our existence, then, lies in our life in community, in which we share all goods, material and spiritual, and call nothing our own. This community life is our very first apostolate and the strength behind our apostolic work, no matter what this work might be.

After the Second Vatican Council the Order's leadership in Rome called a Special General Chapter, which was to update our Constitutions, much as the decrees of the Council had done for the universal Church. This Chapter was held at Villanova University in 1968 after almost two years of consultation with all the members of the Order concerning what changes should be made. These new Constitutions gave renewed emphasis to the importance of community life in the Order throughout the 43 countries where the Order is serving the Church. Frequent visits to the Augustinians in these countries by the elected head of the Order – called the Prior General, whose headquarters are in Rome – have also contributed greatly to strengthening this essential aspect of our life together, as well as to cementing closer relationships among Augustinians worldwide. The universality of the Order was highlighted in the 20th century by the election of Priors General from several different countries: Spain, Germany, the United States, Italy, and Ireland.

Apostolic Works

In the United States the Augustinians have carried out their service to the local Church in many different ways. Traditionally, the field of education – higher and secondary education in particular – has been strongly emphasized, as has parish work. American Augustinians have accepted difficult missions in northern Peru, Japan, and South Africa since World War II, and have seen the fruits of their labor, not only in a strengthened faith among the people, but also and perhaps especially in numerous vocations to the religious life and the priesthood coming from the people themselves. Augustinians have also engaged in very demanding hospital work, professional counseling positions, and in writing instructive and inspirational articles and books. In 1968 the Order in the United States grew in a very significant spiritual sense when a group of seven Augustinian Nuns came from Spain to establish the first Augustinian community of contemplative life in our country.

There is no limit to what Augustinian religious can contribute to the Church, but we must never let ourselves lose sight of our original purpose, as indicated above: to live in oneness of mind and heart as we journey toward God. St. Augustine's life, example, and teachings continue to motivate us to continue our dedicated service to God's people at home and abroad, in keeping with the changing needs of the Church.

IV

The Augustinians: Saints, Blesseds, and Other Famous Persons

Since the founding of the Augustinian Order in 1244 many of its members – men and women – have been honored because of their outstanding example of holiness, that is, their closeness to God. Many other members of the Order have demonstrated special gifts and talents that have allowed them to make great contributions, both to the Order and to the Church. In some cases their accomplishments have spilled over into the world around us, leading to the advancement of science, travel, and the education of many peoples. Though we cannot mention all these very special people in this limited space, we do want to give recognition to some who have left their mark in a significant way on the Church, the Order, and our world. If some readers desire to know more about those listed here – or about others who are not mentioned – they have the possibility of doing so either on the web, in history books, or through other communication media.

A. Canonized Saints of the Church

St. Monica, mother of St. Augustine (332-387)

Monica is hardly a member of the Augustinian Order. However, because of her unique role in the life of Augustine, it is only right that we give her priority among the saints of the Order. Without her influence, Augustine's conversion to the faith might have been very difficult, if not impossible. Augustine practically tells us this himself in the way he talks about her in his Confessions.

Monica was 23 when she gave birth to Augustine. We know that she had at least two other children. She came from a Catholic family of the Berber tribe in North Africa and was so firm in her faith that her husband, a person without any particular belief, was converted to Catholicism shortly before he died. Monica raised Augustine in such a manner that he always greatly loved and revered the name of Jesus, even during his ten years with the Manichees. She suffered greatly when Augustine joined this sect at the university and she used to shed many tears in her prayers to God that he would quickly find his way back to reality. Augustine's return was not quick – he wandered for more than fifteen years before finding his way back. Augustine tells us that his mother suffered far more for his spiritual rebirth than most mothers do in bringing their children into the world. As we can gather from the Confessions, Augustine loved her dearly, even though he did not often follow her advice. The married women in her circle could never understand how she never seemed to be beaten by her husband, as they were by theirs. She assured them that it was patience and prudence that guided her in such a way that Patrick never laid an angry hand on her. Monica died in Ostia, the seaport of Rome at that time, within a few months of Augustine's baptism into the Church. From the earliest times after her death and that of Augustine, she was considered a saint of the Church.

St. Rita of Cascia (1381-1457)

Saint Rita – whose married name was Mancini – appeals to many people today, as in the past, because she lived through so many of life's stages and was exemplary in each one. She was a dutiful child to her parents, a loving wife and mother of two sons, a widow who also lost both her children to an early death, a contemplative religious nun, and a stigmatic. Her entire life revolved around the small village where she was born (Roccaporena) and nearby Cascia, located in the Umbrian hills of Italy. Cascia was at that time an important stop on the commercial lanes

of travel between northern and southern Italy. Rita was married about eighteen years when her husband was murdered. Shortly afterwards her two sons died, probably at about the age of 17 or 18. Rita then resolved to enter the monastery of Augustinian Nuns in Cascia, which she had desired to do even before marrying at the wish of her parents. At first Rita was refused entrance into the monastery. But after much prayer and especially owing to her work of bringing peace to the divided principal families of Cascia, she was finally admitted.

She lived a very devout life as a cloistered nun in this monastery for forty years. Because of her intense love for Jesus in his sufferings for us, she was blessed with the mark on her forehead of a thorn of our Lord's crown of thorns. She bore this stigmata for the last fifteen years of her life. She died in 1456, but her body is still preserved and visible in the sanctuary of the Augustinian church in Cascia.

Rita is most often called the Saint of the Impossible. But her way of life says more to us than any number of miracles which have been attributed to her. She has left us a message of forgiveness and of peace and reconciliation, which is so important for our society which has been the victim of many wars and much violence. She teaches us what it means to give in love without asking any return. Her love for Jesus was a love that sought to serve others, above all in prayer. As Jesus made his suffering a sign of his tremendous love for us, so Rita wished to share in Christ's suffering as a sign of her total consecration to him. Finally Rita has left us a message of joy in the Lord, which can only be found in the heart that is open to God's workings and open to sharing with others the gifts that one has received.

Saint Thomas of Villanova (1486-1555)

Thomas grew up in Villanova de Los Infantes in Spain. He was first a brilliant student and afterwards a professor at the famous University of Alcalá. At thirty years of age he turned down an even more prestigious professorship at the University of Salamanca in order to become an Augustinian. He professed vows in the Order in 1517 and was ordained to the priesthood late in the year 1518. Thomas became famous as a leader of the Augustinians in Spain and was one of the first provincials to send missionaries to the newly discovered lands of Mexico and Peru in 1534.

From the very beginning of his priestly life, Thomas was noted for his holiness and his ability to preach. So wide spread was his reputation that the King nominated him to be Archbishop of Valencia in 1544. In the eleven years he ministered to the Church in this needy archdiocese he won the admiration of rich and poor alike, as well as of his priests. He was especially devoted to helping the poor, and paintings which were done of him after his death often show him at the service of the poor. Villanova University, founded by the Augustinians outside of Philadelphia in 1842, is named after this great saint, who was also himself a great educator.

St. John Stone (____-1539)

About John Stone we know very little. In fact what we do know comes to us from the written record of his execution at the command of King Henry VIII. John was one of the few brave men of those turbulent times who, like St. Thomas More, stood up for the unity of the Church as being found in the successor of St. Peter. King Henry had declared that he, not the Pope, was henceforth to be known as the head of the Church in England. Those who refused to sign the oath of supremacy, recognizing Henry as supreme head of the Church, were to be put to death. John Stone was an Augustinian stationed in Canterbury. When Henry's delegates came to his religious house in 1538 to obtain the signature of the friars on the oath of allegiance, John

refused, declaring that only a priest appointed by God could be head of the Church. He spent a year in prison before he was executed for his conviction that the unity of the Church depended on the leadership of the Pope.

B. Augustinians Recently Beatified by the Church

Beatification is a lengthy process. It is the final step before a person may be proclaimed a saint, and is reached only after an exhaustive study of the person's life, writings, actions, and relationships. Except in the case of martyrs, a proven miracle must have been worked by God through the intercession of the person to be beatified. The three Augustinian Blessed who are described here below are contemporaries of our society. Though born in the latter years of the 19th century, they lived the greater part of their lives in the 20th century. They are all examples of heroic love, of holiness, and of a great desire to serve God in his people. Two of them, Anselmo and Elias, willingly gave their lives for their people, rather than abandon them and seek their personal safety. Maria Teresa was not called to martyrdom, but she also dedicated her life totally to prayer and to the service of others.

Blessed Anselmo Polanco (1881-1939)

Anselmo was born in the province of Palencia in Spain in 1881. He took on himself the Augustinian way of life at an early age and was ordained to the priesthood in 1904. During his life in the Order he was looked upon as a model Augustinian and was entrusted by his brothers with various positions of responsibility: Master of Novices, Prior, and Prior Provincial. In 1935, when he was 54 years old and Spain was going through a very critical time in its history, Anselmo was chosen to be bishop of Teruel, a city located high in the mountains of northeastern Spain. He was a marvelous pastor to his people, living a holy life of prayer and self-sacrifice, and displaying a great love for the poor.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) he refused to abandon his people, stating that he would either be saved with them or die with them. When the army of the Republic occupied the city of Teruel on January 8, 1938, Father Polanco, as he was affectionately called by all who knew him, surrendered himself to the occupying forces. He suffered in prison in Valencia and Barcelona for thirteen months, and was then martyred for the faith as the Republican forces fled in defeat toward France. The mortal remains of the saintly bishop are buried in the cathedral church of Teruel, together with those of his faithful Vicar General Don Filippo Ripoll, who was his companion in prison and in martyrdom.

Blessed Maria Teresa Fasce (1881-1947)

Marietta Fasce was a young girl in Genoa, Italy, when St. Rita was canonized in 1900. At that time she and her family were living in the Augustinian parish of that city, Our Lady of Consolation. St. Rita came to be her model, and at the age of 25 she entered the same Augustinian convent of Cascia, which had been Rita's home many centuries before. There she took the name of Maria Teresa. She did not find things as she had expected, and in the beginning was very discouraged. But through prayer and determination, she set out to help her community renew itself. What she accomplished is almost incredible.

By the 20th century Cascia had lost all the importance that it had enjoyed five hundred years earlier when Rita had lived there. The convent was also not up to the standards that had existed in Rita's time. But with the help of God's grace, Teresa was able to turn things around, especially after she was elected Superior of the convent in 1920. The nuns re-elected her to that office nine times, that is, until her death in 1947. Teresa's deep spiritual life and love of contemplation were the key to her success in the renewal of the Augustinian way of life in her

convent. But her influence went far beyond the walls of that convent. She began to publish a small bulletin to promote devotion to St. Rita; she was able to raise sufficient money to build a new church honoring the saint; she founded an orphanage for poor young girls next to the convent, which is still functioning. But much like her patroness, St. Rita, she also suffered greatly from physical disabilities. She suffered the contradictions of life and her own human limitations in a spirit of great love for God. Her spirit and her work have transformed the convent and even the town of Cascia.

Blessed Elias del Socorro Nieves (1882-1928)

Mateo Elias Nieves was born with very delicate health and during life suffered various disabilities, such as tuberculosis and a temporary blindness, which affected his eyesight throughout his life. His parents died when Elias was very young, so that he was brought up by loving friends of the family. Because of the poverty into which he was born, he had no opportunity to study until he was much older. But his religious vocation was constantly maturing during his years of adolescence while he resided in his parish and dedicated himself to pastoral work. He was 28 years old when he took his first vows as an Augustinian. It was at this time that he took the name “del Socorro”, placing himself under the care of the Blessed Mother of Jesus. He was ordained a priest at the age of 33 in 1916.

He was a simple man himself, and he served with great joy and dedication the very simple people entrusted to his pastoral care. He did not perform any great works, but constantly helped his people spiritually, cementing their faith more firmly in times of great political upheaval. Like Bishop Polanco in Spain, he refused to abandon his people when the government insisted that all priests should reside in Mexico City. He lived in a cave as a fugitive for some fourteen months, protected by his parishioners, who came to him frequently for the Eucharist and the other sacraments.

Father Nieves died blessing the soldiers who were executing him. He not only forgave them but gave his scanty possessions to his executioner, Captain Manuel Marquez Cervantes. It was this very officer who declared years later that Fr. Nieves died like a hero and a saint. The Captain had kept the eyeglasses and the blanket given to him by Fr. Elias before his execution as very special souvenirs of a holy man. The people all regarded Fr. Nieves as a martyr and from the time of his martyrdom honored the anniversary of his death in a special way each year.

C. Other Famous Augustinians

Jerome Cardinal Seripando (1493-1563)

It seems only right to consider in the first place among these other “famous” Augustinians a man whose energy and total dedication to the Augustinian ideal and to the Church gave renewed life to the Augustinian Order at a time of great crisis. The crisis, of course, was the separation from the Church of Rome, led by former Augustinian Martin Luther and by other Protestant reformers in the early and mid 16th century.

Jerome entered the Augustinian novitiate in Naples in 1507, at the age of 20. After several years of studies at the university and following his ordination to the priesthood, he was called to lead his Neapolitan Congregation when only 30 years old. His reputation grew during the following years for his firmness and understanding in bringing about the renewal of his own Congregation. At the age of 46 he was elected the worldwide head of the Order as Prior General

and began an extensive program of renewal by personally visiting all the communities of the Order in Italy, France, and Spain, something that had not been done in more than 70 years. Because of King Henry VIII's suppression of religious in England, it was impossible to visit the few remaining Augustinians in that country.

During his twelve years as General (1539-1551) Jerome was instrumental in bringing about many changes for the better throughout the Order, and especially in renewing a real spirit of unity among Augustinians in different nations. In view of the lack of decent transportation and communication which then existed, it is remarkable how much this one man, with his enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice himself for others, was able to accomplish. The Order at that time numbered between eight and ten thousand members. Though he highly esteemed and promoted theological studies among the Augustinians, Jerome was convinced that the best leaders of the Order were not the learned, but those who were striving to fulfill the Augustinian ideal as good, solid religious.

In 1553 Seripando had been made Archbishop of Salerno, though he was not in the best of health. However, despite poor health, he brought about the renewal of his diocese and insisted on the need for pastors to reside in their parishes. Though as Prior General he had taken part in the opening sessions of the historic ecumenical Council of Trent in 1545, his real influence in this Council came in its final session when he was sent to the Council by the Pope in 1561 as one of the three Cardinal Legates to oversee the final decrees of that Council. Jerome died at Trent on March 17, 1563.

Andrés de Urdaneta (1508-1568)

Andrés was born and raised in Spain. At the age of 17 he began seafaring experiences, which initially provided him with eight challenging years in the Spice Islands (the Moluccas). When he returned to Spain in 1536, at the age of 28, his knowledge of the sea and of cosmography was so highly respected that he was called upon to present a written report of his experiences. After serving as a chief navigator in the Spanish fleet, he moved to Mexico, which had been conquered by the Spanish several years earlier. In Mexico he felt God calling him to the Augustinian religious life, an entirely different type of life than what he had been accustomed to. He entered the Order in Mexico in 1552, professed his vows in March of 1553, and was ordained a priest shortly afterwards.

But though Andrés had desired to live his new life as a missionary in Mexico, his reputation and his precise knowledge of navigation on the seas caused him to be sought out by the King of Spain himself, Philip II. Philip asked him to organize and lead an expedition in 1564 which was to head for the Philippine Islands and find a safe return route to Mexico. Five earlier attempts to find this route had failed completely. Andrés was successful in this venture, returning from the Philippines to Mexico in just 123 days. On the trip he was accompanied by four other Augustinians, who stayed in the Philippines and became the first missionaries to these islands. Andrés died in Mexico three years after completing this round trip and establishing a commercial sailing route to the Philippines and the Far East, which was used successfully for the next three centuries.

Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884)

Gregor Mendel is known universally as the father of modern genetics. But sadly enough, he received no recognition for his discoveries during his lifetime. He was born into a very poor peasant family in Moravia (present day Czech Republic), and experienced great financial difficulty obtaining a decent education for the times. In 1843 he entered the Augustinian Monastery of St. Thomas in Brno, where he spent the rest of his life, except for brief periods away. He was ordained a priest in 1847 and served as Abbot of the monastery from 1869 till the time of his death.

Mendel was a very precise person. He did not stumble upon his discoveries but came upon them through the proper use of logic, mathematics, and biology. He also showed a great amount of imaginative insight, painstaking patience, and analytical skills, all of which are signs of a fine scientist. He eventually established two laws of heredity: the law of segregation and the law of independent assortment. He published the results of his experimentation on over 100,000 individual specimens of peas in 1866, but his results were contrary to the accepted views on inheritance of the scientific world at the time. For this reason his discoveries were lost for almost 35 years. They were rediscovered and duly recognized in 1900, sixteen years after his death, when his first law was reconfirmed independently by three scientists in different countries of Europe.

Sebastian Cardinal Martinelli (1848-1918)

Sebastian Martinelli entered the Augustinian Order in his native Italy in 1863 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1871. His many academic and leadership talents were recognized early on. He was appointed Procurator General of the Order in 1881, and in 1889, at the age of 41, he was elected to the highest office in the Order as Prior General. He was so admired for his work at bringing greater unity to the Order—which had suffered greatly in Spain and Italy due to the civil suppressions of the 19th century—that he was re-elected in 1895 by an overwhelming majority.

Less than a year later, in August 1896, Pope Leo XIII called Fr. Martinelli to the Vatican and told him he would be the next Apostolic Delegate to the United States. The office of Apostolic Delegate had only been established in the United States in 1890. The main purpose of this office was to provide a direct liaison between the American bishops and the Holy Father in Rome. To fulfill his role as the Pope's personal representative, Fr. Martinelli was ordained an Archbishop before leaving for the States. He lived in Washington D.C. and served the Holy Father in this capacity for six years. In 1902 he was called back to Rome and made a Cardinal. His older brother Thomas had been a Cardinal since 1873. Sebastian served the Church and his brother Augustinians with great distinction during his years as head of the Order and as a close collaborator of the Holy Father. He died in 1918.

Sister Caridad A. Martin and Sister Esther Paniagua A.

These two Augustinian Missionary Sisters from Spain are noted here among our "famous Augustinians" for their tremendous courage and love, which cost them their lives. Sr. Caridad, who was 61, and Sr. Esther, who was 45, were gunned down on the streets of Algiers on Sunday, September 23, 1994 by Islamic Fundamentalist extremists. Their deaths were a terrible blow to the great number of needy people of Algiers whom they were serving. Their lives had been a witness to what it means to follow Jesus Christ, that is, to love one's neighbor even to the point of making the supreme sacrifice of one's life.

These two and several other Sisters of the Congregation of Augustinian Missionary Sisters living in Algiers had been well aware of the great danger that they were facing by

remaining at their posts and serving the poor and needy of that large city. They met as a group with their Mother General in the months preceding this assassination to prayerfully consider what they were doing and what were their options. Individually and personally they all decided to remain. They were fearful, of course: they said that much clearly. But they were also full of faith and trust in the Lord. As the Sisters remarked on that occasion: *"They cannot take our lives away, because we have already given our lives for them"*. This was a clear reference to the fact that they had already given their lives freely to the service of the people. There was nothing more for them to give.

AUGUSTINIAN WEB PAGES

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS OF THE AUGUSTINIANS – ROME

www.aug.org

world-wide web pages:

www.aug.org/augustin/instit_e.htm

PROVINCE OF SAINT THOMAS OF VILLANOVA

www.augustinian.org

PROVINCE OF OUR MOTHER OF GOOD COUNSEL

www.midwestaugustinians.org

UNIVERSITIES AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Villanova University

www.villanova.edu/servlet/Web2000 [click on "Mission & Heritage"]

<http://heritage.villanova.edu/heritage/index.html>

[Augustinian heritage, history, saints, famous augustinians, etc.]

Merrimack College

www.merrimack.edu

Cascia Hall Preparatory School - Tulsa, OK

www.casciahall.tulsa.ok.us

Malvern Preparatory School - Malvern, PA

www.malvernprep.com

Providence Catholic High School - New Lenox, IL

www.villanova.edu/pchs/

St. Augustine High School - San Diego, CA

www.sahs.org

St. Augustine Preparatory School - Richland, NJ

www.hermits.com

St. Rita High School - Chicago, IL

www.stritahs.com/Stx.html

Villanova Preparatory School - Ojai, CA

www.villanovaprep.org

OTHER PAGES OF INTEREST

National Shrine of St. Rita - Philadelphia, PA

www.stritashrine.org

Augustine - [University of Pennsylvania web site]

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine.html>

The Augustinian Order - [Fr. John Pejza's web site]

www.geocities.com/Athens/1534/osa.html