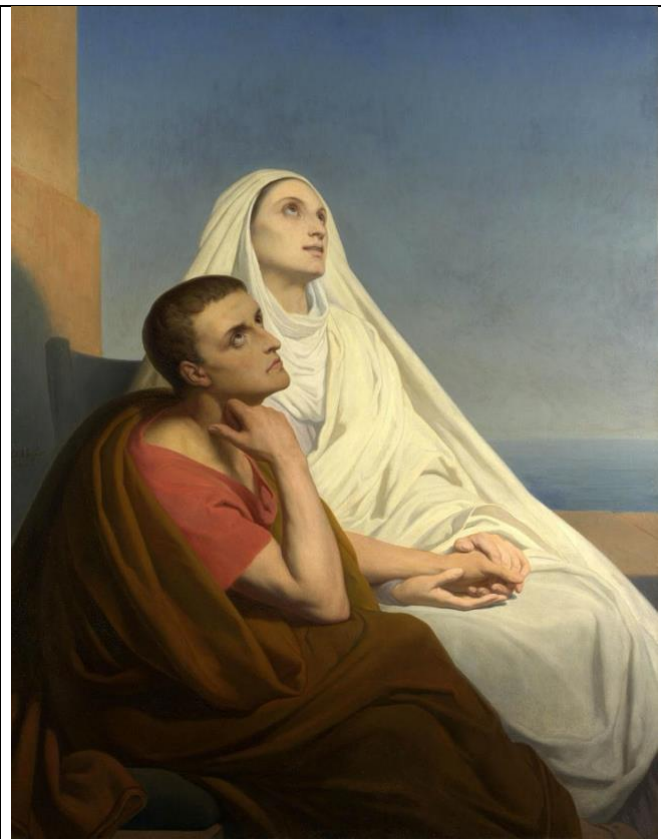


## The Legacy of Saint Augustine, Doug Hayhoe, November 2021

*Augustine was an influential early Church leader. In the fourth century, he shepherded the Church through the collapse of the Roman Empire. He also wrote prolifically, and many of his teachings have endured.*

### His story

Augustine was born in North African in 354 AD. His mother was a strong Christian, but his father a pagan, whose influence was mostly negative. As a child, Augustine learned to steal and as a teenager he became sexually immoral. When he was 17, his parents sent him to school in Carthage, where he soon forgot his mother's teachings. He loved his studies, including the readings from the famous Cicero and some pagan philosophers. (Much of this essay follows Peter Brown's excellent biography [Augustine of Hippo](#), updated in 2013.)



**Figure 1** [Saint Augustine and his mother, Saint Monica \(1948\) by Ary Scheffer](#) (public domain)

After teaching for a while in Carthage, Augustine sailed to Rome, and became a professor of rhetoric in Milan. He soon espoused Neoplatonism, a philosophy that tries to understand everything in terms of a single cause. At the same time, he attended the preaching of Bishop Ambrose, which had a deep influence on his thinking. Nevertheless, having strong doubts that he could ever become a Christian, he continued with his pagan philosophy and immoral lifestyle. But his mother Monica was praying for him, and her prayers were eventually answered (Figure 1).

One day, in his early thirties, he heard a voice saying, "Take up and read." He seized a nearby Bible and read from Romans, "Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" ([Romans 13:13-14](#)). "In an

instant," Augustine later wrote, "all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

After his conversion, he ended his fifteen-year relationship with his concubine, to dedicate himself to a chaste life. He first became a priest and then a bishop, as the Church recognized his abilities. He moved back to North Africa and founded a monastery in the town of Hippo, where, for over 30 years, he led the Church as one of its chief pastors.

At age 76, he fell ill while the city of Hippo was being besieged by the Vandals who had invaded the Roman Empire. After he died, they burned the city, and destroyed everything in it but the Cathedral and his library. Thankfully, all his writings were preserved.

### **His writings**

Augustine's *Confessions* is his best-known book, written when he was in midlife. It describes the thirty years of his unconverted life and fifteen years following, when he became a priest and then a bishop. The book introduced a new genre of autobiography to the world's literature, being uniquely introspective, psychological, and philosophical at the same time.

Augustine begins by confessing his youthful sins, including lust and pride. He then moves on to philosophical questions. When a skeptic asking the question, for example, what was God doing before he made the heavens and earth, a friend of Augustine rudely replied, he was making hell for people who ask such questions! Augustine had a deeper answer, however. Time was created, just as the universe was created, so it doesn't make sense to ask what God was doing "before." Time doesn't exist either before or outside of the created dimension. This concept of time is so profound that it is still quoted by cosmologists today.

In his book, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine was surprisingly relevant about whether scientific observations conflict with the Bible. Twelve hundred years later, Galileo quoted extensively from this book in his ground-breaking letter to the [\*Grand Duchess Christina\*](#), where he argued that his telescopic discoveries demonstrating that the Earth orbits the Sun are not against the teaching of Scripture. This shows the impact Augustine had on the scientific revolution that occurred more than a millennium after his death.

Augustine's culminating work, *The City of God*, was completed when he was in his seventies. It is massive in extent, consisting of 22 books, with an average of 30 chapters each, although some are only a few pages long. It was initially written to encourage the Christians in Rome, after the city was sacked by the Visigoths. But it also wrestles with some profound topics, such as the existence of evil and free will versus divine sovereignty.

### **His conflicts**

Augustine's conflicts occupied a large part of his life. During the persecutions under the Roman emperors, many church pastors had denied the faith and turned in their Bibles to be burned. After the persecution ended, they were uncritically received back into the church. Donatist pastors in Carthage were uncomfortable with this. They said that the church should only consist of those faithful to the Lord. Augustine, however, had a much wider view of the church, potentially encompassing all of society, even unfaithful pastors.

Peter Brown puts it this way, "The Donatists regarded their church as an alternative to society, as a place of refuge, like the Ark. Augustine believed that the church might become coextensive with human society as a whole: that it might absorb, transform, and perfect, the existing bonds of human relationships" (p. 220). Augustine's views justified a state religion, something we still see in many countries today, whether Catholic or Protestant. The Donatists, however, saw the church as being independent of the state. Many protestant denominations today have the same view.

As I read Brown's detailed description of the conflict, I found myself sympathizing with the Donatists. Should unfaithful ministers of the Gospel be preaching sermons and dispensing the elements of the church? Augustine, however, eventually prevailed. But in the process, Brown observes, he became somewhat of a bully, as we might think of it today. For he supported the civic authorities in coercing the Donatists to return to the Catholic Church or face imprisonment or exile if they refused. This no doubt left a poor example for later church leaders, such as the Protestant Reformers, who persecuted the Anabaptists, or the Roman Catholics, who persecuted the Protestant Reformers.

The other major controversy involving Augustine was about the doctrine of original sin. Augustine taught it, remembering how sinful his own childhood was, and that it was only by God's grace that he was converted. The followers of Pelagius opposed it, as they felt it unfair of God to burden every new baby with Adam's sinful nature, so that it had no hope of living a good life in itself. This conflict became so serious that, like the Donatist conflict, it almost divided the Church. But Augustine's strong leadership again prevailed, and the doctrine of original sin is still upheld by the Catholic and many Protestant Churches today.

This time, I tend to agree with Augustine. Anyone who has seen little children resist authority and scream when they don't get their own way is likely to agree! If people were not born in sin, why has there never been a person who lived a sinless life, except Jesus Christ? The Bible teaches throughout that everyone has sinned. [Romans 3:23](#) says it clearly, "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory." But there are at least nine other similar verses: [1 Kings 8:46](#); [Psalm 14:1-3](#); [51:5](#); [143:2](#); [Ecclesiastes 7:20](#); [Isaiah 53:6](#); [Romans 3:9](#); [5:12](#); and [1 John 1:8](#).

### **His teachings**

While Augustine emphasized the pervasiveness of sin, he also taught the necessity of conversion, and the grace of God needed for salvation. Every human being needs to have a personal relationship with God. He once said, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."

Augustine wrote a commentary on Romans, and often taught from Paul's letters. He also wrote commentaries on Genesis and the Psalms. He was not a literalist, when it came to Scripture. He thought that the seven days structure of Genesis 1, for example, may serve as a logical framework for the creation account rather than representing the passage of time. This idea that Genesis 1 doesn't intend to teach that the universe and earth were created in seven 24-hour days is helpful for Christians today in their study of scientific origins.

On the other hand, Augustine taught things that many of us reject today, such as that infant baptism washes people from their sins and brings them into the Church or that Mary remained a virgin all her life. He also taught that sex in marriage was a necessary evil useful only for procreation, and that the single life is superior. Perhaps that is why he didn't marry his concubine whom he loved dearly, after he was converted – something that initially puzzled me – because he had a misguided understanding of God's plan for marriage and physical intimacy!

## **His legacy**

Augustine's legacy is complex. His teachings on infant baptism and the inclusiveness of the Church may have contributed to a thousand years of nominal Christendom. His appeal to secular power to persecute those who disagreed with him set a bad example for church leaders who followed. And his misunderstanding of the role of sex in marriage, together with his defense of the perpetual virginity of Mary, may have contributed to the abuse we see among clergy today, who are restricted from marrying.

On the other hand, Augustine's thoughts about the relationship between science and Scripture are still relevant today, as are his teachings about God, people, and salvation. And his strong leadership ensured the continuance of the Christian church, against insurmountable odds. The ecclesiastical historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his [\*Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years\*](#) (2000), concludes, "Augustine's impact on Western Christian thought can hardly be overstated" (p. 319).