

THE CONFESSIONS  
OF ST. AUGUSTINE



PARACLETE ESSENTIALS

*The Confessions of*  
Saint Augustine



ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO  
*Edited by Hal M. Helms, Foreword by Fr. Mark Henninger*

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH EDITION



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## FOREWORD

I was introduced to St. Augustine's *Confessions* in college, and to this day I'm surprised at the impact this book had on me. Sometimes, as the saying goes, "heart speaks to heart." And although there were many voices calling to me in those years—voices of the popular culture, voices from other writers and teachers, voices of friends—that of Augustine spoke to more levels of my personality and more powerfully than any that I recall. I am not alone.

It is still a mystery how St. Augustine has managed to do this, generation after generation, for over fifteen hundred years. It is similar to going to a movie and hearing spoken and acted out feelings and desires, thoughts and intimations that you were only dimly aware of and could never articulate, but knew were having a profound impact on your life. How could the screen-writer possibly know me so well? we might wonder to ourselves. The answer lies, of course, in the fact that we are not islands; we are not alone; rather, we are, all of us, human.

But what is it to be human? St. Augustine understood it in terms of what is called Christian neo-Platonism, a synthesis of Christianity and the philosophy of neo-Platonism originating in the pagan mystic and thinker Plotinus. Neo-Platonism can be summarized in these terms:

- a theory of the universe
- a theory of human nature
- a diagnosis of what is wrong with us; and
- a prescription of what is to be done about it.

For Augustine, the answers to these four issues were roughly as follows:

- The whole cosmos is made up of a material, changing world and a spiritual, unchanging world.

- We are basically souls, belonging to the spiritual world.
- But we have “fallen” into this changing, material world.
- And it is only with God’s help in Jesus Christ that we can “turn back” to the true homeland, the place where we really belong—our spiritual home.

Hence, to be human, for St. Augustine, is to be caught up in the drama of a soul, fallen yet called to beatitude, true and abiding happiness. All the longings, missed opportunities, and looking for love in all the wrong places that characterize our existence, he sees within this framework.

It is perhaps for this reason that so many people have been moved and changed by reading the *Confessions*. For those caught up in the whirlwind of their own unhappiness, the *Confessions* afford not an artificial safe harbor, but a real and profound understanding of their predicament.

St. Augustine knows from his own experience how bitter it can be to be “lost in a dark wood,” as Dante wrote about nine hundred years later. But he also knows of God’s saving grace that never left him, and does not leave us today. This grace finds us in such a miserable state, and yet it reaches down, calling us to “turn away” from our over-the-top desires for the beautiful things of this world; with his mighty hand God breaks the chains, the obsessions, that bind us.

The *Confessions* are, in essence, a hymn to this grace of God, and a confession—not primarily of Augustine’s sins—but of a God who is great in his compassion. Like the Good Samaritan in St. Luke’s Gospel who stops on his way to help the traveler lying at the side of the road, God pours out the oil of his grace to heal our self-inflicted wounds.

St. Augustine wrote his *Confessions* when he was bishop in the small northern African town of Hippo, as he was looking back on his life, astounded at what had happened to him. It was the record



of an encounter with God. Not only one encounter, but many! He saw his life in a new light, discovering to his delight and astonishment that God had been calling him constantly: through his mother Monica, through the death of a friend, through his disillusionment with Faustus (the leader of the sect of the Manicheans with which Augustine spent many years), through hearing the stories of St. Anthony in the desert, through listening to the homilies of St. Ambrose in Milan, and through his mind-and-heart-wrenching battles with his own sexuality.

Only as bishop, after his conversion, halfway through his life, did St. Augustine realize that each of these experiences, and countless more, were so many ways God had been calling to him. “And behold, you were within, but I was outside, searching for you there. . . . You were with me, but I was not with you.” How deaf he had been to God’s inner call! “Too late have I loved you, O Beauty, ancient yet ever new. Too late have I loved you!”

We need not adopt the whole of the neo-Platonic outlook, with its devaluation of the body and material reality, to be moved by St. Augustine’s account of his life. For he wrote the *Confessions* to awaken others to this inner voice of God, insistently calling us to true inner peace and our inheritance as children of God. We who are made for communion with a loving God are called to a life much better than we ever imagined. The life of a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, the “inner teacher.” Listen to this voice, for as Augustine famously says, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

—Rev. Mark G. Henninger, SJ  
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## INTRODUCTION

Augustine stands as one of the greatest and most influential of Christian theologians. “It may be safely predicted, that while the mind of man yearns for knowledge, and his heart seeks rest, the *Confessions* will retain that foremost place in the world’s literature which it has secured by its sublime outpourings of devotion and profound philosophical spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

It should be borne in mind that the *Confessions* was not intended to be an intellectual exercise, removed from the everyday realities of life. In it, Augustine seeks to lay bare his heart, his soul—before God and before his fellow men. It is an honest book and a book that speaks to the heart first of all.

We moderns may find some difficulty in his allegorizations, especially those found in the last three books. But one translator aptly remarked, “Where the strict use of history is not disregarded, (to use Augustine’s expression), allegorizing, by way of spiritual meditation, may be profitable.” Certainly his insights are not to be despised!

Born in 352, in the small city of Tagaste, Africa (in what is now Algeria), Augustine lived in the time of the growing ascendancy of the Christian Church and the growing decline of the Roman empire. It was scarcely a quarter of a century earlier that the great Council of Nicaea had been held, and there were heresies and schisms throughout the Christian world that still held sway over hearts and minds. Donatists continued to hold that many Catholic orders were invalid because they came through *traditori* (those who had denied the faith during the severe persecution and had later repented and been restored to the Church). In his later years Augustine would spend much effort in fighting for the unity of

the Church against their schismatic beliefs. Arianism (denying the full divinity of Christ) succeeded in winning the allegiance of the Emperor and his mother, and echoes of that threat to the peace and unity of the Church continued to resound throughout Augustine's lifetime. But for Augustine personally, his sojourn among the Manicheans gave the background for much of the material we find in the *Confessions*. After his schooling under a harsh tutor in Tagaste, he was sent to Madaura for a time. Family finances forced his return home and resulted in an idle year, 369–70. He was then sent to Carthage, to what would be equivalent to a university, where he distinguished himself in the rhetorical school. His father died in 371, but his mother continued to support his schooling with the aid of a wealthy patron, Romanianus. It is evident that she continued to cherish high ambitions for his worldly success. While at Carthage, Augustine came under the influence of the Manicheans and took a mistress, to whom he was faithful for fifteen years. To them was born one son, Adeotus.

After some years of teaching at Carthage, Augustine decided to go to Rome. His mother opposed the idea, but could not dissuade him. After a brief stay in Rome, he was appointed in 385 as Public Teacher of Rhetoric at Milan, where he first came under the influence of St. Ambrose. In 385–86, the Empress Justina demanded the surrender of two churches to the Arians. Ambrose led his people in a refusal to surrender the churches, even when confronted by military force. Augustine was aware of this crisis, but he was not personally involved.

Ten years spent with the Manicheans had brought Augustine many intellectual difficulties with their system. Although they had encouraged his own skeptical approach to the Holy Scriptures, they had not satisfied his thirst for sure knowledge nor his growing uneasiness with his disorderly life. With his mother's help, Augus-

tine's mistress was dismissed and arrangements were made for his marriage, which had to be postponed because his intended was underage. But his struggles with the flesh resulted in his taking a new mistress, because he felt morally incapable of making a better choice. He chronicles the inner struggles which led, with timely help from Ambrose, to his departure from the Manicheans and his conversion to the Catholic faith. He was baptized at Easter, 387, along with his son, Adeotus. Having resigned his position as professor of rhetoric, he and his company were waiting for a ship to make their way back to Africa when his mother suddenly became ill and died at Ostia, the port of Rome.

The next year, having returned to Tagaste and sold his property there, Augustine set up a monastic kind of community with a few friends, continuing his writing. In 391, with much misgiving on his part, he consented to be ordained presbyter at Hippo, a nearby city of about 30,000. The Church was not strong there, its population being a mixture of pagans, Jews, several schismatic sects, and a large group of Donatists. In 395 (in violation of the eighth canon of Nicaea) he was made assistant bishop to the aged Valerius, and succeeded him as bishop the following year.

It was not long after his election as bishop that he began the *Confessions*, completing them probably in 398. Thus they represent his thought and the account of his life in its midstream. He wrote this book "at the request of friends who begged him to commit to writing those recollections of his former life to which he often referred in private conversation. He consented for the characteristic reason that he desired his friends to mourn and rejoice along with him as they followed his retrospect of past years, and on his behalf to give thanks to God."<sup>2</sup>

Augustine's years as bishop involved struggles with errors he believed to be a threat to salvation and to the welfare of the Church on several fronts: Manicheans, Donatists, Arians and Pelagians. In

addition to these very real battles, the Roman empire itself was under mortal assault. It is one of the great ironies of history that as Augustine finished his immortal *City of God* in the quiet of his monastic residence, the Vandals were pillaging the countryside of North Africa. “While the Vandals besieged Hippo, St. Augustine died (August 28, 410) in the sanctity and poverty in which he had lived for many years. Shortly afterward, the Vandals destroyed the city, but left his cathedral and library untouched.”<sup>3</sup>

Sending the *Confessions* to a friend, Augustine wrote, “In these behold me, that you may not praise me beyond what I am. Believe what is said of me, not by others, but by myself.”<sup>4</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The older translations of the *Confessions* are, unfortunately, obscure in many places, making it increasingly difficult for the modern reader to see Augustine as the living, vital person he must have been. I have made free use of all the English versions available (and am indebted to them all), comparing them with the Latin version by Gibb and Montgomery. As in other modern versions, I have taken the liberty of removing some of the unnecessary conjunctions and shortening some of the most lengthy and difficult sentences. Throughout, the pronoun *you* is used rather than *Thee* in addressing God, consistent with a growing practice among Christians.

The manuscript has been read by several friends and colleagues (several times!). They are the Revs. H. Arthur Lane, Ronald Minor, Shelton Johnson, and Dr. William Showalter, and Sister Constance Ayers—all of whom made helpful suggestions. Miss Gertrude Andersen has graciously and efficiently proofread my typewritten texts at several levels of their evolution. To all of them I give “humble and hearty thanks.” I am grateful, too, to the people of Paraclete Press who suggested that we add this volume to the Living Library series. It goes forth with the prayer that those who read it will not only come to know Augustine better, but be encouraged to know better the same Lord he knew and loved.

—Hal M. Helms





*The Confessions of*  
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BOOK I

*Infancy to Age Fifteen*

ONE

*You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised. Great is your power, and your wisdom is infinite.*<sup>1</sup> And man would praise you; man, who is but a small particle of your creation; yes, man, though he carries with him his mortality, the evidence of his sin, the evidence that you resist the proud; yet man, but a particle of your creation, would praise you.<sup>2</sup>

You awake us to delight in your praise; for you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Grant me, Lord, to know and understand which of these is most important, to call on you or to praise you. And again, to know you or to call on you. For who can call on you without knowing you? For he who does not know you may call on you as other than you are. Or perhaps we call on you that we may know you? *But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? or how shall they believe without a preacher? And they who seek the Lord shall praise him.* For they that seek shall find him, and those who find shall praise him. Let me seek you, Lord, by calling on you, and call on you believing in you, for you have been preached to us. My faith calls on you, Lord, the faith you have given me, the faith you have breathed into me through the incarnation of your Son, through the ministry of the preacher.<sup>3</sup>

## TWO

But how shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? For when I call on him, I ask him to come into myself. And what room is there in me, where my God can come—God who made heaven and earth? Is there anything in me, O Lord my God, that can contain you? Indeed, do heaven and earth which you have made, and in which you made me, contain you? Or, since nothing could exist without you, does every existing thing contain you? Why, then, do I ask that you come into me, since I, too, exist—I who could not exist if you were not in me? Why do I say this? Because even if I were in hell, yet you would be there also. For *if I go down into hell, you are there*. I could not exist then, O my God, could not exist at all, unless you were in me. Or should I not rather say, I could not exist unless I were in you, *from whom are all things, by whom are all things, and in whom are all things*.

Even so, Lord, even so. Where do I call you to come, since I am in you? Or whence can you enter into me? For where beyond heaven and earth could I go that my God might come there into me, who has said, *I fill the heaven and the earth*?

## THREE

Do the heaven and earth then contain you, since you fill them? Or do you fill them and yet overflow, since they cannot contain you? And where, when the heaven and earth are filled, do you pour forth that which remains of yourself? Or indeed, is there no need that you who contain all things should be contained by anything, since those things you fill, you fill by containing them? For the vessels that you fill do not sustain you, since even if they were broken, you would not be poured out. And when you are poured out on us, you are not cast down, but we are uplifted. You are not dissipated, but we are drawn together. But as you fill all

things, do you fill them with your whole self, or, since all things cannot contain you wholly, do they contain part of you? Do they all contain the same part at once, or has each its own proper part—the greater more, the smaller less? If this is so, then is one part of you greater, another less? Or are you wholly everywhere, while nothing altogether contains you?

#### FOUR

What are you then, my God—what, but the Lord God? *For who is Lord but the Lord? Or who is God save our God?* Most high, most excellent, most powerful, most almighty, most merciful, and most just; most hidden, yet most present; most beautiful, and most strong; stable, yet mysterious; unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new and *bringing age upon the proud, though they know it not*; ever working, yet ever at rest; still gathering, yet lacking nothing; sustaining, filling and protecting; creating, nourishing, and maturing; seeking, yet possessing all things. You love without passion; you are jealous without anxiety; you repent, yet have no sorrow; you are angry, yet serene; change your ways, yet your plans are unchanged; recover what you find, having never lost it; never in need, yet rejoicing in gain; never covetous, yet requiring interest. You receive over and above, that you may owe—yet who has anything that is not yours? You pay debts, owing nothing; remit debts, losing nothing. And what have I now said, my God, my life, my holy joy—what is this I have said? Or what do any say when they speak of you? Yet woe to those who keep silence, since those who say most are as the dumb!

## FIVE

Oh, how shall I find rest in you? Who will send you into my heart to flood it, that I may forget my woes and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? In your pity, teach me to speak. What am I to you that you demand my love, and if I do not give it are angry with me and threaten me with great sorrows? Is it then, a slight sorrow not to love you? Oh, alas! for your mercies' sake, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. *Say to my soul, "I am your salvation."* When I hear this word, may I run and lay hold of you. Hide not your face from me. Let me see it, though I die, for I shall assuredly die if I do not see it.<sup>4</sup>

The house of my soul is narrow; enlarge it, that you may enter in. It is in ruins! Repair it! It has in it that which must offend your eyes. I confess and know it. But who shall cleanse it, or to whom shall I cry, but to you? *Lord, cleanse me from my secret faults and spare your servant from the power of the enemy. I believe, and therefore I speak.* Lord, you know. *Have I not confessed against myself my transgressions to you, and you, my God, have forgiven the iniquity of my heart? I do not contend in the judgment with you,* who are the Truth; I am afraid to deceive myself, lest my iniquity lie against itself. *Therefore I do not contend in judgment with you, for if you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?*

## SIX

Yet allow me to speak before your mercy, me—*dust and ashes*. Allow me to speak for I speak to your mercy and not to man's scorn. You too, perhaps, despise me, but when you turn to me, you will have compassion on me. For what would I say, O Lord my God, but that I know not from whence I came into this—shall I call it “dying life,” this “living death”? Yet as I was told by my

earthly parents out of whose substance you fashioned me (for I do not remember it), the comforts of your compassion sustained me. Then I received the comfort of human milk, for neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts, but you bestowed the nourishment of my infancy through them, according to your ordinance and that bounty of yours which underlies all things.

You also caused me to want no more than you provided; and those who nourished me gave me willingly what you gave them, for they, with a heaven-taught affection, willingly gave me what you had abundantly supplied. It was good for them that my good should come from them, though in truth it was really not from them but by them, for all good things are from you, O God, and *from God is all my health*. This is what I have learned since, as you have declared yourself to me through your blessings within me and from without, which you have bestowed on me. For at that time I knew only how to suck, to be satisfied when comfortable and to cry when in pain—nothing more.

Afterward I began to smile, first in sleep, then awake. This was told me of myself, and I believe it (though of myself I do not remember it), for we see the same thing in other infants. So, little by little, I realized where I was and wanted to express my desires to those who could satisfy them, but I could not! For my wants were inside me and they were outside and could not by any faculty of their own enter my soul. So I flung my limbs and voice about at random making the few signs I could, suggesting (though very inadequately) by signs or sounds what it was I wanted. And when I was not presently satisfied (because what I wanted either was not understood or was not good for me), I grew indignant that my elders were not subject to me, angry with those who owed me no service, for not serving me, and avenged myself on them by tears. Such have I learned infants to be by watching them, and that I was the same way myself;

they, though unknowing, have shown me better than my nurses who knew me.

But lo! my infancy died long since, and I live on. But you, Lord, live for ever, and in you nothing dies, since before the foundation of the world, and before all that can be called “before,” you are, and you are God and Lord of all which you have created. With you, fixed forever, abide the first causes of all passing things, the unchanging sources of all changeable things; the eternal reasons of all things unreasoning and temporal.

Tell me, Lord, your suppliant; O all merciful One, tell your miserable one—tell me, did my infancy succeed another age of mine that died before it? Was it that which I spent within my mother’s womb? For of that I have heard something and have myself seen pregnant women. And what before that life, O God, my joy? Was I indeed anywhere or anybody? For no one can tell me this, neither father nor mother, nor experience of others, nor my own memory. Perhaps you laugh at me for asking such things and bid me praise you and acknowledge you for what I do know.

I give you thanks, Lord of heaven and earth, and praise you for my first being and my infancy, of which I remember nothing. You have appointed that mankind should learn much about themselves from others and believe many things on the authority of frail women. Even then I had life and being, and at the close of my infancy I was already looking for ways to make my feelings known to others. Where could such a creature come from, Lord, but from you, or shall any of us be skillful enough to fashion himself? Or can any stream be found anywhere else that brings being and life into us, except this, that you, O Lord, have made us, with whom being and life are one, because you yourself are supremely being and life? For *you are most high and do not change*, neither does today come to a close in you, and yet it does come to a close in you, because all such things are also in you. For they would have no



way even to pass away unless you sustained them. And since *your years do not fail*, your years are as an ever-present today. How many of our years and our fathers' years have flowed away through your today, and received from it their measure and shape of being; and still others to come shall receive the shape of their degree of being and pass away. But *you are still the same*, and all tomorrows and what is beyond them, and all yesterdays and what is behind them, you make to be in your today. What does it matter to me, even if none of us can understand this? Let us still rejoice and say, "What *is* this?" Let us be content by not understanding to find you, rather than by understanding not to find you.

## SEVEN

Hear me, O God! Alas for the sin of mankind! We speak this way and you have compassion on us, for you made us, but you did not make sin in us. Who reminds me of the sins of my infancy? *For in your sight, no one is free from sin, not even the infant whose life is but a day upon the earth.*

Who reminds me? Does not each little infant in whom I see what I do not remember about myself? What was my sin then? Is it that I cried for the breast? For if I should cry that way now for food suitable to my present age, I should be laughed at and rebuked. What I did then deserved rebuke, but since I could not understand reproof, custom and reason forbade my being rebuked. For as we grow, we root out and cast away such habits.

Now no man, though he prunes, wittingly throws away what is good. Or was it good then, even for a time, to cry for what, if given, would be hurtful—to bitterly resent that those free persons, elders—even my own parents who gave me birth—did not serve me? That many others besides, wiser than I, did not obey the beckoning of my good pleasure? That I did my best to

strike and hurt because my commands were not obeyed, which would only have been to my hurt if carried out? Then in the weakness of infant limbs, not its will, lies its innocence.

I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous, even though it could not speak. It turned pale and looked bitterly at its foster-brother. Who does not know this to be true? Mothers and nurses tell you that they appease these things by all kinds of remedies. Is that innocence when the fountain of milk is flowing in rich abundance, not to allow one to share it, though it needs the nourishment to sustain its life? We look leniently on all this, not because we fail to recognize the presence and degree of the evils, but because they will disappear as age increases. For although they are allowed in infancy, the very same tempers are utterly intolerable when they appear in an older person.

O Lord my God, who gave life to my infancy, furnishing the body you gave with senses, knitting its limbs together, shaping its proportions and implanting in me all the impulses necessary to the maintenance of the integrity and safety of a living being—you command me to praise you in these things, *to give thanks unto the Lord and to sing to your name, O Most High*. For you are God, almighty and good, even if you had done nothing but these things which no one but you could do. You alone made all things, O most Fair, and you make all things fair; and by your law you order all things.

This period of my life, then, Lord, of which I have no remembrance, which I take on others' word and which I guess from observing other infants—true though the guess may be—I do not care to reckon as a part of my life which I live in this world. For it is hidden from me in the shadows of forgetfulness no less than that which I spent in my mother's womb. But if *I was shaped in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*, where, I pray, O my God, where, Lord, or when, was I, your servant,

innocent? But I pass that period by. What do I now have to do with that, the memories of which I cannot recall?

## EIGHT

Passing on from infancy, I came to boyhood, or rather it came to me, succeeding my infancy. The infancy did not depart (for where did it go?) and yet it was no more. For I was no longer a speechless infant, but a chattering boy. This I do remember and have since observed how I learned to speak.

My elders did not teach me words by any particular method (as a little later they taught me other things); but when I was unable to say all I wished and to whomever I desired by whimperings and broken sounds and various gestures which I used to enforce my wishes, I myself began to repeat the sounds in my memory according to the understanding which you, my God, gave me. When they called anything by name and turned toward it as they spoke, I saw and gathered that the object they were pointing out was called by that name. And I understood by their gestures that they meant this thing and nothing else, movements that are the natural language as it were of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eyes, movements of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the feelings of the mind as it seeks, gets, rejects or avoids certain things. And so by frequently hearing words as they occurred in various sentences, I gradually gathered what they meant. Having formed my mouth to make these sounds, I could then give voice to my will. Thus I exchanged with those about me these current expressions of our wants, and so advanced deeper into the stormy fellowship of human life, still subject to parental authority and the bidding of my elders.

## NINE

O God, my God! What miseries and mockeries I now experienced, when obedience to my teachers was set before me as proper to my boyhood that I might prosper in this world and excel in the science of speech which would gain the praise of men and deceitful riches. After that, I was put in school to get learning whose usefulness I could not imagine (useless as I was), and yet if I was idle in my studies, I was flogged!<sup>5</sup> For our forefathers deemed this the right way, and many, passing the same way before us, had laid out the weary paths through which we were obliged to pass, multiplying labor and grief on the children of Adam.

But, Lord, we found that men prayed to you, and we learned from them to think of you according to our abilities, to be some Great One who, though hidden from our senses, could hear and help us. So I began, even as a boy, to pray to you, my help and refuge; and I let my tongue freely call on you, praying to you, even though I was small, with no small earnestness, that I might not be beaten at school. And when you did not hear me (not *giving me over to folly thereby*), my elders, yes, my own parents who certainly wished me no ill, laughed at my stripes, which were then my great and grievous ill.

Is there anyone, Lord, bound to you with such greatness of soul and with so strong an affection (there is a sort of stupidity that may do that much)—is there anyone who is endowed with so great a courage from clinging devoutly to you that he can think lightly of racks and hooks and other tortures? For throughout the whole world men pray fervently to be saved from such tortures and can they as bitterly mock those who fear them as our parents mocked the torments which we suffered from our teachers in boyhood? For we did not fear our torments any less, nor did we pray less to you to escape them. And yet we sinned in writing, reading, or studying less than was required of us. For we did not

lack memory or ability, Lord, of which, by your will, we possessed enough for our age. But we delighted only in play, and for this we were punished by those who were doing the same things themselves. But older people's idleness is called business, while boys who do the same, are punished by those same elders; and yet no one expresses pity, either boys or men. For will any one of good sense approve of my being whipped because as a boy I played ball, and so made less progress in studies which I was to learn only so that, as a man, I might play at more shameful games? And what else was my tutor doing who beat me, who, if defeated in some trifling controversy with his fellow tutor, was more embittered and angry than I was when I was beaten in a game of ball by a playmate?

#### T E N

And yet I sinned in this, O Lord God, Creator and Disposer of all things in Nature (but of sin only the Disposer). O Lord my God, I sinned acting against the commands of my parents and of my teachers. For what they, with whatever motive, wanted me to learn, I might have put to good use later on. But I disobeyed, not because I had chosen a better way, but from love of play, loving the honor of victory in my contests, and to have my ears tickled with fables that they might itch for more. The same curiosity burned in my eyes more and more for the shows and sports of adults. Those who gave these shows were held in such repute that almost everyone wished the same for their children, and they were very willing that the children be beaten if these very games kept them from their studies by which they wanted them to reach the point of being teachers to others.

Look down with compassion on these things, Lord, and deliver us who call upon you now. Deliver those, too, who do not call on you, that they may call on you and that you may deliver them.

## ELEVEN

As a boy, then, I had heard of eternal life promised us through the humility of the Lord our God stooping to our pride. Even from the womb of my mother, who greatly hoped in you, I was signed with the mark of his cross and seasoned with his salt.<sup>6</sup> You saw, Lord, how at one time while yet a boy I was suddenly seized with pains in the stomach and was near death. You saw, my God, for you were my Keeper, with what eagerness of mind and with what faith I besought the baptism of your Christ, my God and Lord, from the piety of my own mother and of your Church, the mother of us all. At this time, my mother was very anxious, since she labored more lovingly in travail for my salvation than in my natural birth. She would have provided for my cleansing initiation by your health-giving sacraments, confessing you, Lord Jesus, for the remission of sins, if I had not suddenly recovered. And so, as if I must needs be further polluted if I should live, my cleansing was deferred, because the defilements of sin would bring greater and more perilous guilt after that washing.<sup>7</sup> I already believed at that time, with my mother and the whole household except my father. Yet he did not overcome the power of my mother's piety in me so as to prevent my believing in Christ. The fact that he did not yet believe did not make me think that I should not. For it was her earnest concern that you, my God, should be my Father rather than he. In this you enabled her to overcome her husband to whom, though the better of the two, she yielded obedience because in this she obeyed your commandment as well.

I beseech you, my God, for I would like to know if it is your will, for what purpose was my baptism then deferred? Was it for my good that the reins were loosened on me, as it were, for me to sin? Or were they not slackened at all? If not, why does it still echo in my ears on all sides, "Let him alone, let him do as he will, for he is not yet baptized"? But as to bodily health, no

one says, “Let him be wounded even more seriously, for he is not yet healed.” How much better then would it have been for me to have been healed at once and then, by my friends’ diligence and my own, my soul’s recovered health had then been kept safe in your keeping who gave it! Better truly. But how many great waves of temptation seemed to hang over me after my childhood! My mother foresaw these and preferred to expose the unformed [unregenerate] clay to them rather than to the very image itself after it was made.

## T W E L V E

In my childhood, which was less dangerous for me than my adolescence, I had no love of learning and hated to be forced to it. Yet I was forced to it, and this was good for me, though I did not do well. For I would not have learned unless I was compelled. But no one does well against his will, even though what he does may be well. Yet they who forced me did not do well either, but the good that came to me was from you, my God. For they were totally uncaring of how I should use what they forced me to learn, except to satisfy the inordinate desire of a rich beggary and a shameful glory. But you, *by whom the very hairs of our head are numbered*, used for my good the error of all those who urged me to learn; and my own error in my unwillingness to learn, you used for my punishment—a fit penalty for one, so small a boy and so great a sinner. So by the instruments of those who did not do well, you did well for me; and by my own sin you justly punished me. For you have appointed and it is so, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment.

## THIRTEEN

But why did I hate the Greek language so much, which I studied as a boy? I do not yet fully know the answer. For I loved the Latin; not what my first masters taught me, but what the so-called grammarians teach. For those first lessons, reading, writing and arithmetic, I thought as great a burden and punishment as any Greek studies. And yet where did all this come from, too, but from the sin and vanity of this life, because *I was but flesh and a breath that passes away and does not come again*. For those primary lessons were better, certainly, because they were more certain. By them I obtained and still retain the ability to read what I find written, and the ability to write what I will. On the other hand, I was forced to learn the wanderings of one Aeneas, forgetful of my own, and to weep for Dido, dead because she killed herself for love; while at the same time with dry eyes, I brooked my wretched self dying among these things, far from you, O God of my life.

What is more wretched than a wretch who does not pity himself, weeping over the death of Dido for her love of Aeneas, but shedding no tears over his own death in not loving you, O God, Light of my heart, Bread of my inmost soul, Power that weds my mind with my inmost thought? I did not love you, and I committed fornication against you, and all those around me who were doing the same, echoed, “Well done! Well done!” for *the friendship of this world is fornication against you*, and “Well done! well done!” echoes on till one is ashamed not to be such a man. And for all this I did not weep, though I wept for Dido, slain as she sought death by the point of a sword, myself seeking the extremest and lowest level of your creatures, having forsaken you, earth sinking to earth. And if I were forbidden to read all this, I grieved that I was not allowed to read what grieved me. Madness like this is considered more honorable and more fruitful learning than that by which I learned to read and write.



But now, my God, shout aloud in my soul and let your truth tell me “It is not so! it is not so! Far better was that first study!” For I would rather forget the wanderings of Aeneas and all such things than how to read and write. Over the entrance of the Grammar School a veil is hung, it is true, but this is not so much a sign of honor of the mysteries taught in them as a covering for error. Let not those whom I no longer fear cry out against me while I confess whatever my soul desires to you, my God, and let them agree in the condemnation of my evil ways, that I may love your good ways. Let neither buyers nor sellers of grammar education cry out against me. For if I question them as to whether Aeneas came once to Carthage, as the poet tells, the less learned will reply that they do not know; the more learned, that he never did. But if I ask with what letters the name “Aeneas” is written, everyone who has learned this will answer me rightly, in accordance with the conventional understanding men have settled on as to these signs. If, again, I ask which might be forgotten with the least detriment to the concerns of life—reading and writing, or these poetic fictions, who does not foresee what all must answer who have not wholly forgotten themselves? I erred then, when as a boy I preferred those vain studies to the more profitable ones, or rather loved the one and hated the other. “One and one are two; two and two are four.” This to me was a hateful sing-song; but such vanities as the wooden horse full of armed men and the burning of Troy and the “spectral image” Creusa were a most pleasant but vain spectacle.

#### FOURTEEN

Why then did I hate the Greek classics, which have the same kind of tales? For Homer also skillfully wove the same fictions, and is more sweetly vain, yet he was disagreeable to my boyish taste. And so I suppose would Virgil be to Grecian children, if forced

to learn him as I was Homer. The difficulty, in truth, of learning a foreign tongue mingled, as it were, with all the sweetness of the Grecian fable. For I did not understand one word of it, and to make me understand I was urged vehemently with cruel threats and punishments. There was a time, of course, when as an infant I knew no Latin. But this I acquired without fear or torment, by mere observation, amid the caresses of my nurses and jests of those who smiled on me, and the sportiveness of those who encouraged me. I learned all this without any pressure of punishment, for my own heart urged me to bring forth its own conceptions, which I could only do by learning words—not of those who taught me, but of those who talked to me, into whose ears also I brought whatever thoughts I had. No doubt then, a free curiosity has more influence in our learning these things than a frightful enforcement. But this enforcement restrains the overflowing of unrestrained freedom. Your laws, O God, your laws—from the teacher's cane to the martyr's trials—are able to turn bitterness into a wholesome thing, and call us back to yourself from the pernicious pleasures that lure us from you.

## FIFTEEN

Hear my prayer, O Lord; do not let my soul faint under your discipline. Do not let me faint in confessing before you all your mercies by which you have saved me from my most evil ways, that you might become sweet to me above all the seductions which I once followed; and that I may love you entirely and clasp your hand with whole heart; and that you may yet deliver me from every temptation, even to the end. For lo! O Lord, my King and my God, let whatever useful thing I learned as a child be for your service, and for your service whatever I speak, write, read or count. For you granted me your discipline while I was learning vain things. You have forgiven my sin in taking delight in those

vanities. Indeed, I learned many a useful word in them, but these may better be learned in things that are not vain; and that is the safe path for youths to walk in.

## SIXTEEN

But woe to you, stream of human custom! Who can stay your course? How long will it be before you are dried up? How long will you carry the sons of Eve into that huge and hideous ocean which even they who are embarked on the Tree can scarcely pass over? Did not I read in you of Jove the thunderer and adulterer? Both, doubtless, he could not be, except to have the real adultery supposedly countenanced and pandered by the feigned thunder. And now which of our gowned masters lends a sober ear to one who from their own school cries out, "These were Homer's fictions; he transferred things human to the gods; I wish that he had transferred divine things to us"? Yet it would be more truthful if he said, "These are indeed his fictions; but he ascribed divine attributes to wicked men, that crimes might not be accounted crimes, and that whoever commits them might appear to imitate the celestial gods, not forsaken mankind!"

And yet, O hellish stream of custom, into you are cast the sons of men with rich rewards for learning such things. And much is made of it when this is going on in the forum in the sight of laws which grant salaries in addition to the scholars' payments. And you lash upon your rocks and roar, "Here words are learned! Here eloquence is attained, essential to gain your ends or to persuade people to your way of thinking." So in truth we would never have known such words as "golden shower," "bosom," "intrigue," "temples of the heavens," or other words in that passage, if Terence had not brought a good-for-nothing youth on the stage to set up Jupiter as his example of lewdness.