



## The Life and Conduct of Our Father among the Saints Augustine, Bishop of Hippo\*

(Commemorated on June 15)

*Aflame with the love of God, O Augustine, thou didst  
Prove to be an all-radiant luminary, O Blessed one.*

**AUGUSTINE** (also named Aurelius), one of the Holy Fathers of our Church, was born on November 13 in the year of salvation 354 in Thagaste (a town in Numidia, not far from Madaura and Hippo). His father was called Patricius, who was from a notable family but was not very well-to-do. Originally a pagan, he subsequently embraced Christianity and received Holy Baptism towards the end of his life. Augustine's mother was called Monica. She was from a Christian family and was adorned with every virtue. From his earliest years, she endeavored with ardent zeal to inspire her son with the Divine teachings of Christianity. But she did not reckon herself to be a perfect mother, as she was wont to say, insofar as she would be unable to impart the life of Grace to him to whom she had given physical life. In truth, all of her holy longings were fulfilled according to her prayers, and the pious mother rejoiced

from the bottom of her heart and glorified God when she saw her beloved son, Augustine, growing up in the fear of the Lord and giving good hopes for his future.

However, her joy did not last for long. For the young man, whom his parents sent to be educated, first in Madaura and later in Carthage, acquired a great deal of basic knowledge, thanks to his keenness of spirit and natural love of learning, but at the same time he went astray and began to lead an extremely dissolute life. He was seduced by bad company and wicked entertainments, and there no longer remained in his soul any of his mother's salutary counsels and precepts. The Saint describes in his *Confessions* the dreadful pit of sins into which he fell and deplors the fact that he began to anger the Lord even from that age, which is customarily and inaccurately called the "age of innocence." He laments the precious time that he wasted in empty studies, from which one could not profit in any other way than somehow to satisfy one day an insatiable desire for the goods and honors of this world, which, as he says, are poverty and ignominy, if we examine them closely.

Of all these secular studies, St. Augustine extols his reading of poetry, saying that he derived great benefit from this. For it not only perfected his diction, but also strengthened his intellectual abilities, and primarily that of inventiveness—an indispensable attribute of creative minds. He also said that from this study he acquired that wealth and height of reasoning and utterance which exalt our nature above itself, and facility in expressing himself eloquently and suitably as occasion demanded.

As if the moral debauchery that overcame his otherwise naturally noble and upright soul were not enough, he who was later to become a fervent champion of the true religion fell, in addition, into the heresy of the Manichæans, being attracted by their pretentious arguments. Although he did not find in the reveries of this monstrous heresy the spiritual respite for which his heart so passionately yearned, he nonetheless persisted in it for nine whole years, after which he had finally had his fill of it. However, not finding anywhere to lay his excited and restless spirit, he fell from Scylla into Charyb-

dis and espoused the errors of the Skeptics, through which he came to entertain doubts about everything.

When she learned of this twofold shipwreck of Augustine's morals and faith, his devout and virtuous mother was sorely distressed and entreated God day and night with torrents of tears to enlighten her son's mind, darkened as it was by passions and delusion. Seeking some relief from the weight of her sorrow and hoping, at the same time, to remedy the evil into which Augustine had fallen, she hastened to a certain Bishop to confess her anguish to him and appealed to him for help in amending the ideas and behavior of her erring son. But this virtuous Bishop, after comforting her in a fatherly way over her misfortune, advised her to endure her suffering with perseverance and with hope to entrust the spiritual healing of her son to God. "The only thing that we can do for the young man, for the time being, is to entreat God for his salvation; so calm down and have confidence in Divine aid, for it is impossible for the Father of mercy and compassions to leave in perdition a son who is mourned with so many tears."

And indeed, the response of this holy man came true, as if it were a Divine prophecy. After a short time, at any rate, Divine Providence brought the ailing Augustine to the hands of the only doctor who could cure his illness. The city of Milan, in need of a teacher of rhetoric, wrote to Symmachus, the Eparch of Rome, asking him to provide someone suitable for the post. He chose Augustine, who had already taught this art in Carthage with proficiency, and sent him to Milan. The Bishop of the Church of Milan at that time was the Divine Ambrose, and from their first encounter these two men felt such great empathy for each other that, although they were at odds in their way of thinking, they were bound together thenceforth in a very close friendship. Thanks to this friendship, and also delighted by Ambrose's eloquence, Augustine frequently went to listen to his sermons.

But no matter how much pleasure he took in the oratory of the Orthodox Bishop St. Ambrose, and even though he was inwardly convinced by the Saint's arguments, he persisted all the more doggedly in his erroneous ideas, obstinately seeking to find the truth

outside the only sanctuary in which it resided (as he himself says in his *Confessions*), smitten by the reproaches of his conscience, held fast by habit, misled by fear, enslaved by passion, and inwardly moved by the beauty of virtue. At the same time, he was entranced by the seductions of vice, even as he unceasingly contended against the errors of his heresy and its religious rituals, seeking safety on dry land, like one shipwrecked, going from reef to reef, gashed by steep and rugged rocks, encountering and yet avoiding the light that ran behind him, grumbling about the weight of his fetters, all the while fending off the hand that sought to release him from these fetters.

Such are the vivid hues in which Augustine depicts the inner conflict of truth and error, of faith and blind obstinacy, which went on within his soul and held it in the grip of unending turmoil. But finally, overcome one day by intense emotions while talking with some friends, he left them and took refuge in a lonely grove in their garden, where he found the peace which was—alas!—missing from his heart. There, he fell to the ground, writhing and groaning from pain of soul, and, moistening the earth with bitter and abundant tears, implored God to have pity on him and show him mercy by coming to his aid.

While in this poignant situation he suddenly (as he himself relates) heard a sweet voice coming from a neighboring house and saying: “Take up and read.” Never had his soul been seized by this kind of emotion. Astonished and beside himself, thinking the matter over and unable to remember from where that voice had come, pondering and unable to understand what he had been recommended to read, he arose and, borne along by some invisible force, ran to find his friend Alypius in the place where he had left him. There, he saw a book lying on a table. He grabbed it in tumult of soul, opened it (this book contained the Epistles of St. Paul), and the first words on which his gaze fell were the following exhortations of the Apostle to the Romans: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Romans 13:13-14).

As soon as Augustine read this passage, a ray of light entered his soul and immediately dispelled the thick darkness that encompassed it, and he had no need to read any further. All the spirit of the Apostle, who, like him, had previously been a cruel persecutor of Jesus and who subsequently, enlightened by heavenly illumination, became a brilliant preacher of the Truth, entered through these few words into the soul of this new convert, diffusing therein faith and the heavenly peace that accompanies it. Finding all at once in the Faith of Christ everything for which he had been searching elsewhere, and embracing all of the dogmas of Christianity, he hastened to wash away the filth of his former sins through the laver of regeneration. Along with his illegitimate son, Adeodatus, whom he had fathered from a concubine, he was Baptized on the Vigil of Pascha by the Divine Ambrose. Augustine was thirty-two years old at the time.

Shortly thereafter, he returned to his native land, having resolved to settle there for good. The joy of his mother, who a short time before was mourning both her deceased husband and her lost son, was indescribable. But this virtuous woman did not survive long after the conversion of her son; she commended her spirit to the Lord, while blessing Him for vouchsafing her to see all of her prayers fulfilled. Augustine very vividly describes in a letter to his friend Alypius how bitterly he lamented the loss of such a good and loving mother. Among other things, he says that he felt that that twofold life, consisting of his mother's life and his own, had been torn asunder.

Nevertheless, the prominence of Augustine's family and his splendid education quickly made him known everywhere in his homeland, while the strictness of his life and his virtue and piety elicited universal respect and love for him. Hence, one day, while he was in Church after arriving in Hippo, the Bishop of that city, Valerius, said that he was in need of a suitable Priest for his Church, and all the people turned and looked at Augustine. They declared with acclamations that he was the worthiest man to fill this vacancy and almost resorted to force in order to persuade him to accept this office. Along with it, the Bishop also entrusted him with the burden of preaching the Divine Word, which, according to the custom that prevailed in Africa, belonged to the Bishop alone.



Although Augustine accepted this heavy burden with reluctance, after accepting it, he carried out all of his duties with most fervent and holy zeal. He would teach sometimes in Latin, which the people of Hippo understood, and at other times in Punic for the sake of foreigners who did not understand Latin, and his natural eloquence, inspiration, and skill endowed his sermons with such power that his words rarely fell on rocky ground, because his inspired oratory had softened these rocks into fertile earth. Very often, poor people, inhumanly oppressed by the rich, slaves maltreated by harsh and tyrannical masters, and sometimes even entire communities harassed by the powerful, waited for the holy orator on the road in order to ask him to speak on their behalf, in the certainty that a single word from him would suffice to improve their lot. As an example of the force of his words we cite, here, just the following account.

In Cæsarea, Mauritania, according to an age-old custom, all of the citizens went out of the city every year; they would divide into two rival camps and, with brothers against brothers and fathers against children, they would begin pelting each other with stones in a terrible and relentless fight. These maneuvers ended in the total defeat of one of the factions, with dreadful results, as one might expect: the mutual killing and wounding, without any cause, of citizens who were completely at peace with one another. Wishing to put an end to this inhuman and barbaric custom, Augustine went out, on the anniversary of the battle, onto the plain where the people were gathered together, ready for the fight, and spoke to the citizens. They all accepted his words with applause, thereby showing their admiration and paying due tribute to the eloquence of the Blessed Augustine.

But this display of flattery did not satisfy the holy orator; he returned to the topic of his speech, expressing himself with such emotion that they all began to feel something more than mere admiration for his words. They jostled and crowded around him so as to hear him better; for from his mouth there dripped the honey of love for mankind and religious devotion, which spoke vividly and fervently

at that moment as never before. The slings and stones fell from the hands of his audience and tears of emotion flowed from their eyes in streams. All of those fierce barbarians praised the speaker with sobs and fell down before him in veneration, and then, after embracing each other, they returned *en masse* to the city, glorifying and blessing God for granting them such a teacher and guide. Thenceforth, that antiquated custom was completely abolished. Very frequently did Augustine win such rhetorical victories.<sup>1</sup>

When the virtuous Valerius, the aforementioned Bishop of Hippo, saw these things, rather than envying the resounding triumphs of his assistant (as many in our day would certainly do), on the contrary, he rejoiced in a fatherly way and, fearing lest some other city should ask for Augustine to become Bishop before he did so, he decided to make him his fellow Bishop on the ground that, owing to his advanced age and infirmity, he could no longer cope with the burdens of his office. As before, Augustine persistently objected to accepting this new office, arguing that it was contrary to the Canons of the Church for a new Bishop to be assigned to a Church in which there was already another Bishop who was still alive;<sup>2</sup> but again he was compelled to submit to the will of Divine Providence, and in 395 he was Consecrated Bishop of Hippo.

The many cares of this new office in no way blunted Augustine's zeal for teaching and writing, but whenever he had time off from his Episcopal duties, he used it for composing homilies, religious and philosophical treatises, critiques, translations of religious books from other languages, and regular correspondence with intellectuals, Bishops, and even rulers and kings, to whom his reputation and writings had become well known. Although he was occupied with these intellectual benefactions, he devoted himself at the same time to works of charity with godly zeal, providing relief and consolation to the unfortunate and afflicted who had recourse to him, mitigating the lot of slaves, feeding and clothing the poor and exhausting his own resources for their sake, personally visiting those in need, and aiding as far as he was able those who sought his assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *De Doctrina Christiana*, IV.53, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. xxxiv, cols. 115-116.

<sup>2</sup> This is, in fact, forbidden by the Eighth Canon of the Synod of Nicæa.

After spending his life performing deeds so worthy of imitation and always offering himself as an example of every virtue for his flock, and having reached the seventy-sixth year of his life, in 430 he entrusted his blessed soul into the hands of God, unto Whom are due all glory, honor, and worship, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

\*Source: Ὁ Μέγας Συναξαριστὴς τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας (Athens: Matthaios Langes, 1979), 5th ed., Vol. VI, pp. 206-214.

### ***Apolytikion. Third Tone.***

Thou didst prove to be a radiant vessel of the Divine Spirit and an expounder of the City of God, O Blessed Augustine; and thou didst minister piously unto the Savior, as a wise and God-inspired Hierarch. O Holy Father, entreat Christ God that He grant us great mercy.

### ***Kontakion. Plagal of the Fourth Tone.***

Having acquired the radiance of wisdom, thou didst prove to be a Divine instrument of piety, O Hierarch Augustine, thou favorite of Christ. As an initiate of godly love, raise up on the wings of Divine longing us who cry unto thee: Rejoice, O God-inspired Father.

