



54 ST. AUGUSTINE

354 - 430

Augustine, who lived during the declining years of the Roman Empire, was the greatest theologian of his era. His writings profoundly influenced Christian doctrines and attitudes throughout the Middle Ages, and indeed still have influence today.

Augustine was born in 354, in the town of Tagaste (now Souk-Ahras, in Algeria), about forty-five miles south of the large coastal town of Hippo (now Annaba). His father was a pagan; his mother a devout Christian. He was not baptized as an infant.

Even in his adolescence, Augustine's intelligence was impressive, and at sixteen he was sent to Carthage to study. There he took a mistress and had an illegitimate child. At nineteen, he

decided to study philosophy. He soon converted to Manichaeism, the religion founded about 240 by the prophet Mani. To the young Augustine, Christianity seemed unsophisticated, while Manichaeism appealed to his reason. However, over the course of the next nine years, he gradually became disillusioned with Manichaeism. When Augustine was twenty-nine, he moved to Rome. A bit later he moved to Milan, in northern Italy, where he became a professor of rhetoric. There he became familiar with Neoplatonism, a modified version of Plato's philosophy that had been developed by Plotinus in the third century.

The bishop in Milan at that time was St. Ambrose. Augustine listened to some of his sermons, which introduced him to a new, more sophisticated aspect of Christianity. At the age of thirty-two, Augustine was converted, and the one-time skeptic became an ardent proponent of Christianity. In 387, Augustine was baptized by Ambrose, and soon thereafter he returned home to Tagaste.

In 391, Augustine became the assistant to the bishop of Hippo. Five years later the bishop died, and Augustine, then forty-two years old, became the new bishop of Hippo. He remained at that post for the rest of his life.

Although Hippo was not an important city, Augustine's brilliance was so obvious that he soon became one of the most respected leaders in the church. Although he had a weak constitution, with the help of stenographers he was able to compose a large number of religious writings. About 500 of his sermons survive, as do more than 200 of his letters. Of his books, the two most famous and influential are *The City of God* and his *Confessions*. The latter, which is one of the most famous autobiographies ever written, was composed when he was in his forties.

Many of Augustine's letters and sermons are devoted to refuting the beliefs of the Manichaeans, the Donatists (a schismatic Christian sect), and the Pelagians (another heretical Christian group of the day). His dispute with the Pelagians forms an important part of Augustine's religious doctrines. Pelagius was an English monk who came to Rome about 400, and there

expounded several interesting theological doctrines. We are each, Pelagius claimed, without original sin, and are free to choose good or evil. By righteous living and good works, an individual can attain salvation.

Partly through the influence of St. Augustine's writings, the views of Pelagius were declared heretical, and Pelagius himself (who had already been banished from Rome) was excommunicated. According to Augustine, all men are stained with Adam's sin. Human beings are unable to attain salvation solely through their own efforts and good works: the grace of God is necessary for salvation. Similar ideas had been expressed previously; however, Augustine amplified the earlier statements, and his writings solidified the Church's position on these points, which thereafter became fixed.

Augustine maintained that God already knows who will be saved and who will not, and that some of us are therefore *predestined* to be saved. This idea of predestination was to greatly influence later theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin.

Probably even more important than the doctrine of predestination were St. Augustine's attitudes concerning sex. When he converted to Christianity, Augustine had decided that it was necessary for him to renounce sex. (He once wrote, "Nothing is so much to be shunned as sex relations.") However, the actual renunciation proved quite difficult for St. Augustine; both his personal struggle and his views on the subject are described at some length in his *Confessions*. The views he expressed there, because of Augustine's great reputation, exerted a strong influence upon medieval attitudes toward sex. Augustine's writings also linked together the notion of original sin and sexual desire.

During Augustine's life, the Roman Empire was rapidly declining. In fact, in 410, the city of Rome was sacked by the Visigoths under Alaric. Naturally, the remaining Roman pagans claimed that the Romans were thereby being punished for their desertion of their ancient gods in favor of Christianity. St.



Augustine dictates to a scribe.

Augustine's most famous book, *The City of God*, is in part a defense of Christianity against that charge. However, the book also includes an entire philosophy of history, one that was to have considerable influence upon later developments in Europe. Augustine expressed the view that the Roman Empire was not of any basic importance, nor was the city of Rome, nor any earthly city. What was really important was the growth of the "heavenly city"—in other words, the spiritual progress of mankind. The vehicle for this progress was, of course, the Church. ("There is no salvation outside the Church.") It therefore followed that

emperors, whether pagan or Christian or barbarian, were not as important as the Pope and the Church were.

Although Augustine himself did not take the final step, the thrust of his argument leads easily to the conclusion that temporal rulers should be subordinate to the Pope. Medieval popes were glad to draw that conclusion from Augustine, and his doctrines therefore laid the foundation for the long conflict between Church and State that was to characterize European history for many centuries.

Augustine's writings were a factor in the transmission of certain aspects of Greek philosophy to medieval Europe. In particular, Neoplatonism strongly influenced Augustine's mature thought, and through Augustine it influenced medieval Christian philosophy. It is also interesting to note that Augustine expressed the idea behind Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," though in different words, of course.

Augustine was the last great Christian theologian before the Dark Ages, and his writings left Church doctrine, in all its major outlines, in roughly the form it was to keep throughout the Middle Ages. He was the most eminent of the Latin Church fathers, and his writings were widely read by the clergy. His views on salvation, sex, original sin, and many other points were correspondingly influential. Many later Catholic theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as Protestant leaders such as Luther and Calvin, were strongly influenced by him.

Augustine died in Hippo, in 430 A.D., in his seventy-sixth year. The Vandals, one of the barbarian tribes which had invaded the disintegrating Roman Empire, were besieging Hippo at the time. A few months later, they captured the town and burned most of it; however, Augustine's library and the cathedral escaped destruction.