

BOOK REVIEW

CONFESSIONS

by Augustine, translated by Garry Wills

(New York: Penguin Books, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006)

In talking with people about their spiritual progress or their spiritual state, I often use the metaphor of a journey: *Where are you in your spiritual journey?* Augustine would have liked that. The construct of the first ten books of *Confessions* tells the story of his personal journey of faith (he calls it our pilgrim's way¹), and yet it is more. In telling his story, he converses with God. And in conversing with God, he wrestles with issues of theology. It is a journey, but it is a journey laden with spiritual fruit. He wrote this book for several reasons. One is to communicate his praise and questions to God. Another is that he might through writing clarify difficult theological and self-perceptual issues. He is working things out. In that pursuit, the book is littered with questions posed to God and requests for answers of insight. A further reason for the book is to influence others in their own spiritual journey. He writes to "give others heart"² in their own search for God's forgiveness of their sinful pasts and to enlarge the glory given to God as others hear his testimony to the grace of God.

Augustine begins with his birth in rural North Africa (now modern Algeria) and carries the story forward through his adolescence, education, entrenchment with Manicheism, career, conversion, and semi-monasticism. Along the road we are drawn into his inner wrestling with doubts and lusts. We meet his devout and interceding mother, his common-law wife, his beloved son, his dear friends, and those brilliant minds who influenced him for good or ill, such as the Manicheans, Faustus, and the Catholic theologian, Ambrose. This is a soul turned inside out. He seems to hold nothing back. The confession of pear-stealing with young friends displays not a sin of stealing to address hunger, but stealing for the sake of stealing (he "dined on crime"). He coveted not the object, but the thrilling experience of sin. He bares his lustful soul as he takes his unnamed common-law wife, sends her away as he is affianced to a noble wifely prospect, and then takes another woman during the lengthy engagement period.

The title has a double meaning. It is, of course, a confession of his sin. But additionally it is a confession of the greatness and the holiness of God. He tried Manicheism and found it wanting. Faustus gave shallow answers to his pressing questions (*My heresy....if I tried to put any weight on them, they crumbled.*). He tried philosophy and found it wanting. He indulged in sensory experiences and still felt empty inside. He is desperately fleeing the Hound of Heaven, and finds himself fleeing even from himself (*How could my heart escape my heart?*). Then he met Ambrose and began to hear deep and convincing answers to his soul's urgent questions. He fell in love with the mind of God first, and then he fell in love with God's great heart. Augustine seems to leave no stone unturned as he mines the immensity of God's great truths and His beneficence to man.

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Augustine discloses a breathtaking, soaring theology. What most of us express as a one-liner of theological formulation regarding any particular tenet of the faith, he pursues for paragraphs and pages. For example, the book opens with five pages dedicated to exploring the immensity of God and, later, six pages on the theology of Christian joy. He accepts no mere spiritual cant. A statement made is a statement to be turned back on itself and examined from another angle (e.g., *Your best suppliant is not the one who asks to hear what he wants but to want what he hears; Granting what you require, require whatever you will*—this one is oft-repeated). For such an early theologian, he has muscular constructs on such complex issues as the origin of evil, the nature and management of the contradictory two wills in every breast, the preexistence of God, the nature of the Trinity, the contextualization of morality,³ and the origin of faith.

Augustine takes the reader by the hand and leads him through the darkness of his blind wandering in sin (*I touched bottom*). He leads him toward the first glimmer of the dawn as the pursuing Spirit prods him to Rome where he might be compelled toward the Truth. Then he exults in the sunrise of God's gracious Truth and guides us in a long, wandering exploration of the wonder of God. He explores such wonders of God as memory, friends, music, and time. Nothing can be excluded from worshipful examination and explication. His bounding joy is tempered only by his regret that it took him so long to find the truth (rather, to be found by the Truth). He confesses, *Slow was I, Lord, too slow in loving you. All the while that he was thrashing in the net, God was already there calling to me, shouting, drumming on deaf ears.*

I doubt that I have ever read such a brutally honest book, with the exception of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. This is spiritual nudity. He doesn't simply confess to the sin of pride. He surgically incises it to probe beneath the surface. He describes the lust of the eyes in watching gladiatorial conflicts in the arena. But for the abstainer, he indicts his fascination at watching a spider capture and kill a fly. In a pure being, he says, one could watch this tiny drama in worship of one of God's natural wonders. But, truth be told, the watcher of the spider and the fly is as much a voyeur of violence as the watcher of the gladiators. It is still sin, regardless of the insect's *trifling size*. He concludes, *My heart is a dumpster for such things*. The honesty shows up as well in his humble admission that he can add nothing to God (note his extremely high view of God and correspondingly low and realistic view of man): *No service of mine can relieve you of any burden, you will not be weaker for lack of my support. I cannot tend you...* In view of my supreme admiration for this godly man, it is with hesitation that I sound a word of criticism. The last three books on the Trinity left me cold. His extensive use of allegory I found tiresome and unconvincing. I became impatient with it as apparently so much parading of intellectual gymnastics. Maybe that is simply the perspective of a Type A personality that wants to get-on-with-it, but there it is!

How to apply a book like this?! It takes the reader apart; that is sure. And that is good, for in an age of over-familiarization with God and over-adaptation to *kosmos* culture, there is a need for a spiritual whack to the side of the head. This book has

³ See page 50 regarding the "sins" of the Old Testament patriarchs.

sensitized my own soul to see sin where last week I would not have seen it. Augustine is a human agent of God to help me enter David's old prayer, *See if there is any offensive way in me...*⁴ Augustine challenges me to peer deeper into biblical texts and not just move on in my mind after a superficial reading. There is much more to plumb in God's Word. There are insights on which to ruminate. There are more questions to ask and a God to appeal to for answers. With thousands of years of doctrinal formulation, the temptation for me is to stop thinking about it and to stop asking questions, as if the last word has been said and all that *can* be said *has* been said. I am also refreshed by his example of sharing with others the spiritual process. I am mindful that Paul exhorted Timothy that his church members should see his spiritual *progress*. I like to display my *perfection*, not my *progress*, because *progress* denotes imperfection and a need for further growth. But my hearers will learn much more by seeing the process rather than an implied and dishonest *final product*. And the sharing of the journey with its struggles and missteps will encourage them to likewise engage in the journey

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May 15, 2006

⁴ Psalm 139:24