

# Saint Augustine

Man, Pastor, Mystic

By  
Agostino Trapè, O.S.A.

*Illustrated*

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## Roman in Culture and Language

**A**LTHOUGH Augustine was born in Africa and, according to all indications, was an African by descent,<sup>1</sup> he was a Roman in culture and language. Tagaste, his birthplace, was one of the many towns which the Romans had scattered around North Africa. As everyone knows, after conquering Carthage the Romans undertook a monumental transformation of these vast regions by laying down an extensive network of roads, building cities, erecting country houses, encouraging agriculture, and bringing culture, trade and prosperity to every corner of the land.<sup>2</sup>

### Tagaste

Tagaste was not a large city; it is called *civitas parva*, "a small town," by the anonymous author of the Latin version of the *Life of St. Melania the younger*.<sup>3</sup> In fact it offered only the first stage of public education, the schools taught by the *primus magister* ("instructor in the rudiments) or, in modern parlance, elementary schools. The town had no special importance except that it was a place where many of the roads of the Mediterranean hinterland met: one of the three roads from Hippo to Carthage passed through it, as did the road from Carthage to Cirta, Sitifis, and distant Caesarea in Mauritania, and the road from Hippo southward to Theveste (Tebessa). The mansion or inn of Tagaste was therefore a well-known one and allowed the citizens of this little town to come in contact with the commercial and cultural doings of a large area of Roman Africa.<sup>4</sup>

The town was situated in a pleasant location on the broad and fertile altiplano of Numidia, 2,200 feet above sea level. It was surrounded by fragrant woods<sup>5</sup> in which Augustine went on long excursions hunting birds<sup>6</sup> and by vines<sup>7</sup> and olive groves<sup>8</sup>; it was rich in grains, fruits, and pasturage.<sup>9</sup>

To the east stretched the broad valley of the Medjerda (the Bagradas of the ancients), river which descended a distance of 155 miles to Carthage. To the south the vast altiplano ran to the

## Theological Formation

**T**HE will of the people of Hippo, which Augustine took for a sign of God's will, caused him to give a new direction to his monastic ideal by fusing it with the ideal of the priesthood. It also caused him to devote himself more urgently to his own theological formation. He had been planning to do so while at Tagaste, but he lacked the time. In his new situation he did not have any more time available, but the urgency was greater. He therefore devoted himself with extraordinary zeal to the study of theology or, concretely, to the study of Scripture and the writers of the Church.

He began by studying the credibility of the Catholic faith, and he produced as the firstfruits of his priesthood a fine work on *The Value of Belief*. The subject was a fundamental one and enabled him to attack head-on the Manichaeian rationalism by which he and his friend Honoratus, to whom the work is dedicated, had at one time been deceived. It also enabled him to strengthen the conviction reached at Milan that faith has temporal priority over knowledge, because it is the way that leads to knowledge; to summarize the reasons for the credibility of the Catholic faith; and, finally, to establish the presupposition of theological research. The presupposition is this: If we are to understand the Scriptures, we must take as our guide not someone who rejects and condemns them (as noted earlier, the Manichaeians rejected the Old Testament) but rather someone who respects, safeguards, and explains them. "Who would seek an explanation of the abstruse and obscure works of Aristotle from someone hostile to them? . . . Who would set about reading and learning the works of Archimedes on geometry under the guidance of Epicurus who argued against them so stubbornly?"<sup>1</sup>

Augustine's study of Scripture was thus guided by faith and by Catholic writers. He would give impressive proof of this in his book *The Trinity* and, later on, in the Pelagian controversy.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, two years later, in 393, he would give a specimen of his progress in an address which, by an unprecedented exception,

## The Goodness of Creation

**P**REACHING and the administration of justice did not exhaust the energies of the bishop of Hippo; he had enough strength left over to devote himself to a broader and more important activity in the service of the Universal Church: the defense of the faith. Circumstances led Augustine in this direction. Having been given the important office of priest at a time of profound change and violent controversy, he thought it his duty to play a part in events. He did so, without posturing and without wearying. He entered the lists against Manichaeans, Donatists, Pelagians, Arians, and pagans: not against individuals, whom he respected and loved, but against errors, in the presence of which he could not rest easy, no matter where they showed themselves.

No charge leveled at the Catholic faith found him without an answer, no opinion that was erroneous, or that he thought erroneous, went unrefuted. He defended the faith in spoken word, in letters, and in books. The first adversary to draw his attention was the Manichaeans.

### Writings against the Manichaeans

Augustine's defense of the Catholic faith against the Manichaeans began, in desire, at Cassiciacum before his baptism<sup>1</sup>; it began in fact at Rome, immediately after his baptism.<sup>2</sup> It continued at Tagaste in the form of works devoted chiefly or even exclusively to the refutation of Manichaean doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Once ordained a priest he turned his attention primarily to his former coreligionists and began a lengthy series of works aimed at them.

I have already mentioned one book, *The Value of Belief*, which was directed against Manichaean relationalism. A second book, entitled *The Two Souls*, took up a basic Manichaean thesis: that the human being has two souls, one good and one evil, which are at odds with one another. The first of the two is a portion of God, the second a portion of darkness; from the latter comes all the evil human beings do, from the former all the good.<sup>4</sup>

## A Letter to God

**A**UGUSTINE was a profoundly religious man, and for him esthetic contemplation inevitably became mystical contemplation. The prayer just cited is but one example. The *Confessions* is a much more extensive and better example. He wrote it at the beginning of his episcopal career, in his forty-fourth to forty-sixth years.<sup>1</sup>

He may have been persuaded to do so by friends, among whom in this case was Paulinus of Nola, a friend of both Alypius and himself. Another motive may have been the desire to dissuade these friends from praising him so often and so generously. Again, he may have felt a need of interior strength in the hard labors of the apostolate or a way of peopling the solitude in which his new responsibilities placed him. This last-named reason surely played some part. Augustine cultivated friendships as few other men have, and yet, once consecrated a bishop, he was in fact a man very much alone. He was surrounded by a flock who loved him but did not understand him; he was far from the friends most close to him; his episcopal duties made it impossible for him to fill his solitude with the study of Scripture and so he sought relief in writing a conversation with God.

The *Confessions* is in fact a long letter to God, in which the author speaks of everything that concerns and interests him: the facts of his life, the mysteries of grace, the profound questions of philosophy, the interpretation of Scripture, his interior ascents, and the wonders of creation. It is therefore a work at once of autobiography, philosophy, theology, mysticism, and poetry. Its many-faceted richness makes Augustine's letter to God a work of world literature, much read in the past and read even more today.

Contrary to what is often thought, the *Confessions* is not simply a confession of sins. Augustine does indeed confess his sins and does so with ruthless honesty and deep humility, but this is only one aspect, and not even the principal aspect, of the work. Augustine's *Confessions* has far wider horizons: it embraces the