

Reflection: Augustine of Hippo Linda E Hunter 28th August 2024

St. Augustine of Hippo died on this day in the year 430 AD. He was perhaps the greatest theologian to have ever lived and is responsible for much of what we believe and understand about our faith. More than any other writer, he developed what would become known as systematic theology, or an explanation of how Christianity fits into views of the universe, creation, and humankind's relationship with God.

What do we know about him?

Augustine was born in 354 in North Africa in the Roman province of Numidia, His father, Patrick, was a pagan, but his mother Monica, was a devout Christian. Monica was very ambitious for her son, wanting him to become a Christian to give him status.

At the age of 11, Augustine was sent to school at Madaurus. There he became familiar with Latin literature, as well as pagan beliefs and practices.

At the age of 17, Augustine went to Carthage University to continue his education in rhetoric, he was going to become a lawyer but abandoning that idea he went on to Rome and then Milan, where he won the position of rhetoric professor. By temperament Augustine was passionate and sensual, and as a young man he rejected Christianity. But it was there in Milan, under the influence of his mother Monica and of Ambrose Bishop of Milan, he began to devote himself instead, to teaching and study, looking afresh at the scriptures. He was interested in Ambrose's sermons, later on adapting much of this teaching to use himself. Augustine later wrote an account of his conversion in his book '*Confessions*, saying, he found a New Testament and opening it at Paul's letter to the Romans after reading it he felt changed, and converted to Christianity. He was baptised in 386. '*Confessions*' has since become a classic of Christian theology

Augustine returned to Africa in 388, and established with some friends a monastic type life style, where study and conversation flourished, he was ordained priest in 391 and elected bishop, in 396. Augustine built his own monastery, living with his clergy in community life. He was actively engaged in the administration of church property, in the care of the poor, in preaching and writing, became renowned for his sermons and teaching. He even acted as judge in civil as well as ecclesiastical cases. As bishop he was an upholder of order in a time of political strife caused by the disintegration of the Roman empire.

Augustine was a person of intellectual brilliance, wide education, temperament and insight. His understanding of Christianity and theological knowledge was shown in his many writings, which have probably proved more influential in the history of thought than any other Christian writer since St. Paul. Most of his writings date from his episcopate.

Two of Augustine's works are considered classics of Western literature: *Confessions*, which is deemed the first autobiography in the West, and *City of God*. *Confessions*, contained sermons on the gospel and epistle of St. John, the De Trinitate and, at the end of his life, the De Giviata dei. This work deals with the opposition between Christianity and the 'world' and represents the first Christian philosophy of religion. His writings were known, in part, in early Anglo- Saxon England, with some being translated into old English under King Alfred.

Augustine served as Bishop in Hippo until his death in the year 430. His relics were taken to Sardinia, later Luitprand, king of the Lombards, enshrined his body at Pavia.

Augustine left 113 books, 218 letters, and 500 sermons, many of which have been preserved. Throughout these documents runs the theme of the sovereignty of the grace of God. His writings are among the most complicated of the Church fathers because over the course of his life, he continually went back to theological concepts to update them as his thoughts changes and evolved.

Although there are no known medieval church dedications in England, his feast was universally celebrated. He also appears frequency in screen paintings and stained glass as one of the four Latin doctors. Scenes from his life are painted on the stalls of Carlisle Cathedral.

Through the various Protestant denominations and their missions, the Christian Western tradition is indebted to the teachings of Augustine.

Collect for Augustine of Hippo

Merciful Lord,
who turned Augustine from his sins
to be a faithful bishop and teacher:
grant that we may follow him in penitence and discipline
till our restless hearts find their rest in you;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.