

# Confessions, St Augustine

## Introduction

Many years ago in college I had taken an advanced Latin class with regard to the **Confessions** by St Augustine. I have no idea why in God's name I had opted for this course which dragged on for two agonizingly long semesters. I put my experience this way which served to be the ultimate turn-off when it came to this author. At the same time I readily acknowledge that Augustine looms large over the Western Church. To put it otherwise, I'd say that he looms not just large but with an oppressive weight.

Over the years I had made several attempts to get at root of my undisguised distaste. It has nothing to do with the Latin language but with the man himself. To compound the problem, from the get-go I had been attracted to the Greek Church Fathers and some years later to those who wrote in Syriac. Thus after those two semesters I never looked at anything again by St Augustine. I had plenty of material to keep me busy for at least one lifetime.

As for this revulsion, much of it is rooted in his **Confessions**. Right off the bat I found that while Augustine sounds strikingly modern, there was something long-winded and downright boring as to his style. He drones on endlessly about his personal problems, almost always using the first person singular. It gets particular dreadful when Augustine talks about his sins. Then he drags in his mother Monica who to me comes across as equally unappealing. When the two get together, watch out. Just think. If she hadn't prayed so earnestly for her son, Augustine never would have come on the scene! <sup>1</sup>

Then recently—only a couple of weeks before writing this short essay—things changed. By no means did I undergo a conversion, a *metanoia*. A friend and I had been talking about Socrates and the sophists, those professional know-it-alls who hire themselves out to the highest bidder. Their profession was to teach people how to be persuasive and win an argument at any cost where focus upon the truth was secondary. In the course of several discussions and

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<sup>1</sup>We can throw in Patricius, Augustine's pagan father who was baptized on his deathbed. This turned out to be a saving grace. If he had been a practicing Christian like his wife, the two would have presented themselves as a dreadful force!

readings my friend and I discovered that sophism (if that's an appropriate word) remains very much alive. In fact, it's all-pervasive like something in the water hard to detect. You need special equipment to detect it. As for doing this, I'd say the best tool at hand is Socrates himself as found in Plato's **Dialogues**.

After you have woken up to the pervasiveness of sophism followed by having gone through a period of dissatisfaction, at last light dawns. You have to be patient with yourself during this time which often turns out to be longer and more painful than anticipated. Keep in mind that not everybody at once can detect the false premises of being a sophist. It takes time and some skill to recognize that it's omnipresent meaning you have learn to cope with it. Forget about rooting it out. That's impossible. It all boils down to acceptance. Once that happens, you're able to see things more clearly. This is a pure gift, nothing we initiate. One of the biggest discoveries (painful as it is) is that only a tiny fraction of the population gets it. This has been the case from the get-go. Despite this tiny number, it suffices to keep the world from imploding, something like the thirty-six righteous ones of Jewish tradition.

In light of all this my friend mentioned above with whom I discussed these matters offered the following two passages from Augustine's **Confessions**, he being well aware of my inherent dislike of the man and his style. The best part is that he singled out a very small excerpt, easy to grasp. Though Augustine was using his characteristic first person singular as a means of address, it didn't bore me to death. In his personal life Augustine was at a crossroads. He had recognized the all-pervasiveness of sophism, was looking to break free, and found in Ambrose of Milan the man who had rescued him. However, it didn't come at once.

And so I decided to swallow my dislike for Augustine after my friend had read parts of the excerpts below. It made me take a look at the original Latin text and jot down a few notes on these excerpts and see how Augustine got lifted from his despair. Putting this into a larger context, I had just completed a short essay on where Socrates had received his inspiration which was Anaxagoras <sup>2</sup>. He was delighted to read about that man's insights into *nous* or mind governing physical reality but was disappointed that he didn't apply it to ethics.

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<sup>2</sup>The Turning Point, also on this homepage.

Nevertheless, Socrates now was armed to branch out on his own. Thus I came to see between Socrates and Augustine an important connection that can be overlooked by reason of the all pervasive effects of sophism, of how it can morph from one thing into another and back again. The two offered hope that despite being such a tiny minority, indeed there is hope.

Source of English text:

**Saint Augustine The Confessions** (Hyde Park, NY, 1997)

Source of Latin text:

<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/latinconf/latinconf.html>[[

With regard to the two Latin excerpts, I put both in italics in order that they stand out more clearly. As for the first section, it has my notations after the Latin text. As for the second section, it has notations after each sentence of the Latin text. Please keep in mind these notations are quite unprofessional and leave a lot to be desired. What counts is the pleasure in having done them.

### **Book Five, Chapter 13**

A message had been sent from Milan to Rome addressed to the prefect of the city asking for a master of rhetoric. A pass had also been issued authorizing the person chosen to use the official post-horses. Against the background of unsatisfactory student behavior I therefore canvassed support among citizens drunk on Manichean nonsense in the hope that after prescribing a subject for a trial discourse the prefect Symmachus would recommend and dispatch me. My real reason for going was to get away from the Manichees, though this was not apparent either to them or to me at the time.

So I came to Milan and to Bishop Ambrose who was known throughout the world as one of the best of men. He was a devout worshiper of you, Lord, and at that time his energetic preaching provided your people with choicest wheat and the joy of oil and the sober intoxication of wine (A mixed figure here, put together from Ps. 4:7; 45:7; 104:15). Unknowingly I was led by you to him so that through him I might be led knowingly to you.

This man of God welcomed me with fatherly kindness and showed the charitable concern for my pilgrimage that befitted a bishop. I began to feel affection for him not at first as a teacher of truth, for that I had given up hope of finding in your Church, but simply as a man who was kind to me. With professional interest I listened to him conducting disputes before the people, but **my intention was not the right one**: I was assessing his eloquence to see whether it matched its reputation. I wished to ascertain whether the readiness of speech with which rumor credited him was really there or something more or less. I hung keenly upon his words but cared little for their content and indeed despised it as I stood there delighting in the sweetness of his discourse. Though more learned than that of Faustus it was less light-hearted and beguiling; but such criticism concerns the style only, for with regard to the content there was no comparison. While Faustus would wander off into Manichean whimsy, this man was teaching about salvation in a thoroughly salutary way. But salvation is far from sinners [Ps 119.155], and a sinner I was at that time. Yet little by little without knowing it I was drawing near.

*Itaque posteaquam missum est a Mediolanio Romam ad praefectum urbis, ut illi civitati rhetoricae magister provideretur, inperita etiam evectioe publica, ego ipse ambivi, per eos ipsos Manichaeis vanitatibus ebrios—quibus ut carerem ibam, sed utrique nesciebamus—ut dictione proposita me probatum praefectus tunc Symmachus mitteret.*

*Et veni Mediolanium ad Ambrosium episcopum, in optimis notum orbi terrae, pium cultorem tuum, cuius tunc eloquia strenue ministrabant adipem frumenti tui, et laetitiam olei, et sobriam vini ebrietatem, populo tuo.*

*Ad eum autem ducebar abs te nesciens, ut per cum ad te sciens ducerer.*

*Suscepit me paterne ille homo dei et peregrinationem amare coepi primo quidem non tamquam doctorem veri, quod in ecclesia tua prorsus desperabam, sed tamquam hominem benignum in me.*

*Studiose audiebam disputantem in populo, non intentione, qua debui, sed quasi explorans eius facundiam, utrum conveniret famae suae, an maior minorve proflueret, quam praedicabatur; et verbis eius suspendebar intentus, rerum autem incuriosus et contemptor adstabam: et delectabar sermonis suavitate, quamquam eruditioris, minus tamen hilarescentis atque mulcentis, quam Fausti erat, quod attinet ad dicendi modum.*

*Ceterum rerum ipsarum nulla comparatio: nam ille per Manichaeas fallacias aberrabat, ille autem saluberrime docebat salutem.*

*Sed longe est a peccatoribus salus, qualis ego tunc aderam.  
Et tamen propinquabam sensim, et nesciens.*

This excerpt is a kind of introduction of what will follow in Chapter 14 in that it provides necessary information as to how Augustine came to Milan and more importantly, how he started to come under the influence of Ambrose, the Catholic bishop there. A key anticipatory word, if you will, with regard to the overall theme of this document is rhetoric, that being the art or technique to speak in a way to win over people as in a law court or debate. For Augustine, pretty much synonymous with this word is the phrase “Manichean nonsense” to which he had been exposed. That too was part of the reason why he wished to escape his native Africa and come to Milan.

In brief, Manichaeans believed that humanity was caught in the conflict between light and dark and that the soul was the good part of humanity while the body was tied to darkness and evil. Given details from his own pen about his personal struggles, you can see how Augustine agonized over this belief system considered a heresy by Christians. Note that he calls the Manichean doctrine one of *vanitas* or vanity which caused a number of citizens to be drunk, this image meaning that they have swallowed it whole and entire.

Before arriving in Milan Augustine heard of Ambrose which is why he made haste to meet him. He was known as “one of the best men,” *optimus* often with regard to character and nobility. Not only was Ambrose *optimus*, he was as such “throughout the world” *orbi terrae*. Augustine calls him a devout worshiper, *pious* having a broader meaning such as devote or better, being faithful to one’s obligations whether divine, related to the state or one’s family. As for worshiper, *cultor* as husbandman gives this word a down-home character, of having one’s feet firmly rooted in the ground as well as a person who reveres God.

Ambrose inspired his flock by energetic preaching, *eloquium* along with the adverb *strenue*, actively or vigorously. It seems that Augustine anonymously attended a Mass or other service to hear the bishop preach and realizes that unknowingly (*nescio*) he was being led by him to Jesus Christ. Augustine uses the same verb without the negative prefix, that is, *scio*, in an adverbial way,

knowingly as it pertains to Ambrose who is leading him to Jesus. As for the verb, it's *duco* or to go along with one and thus suggests accompaniment.

*Suscipio* or to receive is more along the lines of taking up which Ambrose had done with regard to Augustine. It's the same as his paternal love as bishop, the verb *amo* (to have affection for) and adjective *paternus* or paternal (also ancestral). Then there follows the important verb *coepio* or to begin. This heralds the actual turn-around of Augustine and is closely allied with his *amo* or love for Ambrose which at this point is from a certain distance. Note how he qualifies this: not as a teacher of truth (he had given up hope of finding it in his church). Instead, he simply acknowledges Ambrose as *benignus* literally "in me," also as beneficent or favorable. It's important to appreciate Augustine's attitude, that is, the kindness shown by Ambrose simply as a man which ties in with this *benignus*.

Ambrose-as-*benignus* strikes Augustine more than he as a teacher of truth or *verum*. To date Augustine has given up hope of finding it in the formal church, *despero* as to have no hope. This sentiment surely resonates today but doesn't stop there as was the case with Augustine. The best is yet to come.

Following the above mentioned *benignus*, Augustine listened to Ambrose with professional interest as he conducted disputes before the people. *Studiose* is the adverb describing Augustine's attitude which as noted, is the other side of *coepio*, his beginning. This doesn't seem to be a conversion in the conventional sense but leaning in that direction. As for the disputes or *disputans* (also as estimating and even preaching) we have no details but possibly refers to the way the bishop is teaching scripture.

A true-blue sign Augustine is on the just mentioned other side of *coepio* or beginning is that he realized that his intention wasn't the right one, the verb *debeo* or to owe being used with regard to *intentio* also as purpose, effort or exertion. All the while Augustine was trying to ascertain whether Ambrose was really gifted with readiness of speech. The verb *exploro* is similar to the English, to explore here with regard to Ambrose's *facundia* or eloquence. Not just that, Augustine wanted to see if this *facundia* matched the bishop's reputation, *covenio* literally to come with and *fama* also as reputation, opinion.

Augustine was also keen on discovering whether or not rumor was correct with regard to Ambrose's readiness of speech, *profluo* fundamentally to issue forth and *praedico* to announce or to proclaim. And so Augustine remained hanging upon the bishop's words, *suspendo* or to hang with regard to *intentus* or being mindful.

Through all this Augustine delighted in Ambrose's words but not so much the content: *delecto* as to exert fascination with regard to *sermo* or speech, discourse. *Eruditus* is the participle for educated or instructed. Compared with the teaching of the Manichean disciple Faustus, Ambrose's teaching was not as superficial or soothing, *hilarresco* and *mulcens*.

Again, with regard to Faustus and Ambrose: the former would wander (*aberro* also to stray) into Manichaen fallacy or deception (*fallacia*) whereas the latter would teach about salvation in a fully proper manner, *saluberrime* being the superlative adverb of *salubor* or beneficial.

Augustine concludes this section with a quote from Ps 119.155 which reads in full as "Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek your statutes." In light of this Augustine claims to have been a sinner at the time where he applies to himself the adverb *longe* or far from with regard to the psalm verse. On the other hand, he acknowledges that without being aware of it (*nescio*), he was drawing near, *sensim* as gradually or slowly with *propinquo* or to approach.

## **Book Five, Chapter 14**

I was taking no trouble to learn from what Ambrose was saying but interested only in listening to how he said it, for that futile concern had remained with me, despairing as I did that any way to you could be open to humankind. Nonetheless as his words which I enjoyed penetrated my mind, the substance which I overlooked seeped in with them, for I could not separate the two. As I opened my heart to appreciate how skillfully he spoke, the recognition that he was speaking the truth crept in at the same time though only by slow degrees. At first the case he was making began to seem defensible to me, and I realized

that the Catholic faith, in support of which I had believed nothing could be advanced against Manichean opponents, was in fact intellectually respectable. This realization was particularly keen when once and again and indeed frequently I heard some difficult passage of the Old Testament explained figuratively; such passages had been death to me [2Cor 3.6] because I was taking them literally. As I listened to many such scriptural texts being interpreted in a spiritual sense I confronted my own attitude or at least that despair which had led me to believe that no resistance whatever could be offered to people who loathed and derided the law and the prophets. However, I did not yet consider the Catholic way the one to follow simply because it too could have its learned proponents, men who were capable of refuting objections with ample argument and good sense; nor did I yet consider the Manicheanism I professed was to be condemned because I had observed that the party of the defense could make out an equally good case. The Catholic Church appeared to me unconquered but not so clearly as to appear the conqueror. I then expended much mental effort on trying to discover if I could in any way convict the Manichees of falsehood by some definite proofs. If only I had been capable of envisaging a spiritual substance, all their elaborate constructions would have fallen to pieces at once and been thrown out of my mind; but this I could not do. All the same as I gave more and more thought to the matter and made comparisons, I judged that many philosophers had held far more probable views on this physical world and on whatever in nature comes within reach of our senses. Accordingly I adopted what is popularly thought to be the Academic position, doubting everything and wavering: I decided that I ought to leave the Manichees since at this period of uncertainty it was not right for me to continue as a member of a sect to which I judged some philosophers superior; but I flatly refused to entrust the cure of my soul's sickness to philosophers who were strangers to the saving name of Christ. I resolved therefore to live as a catechumen in the Catholic Church which was what my parents had wished for me until some kind of certainty dawned by which I might direct my steps aright.

*Cum enim non satagerem discere quae dicebat, sed tantum quemadmodum dicebat audire—ea mihi quippe, desperanti ad te viam patere homini, inanis cura remanserat—veniebant in animum meum simul cum verbis, quae diligebam, res etiam, quas neglegebam.*



This excerpt starts off with Augustine speaking in a straight-forward honest way. He uses the verb *satago* in the negative sense, basically to make a fuss with regard not paying attention to what Ambrose was saying. Instead, he was focused upon how he spoke, *quemadmodum* also in what manner. I.e., he was plagued with a futile concern, *desperans* or despairing with regard to a way open to you (addressing Jesus), *pateo* or to be exposed. As for the *cura* or concern (also as care), Augustine identifies it remained with him as futile, *inanis* as empty or void, *remaneo* as to stay behind.

While Augustine enjoyed Ambrose's words which penetrated his mind or *animus* as seat of consciousness, he neglected the substance or *res* (thing). Thus *neglego* and *diligo* are opposites, the latter as to esteem or to prize.

*Cor aperirem ad excipiendum, quam diserte diceret, pariter intrabat et quam vera diceret, gradatim quidem.*

It's to Augustine's credit that he opened his heart, *aperio* also to uncover, that is, *cor*, center of thought, memory and other mental/spiritual processes. This concerns how Ambrose spoke, *diserte* as in a skillful manner as well as (*pariter*, equally) his words being true, *verus* also as genuine, proper.

*Nam primo etiam ipsa defendi posse mihi iam coeperunt videri, et fidem catholicam, pro qua nihil posse dici adversus oppugnantes Manichaeos putaveram, iam non inpudenter asseri existimabam, maxime audito uno atque altero, et saepius aenigmate soluto de scriptis veteribus, ubi, cum ad litteram acciperem, occidebar.*

At first (*primus* also as leading) Ambrose's words appeared defensible to Augustine, *defendo* or to protect, to guard. However, Augustine felt that the Catholic faith couldn't hold water against Manichean opponents.

The position just outlined was especially keen when Augustine heard some difficult passages from the Old Testament explained figuratively, *aenigma* also as mystery, allegory and allegory. Such passages were literally death to him, that is, in reference to 2Cor 3.6: "who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." Augustine acknowledges his problem is he's taking

these passages literally, *ad literam*.

*Spiritualiter itaque plerisque illorum librorum locis expositis, iam reprehendebam desperationem meam illam dumtaxat, qua credideram legem et prophetas detestantibus atque iridentibus resisti omnino non posse.*

Without mentioning any names, Augustine says he's listening to scripture being expounded (*expositus*, exposed) *spiritualiter*. This made him confront (*reprehendo*, to seize, hold fast) his desperation, *desperatio* as abandonment of hope. It had led him to believe no resistance could be given to those who loathed and derided the law and prophets, *detestor* and *irideo* or to ward off and to mock.

*Nec tamen iam ideo mihi catholicam viam tenendam esse sentiebam; quia et ipsa poterat habere doctos adsertores suos, qui copiose et non absurde obiecta refellerent: nec ideo iam damnandum illud, quod tenebam, quia defensionis partes aequabantur.*

However, Augustine couldn't yet consider the Catholic position (*via*, road, way) to follow (*sentio* and *teneo* or to feel and to hold) even though it had its own educated proponents (*assertor* or defender). Such men could refute (*refello*, to disprove) objections with arguments and good sense, *copiose* and (*non*) *absurde* or fully and (not) irrationally.

*Ita enim catholica non mihi victa videbatur, ut nondum etiam victrix appareret.*

The Catholic position didn't seem worthy (*victus*, living or nourishing), for not yet did it appear as victorious, *victrix*.

*Tunc vero fortiter intendi animum, si quo modo possem certis aliquibus documentis Manichaeos convincere falsitatis.*

Augustine tries to expend great mental effort (*fortiter*, strongly) to see if he could convict (*convincere*, to persuade) the Manichees of falsehood by employing definite proofs. The verb is *intendo* or to intend with *animus* or mind.

*Quod si possem spiritalem substantiam cogitare, statim machinamenta illa omnia solverentur et abicerentur ex animo meo: sed non poteram.*

If Augustine could ponder (*cogito*, to think, to ponder) a spiritual substance, all the elaborate constructions or *machinamentum* (*machinor* or to devise, intend + *mens* or mind) at once (*statim*, immediately) would dissolve and be cast down from his mind or *animus*. Note the small but important word at hand, *sed* or but. That is, Augustine could not yet do this.

*Verum tamen de ipso mundi huius corpore, omnique natura, quam sensus carnis attingeret, multo probabiliora plerosque sensisse philosophos magis magisque considerans atque comparans iudicabam.*

Nevertheless, Augustine gave this more thought, *fortiter* or strongly with the verb *intendo* concerning his *animus*, mind. He judged that many philosophers held more probable views on the physical world, etc., the verb is *atingo* or to come in contact with. This echoes what's said in the Introduction regarding Socrates' interest in Anaxagoras which ultimately disinterested him. However, Anaxagoras furnished him with the principle of *nous* or mind governing all things.

*Itaque Academicorum more, sicut existamantur, dubitans de omnibus atque inter omnia fluctuans, Manichaeos quidem relinquendos esse decrevi; non arbitrans eo ipso tempore dubitationis meae in illa secta mihi permanendum esse, cui iam nonnullos philosophos praeponere: quibus tamen philosophis, quod sine salutari nomine Christi essent, curationem languoris animae meae committere omnino recusabam.*

Augustine assumed the Academic position <sup>3</sup>, *mos* or manner, custom characterized by *dubitans* and *fluctuans*, doubting and fluctuating. What's really important is that he decided not to entrust himself to philosophers, *praepono* indicative of handing over for good. Philosophers here are Manichees, not the type associated with the tradition of Socrates and Plato. Those at hand Augustine deemed strangers to Christ's saving name, *sine* or

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<sup>3</sup>Perhaps this refers to the Academy originally founded by Plato and still in existence during the life of Augustine.

without with respect to the adjective *salutaris* which modifies *nomen*, name.

*Statui ergo tamdiu esse catechumenus in catholica ecclesia mihi a parentibus commendata, donec aliquid certi eluceret, quo cursum dirigerem.*

Augustine's next step was to become a catechumen in the Catholic Church, that is, as one learning to become a member in preparation for baptism. Note that he concludes with some doubt, that is, until some kind of certainty (*certus*, fixed, settled) came to light (*eluceo*, to shine out) by which he might direct his steps, *dirigo* or to guide *cursum* or course, journey. This is in contrast to what his parents had wished for him, the two positions being at odds.

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