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The Conversion of Saint Augustine

Excerpts from *Confessions and Enchiridion*

Book 8, Chapter VII

*Augustine describes some of the **challenges** and obstacles to accepting faith.*

17. But now, the more ardently I loved those whose wholesome affections I heard reported—that they had given themselves up wholly to thee to be cured—the more did I abhor myself when compared with them. For many of my years—perhaps twelve—had passed away since my nineteenth, when, upon the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, I was roused to a desire for wisdom. And here I was, still postponing the abandonment of this world's happiness to devote myself to the search. For not just the finding alone, but also the bare search for it, ought to have been preferred above the treasures and kingdoms of this world; better than all bodily pleasures, though they were to be had for the taking. But, wretched youth that I was—supremely wretched even in the very outset of my youth—I had entreated chastity of thee and had prayed, “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” For I was afraid lest thou shouldst hear me too soon, and too soon cure me of my disease of lust which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished.

18. And I had thought that I delayed from day to day in rejecting those worldly hopes and following thee alone because there did not appear anything certain by which I could direct my course. And now the day had arrived in which I was laid bare to myself and my conscience was to chide me: “Where are you, O my tongue? You said indeed that you were not willing to cast off the baggage of vanity for uncertain truth. But behold now it is certain, and still that burden oppresses you.”

Book 8, Chapter XI

*Augustine moves closer to the **decision** to become a catechumen.*

25. Thus I was sick and tormented, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever, rolling and writhing in my chain till it should be utterly broken. By now I was held but slightly, but still was held. And thou, O Lord, didst press upon me in my inmost heart with a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame; lest I should again give way and that same slender remaining tie not be broken off, but recover strength and enchain me yet more securely.

I kept saying to myself, “See, let it be done now; let it be done now.” And as I said this I all but came to a firm decision. I all but did it—yet I did not quite. Still I did not fall back to my old condition, but stood aside for a moment and drew breath. And I tried again, and lacked only a very little of reaching the resolve—and then somewhat less, and then all but touched and grasped it. Yet I still did not quite reach or touch or grasp the goal, because I hesitated to die to death and to live to life. And the worse way, to which I was habituated, was stronger in me than the better, which I had not tried. And up to the very moment in which I was to become another man, the nearer the moment approached, the greater horror did it strike in me. But it did not strike me back, nor turn me aside, but held me in suspense.



26. It was, in fact, my old mistresses, trifles of trifles and vanities of vanities, who still enthralled me. They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered: “Are you going to part with us? And from that moment will we never be with you anymore? And from that moment will not this and that be forbidden you forever?” What were they suggesting to me in those words “this or that”? What is it they suggested, O my God? Let thy mercy guard the soul of thy servant from the vileness and the shame they did suggest! And now I scarcely heard them, for they were not openly showing themselves and opposing me face to face; but muttering, as it were, behind my back; and furtively plucking at me as I was leaving, trying to make me look back at them. Still they delayed me, so that I hesitated to break loose and shake myself free of them and leap over to the place to which I was being called—for unruly habit kept saying to me, “Do you think you can live without them?”

Book 10, Chapter XXXV

Augustine prepares for Baptism, but is still tempted by “lust” for knowledge.

54. Besides this there is yet another form of temptation still more complex in its peril. For in addition to the fleshly appetite which strives for the gratification of all senses and pleasures—in which its slaves perish because they separate themselves from thee—there is also a certain vain and curious longing in the soul, rooted in the same bodily senses, which is cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning; not having pleasure in the flesh, but striving for new experiences through the flesh. This longing—since its origin is our appetite for learning, and since the sight is the chief of our senses in the acquisition of knowledge—is called in the divine language “the lust of the eyes.” For seeing is a function of the eyes; yet we also use this word for the other senses as well, when we exercise them in the search for knowledge. We do not say, “Listen how it glows,” “Smell how it glistens,” “Taste how it shines,” or “Feel how it flashes,” since all of these are said to be *seen*. And we do not simply say, “See how it shines,” which only the eyes can perceive; but we also say, “See how it sounds, see how it smells, see how it tastes, see how hard it is.” Thus, as we said before, the whole round of sensory experience is called “the lust of the eyes” because the function of seeing, in which the eyes have the principal role, is applied by analogy to the other senses when they are seeking after any kind of knowledge.

Book 13, Chapter XVII

Long after his own Baptism, Augustine reflects on the outcome of his decision, and others’ decisions, to be initiated into the Church.

21. But as for the souls that thirst after thee and who appear before thee—separated from “the society of the [bitter] sea” by reason of their different ends—thou waterest them by a secret and sweet spring, so that “the earth” may bring forth her fruit and—thou, O Lord, commanding it—our souls may bud forth in works of mercy after their kind. Thus we shall love our neighbor in ministering to his bodily needs, for in this way the soul has seed in itself after its kind when in our own infirmity our compassion reaches out to the relief of the needy, helping them even as we would desire to be helped ourselves if we were in similar need. Thus we help, not only in easy problems (as is signified by “the herb yielding its seed”) but also in the offering of our best strength in affording them the aid of protection (such as “the tree bearing its fruit”). This is to say, we seek to rescue him who is suffering injury from the hands of the powerful—furnishing him with the sheltering protection which comes from the strong arm of a righteous judgment.



Chapter XXI

Augustine continues his reflection on Baptism as entrance into a different order of life as intended by God from the beginning of creation.

29. And thus, in thy Word, it was not the depth of the sea but “the earth,” separated from the brackishness of the water, that brought forth, not “the creeping and the flying creature that has life,” but “the living soul” itself!

And now this soul no longer has need of baptism, as the heathen had, or as it did when it was covered with the waters—and there can be no other entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, since thou hast appointed that baptism should be the entrance. Nor does it seek great, miraculous works by which to buttress faith. For such a soul does not refuse to believe unless it sees signs and marvels, now that “the faithful earth” is separated from “the waters” of the sea, which have been made bitter by infidelity. Thus, for them, “tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to those who do not believe.”

And the earth which thou hast founded above the waters does not stand in need of those flying creatures which the waters brought forth at thy word. Send forth thy word into it by the agency of thy messengers. For we only tell of their works, but it is thou who dost the works in them, so that they may bring forth “a living soul” in the earth.

(The excerpts on this handout are from *Confessions and Enchiridion*, newly translated and edited by Albert C. Outler [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955].)

Reflecting on the Conversion of Saint Augustine

1. What were some of the challenges Augustine faced in his life? Are these unique to the fourth century in which Augustine lived?
2. What do you think motivated Augustine to make the decision to seek initiation into the Church?
3. Were you surprised that Augustine continued to be tempted even after becoming a catechumen? What was the nature of these temptations?



4. Write Augustine's description of the meaning of Baptism in your own words.

5. Augustine considered himself to be a great sinner. Do you think that people today have the same sense of sin that Augustine did?

6. Is there a lesson to be taken from Augustine regarding sin and the need for redemption?
If so, put this lesson in your own words.

7. The outcome of this story is that Saint Augustine is one of the greatest saints in the Catholic Church. He is known as a Doctor of the Church because of his scholarly teaching and defense of the faith that helped form Christian doctrine as we know it. What difference does it make that a man who was beset by weaknesses such as promiscuity and intellectual pride was baptized and later became a bishop and a Doctor of the Church?

8. In what ways might Augustine be an inspiration to you?

