

St Augustine of Hippo

In choosing to write about St Augustine of Hippo, whose feast-day we keep on 28 August, I have given myself an almost impossible task in a small space since he is most influential of Christian theologians whose vast body of Latin writings formulated and developed such fundamental concepts as original sin, free will, divine grace, sacramental theology, the concept of the just war; made powerful pronouncements on slavery, sexuality, and the troubled society of his day; and furnished future generations with detailed interpretations of parts of the Bible through commentaries and sermons. As a result he is the leading figure in a small group of formational writers and thinkers who are known as the Fathers of the Church. Another title, again alongside a small number of others of similar theological standing, is Doctor of the Church. His supreme importance in Christian thought weathered the Reformation since Luther considered him to be pre-eminent (after the Bible itself and St Paul), and Protestants generally regarded him from the outset as one of the 'fathers' of their tradition because of his teaching on salvation and divine grace. So he is honoured in all Christian denominations which commemorate saints. In the Eastern Church his feast-day is 15 June.

Augustine's life is well-documented, not least because he tells us quite a bit about himself in his autobiographical *Confessions*, a work that is very different from his scholarly output: it is personal, appealing, and short, and is readily available in paperback, unlike his other works, which are very much research library material, even when in English translation! He was born in 354 to a pagan father and Christian mother (Monica) in Tagaste in the rich imperial North African province of Numidia. He studied rhetoric at the University of Carthage, with the intention of becoming a lawyer. But he soon abandoned this idea, together with the form of Christianity in which he had been brought up, and took a mistress, with whom he had a son. In this period he joined the Manichaean sect and remained faithful to it for nine years – although later in life much of his work was given a combative edge by attacking the Manichees and other such groups for the divisive beliefs they held and the heresies they put forward, which threatened the still relatively young faith of Christianity. Eventually, Augustine went to Rome to open a school of rhetoric. But he quickly moved on to what we might call a professorship at Milan, where he came under the influence of Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan – another figure who was subsequently regarded as one of the Fathers of the Church. This led to Augustine's baptism in 387, and his return to Tagaste in 388, where he set up a kind of monastic community. He was priested in 391 and began to make a name for himself as an influential figure in the North African church. In 395 he was consecrated as co-adjutor bishop to the then aged Valerius, Bishop of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba in Algeria), and after Valerius's death in c. 396 ruled as sole bishop until his death on 28 August 430. During his episcopacy he wrote many treatises against contemporary heresies, refining the formulation of Christian belief in the process, and addressed the challenging social issues of his day – a time when the Roman Empire in the West was beginning to be destabilised until, in 476, not so very long after Augustine's death in 430, the last Emperor in Rome was deposed.

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