

The great St. Augustine's life is unfolded to us in documents of unrivaled richness, and of no great [character](#) of ancient times have we information comparable to that contained in the "[Confessions](#)", which relate the touching story of his [soul](#), the "Retractions," which give the history of his [mind](#), and the "Life of Augustine," written by his friend [Possidius](#), telling of the [saint's](#) apostolate.

We will confine ourselves to sketching the three periods of this great life: (1) the young wanderer's gradual return to the Faith; (2) the doctrinal development of the Christian philosopher to the time of his episcopate; and (3) the full development of his activities upon the Episcopal throne of Hippo.

### [From his birth to his conversion \(354-386\)](#)

**After Constantine relaxed rules on the practice of Christianity in the Roman empire, northern Africa turned to be an important center for the followers of this religion. In these times, there were many who opposed the traditional views, and heresies abounded. God sent Augustine to the Church, and made use of him again as a catalyst. Sinner though he was, God made use of him, and turned him on his head, and formed a Saint out of him. So we should not look down upon those who appear sinful and weak in our eyes.**

Augustine was born at Tagaste on 13 November, 354. Tagaste, now Souk-Ahras, about 60 miles from Bona (ancient [Hippo-Regius](#)), was at that [time](#) a small free city of proconsular Numidia which had recently been [converted](#) from [Donatism](#). Although eminently respectable, his [family](#) was not

[rich](#)

, and his

[father](#)

, Patricius, one of the

*curiales*

of the city, was still a

[pagan](#)

. However, the admirable

[virtues](#)

that made

[Monica](#)

the ideal of

[Christian](#)

mothers at length brought her husband the

[grace](#)

of

[baptism](#)

and of a

[holy death](#)

, about the year 371.

Augustine received a [Christian education](#). His mother had him [signed with the cross](#) and enrolled among the

[catechumens](#)

. Once, when very ill, he asked for

[baptism](#)

, but, all danger being soon passed, he deferred receiving the

[sacrament](#)

, thus yielding to a deplorable

[custom](#)

of the times. His association with "men of

[prayer](#)

" left three great

[ideas](#)

deeply engraven upon his

[soul](#)

: a

[Divine Providence](#)

, the future life with

[terrible sanctions](#)

, and, above all,

[Christ the Saviour](#)

. "From my tenderest infancy, I had in a manner sucked with my mother's milk that

[name of my Saviour](#)

, Thy Son; I kept it in the recesses of my heart; and all that presented itself to me without that [Divine Name](#), though it might be elegant, well written, and even replete with [truth](#), did not altogether carry me away" ([Confessions](#) [I.4](#)).

But a great [intellectual](#) and [moral](#) crisis stifled for a [time](#) all these [Christian](#) sentiments. The heart was the first point of attack. Patricius, [proud](#)

of his son's success in the schools of Tagaste and

[Madaura](#)

determined to send him to

[Carthage](#)

to prepare for a forensic career. But, unfortunately, it required several months to collect the necessary means, and Augustine had to spend his sixteenth year at Tagaste in an idleness which was fatal to his

[virtue](#)

; he gave himself up to pleasure with all the vehemence of an ardent [nature](#)

. At first he

[prayed](#)

, but without the sincere desire of being heard, and when he reached

[Carthage](#)

, towards the end of the year 370, every circumstance tended to draw him from his [true](#)

course: the many seductions of the great city that was still half

[pagan](#)

, the licentiousness of other students, the theatres, the intoxication of his literary success, and a

[proud](#)

desire always to be first, even in

[evil](#)

. Before long he was

[obliged](#)

to confess to

[Monica](#)

that he had formed a

[sinful](#)

liaison with the

[person](#)

who bore him a son (372), "the son of his

[sin](#)

" — an entanglement from which he only delivered himself at

[Milan](#)

after fifteen years of its thralldom.

Two extremes are to be avoided in the appreciation of this crisis. Some, like Mommsen, misled perhaps by the tone of grief in the ["Confessions"](#), have exaggerated it: in the "Realencyklopädie" (3d ed., II, 268) Loofs reproves Mommsen on this score, and yet he himself is too lenient towards Augustine, when he claims that in those days, the

[Church](#)

permitted

[concubinage](#)

. The

["Confessions"](#)

alone

[prove](#)

that Loofs did not understand the 17th

[canon](#)

of Toledo. However, it may be said that, even in his fall, Augustine maintained a certain dignity and felt a compunction which does him

[honour](#)

, and that, from the age of nineteen, he had a genuine desire to break the chain. In fact, in 373, an entirely new inclination manifested itself in his life, brought about by the reading Cicero's "Hortensius" whence he imbibed a love of the wisdom which Cicero so eloquently praises. Thenceforward Augustine looked upon rhetoric merely as a profession; his heart was in

[philosophy](#)

.

Unfortunately, his [faith](#), as well as his [morals](#), was to pass through a terrible crisis. In this same year, 373, Augustine and his friend Honoratus fell into the snares of the

[Manichæans](#)

. It seems strange that so great a

[mind](#)

should have been victimized by

[Oriental](#)

vapourings, synthesized by the

[Persian](#)

Mani (215-276) into coarse, material

[dualism](#)

, and introduced into

[Africa](#)

scarcely fifty years previously. Augustine himself tells us that he was enticed by the promises of a free [philosophy](#) unbridled by [faith](#) ; by the boasts of the [Manichæans](#) , who claimed to have discovered contradictions in [Holy Writ](#) ; and, above all, by the hope of finding in their [doctrine](#) a [scientific](#) explanation of nature and its most mysterious phenomena. Augustine's inquiring [mind](#) was enthusiastic for the [natural sciences](#) , and the [Manichæans](#) declared that nature withheld no secrets from Faustus, their [doctor](#) . Moreover, being tortured by the problem of the origin of [evil](#) , Augustine, in default of solving it, acknowledged a conflict of two principles. And then, again, there was a very powerful charm in the [moral](#) irresponsibility resulting from a [doctrine](#) which denied [liberty](#) and attributed the commission of [crime](#) to a foreign principle.

Once won over to this [sect](#) , Augustine devoted himself to it with all the ardour of his [character](#) ; he read all its books, adopted and defended all its opinions. His furious proselytism drew into [error](#) his friend [Alypius](#) and Romanianus, his Mæcenas of Tagaste, the friend of his [father](#) who was defraying the expenses of Augustine's [studies](#)

. It was during this [Manichæan](#) period that Augustine's literary faculties reached their full development, and he was still a student at [Carthage](#) when he embraced [error](#).

His studies ended, he should in due course have entered the *forum litigiosum*, but he preferred the career of letters, and [Possidius](#) tells us that he returned to Tagaste to "teach grammar." The young professor captivated his pupils, one of whom, [Alypius](#), hardly younger than his master, loath to leave him after following him into [error](#), was afterwards [baptized](#) with him at [Milan](#), eventually becoming [Bishop](#) of Tagaste, his native city. But [Monica](#) deeply deplored Augustine's [heresy](#) and would not have received him into her home or at her table but for the advice of a [saintly bishop](#), who declared that "the son of so many tears could not perish." Soon afterwards Augustine went to [Carthage](#), where he continued to teach rhetoric. His talents shone to even better advantage on this wider stage, and by an indefatigable pursuit of the [liberal arts](#) his [intellect](#) attained its full maturity. Having taken part in a poetic tournament, he carried off the prize, and the Proconsul Vindicianus publicly conferred upon him the *corona agonistica*.

It was at this moment of literary intoxication, when he had just completed his first work on [æsthetics](#)

(now lost) that he began to repudiate

[Manichæism](#)

. Even when Augustine was in his first fervour, the

[teachings of Mani](#)

had been far from quieting his restlessness, and although he has been accused of becoming a

[priest](#)

of the

[sect](#)

, he was never initiated or numbered among the "elect," but remained an "auditor" the lowest degree in the

[hierarchy](#)

. He himself gives the reason for his disenchantment. First of all there was the fearful depravity of

[Manichæan philosophy](#)

— "They destroy everything and build up nothing"; then, the dreadful immorality in contrast with their affectation of

[virtue](#)

; the feebleness of their arguments in controversy with the

[Catholics](#)

, to whose

[Scriptural](#)

arguments their only reply was: "The

[Scriptures](#)

have been falsified." But, worse than all, he did not find

[science](#)

among them —

[science](#)

in the modern sense of the word — that

[knowledge](#)

of nature and its laws which they had promised him. When he questioned them concerning the movements of the stars, none of them could answer him. "Wait for Faustus," they said, "he will explain everything to you." Faustus of Mileve, the celebrated

[Manichæan](#)

[bishop](#)

, at last came to

[Carthage](#)

; Augustine visited and questioned him, and discovered in his responses the vulgar rhetorician, the utter stranger to all

[scientific](#)

culture. The spell was broken, and, although Augustine did not immediately abandon the

[sect](#)

, his

[mind](#)

rejected

[Manichæan](#)

doctrines. The illusion had lasted nine years.

But the [religious](#) crisis of this great [soul](#) was only to be resolved in [Italy](#), under the influence of [Ambr](#)  
[ose](#).

In 383 Augustine, at the age of twenty-nine, yielded to the irresistible attraction which [Italy](#)

had for him, but his

[mother](#)

suspected his departure and was so reluctant to be separated from him that he resorted to a subterfuge and embarked under cover of the night. He had only just arrived in

[Rome](#)

when he was taken seriously ill; upon recovering he opened a

[school](#)

of rhetoric, but, disgusted by the tricks of his pupils, who shamelessly defrauded him of their tuition fees, he applied for a vacant professorship at

[Milan](#)

, obtained it, and was accepted by the prefect, Symmachus. Having visited

[Bishop Ambrose](#)

, the fascination of that

[saint's](#)

kindness induced him to become a regular attendant at his preachings.

However, before embracing the [Faith](#), Augustine underwent a three years' struggle during which his [mind](#) passed through several distinct phases.

At first he turned towards the

[philosophy](#)

of the Academics, with its

[pessimistic](#)

[scepticism](#)

; then

[neo-Platonic philosophy](#)

inspired him with genuine enthusiasm. At

[Milan](#)

he had scarcely read certain works of

[Plato](#)

and, more especially, of Plotinus, before the

[hope](#)

of finding the

[truth](#)



dawned upon him. Once more he began to dream that he and his friends might lead a life dedicated to the search for it, a life purged of all vulgar aspirations after [honours](#)

, [wealth](#), or pleasure, and with [celibacy](#)

for its rule ( [Confessions](#) [VI](#)

). But it was only a dream; his [passions](#) still enslaved him.

[Monica](#), who had joined her son at [Milan](#), prevailed upon him to become [betrothed](#), but [affi](#)  
[anced](#)

bride was too young, and although Augustine dismissed the mother of [Adeodatus](#)

, her place was soon filled by another. Thus did he pass through one last period of struggle and anguish. Finally, through the reading of the [Holy Scripture](#)

light penetrated his [mind](#)

. Soon he possessed the [certainty](#) that

[Jesus Christ](#) is the only way to [truth](#)

and [salvation](#)

. After that resistance came only from the heart. An interview with [Simplicianus](#), the future [successor](#) of

[St. Ambrose](#), who told Augustine the story of the [conversion](#)

of the celebrated [neo-Platonic](#) rhetorician, Victorinus (

[Confessions](#) [VIII.1](#)

,

### VIII.2

), prepared the way for the grand stroke of

grace

which, at the age of thirty-three, smote him to the ground in the garden at

Milan

(September, 386). A few days later Augustine, being ill, took advantage of the autumn holidays and, resigning his professorship, went with

Monica

,

Adeodatus

, and his friends to Cassisiacum, the country estate of

Verecundus

, there to devote himself to the pursuit of

true

philosophy

which, for him, was now inseparable from

Christianity

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