

Quick start guide to *Confessions*

The *Confessions* of St. Augustine is considered a classic of world literature. Its readership far exceeds anything that Augustine would have imagined or intended. Every year hundreds of new articles and books are written about him and about this extraordinary spiritual autobiography. And *Confessions* is just this: a *spiritual* classic, but in the form of an extended monologue—a prayer to God (as an audience of one), and a recounting of all of the events of his life that testified to God's grace. The primary meaning of "confession" for Augustine is the praise of God for his gracious intervention. Confession of sin is, in fact, only a secondary sense. In Augustine, confession develops into a spiritual orientation and sustained act, even potentially a way of living and seeing the world. In this respect Augustine is very much a saint (the saint?) for our troubled times, since his own cultural challenges mirror many of our own. His concern for a deep interior life, conversion (as process not event), speaking to God and being spoken *to* in the language of Scripture—all of these can serve as antidotes to our modern illusions.

Confessions is structured unlike any other book that we are likely to read, so some explanation is in order. Augustine is writing around the year 397 as a 43-year-old bishop describing the first 33 years of his life (354–387) ten years after the fact. He said that his motivation was simply that God wanted him to do it, that he enjoyed writing and reading it himself, and that those who read it in a spirit of charity seemed to benefit from it as well. The first half of the book (1–9) is somewhat autobiographical, tracing his spiritual restlessness from infancy, boyhood, adolescence, through early adulthood. The selection of material consistently reflects the people and places that were decisive in Augustine's spiritual odyssey. Relatively few individuals are mentioned by name and the places of interest scarcely amount to half a dozen. The second half of the book (10–13) contains his more seasoned reflections on memory, time, creation, and the Church as of the time of writing. Serious engagement with Scripture and participation in the sacramental life of his community signals the end of his spiritual restlessness and the first fruits of spiritual rest.

Augustine does not relate most of the events that transpired in between the death of his mother, Monica, in 387 and the writing of *Confessions* around 397. That he had returned home to Thagaste in Africa in 388, founded there a semi-monastic community, was forcibly ordained to the priesthood in 391, then made bishop of Hippo in 396 are all passed over in silence. His original audience naturally would have known all of this, as by this time Augustine was already a famous person. Or perhaps, the death of Monica signals the end of that stage of his journey so fully and finally that additional biographical details are superfluous. In any event, he explains that his purpose in book 10 is now to disclose his present state of mind, and so confession continues—not of what he has been but what he is at the time of writing. This extended treatment of memory, time, creation and the Church reflects the state of his confessional spirituality "on the other side." Modern readers have not always been in sympathy with the direction taken in the last four books, not least of all because Augustine the sinner is rather more interesting to some people than Augustine the saint. However, if we read him with the charity that he requests, Augustine the saint will always have more to offer.

Given the impressionistic nature of the biographical material, it is not always easy to get a strict sense of the timeline or even Augustine's age in each of the first nine books, so the following page provides a sketch:

Book 1 begins with his infancy, literally his existence as an *enfans*, a non-speaker, and traces his language acquisition and development from the nursery to elementary school and mastery of grammar (age birth–10) in his hometown of Thagaste. In the absence of any possibility of a Christian education Augustine finds himself exposed to the myths and immorality of classical literature delivered in the “choice vessels” of well-crafted words (age 11–15) at a boarding school in nearby Madaura. He imbibes deeply, though he offers a scathing critique of the cruelty and hypocrisy of his first teachers. Nonetheless, God brings lasting good (literacy, rhetorical excellence) out of this early experience of evil.

Book 2 describes his adolescence, disordered sexual awakening, and the interruption of his secondary education at age 16. He returns home to Thagaste from Madaura for a year of enforced leisure and “runs wild.” His deep awareness and personal enactment of a spiritual fall is embodied in the story of robbing a pear tree with friends.

Book 3 sees Augustine pursue his university education far from home in the wealthy provincial capital of Carthage (age 16–20) with all its attendant vices. He experiences his first conversion upon reading Cicero’s lost work, the *Hortensius*, but ends up joining the bizarre, quasi-Christian sect of the Manichees in the hopes of finding a solution to the problem of evil.

Book 4 recounts events from during the nine years (age 19–28) of Augustine’s fringe adherence to the Manichees, while still early in his career as a teacher of rhetoric. He lives with a deeply cherished unnamed woman who bears him a son, dabbles with astrology, experiences the death of a childhood friend, and tries his hand at being an author.

Books 5 relates the events of a single year (age 29) that will lead to his final break with the sect of the Manichees. This includes his disillusionment with meeting the world-famous Manichee bishop, Faustus, the desire for greener pastures in Rome, and winning a government post in Milan that brings him into direct contact with Ambrose.

Book 6 tells how Monica arrives in Milan and Ambrose becomes a spiritual guide to both mother and son. Monica knows Ambrose personally, but he remains strangely out of reach for Augustine (age 31). Beliefs begin to change, but inner turmoil persists. Augustine’s childhood friend, Alypius, is introduced via an extended biography. Monica arranges a respectable marriage for Augustine and the unnamed woman is sent home alone to Africa, dedicated to a life of chastity. Augustine is shattered, and unbeknownst to himself is on the verge of salvation.

Book 7 is an extended digression from the main narrative. Augustine describes his general state of mind (age 31–32) in the period leading up to the crisis of conversion in Book 8. The final break with the Manichees, the solution to the problem of evil, and the influence of the Neoplatonist philosophers are traced out in detail. Augustine achieves a reconciliation between the very serviceable aspects of Neoplatonic philosophy and the Gospel of John, and at the same time has a philosophical-religious experience of God as the One.

Book 8 contains the most famous conversion scene in world literature, and is anticipated by the embedded narrative of two other conversion stories: Victorinus and St. Antony. Augustine’s profound inner crisis (age 32) boils over under another tree (see book 2) and is finally brought to resolution by two voices outside himself: a child singing playfully, “*tolle, lege, tolle, lege*,” and a dramatic encounter with St. Paul in his letter to the Romans.

Book 9 following on the famous garden scene, supplies the early details of the new life. Augustine (age 32) abandons his teaching post, goes on an extended spiritual retreat with friends and family in Cassiciacum near the Alps, then returns to Milan for baptism at the Easter vigil, April, 24, 387. The backstory of Monica is told in full (only Alypius receives similar treatment), and both Book 9 and the biographical section of *Confessions* concludes with Monica’s unexpected death at Ostia en route home to Africa.