

Life is often full of twists and turns. Very often, in our search for short cuts we take the wrong turn and wind up at a dead end. Augustine, the great Father of the Church who served for 34 years as Bishop of Hippo spent his younger years taking many wrong turns.

His mother tried to raise him as a Christian, but her husband's refusal to allow him to be baptized prevented him from becoming a Christian as a child. It didn't take long before that positive maternal influence was powerfully overcome by the ways of the world. At the end of his teen years, he was attracted to Manicheism, a false religion that promised answers to the mystery of nature, could disprove the Scriptures, and could explain the problem of evil. Augustine was searching for truth. He was seeking God but looking in the wrong place. After embracing this heretical religion for nine years, he ultimately found that it led to a dead end and rejected it as incoherent and fraudulent.<sup>i</sup>

As a young man away at school, he embraced hedonism and following the crowd of young men boasting their sexual conquests, real or imagined. Augustine fathered a child out of wedlock and lived with the woman for 15 years with no intent of marriage. In his heart, he knew his relationship was sinful, but he was slow to make amends. An oft quoted line from Saint Augustine is "Lord make me chaste, but not yet." Through his conversion to Christianity, Augustine came to have a much deeper understanding of love than the lust of his youth. "What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like."<sup>ii</sup>

Reflecting on the sin in his life, and the poor choices he had made, Augustine was brought to tears. He was having a crisis of conscience and cried out to the Lord for help. At that moment he overheard children playing next door. They kept on repeating: "Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it." Regardless of what the children meant, Augustine took this as a sign from God to pick the bible up and to read it. He turned to a page at random and the truth within pierced him to the core. He had turned to the 13th chapter of Romans which reads:

For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness [and] put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh (11-14).

Augustine read no further. His contrition and the words of Saint Paul were joined to the healing power of Christ. "For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away" (Confessions Chapter 12).<sup>iii</sup>

Today the path to priesthood involves discernment and years of preparation. This was not always the case in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Augustine is proof that sometimes the Holy Spirit needs to flex a little muscle to empower a vocation. Following his Christian Initiation in Milan, Italy, Augustine returned to North Africa where he embraced a life of prayer and penance. Having become a new creation in Christ, his daily routine included "fasting, prayers, and good works, meditating on the law of the Lord by day and by night." Meanwhile, others were praying for leadership in the church. "On a visit to Hippo he was proclaimed priest and then bishop against his will. He later accepted it as the will of God and spent the rest of his life as the pastor of the North African town, where he spent much time refuting the writings of heretics" and helping others reconcile the wrong turns they had taken in life.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-augustine-573

<sup>ii</sup> goodreads.com/author/quotes/6819578.Augustine\_of\_Hippo From Confessions.

<sup>iii</sup> oldsite.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/unlocked/augustine/augustine-conversion.pdf

<sup>iv</sup> www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-augustine-573