

WATSA

What Are They Saying About Augustine?

St. Augustine of Hippo is one of the most influential—and still controversial—fathers of the church. His thought is evident throughout the documents of Vatican II and his theology is still hotly debated among Catholics, Protestants, and the Orthodox. *What Are They Saying About Augustine?* examines the best of contemporary scholarship on the life, writings, and pastoral work of this bishop of the fourth and fifth century in Roman North Africa.

Augustine's life, sermons and letters, doctrinal writings, and pastoral work, as well as his own faith and spirituality, are reviewed in light of new research. He emerges as a dynamic thinker struggling to integrate his Christian faith with the demands of reason, and to discern Christian meaning amid the political and social controversies that plagued the late Roman world. The circumstances of his life and the dynamism of his faith are more relevant to the contemporary Christian than one might suspect.

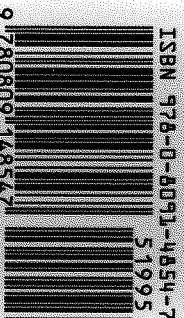
Here is a text that will enlighten the reader on the complexity of Augustine scholarship and on the life and times of the great bishop himself, providing an overview suitable for college-level courses as well as parish discussion groups among laity who wish to gain a more sophisticated understanding of Augustine and of church history.

Joseph Kelley is professor of theology and director of the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts. He is a clinical psychologist, musician, and author of *Faith in Exile*, *101 Questions & Answers on the Four Last Things*, and *101 Questions & Answers on Prayer*, all from Paulist Press.



PAULIST PRESS
www.paulistpress.com

\$19.95



9 780809 148547

KELLEY

What Are They Saying About Augustine?

WATSA
WHAT ARE THEY SAYING ABOUT



Augustine?

JOSEPH T. KELLEY

Paulist Press



1

LIFE

Meeting Augustine

The iconography of Augustine usually depicts him anachronistically in medieval monastic garb or in episcopal vestments, wearing a towering mitre and grasping a gilded staff—religious and liturgical accretions of a later age. Such religious art and his often pounding rhetoric can present him as a formidable hierarch of Christian hegemony, hammering heretics and laying new doctrinal highways atop old Roman roads across the European landscape.

The story, situation, and intention of the man himself are quite different. His genius shines much more clearly when set in the modest realities of his time and place. He was born and raised not in Europe, but in central North Africa, in a province of the Roman Empire called Numidia. His home town of Thagaste is the present day Souk Ahras, Algeria. The port city of Hippo Regius, where he served as bishop, is today the modern city of Annaba, also in Algeria. Contemporary Algerians are quite fond of their famous son in antiquity who died in 430, one hundred forty years before Mohammed was born in 570, and two hundred years before the spread of Islam across North Africa in the second half of the seventh century.

Early Years

As a youth, Augustine received an education typical for the sons of landed Roman gentry of his day. His early education was in grammar, mathematics, and literature.¹ He attended the local school in Thagaste, hating the common corporal punishments he received (*Confessions* I.9.14—10.16). When he was eleven or twelve, his parents saved enough money to send him about twenty-six miles south to Madauros for more studies in Roman and Greek literature.² He returned home when he was fifteen or sixteen to a year of leisure and license since his parents did not have the money to send him on for further studies. He famously writes about his adolescent pranks and sexual awakening at that time (*Confessions* II).

In 371, his father, Patricius, had secured for Augustine the patronage of a wealthy resident of Thagaste, Romanianus by name. This enabled the seventeen-year-old Augustine to study in Carthage, the “second city in the Western Empire,” about one hundred fifty miles east of Thagaste.³ There, like many university students of other centuries, he threw himself into the “cauldron of raging love affairs—*sartago flagitiosorum amorum*” that the big city offered (*Confessions* III.1.1).

Despite the suggestive and alluring passages in *Confessions* about his sexual exploits, Augustine’s behavior was more or less typical of a young man in his time and place. He quickly met one girl with whom he fell in love. She bore him a son whom they named Adeodatus, which means “given by God.” Augustine remained faithful to her for thirteen or fourteen years until they separated in Milan, under some pressure from his mother, Monica. She knew that he had to secure a proper wife from the social elites of Milan to advance his career (*Confessions* VI.16.25).⁴

A closer reading of *Confessions* shows that it was less his sexual behavior and more the arrogance, pride, and political and social opportunism of his younger years that he regretted and later confessed to God.⁵ Augustine presents his sexual desires as

one example of concupiscence. Ambition and the use of others to attain his ends and self-advancement were just as, if not more, sinful results of his inordinate desires. “Quite certainly you command me to refrain from concupiscence of the flesh and concupiscence of the eyes and worldly pride” (*Confessions* X.30.41; see also *Confessions* X.35—36).

Augustine’s curriculum at Carthage was mostly the study of literature and rhetoric. The wheels of empire turned on the axes of persuasion and power. Young men who studied in places like Carthage learned how to grease and turn these wheels to their advantage and for their advancement as lawyers and politicians. So they memorized vast amounts of prose and poetry and practiced techniques for constructing arguments and composing speeches. Augustine excelled in all this. However, during his studies in Carthage when he was eighteen, Augustine read a work of Cicero, the *Hortensius*. It awakened in him a love for philosophy and an ardent desire to pursue truth and seek wisdom. “I was aroused and kindled and set on fire to love and seek and capture and hold fast and strongly cling not to this or that school, but to wisdom itself, whatever it might be” (*Confessions* III.4.8). He also—on his own—began a study of Aristotle’s categories out of his desire to pursue truth as well as rhetoric (*Confessions* IV.16.28). The translation he read was possibly that by Marcus Victorinus.⁶ This was a remarkable achievement for a young student who complemented the usual curriculum of rhetoric with his own earnest pursuit of truth. It presaged his brilliance as a teacher and scholar.

Manichaeism

During his studies at Carthage (370–73), the young Augustine joined the Manichean religion, a sect officially outlawed in the Empire, though the ban was not often enforced. The Manicheans preached a somewhat undigested mix of mythology, philosophy, and religion that intrigued Augustine. They presented themselves

as rational guides to truth, which certainly would have caught the attention of a bright and earnest student like Augustine. They also understood human behavior to be largely the result of much stronger cosmic forces for good and ill, which mitigated individual moral responsibility. That may have suited Augustine's liberal lifestyle at that time.⁷ In addition, the Manicheans were a close-knit community of friends, a social group that would exert a powerful pull on the very social Augustine.⁸

The founder of the sect was a third-century Persian prophet by the name of Mani who had been a member of a Jewish-Christian Church. His teachings spread quickly around the Empire and there were active communities of Manicheans proselytizing in Carthage and in Rome. Manichean teaching was strongly dualistic, delineating two cosmic forces: one of ethereal light and goodness, the other of heavy material darkness and evil. These two forces were in constant conflict, especially in the human being whose soul properly sought release from the body.⁹

The principle of darkness and evil, which they called *Hyle*, existed from all eternity. This principle or power was in endless conflict with the co-eternal God of light and goodness. They identified the evil principle with the God described in the Old Testament. The good God was the one described in the New Testament and preached by Jesus. The evil darkness is mixed in with every human soul, they taught, and is responsible for our tendency to sin. Such moral teaching fit comfortably with the young adult Augustine's sexual practice and political ambition. It shifted moral responsibility for his behavior from himself and onto the evil power that was at war within him against the good God of light (*Confessions* V.10.18).

Augustine reread the scriptures that he would have known as a youth from his mother's church, hoping to find in them some guidance for his search for truth and understanding (*Confessions* III.5.9). However, as a student of rhetoric, he found the Latin Bible of his time to be of inferior literary quality compared to the Latin classics such as Virgil and Cicero.¹⁰ He learned that the

Manicheans rejected the entire Old Testament and parts of the New Testament that contradicted their dualistic doctrines. This dismissal of many parts of the Bible suited Augustine's literary sensitivities and rationalized his professional disdain for the Scriptures at that time of his life (*Confessions* III.5.9). In addition, Manicheans considered themselves to be Christians. Augustine saw himself to be practicing a kind of superior Christianity that was purified of the Catholic superstition of his mother. Indeed, the Manicheans called Catholics "semi-Christians" (*Answer to Faustus* 1.2).

In 373, Augustine finished his studies in Carthage and returned to Thagaste to teach. He had become an avid advocate for Manichean belief and set about trying to convert his friends back home to his newfound religion. This upset Monica to no end—at first she refused to let Augustine move back into her house upon his return from Carthage (*Confessions* III.11.19). Augustine relates how he tried to convince a dear friend, with whom he had grown up in Thagaste, to become a Manichean. The friend took seriously ill and received Catholic baptism. Augustine visited his sick bed and ridiculed him for being baptized. Then, after Augustine had left, his friend suddenly died (*Confessions* IV.4.7–9). This death so devastated Augustine, now age twenty-two, that he left Thagaste and returned to Carthage to teach.

Augustine tells us that he was a member of the Manichean sect for nine years, "from my nineteenth to my twenty-eighth year" (*Confessions* IV.1.1). He was a Manichean "hearer," that is, a member of the general membership as opposed to the elite, ascetical group of the "elect." Yet, even in his early years in the community, Augustine had lots of questions about their teachings and writings. While teaching in Carthage (374–83), he finally got the opportunity to meet a Manichean bishop named Faustus. For years his Manichean associates had promised Augustine that Faustus was an expert who would be able to "sort out and resolve" Augustine's questions (*Confessions* V.6.10). Augustine found Faustus to be an effective public speaker and quite affable, but "ill-educated

in the liberal arts, apart from grammar, and even in that schooled only to an average level" (*Confessions* V.6.11). He was unable to satisfy Augustine's intellectual probing of Manichean doctrine. Augustine's disappointment with Faustus had left him disillusioned with the sect. He later realized that this disappointment began to "set him free from the trap" of their doctrine (*Confessions* V.7.13).

By 383, Augustine had grown weary of the students in Carthage who were rowdy and disruptive (*Confessions* V.8.14). So he, an ambitious colonial from the North African outback, set his sights on Rome, where there were better students and more opportunities. Monica was devastated and tried to prevent his going. Augustine lied to his mother to convince her that he was not leaving. That very same night, he slipped aboard a ship bound for Rome. This lie haunted Augustine: "I lied to my mother—and what a mother!" (*Confessions* V.8.15).¹¹

Rome, Milan, Conversion

Upon arriving in Rome, Augustine stayed with the Manichean community there. However, though he maintained his social connections with them, his interest in Manichean teachings continued to wane (*Confessions* V.10.18). While in Rome, he began to find the credulity of the Manicheans off-putting and their teachings more and more fantastic. He moved toward the philosophical skepticism and universal doubt of the Greek Academics, who taught "that no part of the truth could be understood by the human mind" (*Confessions* V.10.19).¹²

It was not the Manicheans, but the pagan Prefect of Rome, Symmachus, who secured for Augustine his big break. Symmachus recommended Augustine for the position of Imperial *Rhetor* in Milan, where the boy Emperor Valentinian II and his regent Empress mother Justina held court in those years. Augustine left Rome for Milan in 384 to take his new position at court. This role

comprised what we might today call a president's or prime minister's speech writer and spokesperson all in one. So after only a year teaching in Rome, Augustine moved to Milan and to the summit of his secular profession.

However, in God's design, as he later realized, the journey from Rome to Milan was another step on his spiritual pilgrimage. It enabled him finally to get away from the Manicheans on whom he had grown so dependent (*Confessions* V.13.23).¹³ It also brought him before Bishop Ambrose, whose teaching was to have a profound effect on the young African.

Though it was difficult to meet one-on-one with the busy bishop, Ambrose's teaching deeply affected Augustine first by its eloquence, then by its content (*Confessions* V.13.23; VI.3.3—5.8).¹⁴ The way Ambrose interpreted scripture in his homilies opened Augustine's eyes to the deeper spiritual, symbolic, and allegorical meanings of the text. Fourth-century North Africans—Catholics, Donatists, and Manicheans—read the Bible in a much more literal fashion. Generally, the Africans of Numidia followed the Syrian-Antiochene approach to reading scripture, which favored a more literal interpretation. The Milanese favored the more analogical and allegorical hermeneutics of the Alexandrian School. Augustine would bring the latter approach back to Africa and employ it in his anti-Manichean and anti-Donatist writing and preaching.

In addition, it was in Milan that Augustine came to read "some books by the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin" (*Confessions* VII.9.13).¹⁵ Neo-Platonism opened Augustine's mind to the possibility of understanding God as pure spirit, something that he, as a Manichean, had not previously imagined (*Confessions* V.13.23–24; VIII.1.1—2.3; 9.13—10.16; 17.23).¹⁶ These breakthroughs to more sophisticated and subtle biblical hermeneutics and to philosophical metaphysics were the necessary intellectual antecedents for Augustine's religious conversion.

On a personal and ethical level, it wasn't long before the stress of court politics, the pressure of his teaching, the ambiguity of his convictions, and what he would come to identify as the

immanent grace of God led him to abandon his career, seek baptism, and dedicate himself to a celibate Christian life of prayer and study in community back home in Africa. He had come to know about the monk Antony of Egypt and about other Roman courtiers and notables who had given up worldly pursuits to follow Christ in humility and simplicity of life (*Confessions* VIII.2.3–7.18). He wanted to follow that course.

Thus, in the spring of 386, his long personal search for meaning and truth climaxed in conversion to Catholic Christianity, the religion of his mother, Monica, and of his childhood (*Confessions* VIII). In the fall of 386, he resigned his position at court and withdrew from teaching. Along with his mother, his son, his lifelong friend and fellow citizen of Thagaste Alypius, and a few others, he retired to a villa in Cassiciacum, north of Milan to prepare for baptism. At the Easter Vigil on April 26/27 of 387, Augustine was baptized in Milan by Bishop Ambrose. Augustine's teenage son, Adeodatus, and Alypius also entered the waters of Baptism on that auspicious night.

Having abandoned his career and separated from the woman who was his companion and mother of their son, the newly baptized Augustine and his retinue returned to Africa in 388 to live an ascetic life of study and prayer in a kind of Christian commune that he set up at the family home in Thagaste. Monica died in the Roman port city of Ostia, as this group of expatriate Africans made their way back to Thagaste (*Confessions* IX). A year or two after their return, Augustine's seventeen-year-old son, Adeodatus, died.¹⁷ Thus between 386 and 390, Augustine's life changed dramatically. Though he gained his faith, he lost his woman, his mother, his son, and his career. He intended a quiet African retreat and retirement. God, he would later realize, had other plans.¹⁸

In 391, Augustine visited Hippo Regius, a port city about fifty miles north of Thagaste. He had traveled there to recruit a new member and to start a new community in Hippo. While there he was recognized by the local Catholic congregation assembled for worship. They immediately demanded that this somewhat famous

convert be ordained as their priest—a turn of events in which historical evidence suggests Valerius, the elderly bishop of Hippo, was implicated.¹⁹ He was doing his succession planning, and quite well. So the thirty-seven-year-old Augustine, standing before the congregation in Hippo in 391, protesting their request for his ordination, began a new life.²⁰ His little monastic community of ascetic friends, the people of his congregation, and the wider church would be the ones to whom he now dedicated himself.

Augustine spent the next thirty-nine years serving the church in Hippo. His ordination as priest in 391, and then as bishop in 395 made him a public figure once again. He visited the towns in his diocese and made frequent journeys to Carthage, at that time the mother church of central and western North Africa. He worked closely with Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, to reform and strengthen the church in North Africa. As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, his days were dedicated to preaching, teaching, and the celebration of the sacraments. He also brought his immense intellect and rhetorical skills to help the fifth-century church sort through religious questions, controversies, and concerns of the day. There were three major theological controversies that he had to address as a leader of the church. From his ordination in 391 until around the year 411, he worked for the unity of the church amidst the conflict between the Donatist sect and the Catholic Church; from 410 until he died, he engaged in a theological debate with Pelagius and his devotees about the nature of divine grace; and, as refugees from the sack of Rome in 410 began to arrive in Hippo with their Arian sympathies, he had to address the Catholic teaching on the divine nature of Jesus Christ.

Donatism

When Augustine was first ordained, Catholics were a minority sect in the city of Hippo.²¹ Soon after becoming a priest, Augustine had to face the fact that the church in North Africa was split down

the middle in schism. As a young man in Thagaste and Carthage, such a rift in church life would hardly have concerned him. Even upon his return from Italy in 388, when he retired to a life of Christian prayer and study at home in Thagaste, he did not have to deal directly with church politics. However, as soon as he became a priest in service to Bishop Valerius of Hippo, he had to face the painful reality that there were two major Christian churches in North Africa: the Catholics and the Donatists.

Though identical in creed and liturgy, Catholics and Donatists differed on how to understand and live out the mystery of the church, on the role of the one who administered baptism, and on the exclusive primacy of Donatist baptism. Throughout the third century, the Roman Empire initiated persecutions against Christians. Particularly brutal were those imposed during the reigns of the emperors Decius (249–51), Valerian I (253–60), and Diocletian (284–305). Many Christians, both laity and clergy, suffered torture, exile, or execution for their faith. In contrast, others compromised by handing over to Roman authorities the books and properties of the church, or turning in the names of their Christian brothers and sisters.²² When persecutions subsided, some from among these lapsed believers or traitors sought forgiveness and reintegration into the church community.

In North Africa, the ecclesial response to such requests for forgiveness and reconciliation was mixed. The more rigorous position was that lapsed Christians—clergy or lay—could not be accepted back into the church unless they were in mortal danger. This more rigorous faction also decided that, not only were lapsed clergy forbidden to return to office, but anyone baptized or ordained by a lapsed bishop had to be rebaptized or reordained, since the sacramental ministry of these one-time traitors was considered invalid. Likewise the consecration of a bishop that included a lapsed bishop among the three canonically required to consecrate was fatally compromised and considered invalid. As we shall see, Augustine argued that the power of the sacrament came not through the minister, but through the grace of Christ.

Throughout the third century, many, including Saint Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from around 248 to 258, argued for the church discipline that prohibited lapsed clergy from returning to their ministries, though he allowed for their forgiveness. Cyprian also practiced rebaptism, though he did not make it a point of separation from the wider church or from Rome. Upon his own martyrdom, the controversy grew even worse as clergy who had betrayed the church did, in fact, return to their posts.

After the Diocletian persecution (303–5), which further intensified the protests by rigorists in North Africa, a new bishop of Carthage was consecrated in 311, Caecilian by name. The rigorists rejected his leadership, claiming that one of the three co-consecrators had been a traitor. So they consecrated a rival bishop who died shortly thereafter, but whose immediate episcopal successor was one Donatus Magnus, a charismatic Berber from the southern outback of Numidia. Thus began in Carthage a situation soon to be repeated across North Africa. Eventually, most cities and towns had two bishops, two clergies, two congregations: one Catholic and one rigorist. The latter became known as Donatists.²³

When Augustine became a priest in 391, the Catholics in Hippo were actually in the minority. As priest and then bishop, Augustine had to argue against the common Donatist practice of rebaptizing Catholics who might join their faction, and to contend with the anti-Catholic prejudice his congregants had to endure. Even more, he also had to protect Catholics from the growing threat of violence against them by a fringe group of Donatists known as *circumcellions*. The latter were bands of nomadic, anti-Roman Berbers who joined forces and identified with the Donatists, attacking, maiming, and killing Catholic clergy and laity.²⁴ Augustine tells how groups of circumcellions blinded Catholics by throwing a mixture of lime and vinegar into their eyes. He also reports how they burned Catholic homes, set fire to their crops, and smashed valuable large amphorae containing oil and wine (*Letter* 88.8).²⁵

In the first decade of the fifth century, the Roman govern-

ment attempted to curtail the North African sect and control the violence. In 405, the Emperor Honorius signed the "Edict of Union," effectively outlawing Donatism. But skillful Donatist politicking had neutralized enforcement of the edict. Disagreement, disunity, and violence continued.²⁶

The Donatist controversy climaxed in an ecclesiastical conference in Carthage in 411. Under the watchful eye of Marcellinus, a representative of Honorius, most of the bishops of North Africa, Catholic and Donatists, assembled to argue their case against each other's positions.²⁷ Augustine spoke for the Catholics and, according to the decision of Marcellinus, won the argument. After 411, the Roman government began a program to punish Donatist clergy or laity who refused to accept the decision made at Carthage. As we shall see when we review Augustine's anti-Donatist writings, he had very mixed feelings about government-imposed religion.²⁸

Pelagianism

The greatest controversy of Augustine's ministry concerned theological positions associated with Pelagius. This debate, in which Augustine engaged from around 411 until the end of his life, was not so much about church discipline and sectarian strife as in the Donatist controversy. Rather it was a dispute over what Augustine considered the very heart of Christian faith: the nature of divine grace and redemption.

Pelagius was a monk from the British Isles. He was born around 354 and died sometime between 420 and 440—which makes him contemporaneous with Augustine. Arriving in Rome around 380, he became known among Christians there for his asceticism, moral virtue, and teaching.

It was at Rome in 404 or 405 that the first spark of the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine ignited. Pelagius was listening to a reading of Book X of Augustine's *Confessions*, which had begun circulating around 400. Three times in that book

Augustine says "Give what you command and command what you will."²⁹ According to an eyewitness, Pelagius grew visibly agitated at the phrase and the idea behind it: whatever good we do in our attempt to follow God's will is made possible by God's grace, not by our effort.³⁰ To Pelagius, such an approach undermined free will. Pelagius would have been primed to detect and react to interpretations of divine grace, for around this same time, he was writing his own *Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul* and his book *On Nature*.³¹ He was more than likely responding in these works to Augustine's writing on *Romans* and on Paul's theology in *Miscellany of Questions in Response to Simplicianus*.³²

About five years later, in 410, Pelagius left Rome, one of thousands of refugees fleeing the assault by Alaric and the Visigoths. He disembarked at Hippo where he stayed briefly. He then traveled to Carthage with his friend and theological sympathizer Caelestius. As far as we know, Pelagius and Augustine never met face to face. Augustine was not in Hippo when Pelagius passed through, a theological and historical regret if ever there was one. And when both men were in Carthage at the same time in 411, Augustine was busy with preparations for the confrontation with the Donatists at the upcoming conference.

Though he soon left Carthage for Jerusalem, Pelagius's ideas gain a foothold in the North African Church, especially through his friend Caelestius, who stayed on in Carthage. For his proselytizing of Pelagius's ideas on original sin and grace, Caelestius was condemned at an ecclesiastical trial in Carthage late in the fall of 411 and again at councils in Carthage and Melvis in 416. In the section on Augustine's writings on Pelagianism in chapter 3, we will trace the development of his theology of grace. Augustine had already been thinking quite a bit about God's grace, especially in his early years as bishop in the late 390s. To respond to Pelagius's teaching, Augustine returns again and again in subsequent decades to try to plumb the depths of grace and salvation. As we shall see, even in Augustine's old age, he had to contend with continued attacks from supporters of Pelagius.

Arianism

Arian Christianity was not widespread or popular in North Africa before the sack of Rome by Alaric. Consequently, Augustine's interest in Arianism is less evident than his interest in Donatism and Pelagianism. However, after 410, refugees from Rome and Italy poured into North African ports like Hippo and Carthage. With them came many Christians who subscribed to a different understanding of who Jesus was and what he meant to believers. In response to these new members of African congregations, Augustine took on the teachings of Arius.

Arius (ca. 256–336) was a presbyter of the church in Alexandria, Egypt. His teaching about Jesus Christ emphasized the Son's subordination to God the Father. As a Christian, Arius confessed Jesus to be the Word made flesh. However, he believed the Word or Logos was not coeternal with the Father. There was a time when the Word or Son of God did not exist. The Word or Son was generated from the Father prior to creation, and so was not coeternal or consubstantial with the father. Therefore, Jesus as the incarnate Word was not eternally equal to the Father.

Arius's preaching stirred great controversy that spread around the empire. As the first Christian emperor, Constantine took an unprecedented step to confront this growing division among Christians. In 325, he convened and presided over a church council in Nicea. He wanted to settle the issue and calm the imperial waters whipped up by such a theological storm. This First Council of Nicea condemned Arius's interpretation of Scripture and his teaching on the subordination of the Word of God to God. The Incarnate Word of God was "consubstantial" or one in essence (*homoousion*) with the Father, as Christians still recite in the Nicene Creed. Jesus is equal to the Father.

However, Arius's ideas had taken hold and continued to spread around the Empire. Constantine's immediate successor, Constantius II, who ruled from 337 to 361, was of Arian persuasion, as was the later Emperor Valens who ruled from 364 to 378.

Arius's ideas were eradicated by Emperor Theodosius I (379–95) in the Eastern part of the Empire, but they survived in the West in various iterations, and predominated among the Northern tribes, such as the Goths and the Vandals, who invaded and occupied Italy, Gaul, Spain, and North Africa. Alaric and his Visigoths were Arian Christians, as were the Vandal troops who held Hippo under siege when Augustine lay dying in his city in 430.

Augustine would have first encountered Arian Christians in Milan. In the spring of 386, Bishop Ambrose took a bold political stand against the powerful Empress Justina, regent and mother of Valentinian II. Justina was an Arian. She was demanding a church in Milan so that her co-worshippers could celebrate Easter. Monica joined Ambrose and other Catholics in a "sit-in" so that the Arians could not take possession of the particular church building Justina wanted (*Confessions* IX.7.15). Eventually, in the face of the powerful Ambrose, Justina and the imperial soldiers, many of whom were Catholic, stood down. So Augustine certainly knew all about this doctrinal dispute among Christians. But in the spring of 386, he himself was not yet a Christian and his own sense of Jesus' identity was still very much in flux (*Confessions* VII.18.24–21.27). As we shall see, Augustine's sermons and books from the second and third decades of the fifth century reflect the development of his Christology, as he labors to give his congregation a deeper, fuller understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Beyond Controversies

In the theological controversies that swirled around Donatism, Pelagianism, and Arianism, Augustine took a leading role in outlining arguments, defining terms, and identifying core issues. He wielded his impressive rhetorical skills in defense and advancement of his local church community in Hippo and more widely in North Africa and beyond. However, other churchmen did not always concur or automatically defer to him. He was

sometimes challenged, sometimes championed, and sometimes ignored by his clerical colleagues across North Africa.³³ From our twenty-first century perspective, it is important to remember that during his lifetime, Augustine had to argue forcibly for his theological positions, which did not immediately enjoy prominence or authority. The power of his thought and writing can lure us into forgetting that the reforms that he and Aurelius of Carthage envisioned for Numidia required much sustained effort to realize.

The research and discoveries over the past fifty to sixty years have revealed new insights into the life and work of the Bishop of Hippo. We have a better understanding of the wider ecclesial, social, and political contexts of the controversies he faced. We are more attentive to Augustine the pastor who, amidst his composition of famous doctrinal texts, ministered day after day to his people. His role as Christian apologist was an extension of his more basic vocation as preacher of the Word and minister of the sacraments to his congregation. Theological controversy was not for its own sake. Augustine argued and struggled to understand for himself and to teach others what the grace of the Incarnation of God in Christ and the Divine Trinity actually meant for their souls, the church, society, and human history.

Augustine died on August 28, 430. His beloved city of Hippo Regius was under siege by the Vandals who had crossed over from the Iberian Peninsula, led by their chieftain Genseric. Catholic bishops and congregations, along with African Donatists and Manicheans, would suffer at the hands of these Arian tribesmen, who over the next century would use North Africa as a staging area to sail north and bring an end to Rome's domination of the West. They themselves would disappear under the wave of Islam that swept out of Arabia and across North Africa two hundred years later in the second half of the seventh century.

Possidius tells us that Augustine was conscious and alert to the end, and that he died quietly and peacefully, with the words of the penitential psalms written out on sheets attached to the wall of his bedroom and with the attention of his monastic brothers to

console him (*Life*, XXXI.5). In a most touching tribute to his lifelong friend and fellow bishop, Possidius ends his biography with these words:

From the writings of this priest, so pleasing and dear to God, it is clear, as far as the light of truth allows humans to see, that he led a life of uprightness and integrity in the faith, hope, and love of the Catholic Church. This is certainly acknowledged by those who read his writings on the things of God. I believe, however, that they profited even more who were able to hear him speaking in church and see him there present, especially if they were familiar with his manner of life among his fellow human beings. (*Life*, XXXI.9)

As we turn now in chapters 2 and 3 to his writings, we can exercise our imaginations to hear him preaching to the people in his Basilica of Peace in Hippo. We can overhear him discussing his latest ideas and compositions with his brother monks and fellow clerics gathered at table for a simple monastic meal. We can, from a distance, watch him in his library laboring long into the African night, dictating and revising his thoughts. From our vantage point, we now know that in that quiet room, filled only with his voice and the stirring of scribes, the way people think about God, faith, and religion was being forever changed.³⁴