

GETTING TO KNOW THE CHURCH FATHERS

An Evangelical Introduction

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AUGUSTINE

In 1990 a young man named Chris McCandless set out on a journey of self-discovery.¹ As a recent college graduate from an affluent suburban home, he was like many middle-class youth in wanting to experience the freedom of the open road. What made Chris different was the extreme restlessness within his soul. Heading west from Atlanta in a beat-up Datsun, Chris charted a course into the unknown. Eventually the blazing heat of an Arizona summer killed his car. Yet he did not despair; for as the layers of security on which modern people depend were peeled back, Chris felt an exhilaration in his newfound freedom. He buried his worldly possessions in the sand and ceremoniously burned the only money he had to his name. Now the true journey began.

Chris wholeheartedly embraced the life of the wanderer. In fact, he would later give himself the name “Supertramp.” He meandered across the majestic western landscape, hiking in national parks, canoeing the Colorado River all the way to Mexico, and working occasionally in no-name towns when he needed a little cash. His travels brought him extraordinary hardship and peril: he lived on

plain rice for days at a time, and endured exposure to the harsh elements. The suburban boy from Virginia fell in among the drifters and derelicts who populate the homeless underworld of the American West. Through it all, Chris always kept moving. His wanderlust never seemed to be satisfied. Though he sometimes entertained the idea of abandoning his tramping lifestyle, his “itchy feet” inevitably got the best of him, carrying him off to somewhere new.

In time Alaska began to sound its siren’s call. To Chris, the last frontier was the ultimate destination for the ultimate wanderer. In a cryptic postcard to one of his few friends, he wrote, “It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don’t ever hear from me again, I want you to know your [*sic*] a great man. I now walk into the wild.” And that is exactly what he did. Having hitchhiked up through the Yukon Territory, Chris found himself in the rugged foothills around Alaska’s Mt. McKinley. Snow was still on the ground one April day when Chris said goodbye to the stranger who had given him a lift. Then he walked off the edge of the world.

Hiking deep into the wilderness, Chris stumbled across the shelter that would be his home for 113 days—and then would become his tomb. He found an old abandoned bus that had served as a makeshift refuge for hunters. Now Chris moved in. Exhilarated at the prospects of his grand adventure, he scrawled a manifesto on a piece of plywood in his new home:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, ‘cause “the West is the best.” And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

Perhaps you can sense this young man's palpable longing for spiritual rest. He was wandering the earth, trying to find ultimate meaning and fulfillment. Instead he found disaster. Though he was able to subsist for several months on berries, roots, and small game, Chris began to grow weak on such a meager diet. Then he made a fatal mistake: he ate some poisonous seeds that rendered him too sick to hunt. With his body already in starvation mode, he went downhill quickly. In desperation he penned a heartbreaking plea: "S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August?" But help did not arrive in time. Three weeks later, some hunters discovered the pitiful note. And inside the bus they found the emaciated corpse of the Supertramp.

In this chapter we will meet an ancient church father who, like Chris McCandless, was a restless wanderer. Both of them were in spiritual turmoil. Both roamed far and wide, trying to find peace in various sources. But unlike the modern-day voyager, Augustine of Hippo found rest during his lifetime. The motif of the restless wanderer is a central theological concept for Augustine. In a famous expression at the beginning of his autobiography, he cried out to God, "Our heart is restless, until it rests in you."² He was describing the fundamental spiritual longing which many try to satisfy in inferior ways, but which God alone can truly satisfy. Augustine eventually discovered what the Supertramp never did: that real peace only comes from knowing God through Jesus Christ.

Yet Augustine of Hippo always remembered what it was like to be a restless wanderer. In fact, two of his most significant writings use the image of the wanderer to articulate their main points. In his *City of God*, Augustine pictured the Christian as an alien or exile in the world. Believers must wander far from their heavenly home while sojourning temporarily in the City of Man. And in his *Confessions*, Augustine used the concept of restlessness to narrate the story of his

own life's journey. Certainly he discovered through firsthand experience that the human heart is restless until it rests in God.

So let's take this opportunity to journey with Augustine on his spiritual odyssey. By God's grace, his story does not end in tragedy like that of Chris McCandless, but in victory through Jesus. Augustine has offered us a window into his soul by writing his autobiography, the *Confessions*. The work is a treasure of church history that no Christian should fail to read at some point. What did Augustine mean by "confession"? The Latin word *confessio* had connotations that may be unfamiliar to the modern reader. When we think of "confession," we think of owning up to our sins. The person who "confesses" is either a criminal who admits his crimes before the authorities, or on a more spiritual level, is a Christian who seeks forgiveness from a faithful and just God. Certainly Augustine showed himself willing to confess his sins. His work is a masterpiece of transparency with respect to his evil deeds and the darkness of his heart. But it is much more than this. A "confession" in the Augustinian sense is also a "testimony."³ It is the act of bearing witness to the unfathomable greatness of divine grace in the midst of human sin. Today we often ask our fellow Christians (especially if they were infamous sinners) to "share their testimony." We do this because we want to hear God's goodness rehearsed in our presence, witnessing the transforming power of his mercy and grace. That is exactly what Augustine's spiritual autobiography sought to do. It was written as a prayer: a spiritual offering poured out through pen and ink before the Heavenly Father. As we get to know Augustine through his *Confessions*, let's journey alongside him as he shares his testimony with us.

A Restless Wanderer

Augustine was born in sin. This is a point he makes right at the beginning of his *Confessions*. (It's also a theological conviction whose defense occupies much of his later life; but more on that in a moment.) He remarks that even as an infant he was selfish and demand-

ing, bawling loudly to get his way. Though he obviously cannot recall those days, Augustine views such childish behavior as evidence that all people are sinners from birth. “The feebleness of infant limbs is innocent,” he writes, “not the infant’s mind.”⁴ Augustine has observed babies who cannot yet speak, but who still express furious jealousy when their siblings receive their mother’s milk. “If ‘I was conceived in iniquity and in sins my mother nourished me in her womb’ (Ps. 51:5), I ask you, my God, I ask, Lord, where and when was your servant innocent?”⁵ The implied answer is, “Never.” We must understand Augustine’s starting place if we are to understand his story. The great bishop was painfully aware of his alienation from God due to sin. It was precisely this alienation that caused him to search for answers in all the wrong places during the early years of his life.

Augustine’s birthplace was the Roman African town of Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras, in Algeria). Back then, as today, it was a nondescript town of little consequence. His father Patrick was a man of modest means who had to scrape together enough money to send Augustine to school. For most of his life Patrick was not a Christian, and he disappears off the scene rather quickly. The figure from Augustine’s home who had the greatest influence on him was his devout Christian mother Monica. In fact, we might say her influence on her son, which continued into his adulthood, bordered on unhealthy codependency. Despite that awkward dynamic, Monica appears to have played a large role in Augustine’s eventual conversion by her godly example and earnest prayers.

As a teenager Augustine wanted nothing to do with Christ. So he embarked on his first real attempt to satisfy the restlessness in his soul: through sex. Monica had warned him to avoid fornication and especially adultery, but he ignored her and rushed headlong into sexual sin, not only from lust, but also to boast about his exploits (real and imagined) to his friends. He writes,

I refused to satisfy my internal hunger with your spiritual food, my God, and I was unaware of any need . . . My soul was sick and cov-

ered in sores, and it rubbed up against material things in a desperate attempt to relieve the itching . . . To love and be loved in return was what excited me, especially if I could enjoy my lover's body. So I polluted the stream of friendship with the filth of lust and obscured its brightness with foul passions.⁶

Later Augustine would comment on this phase of his life by extolling the satisfaction he had finally found in God:

Sexual caresses are intended to arouse love, but there are no softer caresses than yours and no object of love is more beneficial than your truth, which is more beautiful and radiant than all other things . . . So the soul fornicates when it turns from you and seeks what is pure and unadulterated elsewhere, yet the search is futile while it is away from you.⁷

Though Augustine could look back on his youth from such a wise perspective, as a restless teenager he had not yet come to appreciate the beauty of God.

Nevertheless, Augustine did begin to realize his sexual habits were a form of slavery. Sex was a compulsion that did not truly satisfy. So as a young man he decided to look to human philosophy to assuage his guilt and provide him with the meaning of life. The particular philosophy he embraced was called Manicheism (pronounced Man-ih-KEE-ism). Manicheism was a Persian religious system that had recently migrated into the Roman Empire. Its main teaching was a radical dualism of light and darkness, or good and evil. The Manichees taught that in a great cosmic battle, the good side had been defeated by evil; so now the world was a mixture of both principles. Adam and Eve were created by the evil side through the mating of demons. This meant human beings are the product of an evil force, and are naturally wicked. Yet within humanity's corrupt physical bodies, light particles are trapped. Only the priests of the Manichees, called the "Elect," could release the light. Perhaps you can see why this philosophy appealed to Augustine. First of all, it gave him a clear conscience with

respect to his sexual addiction. He could claim that his fleshly body had overpowered the good inclination within him, so he just couldn't help sinning. His true self was the "good soul" inside of him, which remained untainted by his outward moral failings.⁸ Furthermore, Manicheism provided a fairly undemanding process for dealing with sin. Simply by becoming a member of the Manichean community and providing for the Elect's food and daily needs, Augustine was promised reincarnation with the hope of eventual salvation.

But Augustine was too much of an intellectual to remain with the Manichees for long. Eventually their trite platitudes became apparent to him, and their superficial answers to perplexing questions turned him off. At the same time, Augustine found that his career prospects were skyrocketing. So he turned to yet another means to satisfy his restless longings: worldly success. As his education had progressed, Augustine had discovered he was a very talented public speaker. In the Roman world, skill in the art of rhetoric was a sure ticket to prominence. At age twenty-two Augustine took his first teaching post in the great city of Carthage. (This is the city where Tertullian had displayed his own eloquence nearly two centuries before, and where the martyr Perpetua had given her ultimate testimony to Christ.) From Carthage, Augustine moved up to Rome. Then, at the height of his career, he was nominated for a prestigious professorship of rhetoric in Milan, which meant he would be an official orator in the imperial court. His job was to give speeches in honor of prominent officials and to promote the state's agenda. The new position offered Augustine the chance to mingle with the aristocratic elite. Suddenly the provincial thirty-year-old from an African backwater found himself on the brink of greatness. A regional governorship loomed as a distinct possibility if he played his cards just right. After his rambling years, Augustine was about to begin—to borrow the words of Chris McCandless—his "final and greatest adventure."

Milan in the late fourth century was the perfect place for an up-and-comer like Augustine. The Roman Empire had been split into

two halves, and Milan housed the western emperor's palace and its affiliated governmental apparatus. Situated in northern Italy with access to strategic Alpine passes, Milan had become the capital of the West like Constantinople in the East. The city of Rome was in serious decline and had ceased to function as the administrative center of the empire. So it was not Rome but Milan that lay at the center of a vast mosaic of imperial bureaucracy and cronyism. At this time, the Roman Empire was based on a system of political patronage (the vestiges of which can still be seen today in the Italian Mafia). Rich and powerful senators tapped the chosen few to ascend the ranks of political office. Aspiring young men attached themselves as loyal clients to their patrons. Advancement often required strategically placed bribes. In this environment, Augustine soon realized he needed something he didn't have: a respectable marriage to a well-connected heiress, along with the wad of cash she would provide.⁹ Such necessities confront us with one of the most disgraceful deeds Augustine ever committed (a deed which also takes some of the shine off saintly Monica). With his mother's help, he arranged a marriage to an upper-class girl—and in so doing, left great pain in his wake.

Augustine had been living with a lover since he was about seventeen years old. We do not know who she was, for he never tells us her name. It is generally believed she was a slave, or at least from a lower class than he. Augustine remained sexually faithful to his concubine for a decade and a half. One of the misconceptions many people have about Augustine is that he was a complete profligate until his conversion. Actually, except for a few wild teenage years, he had only shared his bed with this one woman. Yet she was not his wife, and Augustine knew full well he did not intend to remain committed to her or to raise a family with her. In Roman society, the practice of concubinage was widely accepted. Even the Christian church was prepared to accommodate it as a kind of common law marriage so long as there was lifelong fidelity. But Augustine understood he was merely using this woman temporarily for her body: "With her

I learned how wide a difference there is between the partnership of marriage entered into for the sake of having a family, and the mutual consent of those whose love is a matter of physical sex.”¹⁰ When the time came for him to “marry up,” the partner who had been exploited as a sexual object could be cast aside.¹¹

Augustine contracted an engagement to a ten-year-old girl from a wealthy family. This was accomplished partly through Monica’s efforts because she believed a good marriage would cause her son to settle down and get baptized as a Christian. Of course, the engagement meant that Augustine’s concubine would have to be dismissed. In a poignant reminder of the consequences of sin, Augustine later confessed:

Meanwhile my sins multiplied. The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart which was deeply attached was cut and wounded, and left a trail of blood. She had returned to Africa vowing that she would never go with another man.¹²

In the meantime, Augustine procured another lover to sate his desires until his fiancée would reach the marriageable age of twelve. Yet he still lamented his break-up:

But my wound, inflicted by the earlier parting, was not healed. After inflammation and sharp pain, it festered. The pain made me as it were frigid and desperate.¹³

To make matters worse, Augustine kept with him in Milan the teenage son he had fathered with his concubine. So imagine the fate of this poor woman: utterly rejected after a long-term, exclusive relationship, she was ripped from the man to whom she had given her best years, and was separated forever from her only son. She returned home to Africa penniless and ashamed, while Augustine got engaged to a rich preteen to further his career. Indeed it is a tragic and sordid affair.

This is the Augustine we find in Milan in AD 386. He was experiencing great success in his job. All his prospects were bright. But on the inside he was torn with anxiety and ridden with guilt. He was horribly unhappy. On the day of an important, high-pressure speech, he found himself envying the merry, drunken beggar he chanced to encounter in the street. Apparently the carefree happiness Augustine so desperately sought could be achieved by begging a few coins to buy wine. The rat race life seemed utterly futile. But God was at work in Augustine's misery. "I aspired to honours, money, marriage, and you laughed at me. In those ambitions I suffered the bitterest difficulties; that was by your mercy."¹⁴ The Manichean philosophy had proved hollow, the prospect of career success held no lasting appeal, and sex had become a source of relational pain. In the face of such spiritual restlessness, Augustine turned to the one person in Milan who seemed to possess an abiding peace: the great bishop Ambrose, whose preaching would soon light a fire in Augustine's soul.

Rest at Last

Ambrose was fifteen years older than Augustine, and he came from a much different background. Whereas Augustine had to claw his way up the social ladder from the fringes of the empire, Ambrose was reared with privilege. Educated at Rome, the son of a highly-placed father, Ambrose pursued a career in law until a governorship opened up for him in northern Italy. With a family whose heritage in the church was longstanding and well known, Ambrose was widely respected as a godly Christian statesman. So perhaps it is not surprising that when the Arian and Nicene factions were rioting over who should replace Milan's deceased bishop, and Ambrose had to intervene to restore order in the church, somebody (according to tradition it was a small child) realized the politician standing in front of them might be the right man for the job! The crowd demanded Ambrose by acclamation. When it became clear he could

not evade this unexpected pastoral call, he was hurriedly baptized, and so became a bishop.¹⁵ In fact, he would be the greatest bishop Milan has ever seen.

When Augustine arrived in the city, Ambrose had been a revered figure in the Milanese church for over a decade. Having donated his great wealth to charity, Ambrose had become famous for his devotion to the Bible and his powerful preaching. These were two important factors in Augustine's conversion. One of the main reasons Augustine had rejected Christianity (despite being raised with Monica's constant evangelism) was his intellectual disdain for the scriptures. Trained to appreciate the eloquence and stylistic perfection of Cicero, he found the Latin translations of the Bible to be grammatically inferior and full of crude stories. Like so many unbelievers, he thought the Word of God was utterly simplistic and could not stand up to rational scrutiny. Augustine failed to realize that "the Bible is composed in such a way that as beginners mature, its meaning grows with them."¹⁶

In his pride, Augustine had rejected the scriptures many years earlier. But now in Milan he began to attend Ambrose's church services—not to be edified by the content, but just to pick up some rhetorical techniques from the famous preacher. Nevertheless, the Word of God began to do its work in Augustine's heart:

Above all, I heard first one, then another, then many difficult passages in the Old Testament scriptures figuratively interpreted, where I, by taking them literally, had found them to kill (2 Cor. 3:6). So after several passages in the Old Testament had been expounded spiritually, I now found fault with that despair of mine, caused by my belief that the law and the prophets could not be defended at all against the mockery of hostile critics.¹⁷

Through Ambrose's learned sermons and allegorical exegesis, Augustine began to realize the Christian faith is intellectually defensible after all. Looking back, he perceived this to be God's work in his life. "I now began to believe that you would never have conferred

such pre-eminent authority on the scripture, now diffused through all lands, unless you had willed that it would be a means of coming to faith in you and a means of seeking to know you.”¹⁸ The intellectual restlessness that had driven Augustine to the emptiness of Manicheism was now driving him toward the church. His search for a philosophy that would provide him with rest was almost over. Yet he was not quite ready to take the plunge.

Augustine also had to be confronted with the utter futility of his career aspirations. At the pinnacle of his professional success, he encountered some moving testimonies of great men who had put away their secular ambitions for the sake of Christ. One of them was an African named Marius Victorinus, the most prominent scholar of his day. He was so brilliant that the Senate had honored him by erecting a statue of him in the Forum, the very heart of Rome. Throughout his life Victorinus had been an ardent worshiper of the pagan gods. But in his old age he had come to realize, through long philosophical contemplation, especially in the thought of Plato, that Christianity was the true way. (Recall that in chapter 2 we saw this same pattern of conversion in Justin Martyr.) For a while, Victorinus kept his faith in Jesus secret. But when he was challenged on this point by a godly evangelist, Victorinus decided he needed to go public with his beliefs.¹⁹ “He was afraid to offend his friends, proud devil-worshippers,” Augustine says. But then “he became ashamed of the emptiness of those rites and felt respect for the truth.”²⁰ Having offered himself for Christian baptism, he was given the opportunity to recite the creed in private. This he refused to do. When Victorinus strode to the front of the church to boldly proclaim his newfound faith in Christ, the stunned congregation burst forth with gasps of joy. The people marveled that such an eminent pagan could be converted. Of course, when the pagans heard the news of his defection from their ranks, they “gnashed with their teeth and were sick at heart” (Ps. 112:10).²¹

Around the same time that Augustine heard about Victorinus, he received a visit from his friend Ponticianus, a high-ranking court of-

ficial who was also from Africa. During the visit he happened to pick up and read a book lying on Augustine's table. He was surprised to find it was the Apostle Paul. Augustine explained that he had been ruminating on scripture lately. Ponticianus was pleased to hear it, for he was already a committed Christian. As the conversation continued, he shared with Augustine the story of the Egyptian monk named Anthony whose biography had been recorded by Bishop Athanasius. Having never heard of Anthony, Augustine was astonished to hear about the monk's heroic self-denial. Ponticianus went on to share a personal story. He told Augustine how one day he was walking with some friends in a garden when they came upon a monastic house. There they found a copy of Athanasius's book, the *Life of Anthony*. One of Ponticianus's friends was deeply moved as he read it. He discerned that he was wasting his life in secular pursuits. "Tell me, I beg of you, what do we hope to achieve with all our labours?" he cried out in frustration. "What is our aim in life? What is the motive for our service to the state?"²² Touched in his spirit, he turned to his other friend and declared, "As for myself, I have broken away from our ambition, and have decided to serve God."²³ His friend felt the same way. That very day, both of them quit their jobs and broke off their engagements, dedicating themselves full-time to God's service. Their two fiancées decided to do the same. This amazing testimony, like that of Victorinus, made a profound impact on Augustine. He understood that other people were making the kind of hard decisions he was still hesitating to make. Could he not follow their example?

Having grappled with his besetting sins of prideful intellectualism and careerism, only one obstacle remained. Yet for Augustine it was the hardest one to surmount: his attachment to his carnal appetites. He was well aware of the high standards of holiness required for the followers of Jesus. In contrast, when he looked in the mirror he perceived himself as "twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers. And I looked and was appalled, but there was no way of escaping from myself."²⁴ He confessed,

I was an unhappy young man, wretched as at the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed to you for chastity and said, “Grant me chastity and continence—but not yet.” I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress.²⁵

Greatly disturbed in his soul, Augustine fled outside to a quiet garden. He was torn in two. On the one hand, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. Yet his old loves, the sins of the flesh, called out to him, saying, “Are you getting rid of us? From this moment we shall never be with you again!” As he struggled with the cost of discipleship, Augustine felt that Lady Chastity appeared to him as a serene and noble woman. She appealed to the example of great saints. “Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done?” she asked. “Do you think them capable of achieving this by their own resources and not by the Lord their God?”²⁶

Augustine now burst into tears. As he sobbed in agony, he heard a child’s voice telling him to “Pick up and read!” It didn’t sound like any children’s game he knew. Perhaps it was a divine command? Augustine rushed over to his book of Paul’s letters and read the first words upon which his eyes fell: “Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:13–14). It was all he needed to hear. At that moment, Augustine gave his life to Christ. Finally, he had found rest.

Theologian of Grace

On Easter Eve, the night of April 24 in the year AD 387, a band of Christians in rough robes approached the New Basilica of Milan with its nearby baptistry.²⁷ They were hungry, for they had been fasting through Lent; yet their souls were full of the divine food provided by their bishop Ambrose. Each day during the previous week, Ambrose