

Providence in the Confessions of St Augustine

You were always there

Brian Lowery, O.S.A.

For those who feel an affinity with St Augustine, his *Confessions* are an immense treasury of spiritual wisdom and personal help. For in them he speaks of the ways of God as he discovered them in his own life and understood them to be part of the lives of all who seek God. The book is not an easy one to read, and many people have been discouraged when they first tried it. It is a long prayer of praise and thanksgiving addressed to God in another age by a person of extraordinary sensitivity and depth. But with certain keys to understanding its riches, even today it can help us to recognise and respond to the loving God who is calling us.

About twenty miles outside of Rome lie the ruins of the imperial port of Ostia, where the Tiber River met the sea. Old Ostia is a fascinating place to visit with the *Confessions* in hand. For some of the most important action of the book actually took place there. It was in Ostia where Augustine first arrived from his native Africa at the age of twenty-eight on his way to taking up a teaching position in Rome. His mother, St Monica died there four years later with him at her side. It was there, shortly before her death, that the two of them experienced their famous ecstasy together. And at Ostia, after his conversion in Milan, Augustine re-embarked for the shores of Africa with the intention of giving himself to the service of God in community with his friends of like mind.

Upon arriving at the excavations, the first thing you encounter are the original paving stones that make up the ancient road connecting the port with the city, and which Augustine walked over on his way to Rome in the year 383. At this point you can ask a first question of the book: what made Augustine come to Rome in the first place and so pass by this very spot? In Book Five you would find a curious two-track answer that is typical of the spiritual insights of the *Confessions*. Augustine had his reasons, personal and precise. God had reasons, too, mysterious and salvific. He says:

"It was by your action upon me that I was moved to go to Rome and teach there what I had taught at Carthage. How I was persuaded to do this. I shall not omit to confess to you, because therein your most profound depths and your mercy ever present can be meditated upon.

"My reason for going to Rome was not the greater earnings and higher dignity promised by my friends - although at that time these considerations did influence me. The principal and practically conclusive reason was that I had heard that youths there pursued their studies more quietly and were kept within a stricter limit of discipline. For instance, they were not allowed to come rushing insolently into the school of one who was not their own master, not indeed to enter it all unless permitted. At Carthage the license of the students is gross and beyond all measure. And so I decided to go to a place where, as I had been told, such things were not done.

"But you, O my hope, you forced me to change countries for my soul's salvation. You pricked me with such goads at Carthage as drove me out of it, and you set before me certain attractions by which I might be drawn to Rome. Why I left the one country and went to the other, you knew, O God, but you didn't tell either me or my mother (V, 8).

Outer Providence

In this passage of the *Confessions* we meet the firm conviction of the saint, writing ten years or so after his conversion, that God had accompanied him at certain moments of his life, whether he was aware of it or not. Because of this he was eventually brought by the Lord to conversion. "You Were There." He would say in the *Confessions* as he looked back with his newly acquired faith over the events of his past life. In what way was God there? How did Augustine see God as active in his life? The response to these questions makes some of the most exciting reading in Christian literature.

Simply put, God had wanted Augustine in Italy. For this reason there were sent into his life the circumstances and personal desires that would make him want to leave Africa and go there. Augustine mentions the misbehaviour of his students and the financial attractions of the Eternal City. But it eventually became more significant to him that there were certain persons in Italy at the time - Ambrose, Simplicianus, a group of friends, and others - whom God wanted to be instruments for Augustine's salvation. In time each would enter the scene at the right moment, sometimes unwittingly, to do his or her part.

For example, this was the way the author of the *Confessions* understood the role of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, in just this way. In the same book Five he says: *"All unknowingly I was brought by God to him that knowingly I should be brought by him to God"* (V, 13). Augustine had transferred from Rome to Milan to occupy the prestigious chair of rhetoric in the capital of the Empire. While he was teaching the art of speaking, he frequented the bishop's church to hear and perhaps learn from his renowned way with words. But gradually, providentially, he fell under Ambrose's influence and slowly his heart opened to the truth of what he preached, a major step along the way of his life drama.

This is one example of God's secret ways which Augustine relates to us throughout the book of the *Confessions*. God wondrously brought him back through a long, restless journey that covered not only miles across sea and land, but, more importantly, across great distances of his heart.

There were other people sent into his life as well. His mother, Monica, was the one he most vividly remembered. Early in his childhood in Africa by words and example she had planted into his consciousness the name of Jesus, and he was never to forget it, even in his most wayward moments. And who continually pleaded before God for him with her tears and prayers, entreaties which God effectively heard. Augustine gratefully said of her: *"She brought me forth in the flesh to this temporal light and in her heart to eternal light"* (IX, 8)

An unnamed man once helped him out of a fascination with astrology by calmly pointing out the coincidence of historical events that seemingly occur under the same star. The reading of books by authors such as Cicero and the Neo-Platonist philosophers were liberating events for Augustine at crucial moments of his life. The experience of a drunken beggar in a blissful revelry once challenged his own stress-filled efforts to attain happiness in honours, notoriety and power. The words of a friend woke him up to his own self deception. And then there was

Alypius, his lifelong friend, who struggled right along with him on his own way to conversion and in his quiet wisdom stayed by him at the moment of decision.

"You were there." He would say. For he saw in those persons, books, and events the saving presence of God, which made of his life drama a divine drama. Actually the title is a composite of many sayings:

"I had actually become more wretched and you more close to me. Your right hand was ready to pluck me from the mire and wash me clean, though I knew it not (VI, 16).

"I dwelt upon these things and you were near me. I sighed and you heard me. I was wavering uncertainly and you guided me. I was going the broad way of the world and you did not forsake me (VI, 5).

"Though I knew it not, you were listening. And when in silence I sought so vehemently, the voiceless contritions of my soul were strong cries to your mercy. You knew what I was suffering and no one else knew it. (VII, 7).

The effect of this literary mannerism is to create the sense of a mysterious presence always nearby but beyond the line of vision, known only later by faith. God is hovering there at every moment, wise, loving, patient and powerful.

Restlessness

In the *Confessions* God's Providence is presented to be something radical and absolutely pervasive in a person's life. To see this fully it is necessary to go all the way back to the very opening of the book and find God in the role of Creator. *"You made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,"* says Augustine (I, I).

Restlessness, we find, is not a bad thing, although it certainly can be uncomfortable until we understand it better. For Augustine the unsettledness we experience in life is actually a dynamic force of attraction to God. It is a dynamism in each one of us, placed in hearts at the beginning by the Creator who desires union with us. It is a primordial seed of our salvation, the first act of Providence in our regard.

Our fundamental restlessness is first felt as a dissatisfaction and an undefined yearning for more. It sets us searching and questioning life, weighing and discarding values, trying solutions, failing and trying again. All the time it is secretly a search for God. With the advent of faith the search becomes conscious, and our sights are set on God, though not without the struggles that accompany life. This is the restlessness for which Augustine is so famous that ultimately brought him to conversion.

Next God the Creator cares for us along the whole road. In a passage that may seem exaggerated - and saints do tend to intensify - Augustine sees God as provident even when he was at his mother's breast:

"Thus for my nourishment and my delight I had a woman's milk. Yet it was not my mother or my nurses who stored their breasts for me. It was yourself, using them to give me the food of my infancy according to your ordinance and the riches set by you at every level of

creation. It was by your gift that I desired what you gave and no more, and by your gift that those who suckled me willed to give what you had given them (I, 6).

Later on in a beautiful passage of the same Book One Augustine makes clear that wonderful innate qualities that he discovered in himself. They came from the hand of God:

“Yet, Lord, I should have owed thanks to you, my god and the most excellent Creator and Ruler of the universe, even if it had been your will that I should not live beyond boyhood. For even then I was, I felt. Even so early I had an instinct for the care of my own being. In my interior sense I kept guard over the integrity of my outward sense perception, and in my small thoughts upon small matters I had come to delight in the truth. I hated to be wrong, had a vigorous memory, was well trained in speech, delighted in friendship, shunned pain, meanness, and ignorance. In so small a creature was not all this admirable and reason for praise? Yet all these things were the gifts of my God. For I did not give them to myself. All these were good and all these were I (I, 20).

I would like to stop here for a moment and look at one of those innate personal qualities that Augustine lists: the love of truth. *"I had come to delight in the truth. I hated to be wrong."* The instruments of God's care that we have met so far - people, books, circumstances - can be considered as a sort of "outer Providence." If you will, by which God led Augustine onward by means of others. In the Confessions we also meet an "inner Providence."

Inner Providence

The fundamental restlessness of all men and women is one manifestation. In this last passage it takes the form of Augustine's innate character traits. His love of truth, for example when activated and developed in later years, became his consuming passion and would carry him to the end to the God of truth. It was not just a question of intelligence. Rather, it was because of his whole interior makeup that Augustine could not be satisfied with anything less than the fullest and deepest truth of all existence and would strain restlessly and for a long time until he reached.

Sometimes he went down wrong roads in his search and stayed there for a long time. He remained with the Manichean sect for twelve years. Augustine said: *"O Truth, truth, how inwardly did the very marrow of my soul pant for you when time and again I heard them sound your name?" (III, 6)*

As we saw, he even tried astrology for a while. But eventually he would exhaust the possibilities of those systems of thought and have to seek further. He was tempted once by total scepticism, saying that *"a man who has tried a bad doctor is afraid to trust even a good one"* (V, 14), But that wouldn't work either. For God, the Creator and Provider, had put into him a burning passion for truth and would not permit him to let up.

Augustine is telling us to look into our own selves, to sort out those gifts of our own that were put there for our salvation, and to trust that God is in them. They may not be those of Augustine. But they are providential for us in their uniqueness and their fittingness. Rather than a passion for truth, it may be a compassion for others that moves us on, or a practical nature that rejects so much nonsense around us. Maybe a love of beauty, a special

understanding of the human heart, extraordinary courage and will power, a desire to improve the lot of humanity, or many other expressions of God's inner Providence.

In the story line of the *Confessions* outer Providence and inner Providence sometimes join together. We saw it happen in the Basilica Maior of Milan as Augustine listened to Ambrose speak. It happened also when, at the age of eighteen, he read the Hortensius of Cicero:

“Quite definitely it changed the direction of my mind, altered my prayers to you, Lord, and gave me a new purpose and ambition. Suddenly all the vanity I had hoped in I saw as worthless, and with an incredible intensity of desire I longed after immortal wisdom. I had begun that journey upwards by which I was to return to you (III, 4).

Negative Providence

There is a third kind of Providence that we can detect in the Confessions when we question them about how God was "always there." I call it - for lack of a better word - a "negative Providence". Throughout the book Augustine tells us of the pain of his life and describes them as salvific for him. For it, too, led him ahead in his search for God. It was like a prod to not stay where he was, but to go on searching and keep moving forward. For nothing could satisfy him in his life as it was then.

First of all there was the pain of sin, which carries with it its own punishment, as he said about his licentious behaviour as a student in Carthage:

“O my God, my mercy, with how much bitterness did you in your goodness sprinkle the delights of that time. I was loved and our love came to the bond of consummation. I wore my chains with bliss but with torment too. For I was scourged with the red hot rods of jealousy, with suspicions and fears and tempers and quarrels (III, I).

However, with God present the pain becomes Providence. In one of the best "you were always there" passages in the Confessions Augustine said of his idle year in Thagaste:

“You were always by me, mercifully hard upon me, and besprinkling al my illicit pleasures with certain elements of bitterness, to draw me on to seek for pleasures in which no bitterness should be. And where was I to find such pleasures save in you, O Lord, who use sorrow to teach and wound us to heal and kill us lest we die to you (II, 2).

Secondly, there was the pain of disappointment. The death of a beloved friend when he was only a young man caused Augustine to question the ability of transitory things or even cherished persons to fully meet his deepest needs. The failure of Faustus, the promised guru, to answer his questions made him finally leave the Manichees. His important post in Milan did not give him the happiness he sought. These disillusionments in their painfulness were ultimately salutary. For God was in them too, as he says:

“I was all hot for money, honours, and marriage. And you made me mock of my hotness. In pursuit of these I suffered my most bitter disappointments. But in this you were good to me, since I was thus prevented from taking delight in anything not yourself (VI, 6).

This is the point of the negative Providence found in the *Confessions*. We are made for God. Anything less than God will leave us flat, disappointed and unfulfilled if we make it our all. God does not want us to settle for less no matter how good and wonderful it may seem. To the alert soul the Lord speaks clearly out of the inevitable pain of disappointment with which life is constantly filled.

So we see three kinds of Providence in the *Confessions*. God is there in his inner Providence, as the soul of Augustine yearns restlessly and keeps searching. God is there in his negative Providence as satisfaction is never reached. And God is there in his outward Providence in the people and circumstances that touch his life. All these ways of being present accompanied Augustine along the long, hard road of his conversion. As the same time God would not let him drop in his weariness. God was there also to comfort him. He said:

"Behold, you are close at hand to deliver us from the wretchedness of error and establish us on your way, and console us with your word: "Run, I shall bear you up and bring you and carry you to the end" (VI, 16).

You Were There

And this brings us to the final form of Providence that we can find in the *Confessions*: the power that God gives us to go beyond our own ability. His whole life had brought him to the point where he was keenly aware of the nearness of his goal but disturbingly unable to reach it. He said:

"And I marvelled to find that at last I loved you and not some phantom instead of you. Yet I did not stably enjoy my God, but was ravished to you by your beauty, yet soon was torn away by my own weight, and fell again with torment to lower things. Carnal habit was that weight. Yet the memory of you remained with me and I knew without doubt that it was you to whom I should cleave, though I was not yet such as could cleave to you (VII, 17).

In Book Eight, where Augustine tells us of the moment of his conversion, we find a composite of all the forms of Providence. There is the desperate desire to embrace God, the awful sense of distance, the voice of a child nearby singing "Take and read", and the nearness of St Paul's letters. Amid his tears he takes the book, reads the words from Paul, "*Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh,*" and finds the strength to walk over the line. He tells us:

"I had no wish to read further and no need. For in that instant with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though alight of utter confidence shone in all my heart and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away (VIII, 12).

As he wrote the *Confessions* and looking back at his past life, Augustine could not help but look toward the future. For he was only in his early forties. The drama was not yet over, as he says in Book Ten: "*I know not where the victory lies*" (X, 28). Through his prayer of remembrance he came to the conclusion that if God was always there in the past, God will surely be there in the future. And so he could end with the confident prayer: "*Give what you command and command what you will*" (X, 29).

As we close the book of the *Confessions*, we leave Augustine in midstream, still yearning for his final union with God and still hoping in God's salvific presence:

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new! Late have I loved you! For behold you were within me and I outside. And I sought you outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that you made. You were with me and I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all. You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness. You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness. You breathed fragrance upon me and I drew in my breath and not pant for you. You touched me and I have burned for your peace (X, 27).

One last question to the *Confessions* has to do with ourselves. Where is divine Providence in my own life? Does God deal with me in the same way that he did with Augustine or similarly? The answer is a definite yes. For Augustine had his finger on the mystery of us all. Therefore we can ask: how does God work with me? Who has been Providential in my life? And who is that now? What traits do I find within me that are salvific? What pain? What disappointments? What sin? When was God most close to me and I didn't know it? What is God doing now? What are the subtle and not so subtle movements that I can detect deep within my spiritual life? How can I let them bear fruit and bring me along the way to God?

To answer these questions we have good reason to open the *Confessions* again and again, looking to understand God's ways more fully, and to pray with Augustine.

“O Lord, our God, let us hope in the protecting shadow of your wings. Guard us and bear us up. Bear us up you will, as tiny infants and on to our grey hairs. For when you are our strength, it is strength indeed. But when our strength is our own, it is only weakness. With you our good lives forever and when we are averted from you, we are perverted.

“Let us now return to you, O Lord, that we may not be overturned. For with you lives without any defect our good which is yourself. We have no fear that there should be no place of return, merely because by our own act we fell from it. Our absence does not cause our home to fall, which is your eternity (IV, 16).