

Lent with Saint Augustine

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Waldemar Turek



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Stefan Killen Design. Cover photo © Thinkstock.

Originally published as *Historia pewnego nawrócenia: Wielki Post ze św. Augustynem*. © 2012 Wydawnictwo WAM. English translation by Tomasz Koper.

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The Confessions by St. Augustine (Volume I/1 in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*), translated by Maria Boulding, OSB, published by New City Press, Hyde Park, New York © 1997 Augustinian Heritage Institute. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turek, Waldemar, 1962–

[*Historia pewnego nawrócenia*. English]

Lent with Saint Augustine / Waldemar Turek.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-8146-3760-9 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3785-2 (ebooks)

1. Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. Confessiones.

2. Lent—Meditations. I. Title.

BR65.A62T8713 2014

270.2092—dc23

2014009826

*For Priests and Students
of the Pontifical Scots College in Rome,
commending them to the intercession of St. Augustine,
with loving memory
the author*

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Preface

During Lent in 2010 I hosted a series of five-minute segments titled “The Story of a Conversion: Reading St. Augustine’s *Confessions*” for the Polish-language broadcast of Vatican Radio. In each segment I commented on selected fragments of this literary masterpiece, a spiritual history of the bishop of Hippo, in which the author emphasizes above all the help that he has received from God on the road to true happiness. The *Confessions*, permeated with an atmosphere of devout spirituality, is a collection of prayerful deliberations on God, man, the world, time, and eternity that appeals to contemporary people and, incidentally, provides a valuable aid in experiencing the season of Lent.

I am happy that these broadcasts, expanded with the passages of the gospel read on Sundays during Lent, have been published in Polish, Italian, and now English.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all those who showed me kindness and provided help in my work on this text and I pray, through the intercession of St. Augustine, that they may be blessed with the grace of understanding God in increasingly deep and profound ways.

Father Waldemar Turek

“Your hand is not pushed away
by human obduracy”

—*Confessions* 5.1.1



Lent begins. Once again in our lives, we hear the words of the psalmist, so dear to our hearts: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3).

It is a special time in our spiritual journey—a time of deeper contemplation of life, vocation, and suffering in light of the work of Christ over two thousand years ago. We reflect upon our failures, sins, and shortcomings, but above all on God’s mercy as he reaches out to us—much like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Mercy: a word of special significance to St. Augustine, who put in writing the story of his conversion and the graces that God bestowed upon him. He compiled them in his *Confessions*, a collection of pious ponderings on matters of the divine and the human, on the world, time, and eternity. Permeated by passionate devotion, the *Confessions* still appeals strongly to contemporary readers and may provide an important aid in properly experiencing the journey of Lent.

“Accept the sacrifice of my confessions,” St. Augustine prays, “offered to you by the power of this tongue of mine which you

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have fashioned and aroused to confess to your name; bring healing to all my bones and let them exclaim, *Lord, who is like you?* A person who confesses to you is not informing you about what goes on within him, for a closed heart does not shut you out, nor is your hand pushed away by human obduracy; you melt it when you choose, whether by showing mercy or by enforcing your claim, and from your fiery heat no one can hide.”¹

Man can make his heart obdurate, writes St. Augustine, but God can break through if that is His will. There are as many definitions of Lent as there are ways of experiencing it. Following the thought of St. Augustine, then, we may describe it as a time of opening our souls in order to help God in softening our hearts.

¹ *Confessions* 5.1.1 (113). Page numbers in parentheses refer to the English translation by Maria Boulding, OSB (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997).

“An unquiet heart”

—*Confessions* 1.1.1



Who is God? Who is man? Who am I? Saint Augustine asked these questions after going through the painful experience of distancing himself from God, remaining in sin, human failures, and constant anxiety. When he started writing his *Confessions*, he was able to put most of those problems in the past, but questions about God, man, and his fate remained present.

Furthermore, he began to refine, organize, and analyze those questions. What place, he asked, do I occupy in this divinely made world? Who am I for God and for the people I encounter in my daily life? What is the nature of my true happiness?

These eternal questions are ever-present in the mind of the author, who put down the search for answers in the pages of his *Confessions*. Right there in its first paragraphs he talks about the grandeur, magnificence, might, and wisdom of God—but also the meanness, weakness, hubris, and anxiety of man.

“Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we who carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. Yet these humans, due part of your creation as they are,

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still do long to praise you. You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.”²

Who is God to me? Who is man to me? Who am I? We fear questions like these because they seem too difficult, and so we leave them unanswered for too long. Lent provides the perfect opportunity to face them, in order to define our own spiritual state. We do not have to turn to philosophical inquiries, scientific investigations, or precise analyses. Saint Augustine states that we are a due part of God’s creation and, as such, we are marked with sin and pride. He immediately adds, however, that in this element of His creation lies an immense longing to praise God, a desire that is integral to our nature. This is the way we were created and we go through life carrying some internal anxiety, which—from a spiritual standpoint—might prove useful.

Anna Popławska makes a similar confession in the pages of *Życie Duchowe* (Spiritual Life) magazine: “I was not able to pray. Or rather, I did not put enough effort in it. I fell asleep too quickly at night, weighed down by the burdens of the day, and in the morning I did not have the time. . . . I heard a constant voice of anxiety and longing, and in my heart of hearts I prayed: Lord, don’t let the voice stop racking me, don’t let it go away. There will come a time when I will follow it.”³

² *Confessions* 1.1.1 (39).

³ Anna Popławska, “Czas poszukiwania,” *Życie Duchowe* 59 (2009): 104.

“I praise you for my earliest days and my infancy”

—*Confessions* 1.6.10



After the invocation, which is a form of very personal prayer, St. Augustine proceeds to describe and analyze his life from a spiritual standpoint, beginning at early childhood. It is a detailed retrospection of an experienced and spiritually deep man who longs to comprehend the journey along which God had led him since conception. Watching children’s gestures and behavior proves helpful to his *Confessions* in this task.

“Confess to you I will, Lord of heaven and earth, and praise you for my earliest days and my infancy, which I do not remember. You allow a person to infer by observing others what his own beginnings were like. . . . Already I had existence and life, and as my unspeaking stage drew to a close I began to look for signs whereby I might communicate my ideas to others. Where could a living creature like this have come from, if not from you, Lord? Are any of us skillful enough to fashion ourselves? Could there be some channel hollowed out from some other source through which existence and life might flow to us, apart from yourself, Lord, who create us? Could we derive existence and life from anywhere other than you, in whom to be and to live are not two different realities, since supreme being and supreme life are one and the same? . . .

“What does it matter to me, if someone does not understand this? Let such a person rejoice even to ask the question, ‘What does this mean?’ Yes, let him rejoice in that, and choose to find by not finding rather than by finding fail to find you.”⁴

Saint Augustine gives thanks to God for the gift of life and his infancy—that mysterious time to which his memories do not reach. He was not aware then of what was happening in and around him. For him that is yet another proof that he must have been shaped and given life by someone. In other words: created.

How do we perceive the earliest years of our lives, obscured by the mists of time? Stanisław Morgalla, SJ, a Jesuit priest and a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University’s Institute of Psychology, explains: “One’s childhood and one’s recollection of it are two different things. The former is only granted once in a lifetime and, like the river of Heraclitus’s parable, it cannot be entered twice. But the memory of our childhood and, in fact, all of our past is not clear, given once, or unchanging. Quite the opposite, it grows and develops with us. . . . It is entirely up to us to choose to be ‘victims’ or ‘authors’ of it, whether to bear it passively and return to it painfully or actively face it and transform it anew.”⁵

⁴ *Confessions* 1.6.10 (44–45).

⁵ Stanisław Morgalla, “Stać się dzieckiem,” *Życie Duchowe* 54 (2008): 6.

“Rejoice over salvation of soul”

—*Confessions* 8.3.6



Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* are a form of honest and deep prayer, through which the author attempts to understand at least some stages of his spiritual life. By describing his personal experiences, he wants to illustrate (for the reader’s benefit) the internal mechanisms that govern humans and their actions. The words he directs at God brim with references to persons, events, and passages of the Holy Bible. The Bible demonstrates how different is the thinking of God and humans, how dissimilar are the ways in which God and we attribute value. How can one, for example, explain with human logic why there is more joy in heaven from one repentant sinner than from many just persons who need no penance?

“O God, who are so good, what is it in the human heart that makes us rejoice more intensely over the salvation of a soul which is despaired of but then freed from grave danger, than we would if there had always been good prospects for it and its peril slighter? You too, merciful Father, yes, even you are more joyful over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. And we likewise listen with overflowing gladness when we hear how the shepherd carries back on exultant shoulders the sheep that had strayed, and how

the coin is returned to your treasury as neighbors share the glee of the woman who found it.”⁶

It is easy to see a relation between the passage above and today’s reading of the Bible, which describes the calling of Matthew the tax-collector. “[Jesus] said to him ‘Follow me.’ And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house” (Luke 5:27-29). One might say: here is the sinner, whose return pleases God. Here is he who answers the calling of the Lord without questions, follows him, and radically changes his life, thinking, and actions.

How relatable was the apostle Matthew to St. Augustine; how well did he understand Levi’s joy of meeting the Lord and his desire to make a great feast for him; how clear to him were the words of the evangelist saying that Matthew “left everything.” More than simply surrendering one’s wealth, this means abandoning one’s former habits, harmful routines, and mistreatment of others.

Will we be blessed with the grace of encountering the Lord, of hearing his sweet voice, of leaving that which gives us apparent happiness but really enslaves us? Or, rather, will we stand with the allegedly just Pharisees and say: “We are the chosen few, the believers, we truly need no change”?

Let us ask the Lord, through St. Matthew and St. Augustine, that we might be able to see Jesus passing by us in our daily lives, so that with his help we may pick ourselves up from where we fell and follow him. The Lord will truly rejoice at our return.

⁶ *Confessions* 8.3.6 (189).

“Beset by temptations I struggle every day”

—Confessions 10.31.47



No one needs to be convinced about the existence of countless temptations in our everyday lives. They have accompanied us since our childhood, since the very first moment we feel the urge to do something that we know is forbidden. One is so tempted to try this or that, because, after all, what could be wrong with it? New temptations appear throughout the years—new dangers, often in very subtle forms, coated with appealing beauty. We succumb to some and resist others. And today? No man can say he is free from temptation. We have been through much in life, we have learned from our own and others’ mistakes, and yet time and time again we still encounter new perils—even in forms as familiar and basic as food and drink.

“Beset by . . . temptations I struggle every day against gluttony, for eating and drinking are not something I can decide to cut away once and for all, and never touch again, as I have been able to do with sexual indulgence. The reins that control the throat must therefore be relaxed or tightened judiciously; and is there anyone, Lord, who is not sometimes dragged a little beyond the bounds of what is needful? If there is such a person, he is a great man, so let him tell out the greatness of your name. I am not he, for I am a sinful man, yet I will tell out the greatness

of your name nonetheless; and may he who has overcome the world intercede for my sins, and count me among the frailer members of his body, because your eyes rest upon my imperfections and in your book everyone will find a place.”⁷

Temptation is also the theme of today’s gospel reading, but in this case the stakes are immeasurably higher—here, the God-Man himself is tempted by Satan: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matt 4:3). Satan tempts Jesus with the ordinary, an everyday necessity for any living creature. He knew the Savior had been fasting for forty days and forty nights; he was hungry and thirsty, so why not follow the advice and satisfy the most basic of human needs? But Jesus answered him: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). There are things more important in life than food and drink.

“Beset by . . . temptations I struggle every day against gluttony,” St. Augustine honestly admits in his *Confessions*. Even our Lord Savior was subject to temptations, so why should we be immune? Fasting is not a popular idea in today’s world—neither the word itself, nor its practice and spiritual motivation. We prefer to talk about *dieting* in all its shapes and forms. However, it is precisely during Lent when we should return to it and attempt even a minor sacrifice. This must be done for spiritual reasons, though, and not just to lose another six pounds and get slimmer. Rather, we seek to beautify our *souls* through even the smallest of sacrifices. This form of spiritual exercise will make it easier to face more serious temptations in other areas of our lives.

⁷ *Confessions* 10.31.47 (268).