

**Commemoration of Monnica,
Mother of Augustine of Hippo, 387**

May 4, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

1 Samuel 1:10–11, 20; Psalm 116:10–17; Luke 7:11–17

Let me begin with the good news that, when I sat down at the desk in my study this morning, there was an email from our church's bank with the documents to be signed for the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program. The board of trustees will know soon how the parish's finances were affected at the end of April. The loan, and the expectation of loan forgiveness, will be a great help to our parish.

The church complex has been closed since Sunday, March 15, to all but its residents. Let me add that I hope our bishop will be able safely to open our churches sooner than later. Our parish community needs to be able to gather. The many ministries this congregation enables will be needed urgently by many.

So, Saint Monnica. This morning, for the first time, I looked at the entry for Saint Monnica in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.¹

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (ODCC) (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Monica, St.," 931.

First, I've often wondered why we Episcopalians spell her name with two "Ns"—our great friend Sister Monica, of the Community of St. John Baptist, is a one "N" Monica and so is that wonderful California city, Santa Monica. The ODCC tells us that her name, however, in the earliest manuscripts is spelled with 2 Ns.

In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church moved her feast day from May 4 to August 27, the day before the commemoration of her very famous oldest child, Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who died on August 28 in the year 430. I could not find any specific reason for the May 4 commemoration. It's sometimes the case that dates are selected when relics are moved or a special church is built or the local calendar is free. Her place birth is not known for sure, but her name is a Berber name, almost certainly she was from a town on the North African coast. His father was from Hippo, then another seaport in what is today Algeria. He died when Augustine was 17. He fell in love with a woman not, of his class, with whom he had a gifted son, Adeotus, who died at the age of 16.² He was present

² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 1969), 39, 62.

with Augustine and the family group when Monnica died.³

Augustine was not a Christian, though he knew his mother longed and prayed for his conversion. Instead he turned to studies and took up Manichaean philosophy, thinking concerned with the struggle between good and evil. Engaged to a ten-year old whom he could not marry until she was twelve, he became a Christian. His mother's manner of life, I think it's fair to say, was not unimportant in preparing his way to faith.

Monnica followed Augustine, pursuing his studies, and her other son Navigius, first to Rome and then to Milan, where Augustine came under the influence of Ambrose, its bishop. He was baptized by Ambrose at the Easter Vigil April 24–25 in the year 387.⁴

Monnica and her sons decided to return to Africa. As their journey began, she died and was buried in Rome's port city, Ostia. In the fifteenth century, her relics were moved to the Church of Saint Augustine in Rome.⁵ Peter Brown in his biography of Augustine

³ Ibid., 129–30.

⁴ Ibid., 124–25.

⁵ ODCC, s.v. "Monnica, St.," 931.

writes that the original grave marker was uncovered in 1945 by two boys digging a hole to plant a marker for a game.⁶

I want to close with words by the late liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanagh, a monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey, a Roman Catholic community, who taught for many years at Yale Divinity School, from his book *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*. In a passage reflecting on “The Meaning and Knowledge of Baptism,” he wrote:

[The Church] is a Tree of Life whose vast branches hold ensnared a living, if bloody Lamb; whose taproot sinks deep into the rich and murky waters of creation itself. Who would live in Christ must learn to climb with muddy feet, for there is nothing conventional, neat, or altogether logical about a crucifixion or the Church. Conversion in Christ involves broken hearts more than changes of mind. Augustine, perhaps the most towering intellect of his day, was more moved to faith by the sight of the Church at worship and by the voice of a child singing than the . . . [teachings] of Ambrose or arguments against the Manichees.⁷

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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⁶ Brown, 131.

⁷ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978), 159–60.