

Homily for Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, 430
August 28, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Hebrews 12:22–24, 28–29; Psalm 84:7–12; John 14:6–15

The Dream of Scipio is a novel by Ian Pears, an English novelist, art historian, and journalist.¹ Its central characters are three men and the relationship each had with a woman in a time of change: the collapse of the world in which they lived. The novel is set in what we call southern France, Provence, for first couple in the fifth-century of the Christian Era, for the second, the Middle Age, and for the third, the Second World War.

As the novel begins, the Roman Empire is receding before the invasion of Visigoths, Vandals, and others. Manlius is Pears' first character. He's a high ranking, wealthy, and well-educated Roman aristocrat, a student of philosophy, not Christianity. Yet he becomes a bishop to preserve what he can of the world he knew as a younger man.

Of course, this is the time when Augustine of Hippo lived. Hippo was a small Roman port city in what is now the northeast coast of Algeria. At that time,

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/9833.Iain_Pears, (accessed 28 August 2020).

North Africa, not Rome, was, in the words of historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, “the first stronghold of Latin Christianity, the home of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine of Hippo.”²

When Augustine died on August 28, in the year 430, the city had been besieged for three months by the Vandals. It surrendered a year later.³ Though it’s a novel, *The Dream of Scipio* is suggestive of the world in which Augustine lived.

Somewhere in the rectory is a copy of the book published to accompany Kenneth Clark’s 1969 British television series *Civilisation*⁴ I can remember his words about the collapse of literacy in Western Europe after Rome’s fall. For centuries afterward, higher clerics and religious were the only people in the West who could read and write. I remember thinking at the time, how bad would life have to be not to teach one’s children to read. I didn’t know then but would learn many years later that one of my four great-grandfathers, John Lafayette Collins, born in 1859 on a

² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 277.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Hippo_Regius, (accessed 28 August 2020).

⁴--it was a Christmas present from my parents that year.

sharecropper's farm in the middle of Georgia, would never learn to read or even write his own name.

We know that Augustine was born on the thirteenth day of November in the year 354 in north Africa. His parents were a pagan father, Patricius, and a Christian mother, Monnica, who would become very well-known because of her son. Many of Augustine's sermons survive. He is famous for two books, *Confessions* and the *City of God*, sermons, and other writings. In his *Confessions*, one prayer as a younger man was, "Oh, Master, make me chaste and celibate—but not yet!"⁵

Augustine was very well-educated and very smart. He left North Africa for Italy to be a teacher of rhetoric. He would end up in Milan, where Ambrose was bishop. He was baptized by Ambrose at the Easter Vigil on April 24 in 387. His mother dies later that year in Italy. He settled in Hippo in 391 and was ordained priest. In 395 he's consecrated as bishop to follow the frail, older bishop of Hippo. He becomes bishop in 396 and serves until his death. We know little about the concubine mother of his son, Adeodatus. This son was present with Augustine when

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kenneth-Mackenzie-Clark-Baron-Clark>, (accessed 28 August 2020).

Monnica died. The son died young, probably in the year 390.⁶ Augustine never married.

Aidan Kavanagh, in his book *The Shape of Baptism*, writes, “Conversion in Christ involves broken hearts more than changes of mind. Augustine, perhaps the most towering intellect of his day, was moved to faith by the sight of the Church at worship and by the voice of a child singing than the confessional apologies Ambrose”—the great bishop who baptized him—“or arguments against the [Persian religion of Manichaeism].”⁷

Augustine was important to the theological path, development of the Christian community East and West. As bishop, he participated in the controversies with the Manichees and two important Christian theological debates. A breakaway group in North Africa, known as the Donatists, maintained that a bishop or priest’s personal holiness determined whether a sacrament was valid. Augustine was against that.⁸ The other was the theological debate with

⁶ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 1969), 74, 135.

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

⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Augustine, St. of Hippo,” 108–10.

Pelagianism—the idea that a man or woman can move towards salvation apart from God’s grace. Pelagianism lost.⁹ Martin Luther would turn to Augustine to undergird his writings on reformation.¹⁰ It’s hard to imagine Christianity without the mark Augustine, by God’s grace, placed on it.

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

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⁹ Ibid., s.v. "Donatism," 419.

¹⁰ Ibid., s.v. "Pelagianism," 1058–59.