

New Insights into St. Augustine

We think of him as a principal architect of Western civilization, and only St. Paul and our Lord himself have determined the character of the Western church more than St. Augustine of Hippo. But Catherine Conybeare suggests that the great bishop always thought of himself as an outsider.

In her new study, [Augustine the African](#) (2025), Conybeare sets out to retrieve the world of coastal North Africa at the close of the Roman Empire in the West. What was then Rome's rural breadbasket birthed its most famous Christian.

Augustine was born to landowners in Thagaste, now in the highlands of Algeria. The family spoke Latin at home, though the name of Augustine's mother, Monica, betrays her indigenous Berber background.

Well educated at home and in Carthage, then the crown of North Africa, Augustine made the leap across the Mediterranean to the Italian peninsula and into much higher social spheres. At the time of his conversion, he was a celebrated intellectual, what today we would call a "scholar in residence" to the Western imperial court, which was then in Milan.

But, as Conybeare points out, Augustine's interlocutors, while praising the style of the Latin he spoke, consistently mentioned that it came with a North African accent, betraying his rural origins. The course of the fourth century witnessed the conversion of Rome's noble families to the new Christian faith so that by its close, one could clearly speak of a class-conscious Christianity. Augustine's intellectual inferiors never let him forget that they were born into a level of society forever closed to newcomers such as himself.

Conybeare suggests that Augustine's self-image as the outsider explained his decision to return to North Africa following his own conversion to Christianity. Augustine had barely disembarked before the local church in Hippo insisted upon the ordination of their famous son.

From that rural diocese, Augustine set the course for the church of his century and ever since. Corresponding with emperors, bishops and assorted nobles, he ended the Donatist schism from the Catholic Church in North Africa. He went on to champion the doctrine of grace against the Pelagian heresy, which thought salvation was something we could earn in our own right.

On Aug. 24, 410 A.D., soldiers of the Visigoth king Aleric sacked the city of Rome. The center of the empire's life had already shifted to its newly constructed Eastern capital city of Constantinople, but everyone in the Roman empire struggled to comprehend the notion that Rome, the "eternal city," could fall. Imagine yourself watching the destruction of Washington, D.C., on some screen, even after the construction of a new capitol building in, say, Denver.

Some suggested that a Rome still rooted in its pagan origins would never have fallen. This cataclysm, the greatest the world had known, prompted Augustine to compose his classic *The City of God*. While the other great minds of the age lamented the unthinkable, Augustine rather cavalierly accepted Rome's fall as both inevitable and overdue.

His masterpiece suggests that two cities are destined to be intertwined. One is human; the other, divine. While our eyes are forever attuned to what is happening in politics, God is at work in the world far beyond that pale and at a much deeper level.

One city is forever passing; the other is forever coming to be.

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, "I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength." (*City of God*, Book XIV, Chapter 28)

Of course, what happens in the earthly city matters. Christians must support the good that it can do without being seduced by promises it can never deliver.

But everyone—Christian and non-Christian—suffered when Rome fell. Did it matter to what city one's heart was pledged? In answer, Augustine essentially repeated the Lord himself, who told us that "By your perseverance you will secure your lives" (Lk 21:19). Christians must remain grounded in their faith, even while they suffer the same vicissitudes as unbelievers. If God permits our suffering, it cannot be without purpose.

The whole family of God, most high and most true, has therefore a consolation of its own,—a consolation which cannot deceive, and which has in it a surer hope than the tottering and falling affairs of earth can afford. They will not refuse the discipline of this temporal life, in which they are schooled for life eternal; nor will they lament their experience of it, for the good things of earth they use as pilgrims who are not detained by them, and its ills either prove or improve them (I.25).

In whatever city, heavenly or earthly, one's heart lies, that heart will be broken as it sees its dreams come to nought. The trials are the same, but their meaning—in the light of eternity—is not. When God

exposes us to adversities, it is either to prove our perfections or correct our imperfections; and in return for our patient endurance of the sufferings of time, He reserves for us an everlasting reward (I.29).

Already an old man, Augustine struggled to complete *The City of God* before he died. The great bishop of Hippo drew his last breath as a Germanic tribe, the Vandals, whose atrocities remain embedded in the English language, besieged his city.

It did not matter for Augustine and not simply because death was already at his door. Though he surely must have worried about the future of the church and prayed for its survival in a post-Roman world, he had never been a true believer in the power and privilege of Rome. He had always been an outsider, mastering its language with an accented tongue. For him, all the powers of earth were destined to pass,

But for you who fear my name, there will arise
the sun of justice with its healing rays (Malachi 3:20).

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