

## ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

### Sinning Saints (1)

#### St Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430)

In this series of six sinning saints I will overlook the most famous of these, he who persecuted Christians and was seemingly complicit in the murder of St Stephen, namely St Paul. Yet the first in the series, St Augustine of Hippo, is, apart from Paul, perhaps the most famous saint with a sinful history. This was despite his upbringing in the Faith by his devout mother, St Monica. His father was a pagan Roman citizen who converted to Christianity on his deathbed.

Augustine benefited from a good education first in his home town of Tagaste (North Africa) and finally at Carthage. An excellent scholar, he began teaching rhetoric at Carthage until, in 383, he went to Rome and, in 384 to Milan, then the most important city of the Western Empire, where he became Imperial Professor of Rhetoric. Augustine by now was 30 years old.

His private and spiritual life had meanwhile been far from exemplary. Aged 17 in Carthage, he began a 13-year relationship with a woman who bore him a son, Adeodatus. Also while in Carthage, he became a zealous Manichean, a heretical religion which (among other things) denied the omnipotence of God. He adhered to this religion for some 10 years and, indeed, it was through Manichean connections that the academic posts in Rome and Milan opened up to him. St Monica followed her son to Milan and persuaded him to marry a young woman, whereupon he reluctantly renounced his long-term concubine and mother of his child. His fiancée was, however, underage, such that Augustine had to wait a couple of years to marry her. In this interim period, he took another concubine but then broke off that relationship and also his engagement to marry. It was about this time that he made his most famous quote: *“Lord give me chastity and continence but not yet”*

In Milan Augustine met the Bishop, St Ambrose, who was also a rhetorician. They became good friends, though at first Augustine was still not attracted by Christianity saying that he had entirely despaired of finding faith in the Catholic Church but, in due course, he became more and more under Ambrose’s influence. In 386 Augustine was ready to embrace the Faith. He said that he had opened a book on St Paul and there read, at Romans 13:13-14: *“let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”* This was what finally led him away from his previous life and to the path of priesthood and the saintly life. Augustine, and his son, Adeodatus, were baptised by Ambrose at Easter 387.

Augustine returned with Adeodatus to Africa. St Monica died soon after and father and son then led a life of some comfort underpinned by their inheritance. However, Adeodatus died soon after. This prompted Augustine to give all his possessions to the poor and embark on the path of priesthood, becoming ordained in 391. He became Bishop of Hippo (in modern day Algeria) in 395. From then on Augustine

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spent much of his life writing and struggling against the many heretical versions of Christianity which were then prevalent in North Africa. His bishop friend, Possidius, described him as a man who ate sparingly, worked tirelessly, despised gossip, shunned the temptations of the flesh, and exercised prudence in the financial stewardship of his See. Such was the intellectual input of his spiritual writings that he has been made a Doctor of the Church. He crystallised many of Catholicism's fundamental doctrines, including those concerning original sin and divine grace. The historian Diarmaid McCullough said of him: *"Augustine's impact on Western Christian thought can hardly be overstated"*.

Pope Leo XIV is of course an Augustinian. In 2025 he said: *"Augustine's journey was full of trial and error, like our own lives." Yet through grace, the prayers of his mother Monica, and the witness of the community around him, he discovered "the way to peace for his restless heart"*

SS (24<sup>th</sup> May 2026)

