

# Saint Augustine

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*Homily on Matthew 23:27-32*

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On this day when the Catholic Church remembers Saint Augustine, I want to begin with a quotation from G. K. Chesterson. It is an odd place to begin, but my reason will be come clear in a few moments. Here's the quote:

The weak point in the whole of [Thomas] Carlyle's case for aristocracy lies, indeed, in his most celebrated phrase. Carlyle said that men were mostly fools. . . [Chesterton contrasts Carlyle's view with that of] Christianity, [which he notes] with a surer and more reverent realism, says that they are all fools. This doctrine is sometimes called the doctrine of original sin. It may also be described as the doctrine of the equality of men. But the essential point of it is merely this, that whatever primary and far-reaching moral dangers affect any man, affect all men. All men can be criminals, if tempted; all men can be heroes, if inspired. And this doctrine does away altogether with Carlyle's pathetic belief (or any one else's pathetic belief) in "the wise few." There are no wise few. Every aristocracy that has ever existed has behaved, in all essential points, exactly like a small mob.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See G. K. Chesterton, *On Heretics* (Rockville, Maryland: Serenity Publications, 2009)

I begin with Chesterton's description of original sin as the doctrine of the equality of men because it give us a perspective from which to approach the saint and doctor of the Church we celebrate today.

I want to lay the Chesterton quotation alongside one from Clyde Fant and William Pinson, which comes from their biographical essay on Augustine. Fant and Pinson remind us that:

He had two mistresses, fathered an illegitimate child, flitted from one job to another, and was erratic in his beliefs. These are hardly the credentials for greatness in any field and certainly not in preaching. But God can transform any man and work through him and Aurelius Augustinus better known as Augustine is a first class exhibit of God's transforming work. Dissipated and wicked during the first 30 years of his life, Augustine became one of the greatest preachers and theologians of all time.<sup>2</sup>

I place these two quotations together because I believe that Augustine's life proves the first quotation to be true in both of its points. The first point is that All men can be criminals, if tempted; all men can be heroes, if inspired. The second point is that there are no wise few.

Those who think there are a wise few, have not walked along the Third Path of Formation. There is a reason that the third path comes at the end of formation, for it is

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<sup>2</sup>*Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. 1, eds. Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr. (Waco, Texas: Word, Inc., 1971), 113.

precisely then that the temptation to think that somehow those of us who are further along are somehow exempt from the lessons of the first two paths. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not talking about the upper classmen of the seminary. I'm talking about priests and bishops for, in truth, your journey on the third path only really begins, as Father Barron said so well on Monday night, on the day you become a father. It begins the moment you realize that another's life has been placed in your care and you don't know what to do, yet you will be held accountable for the care of that life. Augustine knew this when he said "With you I am a Christian, for you I am a bishop. The second fills me with terror, the first, with great consolation."

How is it possible that a sinner like Augustine became a doctor of the Church? It is only by his journey down the second path, where he came to confront his sinfulness and by his cooperation with the grace of God and the help of the prayers of Saint Monica, and yes, even her tears, find the Center which would discipline and order his life to one of sanctity.

And it is that notion of ordering our life toward sanctity that I want to use to end this reflection. Everyone knows that Saint Basil the Great in the East and Saint Benedict in the West wrote rules for monasteries. But Augustine also wrote a rule for the priest's living in his diocese. It is much shorter and simpler, but lacking nothing in the depth of its insight. Its key point, like that of the other monastic rules, is that priests need the whole of their life to achieve sanctity. One never graduates from priestly formation. The seminary, like the novitiate, simply prepares you to live in a priestly manner for the

rest of your life on this Earth, so that you might continue to live forever.

The three paths, then, are not like classes which you take and then finish. They are to be stable qualities which grow in your life to the point where they are self-sustaining. They are not habits exactly, as much as qualities which have become part of the structure of your personality. Walking the path transfigures you so that you have a Christ-centered mind, an ascetically trained body and pastoral spirit.

Augustine spent 30 years of his life believing he was one of the wise few. It was only when, through the preaching of Saint Ambrose he embarked on the journey of the three paths, that became the man who could inspire others to be heroes.

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