

# Introduction

At Villanova University, every freshman undergraduate student takes the Augustine and Culture Seminar (ACS). One of the high points of this program is a study of *Confessions*, the famous spiritual autobiography of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). ACS seeks to help first year students understand how Augustine's thinking pertains to their own lives as they begin their college careers.

Some of Villanova's new faculty members are, of course, deeply conversant with St. Augustine's works, but others may have only a slight familiarity with this great writer and thinker. The goal of this booklet is to introduce new Villanova faculty members to some of the ideas explored by Augustine. It was written by the students in two ACS sections. As new readers of Augustine themselves, they may be best able to introduce his thought to others who are just discovering him.

We began the project by isolating twelve important incidents or themes in *Confessions*. Three students wrote an individual paper on each of these topics, analyzing the significance of their topic to the *Confessions* as a whole. Then, working in teams of three, the students built on their previous work to develop the pages that follow. In each section they begin with a summary of the basic incidents in the story. Next, they delve into the deeper meaning of each episode by analyzing Augustine's text and extracting the underlying message. Finally, the students draw comparisons between what they read in *Confessions* and their lives as freshmen at Villanova, answering the proverbial question among students, "Why is it necessary to read such ancient texts?" As instructors in this course, we had the privilege of working with these talented students and truly learned from them as they did from us.

Augustine himself had wonderful advice for any new teacher: “Set love as the criterion for all that you say, and whatever you teach, teach in such a way that the person to whom you speak, by hearing may believe, by believing, hope and by hoping, love.” We hope this booklet embodies this quote and will encourage others to learn more about Augustine and to teach in his inspiration.

Instructor: John Immerwahr, Department of Philosophy  
Teaching Intern: Greg Doyle '12

Source: St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. In a few cases, the text has been slightly edited for readability.

Villanova University, Spring 2012

# Contents

Introduction.....	1
In the Beginning.....	4
The Pears Incident .....	7
Reading Cicero's <i>Hortensius</i> .....	10
Death of a Friend.....	13
Meeting Bishop Ambrose.....	15
The Problem of Evil.....	17
Seeking a New Life .....	19
<i>Tolle Lege</i> .....	21
Baptism .....	24
Monica .....	27
The Vision at Ostia.....	30
Death of Monica.....	32
Authors and Acknowledgements.....	34

# **In the Beginning**

*“Our hearts are restless until  
they rest in you” (St. Augustine Confessions, 1.1.1)*

## **The First Paragraph of *Confessions***

As you drive on to Villanova’s campus through the main gate you will, hopefully, exchange a friendly greeting with the Public Safety Officer at the kiosk. If you linger for just a moment and look to your right you will see the Health Services Building. If you look carefully you’ll see an inscription on the wall just inside the door. It is the famous line from the very first paragraph of St. Augustine’s spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*. It reads: “You have made us for yourself, Oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (*Confessions* 1.1.1). This quote is a fitting welcome to Villanova’s campus because it captures the essence of the Augustinian tradition and the way of life here at Villanova University. Here Augustine immediately introduces this pervasive theme of restlessness that runs throughout his life. In telling his life story he shows how this restlessness followed him until he turned his direction to eventually find God. Augustine recognized that he was unable to feel the universality of God until he grew beyond this dissatisfaction with life and the general unhappiness that was contained within him.

## **Deeper Meanings**

From a young age, Augustine wanted only what was pleasurable to his senses, oblivious of the imminent consequences. In search of happiness, he engaged himself in sinful, momentary pleasures that would soon fade, leaving him unsatisfied with his poor choices. According to Augustine:

“I had become deafened by the clanking chain of my mortal condition, the penalty of my pride...I travelled much further away from you into more and more sterile things productive of unhappiness, proud in my self-pity, incapable of rest in my exhaustion” (2.2.2). \_

As his life in this condition progressed, Augustine longed to break from this symptom of sin that prevented him from experiencing inner peace with God. Each time he sinned by succumbing to temporary desires, he endured an unsatisfying emptiness as a result of the quick loss of these enjoyments. Consequently, Augustine suffered immensely from this flaw in his lifestyle that restrained him from seeking the peace of God.

Augustine found himself trapped in a constant struggle of prioritizing ephemeral satisfaction above God. “So my two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration” (8.5.10). Due to his developing awareness of this “disease,” he began to question the purpose for his actions. He was left in a state of misery as he was impeded by this punishment. Augustine could not mentally overcome this symptom that was preventing him from fully committing himself to God.

However, this restlessness that tormented Augustine was in fact necessary in order for him to return to God and a life of loving the higher over the lower. “My hunger was internal, deprived of inward food, that is of you yourself, my God” (3.1.1). All that could quell Augustine’s disturbed soul was returning to God, and it was his restlessness that, over time, led him to the discovery of that tranquility. What previously served as distractions for Augustine were at once cast aside. “What I once feared to lose was now a delight to dismiss” (9.2.2).

## **For Villanova Students Today**

Villanova students today may share this same restlessness that Augustine endured in his life. College is the prime time to discover oneself through learning and experimentation. With this, choosing the morally “right” decisions will not always be first priority, and mistakes are bound to be made. Depending on some people, the extent to which one will be compelled to do certain actions by their need to fit in (socially or academically) differs. However, this motivation exists in essentially all young adults. Nowadays, students have a preconceived notion that their purpose in life is to go to school, receive a decent education, and eventually obtain a successful career that provides as much money as possible. In addition, there is a need to build relationships as well as attain a certain reputation. A great number of people spend their lives constantly searching for more, unsatisfied with their present status and possessions. It is rare that people admit to having enough, even though they likely have plenty or even too much. Therefore, in the ongoing search to fill the emptiness, they remain restless for the majority, if not all of their lives. However, many can find their own fulfillment from their faith in God as Augustine did after a life of continuous searching. Others find fulfillment in service to others or in self-understanding. A good way for students to discover more about themselves and their faith would be to join activities and get involved on campus. For example, Campus Ministry offers several retreats for students to attend that provide valuable time for reflection. By doing this, they may find that God is using these organizations to reach out to them. Though it may be more painful and may take longer than expected to seek comfort in our faith in God, it is a necessary step in the strenuous journey to inner peace.

# **The Pears Incident**

*“It was in the crime itself” (2.8.16)*

## **In Augustine’s Life**

After Augustine writes about his infancy and early childhood schooling, he talks about an event in his adolescence that was very important to him. He begins by telling of how one night, Augustine and a group of friends set out to steal the fruit from a pear tree. He did not steal the fruit for the purpose of eating it. According to Augustine, the pears were “neither attractive in color or taste” (2.4.9). However, he solely desired to carry out the action in order to enjoy the excitement of thievery. Augustine and his friends stole the fruit simply for the sake of doing it, not for the desire to eat the fruit. Admittedly, Augustine would not have committed the crime by himself, exemplifying that “friendship can be a dangerous enemy” (2.2.10). Augustine fell in love with a group that urged his exploits and encouraged him to commit wrong-doings alongside of them. He explains this idea when he says, “Therefore my love in the act was to be associated with the gang in whose company I did it” (2.8.16). This incident shows that in his search to relieve his restlessness, Augustine found distractions along the way to God.

## **Deeper Meanings**

The pears incident is extremely important to the understanding of Augustine's theory of sin. For Augustine, the world is arranged in a hierarchy where God is the highest and everything else is placed lower on the scale, and sin is loving these lower desires as if they were the higher. According to him, loving the lower over the higher is wrong because it places the majority of one’s love on something imperfect as opposed to placing it on the most supreme being, God, who will always be good. In this way, sin is not about what we do, but rather what we love and how much value we place on it.

First Augustine commits a sin, stealing pears, for the love of things that are on the lowest end of the scale such as the thrill of stealing and the obtaining of immoral friendships. Augustine holds these sinful pleasures with great value. He sins for the simple joy of transgression and portrays this when he says, “Yet sin is committed for the sake of all these things and others of this kind when, in consequence of an immoderate urge towards those things which are at the bottom end of the scale of good, we abandon the higher and supreme goods” (2.5.10). Augustine found rebellious pleasure in doing what he knew he was not permitted to do. As a result of the free will that is given to Augustine by God, his mind became a victim of loving the lower or immoral things.

Furthermore, Augustine’s definition of sin teaches people to focus on what they love rather than what they do. Actions and emotions can be interpreted as the results we receive when one loves the lower, such as crime and misery over the higher. Inferior goods should not be comparable to God. The creations are supposed to be loved but to a lesser degree. The individual parts that make up the whole are “sweet experiences,” such as the friendships that may pass away from the Earth (4.4.7). As Augustine began to develop more mature relationships, he realized that his previous friendships had not brought him the peace for which he searched. This understanding demonstrates that one should not love something that will not last forever, and if one finds God on the highest scale of good, there will never be disappointment.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

By reading Augustine's *Confessions* and specifically the pears incident, students can learn two things: having good priorities and focusing on the higher rather than the lower. Augustine demonstrates this through his own experiences, showing that through his mistakes, he could come to find the higher truth. In college, students may seek the company of others or things that only promote the lower desires to try and feel included. College students, however, can further learn to resist peer pressure by using these experiences to better themselves. Instead of partaking in activities that promote dishonest behavior, students can look to join clubs and organizations that seek to create good, substantial relationships and lifestyles. In contrast to Augustine's motive to commit a sin with a group who urged his exploits, Villanova students can make decisions for themselves to improve their well-being and character. They can implement this by setting positive goals for themselves, seeking out people who bring out the best in them, and avoiding any negative factors that they may face.

## **Reading Cicero's *Hortensius***

*"I burned with longing to leave earthly things and fly to You" (3.4.8)*

### **In Augustine's Life**

The next phase of learning in Augustine's life came while he pursued his education in the study of rhetoric during his college years. He was instructed to read Cicero's *Hortensius* as a model of style in order to understand good writing. But what struck Augustine was not the style of writing, but rather the content. The book inspired him to focus on something beyond status and success in his life. According to Augustine, "It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart" (3.4.7).

Augustine's exposure to this book served as the first major turning point in his life, as he now longed for true wisdom. It was here that he introduced the idea of the burning heart with his following words: "All my hollow hopes suddenly seemed worthless, and with unbelievable intensity my heart burned with longing for the immortality that wisdom seemed to promise" (3.4.8). [For this passage we use the translation by Maria Boulding.] As we will see, it was a long and painful journey afterwards, but this was the beginning of Augustine's transformation. The image of a burning heart can be found on the Villanova University seal and reminds us that we should model ourselves after Augustine whose heart burned with passion for wisdom.

## Deeper Meanings

While Augustine considered Cicero's *Hortensius* to have had a major influence on his life, it was only the beginning of a series of encounters that led him to conversion. He was now realizing that his priorities should no longer stem from a desire for worldly things, but from a true love for wisdom. After being exposed to Cicero's *Hortensius*, Augustine turned to the Holy Scriptures in an attempt to quench his thirst for wisdom. Under further examination, however, Augustine rejected the Bible because he thought the content was unsatisfying. He allowed his pride and closed-mindedness to block the valuable message that the Bible had to offer when he wrote, "It seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero. My inflated conceit shunned the Bible's restraint and the gaze never penetrated its inwardness (3.5.9)".

Though this stage was a promising start to Augustine's conversion, the fundamental issue of pride arose. Due to his unwillingness to set aside his conceit, he involved himself with the Manichees. These people were a group of non-Christians who rejected God and formulated their own ideas and accepted them as the ultimate truth. This arrogant behavior and idea of supposed "wisdom" clouded Augustine's mind until he came to the realization that they were not the source of the true wisdom he yearned to find. Upon his awakening to the Manichees' wrongful actions, Augustine concluded that, "Otherwise their heart was empty of truth. They used to say 'Truth, truth', and they had a lot to tell me about it; but there was never any truth in them (3.6.10)".

## **For Villanova Students Today**

Augustine's encounter with Cicero's *Hortensius* relates directly to the lives of students today in the sense that we live in a world where people are often only concerned with style, rather than content. But students must focus on going beyond style in order to gain true wisdom. Students can gain invaluable wisdom from all aspects of the college experience if they allow themselves to open their minds to new opportunities. This directly relates to the struggles of Augustine when he attempts to read the Bible, as he lets himself assert his pride over education. Instead of using the contents of the Bible to see how important substance is over style, he let his pride close his mind to learning and improving himself. Students will often come across an idea that interests them, but they hesitate to pursue that interest because it may not be lucrative. At other times students are uninterested in a certain class because it is a requirement or because the teacher is less exciting. If they approach those classes with a different mindset they may gain valuable knowledge. In other words, if students today prioritize their love of wisdom over lower desires such as pride in themselves and monetary aspirations, they may be able to expand their horizons and lead more fulfilling lives.

# Death of a Friend

*"Grief darkened my heart" (4.4.9)*

## In Augustine's Life

Augustine tells the story of an unnamed friend from childhood with whom he spent much time during the period when he taught rhetoric in his hometown in North Africa:

As a boy he had grown up with me, and we had gone to school together...He was then not yet my friend, and when he did become so, it was less than a true friendship" (4.4.7).

Augustine heavily influenced his friend by turning him away from Christianity and toward "superstitions and pernicious mythologies" (4.4.7). Augustine enjoyed this friendship because he was able to sway his friend towards whatever direction Augustine pleased, and Augustine enjoyed the feeling of control and power over his friend. However, this changed when his friend was nearing death and lay unconscious, causing his friend's parents to baptize him without the friend's knowledge (4.4.8). When his friend's health improved, Augustine ridiculed the baptism, assuming his friend would too laugh at the idea; however, much to Augustine's alarm, his friend grew furious at him and warned him that such jokes would not be tolerated. Within a few days, Augustine's friend died while Augustine was absent from his side. After his friend's death, Augustine was devastated by the loss. He was so distraught that he said that he had "become to myself a vast problem" (4.4.9). This experience was another major turning point in Augustine's life.

## Deeper Meanings

Augustine tells us that his friendship with his unnamed friend was not a true friendship because it was based on Augustine's desire for power.

Augustine cared less for the friend than he did for the power he felt through being the puppeteer of his friend. In a true friendship, friends are drawn together by the love of God, something that was lacking in Augustine and his friend's relationship. Augustine made his desire for influence over his friend the god of his life, rather than God Himself. Because of this ill-judgment, he is inflicted with great misery upon the death of his friend. Augustine wrote, "I was surprised that any other mortals were alive, since he whom I had loved as if he would never die was dead" (4.6.11). This was a severe mistake because no one but God is constant, and yet, Augustine acted as though his friend would live forever, along with his love for 'playing God' in his friend's life. By placing himself before God, Augustine in essence rejected God rather than mourning his friend through God who would have helped Augustine during the tough times. Augustine's story has a direct correlation to his teachings of how the punishment for one's sin is misery. Thus, Augustine is showing his belief that not letting God into his life is a sin, and that is why he is stuck in such a dark place after his friend dies.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

Augustine's reaction to the death of his friend teaches Villanova students today about what true friendship is. Throughout college, they will encounter and embark on friendships with many different types of people. Unfortunately, many people make the mistake of choosing their friends for selfish reasons such as befriending someone smart for help on homework, etc. These relationships are not genuine relationships because they stem from selfish motives. The passage teaches students that their true friends are only ones with whom they are bound together by something more profound than smaller, insignificant reasons like feeling in control. Students should also not let their friendships dominate their lives because if those friendships happen to disappoint them, they will only end up disappointed and miserable, like Augustine. This passage encourages Villanova students to think about who their real friends are and realize that their true friends are the people in their lives who make them better people.

# Meeting Bishop Ambrose

*“The best of men, devout in your worship” (6.4.6)*

## In Augustine’s Life

Eventually Augustine went to Rome to teach rhetoric there; but he disliked the atmosphere, triggering his decision to move to Milan to teach. It was in Milan that Augustine encountered Bishop Ambrose. Upon arriving in Milan, Augustine initially visited Bishop Ambrose in order to learn from him a more impressive style of public speaking that could help his position as a teacher of rhetoric. Augustine listened to Ambrose’s sermons expecting purely style, but received a greater gift:

“I was not interested in learning what he was talking about. My ears were only for his rhetorical technique; this empty concern was all that remained with me after I had lost any hope that a way to you might lie open for man. Nevertheless together with the words which I was enjoying, the subject matter, in which I was unconcerned, came to make an entry into my mind. I could not separate them. While I opened my heart in noting the eloquence with which he spoke, there also entered no less the truth which he affirmed, though only gradually.” (6.14.24)

Eventually, Augustine understood the Bible’s substance after hearing many of Ambrose’s public lectures. It is at this point in Augustine’s life when he begins to question his stance on faith. Earlier in his life when he had first picked up the Bible after reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* (see previous section), he was immediately disappointed with the content, having interpreted Genesis in a literal sense. However, Ambrose teaches Augustine to read the Bible figuratively and to ponder its meaning beyond the physical text.

## **Deeper Meanings**

The passage about Ambrose brings up the deeper themes of mentorship and having an open mind. Before Ambrose, Augustine had read Genesis only to be disappointed by the content, deeming it juvenile and unreadable. Now, however, Augustine realizes through Ambrose's teachings that he had been reading the Bible too literally, and a more figurative reading would reap more rewards. After reading "many difficult passages in the Old Testament scriptures figuratively interpreted, where I, by taking them literally, had found them to kill [the deeper meaning]" (5.14.24), Augustine changes his method of interpreting the scriptures. Under Ambrose's influence, Augustine sees a whole new meaning in the Bible and is able to grow closer to God.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

We college students often assume we are old enough to make our own decisions without any outside help; while we most definitely are old enough to choose, Augustine teaches us the importance of having a mentor who leads them to choose the best possible option. Most college students in general don't exactly know how their lives will turn out, so they need to be able to keep an open mind in order to be accepting of guidance. Villanova students should also understand that not everything should be interpreted literally, and that exploring the figurative is also very important, as demonstrated by Augustine's initial reading of the Bible as opposed to Ambrose's idea of the Bible.

# **The Problem of Evil**

*“A perversity of will twisted away  
from the highest substance” (7.16.22)*

## **In Augustine’s Life**

After his encounter with Ambrose (see previous section), Augustine became deeply interested in becoming a Christian. But two obstacles stood in his way. On the one hand, he was psychologically unable to give up his relentless quest for social status and sexual gratification. At the same time, he was hesitant to become a Christian because of his intellectual doubts about what is today called “the problem of evil.” For Augustine, the problem of evil stems from the assumption that a good and gracious God created everything on earth, which means He must have created evil, as well. Augustine’s inability to grapple with the coexistence of God and evil prevented him from committing himself entirely to Christianity. Because he could not find the answer to this dilemma, Augustine used it as an excuse to continue in his sinful ways. While he was searching for a reason as to why God would create evil, Augustine pursued a life filled with lust and impurity.

Though he longed to free himself of his demons, like most addicts, Augustine tells himself that he will turn his life around tomorrow, but eventually realizes that day may never come and he must act now. “Why not now? Why not an end to my impure life in this very hour?” (8.12.29) Still, Augustine is plagued by the question of what defines evil. He knows it relates to sin, however he cannot come to terms with how God and all of his creations can be good, and yet evil still exists.

## **Deeper Meanings**

Augustine delves deeper into the problem of evil when he asks, “See how God surrounds and fills them. Then where and whence is evil? How did it creep in? What is its root and what is its seed? Or does it not have any being? ... yet the creator and all that he created are good” (7.5.7). The deeper meaning behind this questions how God can be

almighty, good, the ultimate creator, but evil can still exist. These things could not possibly coexist without contradicting one another. For example, if God were all-powerful, he would be able to defeat evil. If God created all things good, evil would not exist.

Upon further evaluation, Augustine comes to the conclusion that evil does not, in fact, exist. All of God's creations are good, but to different degrees; therefore, sin is the act of choosing of a lower good over the higher good, the ultimate good being God the Father. Humans sin when they put a lower good, such as family, school, or in Augustine's case, sex, over the greatest good of all, God. We see Augustine reach this epiphany when he states "I inquired what wickedness is; and I did not find a substance but a perversity of will twisted away from the highest substance, you O God, towards inferior things, rejecting its own inner life" (7.16.22). He claims he did not find evil to be a substance, or in other words he did not believe evil was real.

When Augustine reaches this conclusion, he is faced with another dilemma; he no longer has an excuse for his hedonistic ways, and must rid himself of his obsession with status and sexual gratification.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

St. Augustine's *Confessions* is important for Villanova students' growth and development as not only college students, but also effective human beings. The modern distinction between good and evil is constantly being clouded today by a focus on materialism, peer pressure, and inability to prioritize what is truly meaningful. According to Augustine, there is a hierarchy of things that are good and real, but college students are prone to confuse this order and to get caught up in things that are not necessarily that important. For certain students, the higher may be finding meaningful relationships and fulfilling good work and service, and for some, it may be finding an intimate and spiritual relationship with God. Augustine teaches these students always to seek the higher good, and to be mindful of this hierarchy of what is good and real.

# Seeking a New Life

*“Bound by the iron of my own choice” (8.5.10)*

## In Augustine’s Life

At this point in his life, Augustine is trying to commit his life to God, but continues in his old, sinful ways. He is unable to completely devote himself to God because he is bound by his chains of temptation and aspirations of success. We see a parallel to the Biblical book of Genesis as Augustine finds himself in a garden attempting to sort out the battlefield of his mind. He proves that he is not truly willing to rid himself of his sins when he said that he states, “I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust, which I prefer to satisfy rather than suppress” (8.7.17). Augustine becomes aware of his flaws, but continues to struggle with the battle between his desire to change and his habits of sin. It soon becomes clear that in order to find true religion and true happiness with God, Augustine must sever the chains of sin.

## Deeper Meanings

As Augustine became more obsessed with his sexual endeavors and need for success, he chained himself, in a sense, into a life of sin. The image of the chain is suitable because he is bound by his habits, which are hindering his relationship with God. Augustine begins to explore the repercussions of his life in chains, and realizes that he alone is incapable of fixing his situation, as he needs the grace of God to become truly free.

This particular use of imagery is interesting once we observe the nature of his chains. Augustine initially writes, “The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner” (8.5.11). Further inspection reveals, however, that Augustine is unable to fix his habits, not because the chains of his sins bind him, but rather

because he willingly holds onto these chains. He invokes the image of a drowsy man who, “although displeased with himself is glad to take a bit longer, even when the time to get up has arrived” (8.5.12). Like the drowsy man, Augustine, though fully aware of the negative consequences of his habits, has grown very attached to them. While in the beginning he might have been more capable of breaking free of his habits, Augustine has fallen into a position where he can be saved from his flaws only by God’s intervention. He explains that his own will is too weak as he writes, “The willing is not wholehearted, so the command is not wholehearted. (8.9.21) He is no longer held by the chains, but rather he is unwilling to let them go, because of the satisfaction he finds in earthy pleasures.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

The lesson we should draw from Augustine’s battle with his broken will largely concerns the habits that imprison us. It is important to recognize that we are not bound by chains, but we are simply holding onto them. College students are often bombarded with opportunities to fall into bad habits. For example, students may begin to turn to detrimental behavior such as not getting enough sleep, partying instead of focusing on their schoolwork, or spending excessive amounts of time on Facebook or playing X-Box. They then proceed to blame their lack of studying on their own inability to succeed in the class. Students must realize that they have the power to change their performance, just by actively making decisions and releasing the chains of bad habit. If we do not allow ourselves to become consumed by these sins, we retain the ability to break free. Although we often have chains of our own which we are capable of breaking ourselves, Augustine believes that there are also instances in which we need God’s help to break free. Once sins have become chains in our lives, we must recognize that our own willpower is weak and that we need divine help to break out of our habits.

# Tolle Lege

“Pick up and read” (8.12.29)

## In Augustine’s Life

As we saw in the garden, Augustine continues to struggle to break free from his chains that bind him to success and sexual desire.

Suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again "Pick up and read, pick up and read" (8.12.29). [in Latin *tolle lege, tolle lege*.]

This *tolle lege* scene is extremely important to the Villanova community, and these words can be found on the seal of the Augustinian order. This phrase is displayed in many places on Villanova’s campus, such as in the Belle Aire Terrace and on the floor at the entrance to St. Mary’s.

At this moment, Augustine picks up the Bible and opens and reads the first passage he sees. As he reads this text, he is struck by the similarities between the passage and his own life:

Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts (Romans 13:13).

This Bible passage is particularly applicable to his situation as the riots of drunken pleasure and eroticism speak to his need for sexual pleasure and the strife and rivalry relate to his want for success. He "neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into [his] heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled" (8.12.29).

His lack of earthly desires prompts him to become free to focus himself entirely on the love of God. God's grace allows him to be free to be what he wanted to be and do what he wanted to do. This means that he is now able to let go of the chains that he once held onto. Because of this freedom, he does "not now seek a wife and [has] no ambition for success in this world" (8.12.30). He immediately relays the events of his great conversion to his mother, Monica. We will learn more about her shortly.

## **Deeper Meanings**

Augustine tells the story of his spiritual journey in a number of ways, one of the most prominent being through his relationship with books. Throughout *Confessions*, we see Augustine experience spiritual development through which he suffers tremendously due to his sinful activities, but finally finds peace and tranquility with himself and his life by the grace of God. He first encounters *Hortensius*, which sparks a desire within him for an understanding of something higher rather than a love of rhetoric and success. He then turns to the Bible, which he initially finds discouraging but gradually transforms his ideas surrounding Catholicism. Ambrose then helps him better understand the Bible, which is the cause of his ultimate conversion. As Augustine is called to "pick up and read" the Bible (8.12.29), he is enlightened as a "relief from all anxiety flooded into [his] heart" (8.12.29) and he is called to follow God. The reader observes the culmination of all the events and circumstances in Augustine's life that caused suffering and torment. These impediments of his faith are finally released during the scene as Augustine acknowledges that "all the shadows of doubt were dispelled" (8.12.29). The *tolle lege* scene serves as the final step in Augustine's long and tumultuous journey of finding and obtaining a devout faith and love for God.

## For Villanova Students Today

“Pick up and read” is a great motto for any Villanova student. So often students regard reading assignments as material to simply remember for the next test, rather than as something applicable to their own lives. It is important for these students to take these texts seriously and to try to learn from each one, whether it be from examining and questioning information for a class, or comparing the text to personal experiences. Just as Augustine spent much of his life studying literature and teaching rhetoric, so the years of studying encouraged him to turn to God. The *tolle lege* scene shows how important literacy and each reading should be to college students, because at any moment an encounter with a book could be life changing.

In a similar way, Augustine shows that students should value each moment and each experience. Just as Augustine's encounters with books gradually led to his conversion, college students can experience similar events that encourage them to value and learn from their experiences. Augustine's experiences depict the importance of valuing each opportunity and living in the present, rather than becoming so conscious of the past or the future, that nothing is learned.

# Baptism

“Bring me to the water of your grace” (5.8.15)

## In Augustine’s Life

After he has been converted and tells his mother about this monumental event, Augustine goes on a retreat, as many people do today. He gives up his job, and is finally baptized by Ambrose, the bishop who had not only been influential in Augustine’s success as a master of rhetoric, but had also aided him in his comprehension of the Catholic faith. His mother, Monica, and his son were present for this occasion. It is now that Augustine feels that the “disquiet from his past life vanished,” and his “feelings of devotion overflowed” (9.6.14). There is a beautiful stained glass window in the Saint Thomas of Villanova Church on the right side depicting this scene.

## Deeper Meanings

Just as Augustine’s relationship to books marks his spiritual journey, we can also see this in his relation to baptism. In *Confessions*, his conversion to Christianity is comprised of three encounters with baptism: the first Augustine avoids, the second stirs him, and the third is his own culminating experience. Through these experiences, Augustine learns that baptism is more than a ritualistic motion and is in actuality crucial part of finding a devout existence.

In Augustine’s infancy, he fell very ill. At the time, it was common practice to be baptized when sick to ensure salvation. However, Augustine’s “cleansing was deferred on the assumption that, if he lived, he would be sure to soil himself” (1.11.17). This demonstrates the archaic belief that baptism’s sole purpose is to absolve people of their sins. Eventually, however, this simplistic belief is disproved by Augustine in his later experiences with baptism.

Later in Augustine's life, a friend of his becomes sick and the same ritualistic baptism is performed. This time, however, after his baptism Augustine's friend awakens as a devout Christian, looking at Augustine "as if he were an enemy" (4.4.8). After witnessing this powerful and shocking experience, Augustine begins to reevaluate his disbelief in Christianity.

In the end of his baptismal journey, Augustine himself finally chooses to be baptized. After his baptism, he had finally found an end to his restlessness and was entirely devoted to God. Immediately Augustine finds himself embraced by God's divinity and he views his worldly chains as broken. Augustine's own baptism is his personal culmination of enlightenment as he describes his newfound ability to rest his heart with God. At this point, Augustine is able to more fully understand God.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

Augustine's perception of baptism begins as naïve perception, develops to a state of questioning, and culminates with a final, deeper comprehension. Although students today do not have a similar baptismal experience to Augustine's (since most Christians are baptized as infants), they go through a similar intellectual process when transitioning from high school to college.

In high school, students believe themselves to be mature enough to disregard what their parents may still try and teach them. They often sin to simply rebel, much like Augustine did in the pear incident of his early life. Many young adults believe that they can handle the real world without any assistance, but experience a significant adjustment once they arrive at college. It is then that they begin to realize that independence is not always what they had imagined it to be. They must learn to motivate themselves to make the right decisions. This transition that college students experience parallels Augustine's shift from belief to true understanding, which occurs through his baptism. Augustine, too, initially believes that he knows all there is to know

about God and he is first unwilling to devote himself to a new life. High school students share this naïve view of the world, and the college experience is necessary in order for them to learn to live independently and responsibly, just as Augustine's baptismal experience is necessary for the full comprehension of his newfound relationship with God.

# Monica

“*The son of these tears*” (3.12.21)

## In Augustine's Life

A character who plays a very important role in *Confessions* is Augustine's mother, Monica. Monica is everything anyone could ask for in a mother: loving, nurturing, wanting the best for her son, and always worrying about her child's actions and choices. Besides here a natural motherly concern, however, there is another reason for her anxiousness. Monica is well-aware of Augustine's constraints that are holding him back from Christianity and she advises him on a regular basis to break loose and turn to God.

Augustine contrasts two parallel events, one in Monica's life and one in his own experience, to help us understand how God leads us toward living better lives. Just as Augustine had, Monica herself went through an adolescent period of sin and misbehavior. As a child, Monica had always been an obedient and responsible daughter. However, when her parents sent her to the basement to draw wine from the cask, she would take a tiny sip, “not from any real craving for drink, but from a certain exuberance of youthful naughtiness” (9.8.18). Soon, she began to drink a little more each time and fell into a habit of consuming large quantities of wine. Fortunately for Monica, this sin ended quickly through the intervention of God's grace in the form of her servant. After being confronted by the servant about her alcohol addiction, Monica was able to regain her footing with God.

In his own life, Augustine was overwhelmed by a desire for sexual gratification with multiple women. Though given the same opportunity as Monica to rid himself of this lust, he rejected the criticism and advice of his mother and slipped down the steep path back into sin. Augustine said of his mother's warnings, “These warnings seemed to me womanish advice which I would have blushed to take the least notice of. But they were your warnings and I did not

realize it. I believed you were silent, and that it was only she who was speaking, when you were speaking to me through her” (2.3.7). Augustine did not seize this immediate opportunity to return to God as Monica had.

## **Deeper Meanings**

By comparing these two incidents in the lives of Monica and Augustine, Augustine shows that God uses a third party, often another person, to give us a new perspective on life. Those who believe that people are placed in our lives for certain reasons can agree with Augustine on this point. In reference to Monica’s experience, Augustine said, “Just as flattering friends corrupt, so quarrelsome enemies often bring us correction” (9.8.18). While the servant had her own motives for pointing out Monica’s flaws, God ultimately had a specific reason for sending her as He used the servant to show Monica that she must change her ways in order to receive the grace He was offering. Once she recognized this, Monica used this gift from God to live her life with “modesty and sobriety” (9.9.19).

For Augustine, Monica was the person that God used to help him seek out His grace. Though Augustine disregarded his mother’s advice and went through a longer process to return to God, Monica had a fierce belief in her son, knowing that he would change the error of his ways. Later in her life, she told Augustine that “The one reason why I wanted to stay longer in this life was my desire to see you a Catholic Christian before I die...For I see you despising this world’s success to become his servant” (9.10.26). Monica knew that God would use her as the instrument to help Augustine turn away from his sinful actions and seek God. By working through people, God looks to bring us from our material desires to Himself, and we can see that in *Confessions* through the comparison of Monica and Augustine’s lives.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

For college students, it is important to recognize that the people around them can help them grow as they go about their lives. Many students come face to face with the same temptations and aspirations for worldly success Augustine faced and it is common to place these material desires as our top priorities. Although it may not always be as clear as the turning points in Augustine's life, students must examine every experience-good or bad. Augustine made mistakes in his life, but that did not stop him from building a burning passion for God with the help of others. For Christians especially, friends, family, and professors can all help students grow in their faith.

# The Vision at Ostia

“With the mouth of the heart wide open” (9.10.23)

## In Augustine's Life

After Augustine's conversion, as described in the *tolle lege* and baptism scene, Augustine, his son and his mother, Monica, decide to return to North Africa. They first travel to Ostia, the port town near Rome, There, while they are waiting for a ship to take them to North Africa, Augustine and his mother share a vision. He says, “She and I were standing leaning out of a window overlooking a garden” (9.10.23). While looking out the window, the two of them have a vision of divinity that brings them closer to God and true enlightenment: “That is how when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things” (9.10.25). Monica explains to Augustine how thrilled she is to see her son's journey of faith completed. Thus, this vision is the final and most important step in Augustine's conversion into a faithful servant of the Lord.

## Deeper Meanings

Augustine's vision at Ostia is significant because it represents how Christians relate to God. From the different moments of his vision, we can see three important aspects of Christianity. First, his vision at Ostia can be closely connected to the Bible as it takes place in a garden, a strong biblical setting. By envisioning a garden, Augustine links it closely to the Garden of Eden, where sin originated. In his vision, Augustine is finally freed from his life of sin. This connection between where sin began in the Bible and where sin ended for Augustine ties his vision closely to Christianity.

Second, Monica's presence in this vision is significant in that it leads to the idea that a great religious transformation does not have to happen in solitude. In the beginning of the passage, Augustine makes it clear

that his mother is there for the vision. Her role throughout Augustine's life is to guide him toward a more spiritual, fruitful life and this final vision enables him to remain faithful to God. Monica's presence during the vision ties into the Christian concept that finding faith is not a journey that has to be taken alone.

It is also in this that Augustine reflects on his true dedication to God and brings about the theme of discipleship. He accepts his role to serve God and says, "He alone would not speak through them but through himself" (9.10.25). The fact that God would speak through Augustine shows that their relationship is one of great faith and respect, illustrating great discipleship. Prior to his conversion, Augustine was easily tempted by lust. He was led astray many times because of these sexual temptations, but this vision served as the final most important step in returning to God, not just as a follower, but as His servant.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

The vision at Ostia represents a vital theme for college students. While many students may not have the same mystical experience that Augustine and Monica had shared, they may still undergo a similar process. As with so many of the other experiences that we have described from Augustine's life, finding success and meaning in our lives comes from the act of reprioritization. Augustine's journey is about figuring out what is most important to him and making that the center of his life. For students here at Villanova, the college experience is also about finding the things in life that mean the most to them and making them a top priority. Just as it was for Augustine, it can be a constant struggle as less important things crowd out those that are of true value and significance. This theme of reprioritization in *Confessions* is particularly important because only when we stop worrying about the trivial things in life and start focusing on the things that mean the most to us, will we be able to enjoy life fully.

# Death of Monica

*“My mother, your faithful servant” (9.9.19)*

## In Augustine's Life

Soon after the vision and before they could return to North Africa, Augustine's mother, Monica, fell gravely ill with a fever. Nine days into her illness, Monica passed away and Augustine's world was turned upside down. Harboring extreme agony, he fought back his tears. “Why then did I suffer sharp pains of inward grief? It must have been the fresh wound caused by the break in the habit formed by our living together, a very affectionate and precious bond suddenly torn apart” (9.30.12). Augustine, however, would not let himself grieve as he tried to be Stoic. It was only when he finally relinquished control and took solace in God that his mind was put at ease. Augustine came to realize that there was no need to grieve excessively over his mother's death because his mother was not only eternally safe in the kingdom of God, but he would also be with her again someday. “...my mother's dying meant neither that her state was miserable nor that she was suffering extinction” (9.29.12). Augustine went through different stages of grief, but in the end, he was able to find peace and contentment in his mother's departure.

## Deeper Meanings

As we see throughout *Confessions*, there are deeper meanings to be learned around every corner. This painful moment in Augustine's life contrasts with his experience of the loss of his friend before his conversion. With the death of his friend, he feels overwhelming grief over the fact that he lost the control and power over his friend. But with the death of his mother, Augustine initially feels this need to hide his grief and sadness from others but only after he gives in to God does he discover what it truly means to grieve over the loss of someone

important to him. When Augustine weeps “before God about her and for her...” (9.12.33), it shows us that losing someone is not just about our own loss but the deceased as well. Due to his renewed faith in the Lord, Augustine discovers a more positive reason to grieve over the death of a loved one.

As a Christian, Augustine also realizes that just because Monica’s physical body is gone, this does not mean the relationship between the two of them ends. When his friend dies, Augustine felt that their connection was forever severed as he noted, “I was even more surprised that when he was dead I was still alive...” (4.6.11.). But it is very different with the loss of his mother because he knows that she will “be ‘made alive in Christ’” (9.13.14) and rest in the kingdom of heaven. He understands that one day they will be reunited and be together once again. This story in *Confessions* gives us an insight to how a devoted Christian views death and allows us to compare Augustine’s ideas on death with our own understanding of loss.

## **For Villanova Students Today**

The death of Monica contains lessons and themes applicable to life today for college students here at Villanova. For undergraduates, loss can take on many forms: loss of friends, loss of relationships, and loss of parents, grandparents, and relatives. Being far from home when a relationship falls apart or when a family member falls gravely ill is a difficult test of faith for a college student because the traditional support system of home and family are missing. Many Christians, at times like these, believe that we must rely on God to take care of our loved ones, and permit Him to provide us with compassion and support during the period of angst until we are finally able to share our feelings with family and friends.

# **Authors and Acknowledgements:**

## **Editors:**

JiHyun Lee  
Anna Mariani  
Danielle Morro  
Rickie Zheng

## **Authors:**

### **Augustine and Culture Seminar: Ancients, section V01**

Matthew Bolton, Sean Currao, Kelly Gibbons, William Haner, Brittanie Hendrix, Christian Hoelzli, Megan Hopkins, Brendan Hughes, Alessandra Lamari, Bryan Lee, Nandeet Mehta, Christina Mitarotonda, Danielle Morro, John Prufeta, David Stillings, Savannah Trifiro, Rickie Zheng

### **Augustine and Culture Seminar: Ancients, section V02**

Nicole Breen, Donovan Driscoll, Callan Edwards, Kelly Gabriel, Kristin Hollowell, Chris Herman, Jim Jacobs, Jenny Lee, Brian Lutkewitte, Deanna Manniello, Anna Mariani, Dan Petrocelli, Spencer Snyderman, Noah Thacker, Stephanie Uibel, Joelle Viscardo

**Teaching Intern:** Greg Doyle, '12

**Writing Center Consultants:** Greg Doyle, '12, Nancy Margolis

**Cover Design:** Ravahn Duval, '15

Special Thanks are due to the Rev. Joseph Farrell, OSA, Associate Vice President, Villanova University Office for Mission and Ministry. In addition to sharing his insights and inspiration with the students as they began the project, he also read the finished document and provided helpful feedback. We are also deeply grateful to Ms. Carolann Weidmeyer of the Center for Instructional Technology of Villanova's UnIT for formatting this booklet for publication.

**Instructor:** John Immerwahr, Professor,  
Department of Philosophy  
Villanova University  
Spring, 2012