

7-2018

# Healing through Humility: An Examination of Augustine's Confessions

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HEALING THROUGH HUMILITY:  
AN EXAMINATION OF AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

By

Catherine G. Maurer

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

July 2018

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Healing through Humility:  
An Examination of Augustine's *Confessions*

This thesis by Catherine G. Maurer is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Interim Director of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### HEALING THROUGH HUMILITY:

#### AN EXAMINATION OF AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

By

Catherine G. Maurer

The concepts outlined by St. Augustine show how confessional writing leads to breaking the bonds that trap people in negativity, self-doubt, hurt, depression, grief, despair, and shame. His writing journeys through breaking the barriers pride placed on him while working to show how those barriers came into place. This thesis analyzes Augustine's confessions through the lens of humility to show how Augustine's revelations do more than bridge the gap between saint and sinner. They speak to the capacity of humility to define the individual in honest and practical ways. Augustine, along with many other saints and scholars of humility, holds a common appreciation for the truth that humility reveals about the human self.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Joyce Maurer, who has been a loving support during my research for this project.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank some very special people who in some way helped her along her journey towards writing this project. To Professor Laura Soldner, whose constant faith helped her through the hardest year of her life. To Dee Prestay, who freely offered her love, mentorship and prayers. To Jacob Hall, the best officemate (and friend) anyone could ask for. To Drs. Lynn Domina and David Wood, who both kindly and patiently pushed the author further than she thought she was capable of ever going. To Kyle, Ashley, George, Emily, Peter, Katrina, Maggie, and Mathew – literally the best siblings in the world. To her parents, Michael and Cathlene, who blessed their kids with the best life.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

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## Introduction

In the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo wrote one of the earliest autobiographies that would greatly influence people's approaches to humility, confession, and Christianity. One man's account of coming to see the error of his ways, shared publicly in a series of thirteen books, had the ability to inspire others to conversion through his unflinching honesty. In the *Confessions*, Augustine tells us about his arrogance, drunkenness, reckless ambition, and sexual desires. His revelations do more than bridge the gap between saint and sinner. They speak to the capacity of humility to define the individual in honest and practical ways.

Augustine was born in 354 A.D. in Tagaste, Algeria. His parents were respectable people, though not very wealthy. His father was a pagan who lived a life of loose morals, while his mother, Saint Monica, was a devout Christian. She desired Augustine to receive a Christian education, and at her insistence, Augustine completed his elementary studies as a Christian catechumen. Despite her best efforts, Augustine fell away from the faith in his teenage years. His time of youth brought on much of the debaucherous behavior included in the *Confessions*. Augustine admits to drinking excessively, becoming slave to lust: "Where then was I, and how far from the delights of Your house, in that sixteenth year of my life in this world, when the madness of lust - needing no licence from human shamelessness, receiving no licence from Your laws- took complete control of me, and I surrendered wholly to it?" (26). Augustine explains that during the time of his youth, his life had become chaotic by his philandering habits, which did nothing to encourage the life of faith Monica desired for her son. He admits to keeping a concubine (who bore him



an illegitimate child) and then casting her away for his own ambitions. Although Augustine indicates the relationship with this unnamed woman was founded on love, he also describes the relationship as one which conveniently satisfied his desires.

Augustine describes an inner recklessness that accompanied this phase of his life, which contributed to a confusion which surrounded his relationships with God and women. His wild habits were all focused around a singular, intense interest:

My one delight was to love and to be loved. But in this I did not keep the measure of mind to mind, which is the luminous line of friendship; but from the muddy concupiscence of the flesh and the hot imagination of puberty mists steamed up to becloud and darken my heart so that I could not distinguish the white light of love from the fog of lust (25).

Blinded by what became passion, Augustine, a young man, sought to please himself before others. This self-seeking mindset contributed to the breaking of his relationship, causing much distress in his life, and hindered him from distinguishing love from lust. Augustine's singular focus clouded his judgment, and forced him to lead a lonely life, even on nights he was not alone. Yet through these hazy failings, Augustine discovered a humble side, one that would eventually lead him down a path of virtue.

To understand the humility embedded in Augustine's written failings, it is helpful to understand the definition of humility provided by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.). In particular, his *Summa Theologiae* helps explain how humility developed in Augustine's life. Humility at its most basic level functions as a scale, a tool for accurate self-measurement according to Aquinas (91). Augustine comes to understand this humility through the act of confession, both in writing and in the sacrament. He learns

that humility is the right estimation of self, one that leaves room for modesty without groveling, confidence without pride. Aquinas' definition of humility sheds light on the motivations and ramifications of Augustine's growth.

To avoid and grow past his self-seeking habits, Augustine must learn to see his actions as wrong. His writing journeys through breaking the barriers pride placed on him while working to show how those barriers came into place. Through the eradication of pride and birth of humility, Augustine discovers the importance of recognizing his weaknesses and imperfections. This recognition dismantles his prideful self to allow for personal peace and greater connection with others. Augustine's *Confessions* establishes the essential healing power of humility, and clarifies how embracing failure gives a person the strength to avoid and grow from failure.

When I refer to healing, I am following Augustine in talking about emotional and spiritual recovery. There are some acts a person may commit that have long lasting and taxing effects. Augustine's early escapades cultivated deep feelings of shame, insecurity, and condemning self-criticism. These feelings affected both his confidence in his work and in his relationships, but also had an impact on his spiritual life. Through the crushing weight of self-condemnation, he struggled to see his purpose in life. However, by his conversion, Augustine discovers what areas in his life are causing his harmful feelings. Throughout his narrative he refers to God as the "Divine Physician" (190), who restores a soul's health. He tells us that by God's grace, he finds strength to move past his hurts.

Augustine's *Confessions* is more than a cathartic exercise. He seeks to develop the spirit of his community, and to reveal himself to God and humanity with the goal of making his virtuous growth accessible. His was a haphazard, flawed, perfectly human

journey. By writing about the dark thoughts that haunt his dreams and memories, Augustine is working to foster a community of growth, one that resonates across generations. This lofty goal was fueled by his ambitious nature, a quality that sometimes proved problematic.

Augustine knew he was intelligent. He often received compliments, and like many young people, he let these go to his head (40). Arrogance stood in the way of his growth. It was arrogance that kept him from early conversion, convinced that he could clearly identify and understand divinity, should such a thing exist. It would not be until later in life, when Augustine learned the nature of humility, that he could witness grace. But Augustine never lost his ambitious nature; rather, he learned to temper that ambition, to let God's will dictate his actions, (rather than pride).

In my analysis, I begin by describing Augustine's language in the *Confessions*, which he directs towards God as the reader. I examine the events Augustine felt corrupted him, with the goal of illustrating, through the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, how pride blinds humans to self-awareness. I explore how Augustine begins to despise his actions to show how powerless he becomes towards temptation. Finally, I conclude my analysis by articulating how Augustine receives healing by owning his past failures.

Augustine *Confessions* reveal that in order to heal from early transgressions, an individual must first assert that what they have done is wrong. Through this admission, a person learns from their mistakes, how not to make them again, and how to grow stronger from them. Often, in order to see something as unhealthy, one must first discover how much damage it has caused. Augustine exemplifies this learning experience. He carries

readers along a journey of self-realization, one that begins with stealing fruit from another's tree and ends on the humble road to sainthood.

## **Review of Literature**

An abundance of philosophy, scholarship, criticism, and literature focuses upon the life, times, and psychology of Saint Augustine. Much of the scholarship explores Augustine's conversion from wild party boy to saint. Analyses have often focused on the historical, cultural, and religious context that motivated Augustine's conversion. Yet not enough attention has been given to the role humility played in his spiritual transformation. In my research, I discovered material that seeks to define humility, though little that successfully captures Augustine's interpretation of humility. Below I navigate works that show the connection between Augustine's humility and self-acceptance, and how this link can promote an understanding of Augustine's ability to heal and to grow.

In *The Greatness of Humility: St. Augustine on Moral Excellence*, (2016), Joseph McInerney explores the paradox of how the height of human greatness depends completely on humility. McInerney compares Augustine's concepts of humility with a variety of works from Aristotelian, Stoic, and Ciceronian writing that relate humility with greatness. He also compares Augustine's views to those of modern philosophers like David Hume (1711-1776) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), in order to understand the change in the concept of humility over time. McInerney explains how Hume and Nietzsche believed pride to be the recognition of one's goodness, and that it should be cultivated. Humility, on the other hand, they defined as deceitful and self-deprecating,

robbing people of their potential. McInerney illustrates through Augustine that in order for people to achieve greatness in their lives, they first must become humble. By bringing these very different scholars into conversation, McInerney provides insight into how the foundations of humility encourage human potential. His study enlightens my discussion of Augustine's *Confessions* by claiming that greatness can only be achieved by starting with humility. I would like to take this concept a step further by adding that greatness can only happen with growth, and growth only happens with humility.

In *The Essential Worldwide Laws of Life*, (2012), John Templeton compiles various schools of thought from history, theology, philosophy, science, and art to examine what it takes to live a good and wholesome life. He states that by acknowledging our smallness compared to all of creation, by accepting that our concept of God is more than we will ever understand, and by surrendering our wills to God, we can cultivate our humility. Templeton's definition of humility reflects St. Thomas Aquinas' writings on humility. Both argue that humility provides individuals with the wisdom to recognize their own unique talents, as well as areas in need of improvement. Templeton adds that the understanding of the self that arises with humility leaves people open and willing to improve themselves. His belief is that by engaging with areas that need improvement, humans have the ability to improve and to strengthen their connections and relationships. He writes, "Humility is the gateway to understanding...it opens the door to greater knowledge and open-mindedness" (Loc. 2078). It is precisely this "open-mindedness" that allows progress and healing to take place. He successfully highlights the importance of humility in an individual's quest for self-improvement, as well as how these improvements strengthen human relationships. Templeton's theories on humility are

extremely useful for my study because they shed light on how through lack of humility, Augustine's early personal life and relationships deteriorated.

Coming from a theological perspective, Deborah Wallace Ruddy in her essay, "Humble God: Healer, Mediator, and Sacrifice," illustrates that in order to understand humility we must look at Christ's salvation. She claims that by studying Augustine's teachings on humility, we can learn to understand its importance in authentic Christian living. She examines how humility acts as an antidote to pride, how it allows for a relationship with God to grow, and how it is exemplified through Christ's actions (89). Through examination of Augustine's sermons, Ruddy explains how lacking humility [having pride] puts a barrier between the person and God. "In pride," she writes, "we fail to see the fundamentally unequal relationship between God and creatures. In humility, however, we recover awareness of that inequality" (90). Ruddy explains that recognition of this inequality serves as the starting point from which humility can take off.

Ruddy argues that more attention should be given to how people become broken by seeing themselves equal to God. She comments on Augustine's pride in the *Confessions* and points out how he had two different types of pride. His primary focus tended towards the inflated side of pride, but there was another type of pride that Augustine touched on that Ruddy feels does not get enough attention. She explains that when a person despairs of his or her own self-worth, becoming broken and self-abasing, pride is often at the root. This despair comes from the shaky belief that one is equal or above God, but when measuring oneself as equal to the Creator, that perceived power of creation can lead to a sense of existential dread. Ruddy writes, "In this sense, humility lifts us up from despair to a proper understanding of our own worth" (91). She points out

that Augustine came to believe that with Christ as the physician, pride could be treated, and true humility restored. She quotes Augustine, who saw Christ as both medicine and physician, where he wrote: “Thus the Wisdom of God, setting out to cure men, applied Himself to cure them, being at once the Physician and Medicine. Because man fell through pride, he applied humility as a cure” (92). Ruddy’s essay sheds light on the relationship between humility and Christ as healer. She illustrates how humility cured Augustine from the “brokenness,” or “blindness” of his pride, and this brokenness provides insight into what it means when a man such as Augustine is blind to the areas in his life that need work.

Approaching the discussion of humility from another perspective, June Price Tangney comes from a social and psychological point of view. Tangney argues that many common definitions of humility are misconstrued and inaccurate. For example, believing that humility calls for low self-worth or a sense of unworthiness. Rather, she explores how humility is key to human life and mourns the lack of attention it gets by researchers of the social and psychological field. The first section of her essay explains how humility is improperly defined in most dictionaries. Humility, she explains, is commonly understood as having a low self-regard. She cites the Oxford Dictionary, which defines humility as “The quality of being humble or having a lowly opinion of oneself; meekness, lowliness, humbleness: the opposite of pride or haughtiness” (Oxford). The Encyclopedia of Mormonism describes humility as having self-acceptance and being honest about one’s faults (Clark). Tangney explains that in accepting both our good and our bad, humility cultivates a willingness to learn and accept ourselves even when we fall short. She compares these concepts to arrogance, which only serves to separate human

beings from one another. Humility, she argues, has the ability to draw people out of their self-centeredness. When they are no longer preoccupied with themselves, the focus tends to shift outwards. When this happens, Tangney writes, “persons with humility become ever more open to recognizing the abilities, worth, and importance of others” (4). In summary, when a person can appreciate his or her own unique abilities, while not becoming absorbed by them, that person can have a greater chance for human connection. This essay shows the deep tie that humility has with human behavior, and thus provides a way to approach Augustine’s actions in the *Confessions*.

Similar to Tangey’s perspective on human behavior, Norman Wirzba argues in “The Touch of Humility: an Invitation to Creatureliness,” that humility helps people discover their place in the world as created beings. He believes that when we fully take into consideration our part as members of a community on earth, we are more apt to be thankful for what we have and more attentive to all earthly life. Wirzba addresses the disordered attitudes that prevent people from realizing their place as and living out who they are. He defines these negative attitudes as fear, anxiety, [mental or spiritual] blindness, suspicion, arrogance, or rebellion. He explains that negative mindsets prevent us from being patient and honest with ourselves and the world, but that, with humility, these mindsets can be pushed aside so that people can see things as they truly are (226). Wirzba explains that there is a temptation to self-aggrandize when our fears or anxieties arise, but doing so only cultivates feelings of insecurity and unworthiness by being deceitful of who we are (231). There are a couple ways Wirzba outlines methods of practicing humility. One is by way of acknowledging our mortality, another by seeing ourselves as dependent on other members, rather than independent. He also explains that



if people can learn to understand their lives as fragile, temporary, as well as relational, their natural response would be to begin paying more attention to others. From that point, people become more attentive to others, as well as learn how to be grateful for what we are given, and more committed to helping others (234). Wirzba opens up new ways of considering the importance of humility in a community. By describing earth as a community, he brings into consideration how lives outside of our own are impacted when we become dishonest about who we are. This is precisely what happens when Augustine separates himself from people in his life by setting himself above others.

In my study of Augustine, humility, and healing, I plan to draw upon these sources to examine how Augustine's evolving humility changes him from self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing, into a devout and compassionate man. Most of these sources discuss how humility diminishes pride and works to heal people by bringing them closer together. In his *Confessions*, Augustine realizes that he is humbled before God. In acknowledging humanity's smallness next to creation, in being realistic about individual positions, and in accurate self-measurement, Augustine finds a way to measure himself in God's eyes.

## **Methodology**

In this project, I will examine the connections between humility and healing by performing a close reading of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, focusing specifically on understanding humility and its counterpart, pride. I will do so by examining these concepts in relation to the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. The latter states that the

cultivation of humility lies first in grace, and then in human effort. I will be discussing how Augustine first experiences the grace that reveals to him his lack of humility, and then what steps he takes towards rooting out all pride. In addition, I will be analyzing how spiritual and emotional recovery can take place through the cultivation of humility, which thereby benefits the individual as well as others. I will be asking how Augustine's act of writing and publicly sharing his experiences has the ability to produce healing and its effects for himself, as well as for others. I believe there is much to be gained on this topic from an examination of the *Confessions*, where Augustine reveals parts of his life in a beautiful and genuine way.

In order to understand how humility cultivates healing, and how certain acts have the potential to be humbling, we must first understand humility's meaning and its vital importance to human life. In its most basic understanding, humility functions as a scale – a way of accurate self-measurement, moderating and keeping humans reasonable and honest about both their talents and limitations. St. Thomas Aquinas, an avid scholar of Augustinian works, offers a very practical definition of humility in his *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas tells us that humility acts in two ways: 1) as a way of temperance, restraining the mind from “immoderately high things,” and 2) as way of guarding the spirit against hopelessness, hearten[ing] it in the pursuit of greater things within right reason” (91). In other words, humility keeps us right in the middle—away from both pretentiousness and despair. He also explains that humility offers a reasonable evaluation of the self. He writes, “Humility is not about the appetite for, but rather the estimation of our own greatness” (95). To put it plainly, humility can help us recognize the talents and gifts we possess, while not particularly striving for them. It also allows us to see our

triumphs and our failures. In my exploration of Augustine's *Confessions*, I analyze how Augustine evaluates his own actions, and how in order to grow and learn from his mistakes, he must first acknowledge he has done wrong. This admission in itself is humbling, and ultimately allows for healing to take place.

Aquinas says that it takes two things for a person to develop humility. "The first is grace, the second, human effort" (113). In the *Confessions*, we will see how Augustine receives spiritual insight into the state of his soul, and how being disturbed by it, he recognizes his overwhelming pride. Aquinas explains that once pride is revealed, the responsibility lies in the person's ability to practice self-restraint – controlling the tendency to perceive him or herself as greater than he or she is – and to "recognize, acknowledge, and accept their weaknesses" (111). In my thesis, I will be viewing this recognition as akin to humility, meaning taking full ownership and responsibility for the areas in our lives where we have fallen short, and where we are still in need of improvement. Aquinas writes that when a person makes a cognitive effort to restrain personal overestimation (or in many cases underestimation), the root of the "disorder" is revealed and can be dealt with. I will define this disorder (i.e. pride), which Aquinas refers to, in my next section. By restraining our natural tendency to view ourselves inaccurately, Aquinas explains that a general disposition of humility will begin to take place in a person. This humility can be recognized in "outward signs, words, deeds, and gestures" (111). What Aquinas is telling us here is that by clearing away the false and preoccupied ideas we have of ourselves, our true characters show themselves in how we act, speak, and treat others. In Augustine, we see how this "clearing away" allows for healing to take place, for the removal of false forefronts not only allows for the

establishment of his true or authentic self, but it also reveals long-hidden wounds that can now be brought to light.

The opposite of humility is generally understood to be pride, but to fully conduct a study on the latter we must fully understand pride and how it functions in Augustine's life. As with the definition of humility, I look to Thomas Aquinas to define pride.

Aquinas states, "the proud submit their minds to learn from no one, neither God nor man, in order to come to the truth" (127). Pride relies on its own wisdom and knowledge to make decisions. From the outset, it creates barriers against outside reason, for it seeks only to obey itself. Understanding this type of mindset is important to my analysis of Augustine, for it took him a very long time to learn how to listen to reasoning outside of himself. Additionally, Aquinas explains that pride "oversteps reason" (119), and instead makes a person crave praise or recognition for something he does not necessarily deserve. In the *Confessions*, Augustine explains that the mindset of his former self believed itself to be superior to others in many ways, in knowledge and skill. After his conversion takes place, however, he notes how little he really understands about the world. Pride, within this study, is analogous to a barrier, a wall, or even a blindfold. These images, which Augustine often uses, illustrate the limits pride places on human growth and oftentimes, restoration.

In studying Augustine's *Confessions*, especially when considering humility as the primary focus of my analysis, close attention should be given to the form in which Augustine writes. Some scholars claim that Augustine's intentions in his autobiographical narrative can be seen as prideful or attention seeking, for as some point out, how could someone who has supposedly learned humility focus the narrative mostly

on himself? If we view Augustine from a contemporary perspective, the *Confessions* could potentially come across as disingenuous or even hypocritical, as he performs his own self-analysis. However, my study comes from another perspective. I am interested in how Augustine's work possesses characteristics of the sacrament of confession within the Catholic Church, and how, similar to the spiritual and psychological healing that many Catholics receive in the sacrament, Augustine's narrative can be viewed as salubrious for both his readers and himself.

Aside from the name, Augustine's *Confessions* has more than one similarity to the Catholic sacrament of confession. Like Augustine, who in his narrative discloses his weaknesses to his readers, the repentant sinner in the confessional discloses his or her wrongdoings, seeking God's forgiveness. They do so honestly, hiding nothing, explaining any actions or thoughts that are not in accordance with God's will (CCC, 401). Although confessions are understood within the Church as private matters occurring between the penitent and priest, Joyce Schuld believes that the act can be thought of as a public one as well. Schuld, a scholar of Augustine and Foucault, believes that modern culture has diminished much of what the world understands about theological teachings. She states that the sacrament of confession is beneficial not only for the individual who seeks pardon, but also for the community in which the individual dwells. She explains that confession does so by fostering a sense of unity in its members by showing that everyone makes mistakes – that all are in need of improvement. Confession, for Schuld, serves two specific functions within a community:

First, it offers a way of personal decentering that keeps individuals mindful of their utter dependence on God's mercy and sustenance, thereby

helping them to navigate between the dangers of despair and arrogance. Second, as a public activity, it disturbs the pride of others (123).

Staying mindful of one's dependence on God is one way that Catholics, and perhaps all Christians, strive to cultivate humility by weighing truthfully both the good and the bad that they do, as well as not taking for granted the things they are blessed with. This open mindset allows individuals to be less focused on themselves, more open to learn, and more aware of the needs of others. Schuld continues that an honest confession has the ability to affect others by its example, for seeing other humans make steps to right their wrongs has the potential to inspire others. According to Schuld, Augustine demonstrates both dependence on God in the *Confessions*, as well as serving as a public witness to his readers. Due to his prominent role as a university professor and Bishop of Hippo, the effect of his testimony was especially impressive at the time, and continues to be to this day.

So what was the purpose of a public and written confessional? Why would Augustine breach the privacy found within the sacrament? Why reveal his personal history, especially as a faith leader and role model to his community? Schuld demonstrates that Augustine's act of writing the *Confessions* was one of self-giving love. She even describes the saint's act of publicly confessing as sacrificial:

If we are to discern the richer meaning of Augustine's self-interpretations as he searches for wisdom and virtue, we must consider his reflections as, at least from his perspective, a form of "sacrifice" or participatory offering that is meant to nourish, in self-emptying exercise of confession, bonds of social solidarity (123).

What Schuld suggests here, is that Augustine did not simply write for himself, but had in mind the spirit of his community. Leading by public example would have been sacrificial to Augustine, making him subject to criticism and ridicule. He would not have been an average convert. But even so, he willingly shares his reflections, humbly acknowledging that he is a sinner in need of redemption, with the possibility that others learn from him.

What I have outlined here are the methods I will use to analyze Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. In order to understand how Augustine exemplifies and discusses humility and its counterpart pride within his narrative, I will continue with Thomas Aquinas' definitions of the two: that humility acts as an accurate measurement of ourselves, and that pride acts as a blindfold, preventing humans from seeing their wrongs. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas illustrates that it takes grace, or spiritual insight, to realize that one lacks humility, but that it takes cognitive effort to learn humility and expel pride. I maintain that the *Confessions* does in fact hold similarities to the sacrament of confession, illustrating how a humble participant can share his or her personal experiences and inspire others to look more closely at their own lives in the same way. Through this project, I also show how the cultivation of humility has profound healing effects on both the individual who strives for self-betterment, as well as those who witness their progress.

## **Analysis**

Saint Augustine begins his life narrative in the *Confessions* by acknowledging his unshakable belief in God. It is from this belief that Augustine illustrates a portion of the humility that he attains in his life. As Thomas Aquinas explains, "humility is acquired

first by grace, and then by human effort” (113), Augustine likewise shows in Book One that it is first through God’s grace he owes thanks. Because the central theme of his narrative will be his relationship with the Divine, Augustine writes in first person throughout the book, addressing God directly as his reader. Before delving into the details of his life, Augustine asks permission of God to tell his story. The request is a humble one, in which Augustine fully attributes his change of heart to aid from God, while seeking to divulge those changes: “Suffer me to utter my plea to Thy mercy; suffer me to speak since it is to God’s mercy that I speak and not to man’s scorn” (6). Beginning in this way, Augustine shows both gratitude and obedience to the authority of God, and his “plea for mercy” becomes the narrative, resembling a reflective prayer.

There are several instances within the *Confessions* where Augustine pauses his narrative to express actual prayers to God. These prayers often show thanksgiving, while other times the prayers express remorse for the actions of his previous life. The prayers placed between the narrative scenes allow Augustine to shift between the roles of narrator and penitent in order to reflect objectively on the state of his soul at the time. The majority of these reflections consist of metaphors that describe his soul as sick, or unclean, and in need of healing. In one particular prayer scene, Augustine describes his longing for the peace and freedom from pride that he experiences in God:

Who can unravel that complex twisted knottedness? It is unclean, I hate to think of it or look at it. I long for Thee, O Justice and Innocence, Joy and Beauty of the clear of sight, I long for Thee with unquenchable longing...He that enters into Thee, enters into the joy of the Lord and not fear and shall be well in Him who is



best... I went away from Thee, my God, in my youth, I strayed too far from Thy sustaining power, and I became myself a barren land (34).

The language Augustine uses in this scene to describe his soul mirrors the chaos that had developed in his life. The descriptions of “complex, twisted, knotted, unclean and barren” illustrate Augustine’s confusion by not having God in his life. But these words also give imagery to the pride that Augustine had adopted by this time. We know from Aquinas that pride creates a barrier between the individual and reason, causing confusion and limiting what the self is capable of doing. While Augustine gives voice to this confusion, he also claims that the peace experienced in God offers “clearness of sight,” and wellness. The clearing away and healing Augustine petitions for here articulate his longing not only for God, but also for freedom from the unyielding barriers that pride places on himself.

In his first chapter, Augustine thanks God for the talents and gifts he has received. He praises God for the gift of integrity, knowledge, a brilliant memory, and the ability to speak clearly and effectively, but while doing so he attributes all to God’s goodness. “Yet all these were the gifts of You, my God” (21). Augustine complicates matters when he explains that while he is grateful for these gifts, they are also the cause of many of his struggles. He writes, “But in these lay my sin: that I sought pleasure, nobility, and truth not in God but in the beings he created, myself and others, and for this I fell into sorrow and confusion and error” (21). Augustine’s meaning here, of course, is that his talents early in life made him overestimate himself, which in turn filled his heart with pride. Pride and overestimation, we know from Thomas Aquinas, tends to make humans overly self-reliant – unwilling to listen to the reason of others. As Augustine grew into a man,

his talents were recognized and esteemed by others. “I was the most renowned student of rhetoric, and I was proudly joyful and swollen with self-conceit” (67). Recognized for his intellectual brilliance by his superiors, he was frequently praised, causing him to become competitive, self-seeking, and judgmental towards others. Charles Herbermann, a contributor to “Catholic Encyclopedia Online,” writes that Augustine “desired to be first in all things, even to the point of evil” (Herbermann). Consequently, Augustine begins the *Confessions*, with a practical and humble mindset. He believes in recognizing his talents, but to avoid dwelling on them, for doing so would welcome pride.

In addition to giving thanks to God for the change of heart he has experienced in his life, Augustine discusses the *present* state of his soul (that is, in his place as author) to illustrate his continuous need for growth. He describes his soul’s brokenness, reminding himself *and* his readers of our need for improvements: “The house of my soul is too small to receive Thee: let it be enlarged by Thee. It is all in ruins: do Thou repair it. There are things in it that must offend Thy gaze, I confess and I know. But who shall cleanse it? Or to what other besides Thee shall I cry out?” (5). Even as Augustine reflects on his past life, long after having converted and become Bishop of Hippo, he still writes from a place of humility, fully taking into account his need for healing. He uses the metaphor of a house to depict his soul – a space that, over time, has been diminished in size and quality with the effects of sin. By pointing out his soul’s continuous need for repairs, Augustine shows humility in his openness to future growth. Even after becoming a Bishop, he never claims to have reached a point of perfection.

This humble attitude is carried on when Augustine acknowledges that, because God is omnipotent and therefore all-knowing, there is nothing about Augustine’s life that

He does not already know. When Augustine describes the purpose behind his writing, he notes that his confession is to instill his own love for God, as well as inspire that love in others:

But, Lord, since You are in eternity, are You unaware of what I am saying to You? Or do you see in time what takes place in time? But if You do see, why am I giving You an account of all these things? Not, obviously, that You should learn them of me; but I excite my own love for You and the love of those who read what I write, that we all may say, “The Lord is great and exceedingly to be praised!” (233).

Augustine is acknowledging here that he has two audiences: God and his readers. Although the narrative is addressed to God, Augustine aims to show people how communicating with God can be restorative. He frequently praises the greatness of God, continuously expressing gratitude and submission. It is as if, through his writing, he desires to show others how to make amends for all the prideful moments in life. As he states here, his writing served to keep his heart elevated to the one who redeemed him, and in doing so, show others that they are redeemable as well.

Prior to his conversion, Augustine describes the state of his soul as something sick and in need of healing. To pinpoint a time in his life where this sickness began, Augustine turns as far back as his childhood, where he confesses to often stealing food and drink from his parent’s cellar, and cheating at games with other children (20). Yet, the age of real corruption for Augustine begins close to his sixteenth year. At that time, he had been attending school in Tagaste, (now Souk Ahras, Algeria). Due to insufficient funds, Augustine’s studies were delayed for a year while his father saved enough money

to continue his education. Augustine describes this period as when his growing love for pleasure became “carnal corruptions of the soul,” and where his desire to pursue all things pleasurable spiraled out of control. “Both love and lust boiled within me, and swept my youthful immaturity over the precipice of evil desires to leave me half drowned in a whirlpool of abominable sins” (25). The language Augustine uses here, of boiling desires, precipices, and whirlpools, offers wonderful and terrifying imagery for the chaos that becomes his life when his desires become a priority: “I burned for all the satisfactions of hell” (25), he writes, a statement that becomes particularly accurate for Augustine when he steals fruit from another’s tree.

The scene of stealing pears in the *Confessions* of Augustine is well known, even for those who have not read the story. This moment captures both Augustine’s absolute honesty in sharing his sins, but also emphasizes how bad the state of his soul had become by this point. One night, Augustine and a group of friends trespassed into someone else’s yard and stole a bunch of pears from a tree. Instead of eating them, however, the boys threw the fruit to the hogs. It would seem like a harmless enough prank for mischievous youths to make, but Augustine explains the gravity of the situation:

Such was my heart...I was thus evil for no object, having no cause for wrongdoing save my wrongness. The malice of the act was base and I loved it – that is to say, I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me...I [sought] no profit from wickedness but only to be wicked (29).

These statements stand out as something appalling in the *Confessions*, for they convey just how corrupt Augustine had become. Not only is he stealing fruit that belongs to another, he feels good in committing the act and does so simply *because* it is forbidden.

Like Eve in the Garden of Eden, Augustine reaches for the forbidden fruit. While Eve was tempted by more than the desire to perform a forbidden act—she was deceived by the serpent into pursuing godhood—she too found herself holding forbidden fruit, and then being overcome with remorse (*New American Bible*, Gen. 3:4-6). Augustine's scene with the pear tree illustrates a lack of guilt and/or shame for his actions, and a selfish willingness to place himself above others. Indeed, Augustine's remorse did not come until much later in life, unlike Eve, whose guilt almost immediate. Through this theft, we recognize the corrupt man that Augustine is becoming, as he loses sight of himself and takes on a prideful mindset.

Although prone to drunkenness, wild behavior, and sexual escapades, Augustine was a brilliant learner and thinker. He graduates from his studies in Tagaste, then goes to Carthage, and later becomes a renowned professor of rhetoric at the University of Carthage. In the year 383, he starts a teaching position in Milan, where he continues to teach rhetoric. While teaching, Augustine eagerly explores the world of philosophy. Constantly on the search for meaning, he confronted some of the teachings of the Christianity during these explorations. He was influenced especially by the teachings of Saint Ambrose, who was bishop of Milan at the time, Augustine spent time learning under him. Augustine admits to being attracted by the teachings, but did not yet accept any of them. "Nothing of what [Ambrose] said struck me as false, although I did not as yet know whether what he said was true. I held back my heart from accepting anything...I wanted to be as certain of things unseen as that of seven and three makes ten" (99). For Augustine, the need for certainty in his studies is a consistent thread throughout his early life. His thirst for knowledge brings him success and

acknowledgement from both students and professors, yet perhaps due to his philosophical mindset, Augustine rejects many ideas on the grounds of insufficient proof to declare them acceptable.

In spite of Augustine's need for certainty, he continues for years to search for meaning in life. He describes a yearning to believe in the spiritual world, and to trust in things beyond the senses, but how he struggled to do so. He states, "By believing I might have been cured...the eye of my mind would have been clearer and so might in some way have been directed towards your truth which abides forever" (100). These lines suggest the inner realization that Augustine faced – that in him lays some form of sickness or disorder, which blurs his thinking. Later he defines this sickness as pride. Under the instruction of St. Ambrose, Augustine begins to believe that he might find clarity in God. However, he admits that he found the teachings of Ambrose on celibacy as a "heavy burden" (97). Although impressed with the piety and example of Ambrose, Augustine clings to his former beliefs: "The man who has tried a bad doctor is afraid to trust even a good one: so it was with the health of my soul, which could not be healed save by believing, and refused to be healed that way for fear of believing falsehood" (100). After reading many philosophical and various religious beliefs, Augustine finds himself skeptical that one set of beliefs, such as the Christian faith, could hold all the answers to questions he held in his heart.

Augustine remains honest and open about these reservations. His narrative illustrates his uncertainty from the time of his instruction with Ambrose, till just before his final conversion. When at last convinced that there was some validity in abstaining from premarital relations, Augustine stubbornly pushes off making changes until a later

date. Not long before his conversion he prays: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet” (152). Augustine knows that he needs to change, but he chooses to wait, continuing to give in to impulsive behaviors, even when they harm him. Norman Wirzba sees such hesitancy as troubling. He argues that in order for a mind to see things clearly and honestly, it must first be “cleansed” of its prideful habit of placing itself in a superior, or sovereign status. Wirzba, who believes humility requires recognition of one’s humanity, explains, “Without this cleansing we will continually be infected with the hubris that places ourselves—our wants, fears, vanity, ambition, and anxieties—at the center of value and significance” (228). Likewise, as Augustine searches for meaning in his life, he filters what he learns through his own system of ambition, desire, and vanities. Peter Kreeft also comments on Augustine’s reservations. He writes, “Fear is a kind of immaterial thing that holds us back from acting. When we are uncertain about the truth, fear of error holds back our mind. When we are certain of the truth but still refuse it, fear of having to give up cherished pleasures holds back our will” (179). Clearly, on one hand, Augustine battles with his desire to believe; while on the other, he remains attached to his former habits.

Augustine describes not only his uncertainty, but also admits to carrying an overwhelming unhappiness during his search for meaning. In every aspect, it would seem he has a good life. He has an established career as a university professor; his superiors recognize him as successful, he has friends who appreciate him, and even a concubine with whom he lives. The latter, whom Augustine spends many years with, actually gives birth to a child they name Adeodatus, meaning “gift of God.” Yet amidst all of this, Augustine finds himself miserably unhappy. During the years spent weighing the truth of

philosophical and theological writings, he one day observes a drunken beggar in the street that inspires him into deeper self-examination. At the time, Augustine and some friends were out trying to have a good time, when the beggar caught their attention. “He was jesting and laughing and I imagine more than a little drunk. I fell into a gloom” (102). Augustine describes how his initial reaction was to condemn the beggar for disrupting his group’s efforts to have a good time, but he quickly realizes that because of the unhappiness he carried himself, it seemed the beggar succeeded a much greater level of happiness than Augustine. This moment in Augustine’s narrative serves to point out the miserable state of his soul. He writes:

The beggar had reached the same goal before us, and we might quite well never reach at all. The very thing he had attained by means of a few pennies from passers by – namely the pleasure of a temporary happiness, I was plotting for with so many a weary twist and turn (102).

By witnessing someone seemingly free from worry, Augustine finds himself evaluating his own state of happiness, and in comparison, finds himself quite miserable. This moment serves to reveal in some level the state in which Augustine recognizes a happiness that is not his.

Because he recognizes the difference between his mood and the beggar’s mood, Augustine begins to be aware of his own overbearing self-doubt, while the other man is completely oblivious to how those around him might be perceiving him. Augustine writes, “[the beggar] was cheerful and I was worried, he had no cares and I had nothing but cares” (102). Care, in this sense, can refer to sorrows or excessive worry over what other people might be thinking, for he adds, “I ought to have preferred my own state



rather than his merely because I was the more learned, [but] I got no joy from my learning but sought only to please men by it” (102). Aquinas would define Augustine’s state of insecurity as pride, for he explains that pride arises when a person aims above what they really are. In Augustine’s case, it comes when he craves lots of recognition from others. Aquinas adds that pride goes beyond practicality, for it attempts to measure itself outside of reason, or what is true. This definition helps to explain that because Augustine predicts how his superiors, other professors, and/or students perceive him, his confidence in himself is weak. However, through humility, Augustine soon learns that an honest self-evaluation – rather than an anticipated evaluation from others – can build an unshakable confidence and happiness.

I would like interject here and explain that, although the concept of humility might appear to be simple in itself, Augustine’s journey towards adopting it as a way of life is a complex and meandering process. Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene breaks the notion of pride down for us in *Divine Intimacy* (2014), by explaining that human nature tends to allow us to hold ourselves in a very prominent place and enjoy others viewing our own excellence. The combination of these things affects us personally, and in our relationships with other people. He writes, “[We] often spontaneously exaggerate our own worth, and as a result are demanding and pretentious. This makes us haughty and arrogant as well as difficult in our relations with others” (303). Of course, the desire to appear well in the sight of others is natural, but when we call attention to ourselves or allow others’ compliments to make us feel superior, pride has become an issue. Augustine repeatedly admits to having a desire for praise and recognition, which only serves to build his need to measure himself by how others perceive him.

Just before the conversion part of his story, Augustine notes that the corruption of his heart became worse than ever at the time when he broke off the long-term relationship with his concubine. He was pressured to marry by his mother and friends, and when a Christian woman of advantageous station was found for him, Augustine was forced to send his woman away. He explains that his grief from dismissing her was great: “My heart which had held her very dear was broken and wounded and shed blood” (113). Unable to bear the heartache, and not patient enough to wait the two years until the arranged marriage was to take place, Augustine admits to quickly taking up another woman to soothe his sorrows. He adds that doing so in no way helped his situation, but rather served to cause him greater pain:

My soul’s disease was nourished and kept alive as vigorously as ever...the wound [was not] healed that had been made by the cutting off my former mistress. For there was first burning and bitter grief; and after that it festered, and as the pain grew duller it only grew more hopeless (113).

Here Augustine voices the despair he feels towards not only losing someone he cared for, but also towards life and himself. He admits that he was powerless to his lust – a part of the disease he refers to – but finds that feeding his desires only spurs these feelings of hopelessness. Kreeft comments on Augustine’s despair, adding that it was not only lust which filled him with grief, but an array of spiritual sins, such as “pride, dishonesty, cowardice, sloth, and procrastination” (177). At this point in his life, Augustine has recognized his weaknesses and unhappiness, as well as a deep self-despondency. However, at this point, he resists looking inward to see if it is himself that is the problem.

Not long after his former concubine departs, when Augustine is thirty-one, he begins to see clearly the correlation between his misery and his sins. This connection is one of his first steps towards humility. By this point, having learned many things about God, Augustine explains that he had come to firmly believe in God's presence and to admire the overwhelming beauty of creation. He describes a yearning he has for God, after reading and reflecting on scriptures, but this yearning is still resisted: "I was ravished to You by Your beauty, yet soon was torn away from You again by my own weight, and fell again with torment to lower things" (132). Although he admits to finally believing, Augustine still feels powerless to change his thinking or his ways. On the topic of conversion, which in Augustine's case can be defined as a total trusting and release of the individual's will to God, he explains that his carnal desires bound him from doing anything differently with his life, not unlike addiction:

I was bound not with the iron of another's chains, but my own iron will. The enemy held my will; and of it, he made a chain and bound me. Because my will was perverse it changed to lust, and lust yielded to become habit, and habit not resisted became necessity. These were the links hanging one on another – which is why I have called it a chain – and their hard bondage held me bound hand and foot...my two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, one spiritual, were in conflict and in their conflict wasted my soul (148).

Three things are significant about this paragraph. One, the repetitive structure serves to describe the circuitous path Augustine finds himself unable to escape. Two, it illustrates a pattern of events which ultimately led to his corrupted soul. He describes the pattern as beginning with a perverseness, which weakens him to resisting his greatest temptation:

lust. By frequently engaging in lustful acts, the acts become habitual and from there a vicious cycle takes place. Three, Augustine here shows that he has at last begun to see that his actions are not only the cause of his unhappiness and despair, but that he has become powerless to his desires. The act of admitting defeat against these desires, as well as seeing clearly the person he had become, are the prominent constructs of what leads him to humility, conversion, and healing.

The events that lead to Augustine's change of heart begin with a detailed story of another person's conversion, and one that deeply influences Augustine. While visiting with the Bishop of Milan, a man named Simplicianus— who succeeded Ambrose — Augustine explains to him some of his troubles. "I told him all the wanderings of my error" (142), he writes. Simplicianus listens, and then proceeds to tell Augustine of the conversion story of a professor from Rome, named Victorinus. The latter was a distinguished rhetoric teacher, an expert in all the liberal sciences, and so appreciated by the Roman people, that they had a statue made in his honor. Victorinus was also a worshipper and promoter of Egyptian gods, celebrating idols like Anubis. Yet in his studies, he came upon Christian writings that convinced him that he wanted to become a Christian himself. At first, however, Victorinus declared that there was no need for him to attend church. He argued, "Is it walls that make Christians?" (142) The truth was, Simplicianus explains to Augustine, Victorinus feared what other people would think about his conversion. Many of his friends were still idol worshippers. However, a thought occurred to him one day; if he denied Christ on earth, would Christ deny him in the afterlife? "He felt he was guilty of a great crime in being ashamed of the sacraments," Simplicianus says "When he had not been ashamed of the sacrilegious rites of those

demons of pride whom in his pride he had worshiped. So he grew proud towards vanity and humble towards truth” (144). These thoughts motivated Victorinus to go to church the same day. The most striking aspect of Victorinus’ story is that, as he prepared to make his profession of faith, the priests offered to let his profession be made in private, to avoid embarrassment. Instead of agreeing to this, Victorinus was adamant about making a public declaration of his faith. In front of the congregation, he professed his belief in perfect confidence, touching the hearts of those who were witness there.

The story of Victorinus inspires Augustine to such an extent that he writes, “I was on fire to imitate him” (147). But even after hearing this, Augustine still clings to his former ways. He admits to having an overwhelming desire to devote himself wholly to God, now recognizing the beauty in doing so, but unfortunately still feels himself trapped in the bondage of his current life. “I regarded it as settled that it would be better to give myself to Your love rather than go on yielding to my own lust; but the first course delighted and convinced my mind, the second delighted my body and held it in bondage” (148). Augustine had come to believe in God and the Catholic faith, feeling certain that at last he had discovered truth. His mind and heart desired a life with God, while the carnal part of him, that was in no way accustomed to subjection, resisted. Augustine continues, “I was still bound to earth and refused to take service in your army” (148). Although his full conversion was yet to come, the story of Victorinus had served its purpose for Augustine by igniting a desire, stronger than ever, to change his life. It is important to note here that the change that comes over Augustine is built upon his learning of other’s conversions, just as so many have been moved in some way by his own.

It happens that the next influential moment for Augustine, which impels him closer than ever to humility and conversion, occurs when his friend, Ponticianus, describes to him the conversion story of two young men. Augustine learns how these men became inflamed with love for God after reading the story of an Egyptian monk, Antony (St. Anthony). The men, who were state officials, read about Antony's holy life and were inspired to give their lives to God as he had done. Ponticianus communicates how these men were, "Filled with a love of holiness and angry with righteous shame...they read and were changed inwardly...their hearts, tossing on their own floods, at length broke out in weeping and saw the better way" (151). Upon hearing of the change these men went through after coming to God, Augustine describes experiencing a huge longing to do likewise. He states that he was impressed with their resolve "to win health for their souls by giving themselves up to God's healing" (152). Even as he listened to their story, something in Augustine inspired him to critically examine his own life, for he writes:

You, Lord...turned me back towards myself, taking me from behind my own back where I had put myself all the time that I preferred not to see myself. You set me there before my own face that I might see how vile I was, how twisted and unclean and spotted and ulcerous (153).

As is common with pride, the tendency is to cover up and hide all the "secret" parts of us that are uncomfortable to think or talk about. In this moment, Augustine describes grappling with the discomfort of seeing his own face (or soul), as if for the first time. He uses similes to describe his diseased, or corrupt parts of himself that he had long kept hidden but suddenly faces. In her article, "Humble God," Deborah Ruddy explains how human pride is like a sickness, but those who become entrapped by it fail to acknowledge

their need for healing. She states, “Humility is the remedy, and Christ is the ‘great Physician.’ Like a patient delirious with fever, the prideful turn away from Christ’s healing ointment” (91). In this scene, Augustine forcibly encounters the sickness of his soul, and must come to terms with it. He continues:

I saw myself and I was horrified; but there was no way to flee from myself. I tried to turn my gaze from myself, and again You were setting me face to face with myself, forcing me upon my own sight, that I might see my iniquity and loathe it. I had known it, but I had pretended not to see it, I had deliberately looked the other way and let it go from my mind (152).

At last Augustine realizes here that he can no longer ignore his corruptness. He admits to pretending before that nothing was wrong with him, and now all at once he sees himself clearly. This is a huge moment for Augustine, for at last a touch of humility enters his heart. For perhaps the first time, he sees himself accurately. Although what he sees about himself is corrupt at the moment, soon the clarity that comes with humility will allow him to see the bad parts that with effort can be fixed.

Augustine’s response to this sudden clarity fills him with sorrow, and he sees that he too could give himself over to God, but his selfish will refuses to allow him to surrender. He retreats to a nearby garden to cry, and the tears Augustine sheds there become his first real movement towards conversion. He writes, “It struck me that solitude was more suited for the business of weeping” (157). Once alone he flung himself down by a fig tree and cried out, “Let it be now, let it be now,” meaning, let this be the moment my heart makes the commitment to change (158). Amidst the weeping, he begged God for the strength to surrender. Unceasingly he cried, kneeling and praying, when suddenly

he heard the voice of a nearby child. The voice was singing, “Take and read, take and read” (159). Augustine immediately ceased crying and tried to determine if the words he heard went with some sort of child’s game, but he very quickly determined the occurrence to be of divine origin. Stopping his tears, he jumped up and hurried to his book of scripture. Opening the book, he read the first passage: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh of concupiscences” (*New American Bible*, Rom. 13:13-14). The effect of this verse on Augustine was profound, for it touches directly on his struggles with lustful behavior. He immediately closes the book and seeks his friend to tell him about the whole incident.

Reflecting on this moment in the garden, Augustine writes that it was, “In that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, a light of utter confidence shone in my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away” (160). With this newfound confidence, Augustine instantly resolved to give his life to God. He makes this decision in a garden, which is not insignificant to him or Christianity. The last garden he mentions is the one from which he stole a pear. The other garden is, of course, the Garden of Eden. It is interesting to note that these gardens together illustrate at first prideful disobedience, and finally a change of heart. The ultimate succession of events in the final garden scene is important to note for my study, for none of these things would have occurred without humility. First, Augustine weeps, which is followed by an audible voice urging him to read, next the urge to turn to a scripture verse, (which hits directly at his personal struggles), and, finally, his sudden rush of assurance in what needed to be done in his life. The events in this scene all act together to bring about Augustine’s conversion, but none



could have taken place without his initial tears of remorse. Ultimately his tears become an acknowledgement of his errors.

The scene in the garden, as well as the events leading up to it, illustrate how in order for Augustine to heal from his past failures, he must first totally believe that they are failures. Only through the acceptance that these acts are failures does Augustine learn both how not to do them again, and how to move on from them. There was yet another garden, the garden of Gethsemane, in which Christ experiences temptation. Every incident leading up to the garden scene, which had brought Augustine close to conversion, had also given him insight into the need to abstain from things like drinking, lusting, and vying for recognition from others. However, up until the garden scene, he could not make himself *desire* to give them up because he could not bring himself to see them as wrong. It is not until he finally sobs in the garden over the fact that he feels powerless against his desires that Augustine at last sees them as corrupted and decides to give them up for good. The instant he takes ownership of his failures, humility at last enters Augustine's heart and brings him to tears. These remorseful tears ultimately prove to have healing power because they open Augustine up to growth.

Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine refers to God as "the divine physician" whose grace brings light and healing to the humble. Augustine's newfound humility gives him the personal growth necessary to experience this healing. McInerney writes, "Humility, for Augustine is the medicine through which the tumor of pride may be healed" (3203). His belief is that the proud are healed by humbly stepping down from their position, which references Augustine's words on spiritual sickness: "[T]his disease Thou only curest, who resistest the proud, and givest grace to the humble" (57). In

writing the *Confessions*, Augustine contends with his earlier, prideful self. His narrative is a journey toward understanding and growing in virtue, and in the process of writing his story, he strives to become virtuous himself. The soul, according to Augustine, represents a body that grows sick with lack of care and misuse. It is only through acknowledging and letting go of one's past that the human patient embraces the lowly, but paradoxically heavenly, remedy of humility.

The engagement with past events Augustine provides in his *Confessions* mirrors the Catholic Sacrament of confession, where the penitent recalls not only what sins they have committed, but also where they recollect having immoral thoughts as well. Interestingly, rather than focusing strictly on what his past failures were, Augustine goes a step further by examining *how* he got from point A to point B. Through self-examination, he delves deep into past memories to take full responsibility and to figure out how—and why—he took part in the things he did. He follows the form of the Church's *Confiteor* (translated "I Confess") of the Catholic mass – "I confess to almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts, in my words, in what I have done, and what I have failed to do" (Herbermann). Here the repentant sinner takes full responsibility for the wrongs they have committed against God and other humans through the act of confession, and Augustine does likewise in his narrative.

Since the time when Augustine wrote the *Confessions*, confessing one's sins has been a private matter involving only the penitent and an ordained priest or bishop. Historically, confession has been a private and confidential act from the beginning of the Catholic Church's foundation. The tradition began on the first Easter Sunday, when

Christ breathed on his apostles in the Upper Room and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (*New American Bible*, John. 20:22-23). From that day forward, the apostles were able to forgive sins through the power of Christ. Although the recitation of personal sins to a priest has been a private act since its foundation, in the early years of Christianity there existed penances that were given publicly. Penance came after a private confession and was a way for the penitent to make amends for his or her wrongdoings. A penance could come in the form of fasting, wearing abrasive clothing, not bathing, and abstaining from communion and the marital act (Fier). Depending on the gravity of the sin, a penance could last for years. The idea behind a penance was for the penitent to restore his or her relationship not only with God, but also with fellow Christians. Because the Christian Church was thought of as a unified whole (its members formally called the Body of Christ) when one person sinned it wounded not only the person committing the act, but also wounded the whole Body.

When Augustine was bishop of Hippo, the penances following confession were often severe. A serious sin could warrant years of penance, or in the worst cases, excommunication, an eviction from the Church and life-long abstinence from the sacraments. Although some regarded the worst sins as unforgivable, Augustine was an advocate for mercy and “healing corrections” rather than excommunication. The gravest of sins, according to a sermon that Augustine gave on the New Testament, were adultery, homicide, and sacrilege (Augustine, Sermon 52). When serious sins such as these were committed, and the penitent sought absolution, there followed a serious procedure 1) A private confession with the bishop 2) A public enrollment in the order of penitents 3) An

extended period of works, fasting, and abstinence from communion 4) A solemn public penance held by the bishop (Hubbard). It is likely that Augustine himself followed this order of events following his own conversion. The sacrament of confession in modern times has evolved to exclude public penances, and a lengthy penance period. Today, penitents can meet with any ordained priest and confess their sins privately. Afterwards, the priest will assign a small task or a set of prayers as penance. The process of confession, although shortened since the time of Augustine, still requires penitents to have solemn remorse, to confess, and to have a firm resolve to avoid sin in the future.

When we read the *Confessions*, the reader is to assume that Augustine has already confessed his sins formally to a priest - most likely a bishop. His writing follows the narrative of his life and bears the nature of his sins to the world. Yet, in doing so Augustine refrains from revealing the minutiae of his sins, focusing instead on the core of the acts and their repercussions. In this way, his writing differs from the sacrament, where nothing would be withheld. His narrative follows the form of confession, but the most striking similarities to the sacrament come from his writing's penitential nature. While penance in Augustine's time was public, and he did believe that public sin deserved public penance, his own method of penance came in the form of his writing. While ostensibly Augustine's primary audience was God, he knew that he was writing for the masses. Even though Augustine performed the sacrament, he needed to humble himself more, and to help show others how honesty and openness about one's transgressions has the transformative power to bring healing.

Augustine's work presents itself not only as an acknowledgment of wrongdoing, but as a unique form of self-analysis. Starting in the 17th century, confessional writing

would become a pretty mainstream practice and many would follow in Augustine's stead. Jean-Jacques Rousseau would compose his own confessions centuries later, but not for religious purposes. His writing was in the attempt to know himself better, while also proclaiming his uniqueness. In a study on confessional writing, D. Wear and T. Jones explain that centuries after Augustine, a trend for confessional-style writing would become popular, similar to the way life writing is today. From religious programming on the radio, to television shows, to radio psychologists giving advice to callers who confessed things on air, public confessions evolved into something common over time (218). At the heart, humans are confessional beings. Augustine illustrates how confession is not only beneficial within the sacrament, but helps anyone who partakes in the practice, whether in public or not, own their weaknesses in pursuit of a humble existence.

Augustine believes that humility is the core virtue that allows other virtues to grow (163), therefore, essential to personal growth. This belief suggests that without humility, other virtues such as charity, faith, patience, honesty, and assertiveness could not take place. But not only does Augustine advocate humility as foundational for other virtues, according to McInerney, he also believes it to be the beginning of human greatness. In one of his sermons, written later in life, Augustine writes:

Do you want to be great? Start from the bottom. Are you thinking of constructing a great building? First give thought to the foundation of humility....the bigger the building is meant to be, the deeper [one must] dig the foundation. As the building is constructed, it rises higher and higher...the one digging the foundations pushed down lower. The lower levels of the building need to be humbled before they

reach their loftiest height, and its topmost pinnacle can only be erected after it has been humbled to the depths (536).

To Augustine, humility is not only foundational, but in order for a person to be their best self, they *need* to have humility. Even more, in order for someone to become truly great, they first need to have suffered some sort of humiliation. I would like to determine what Augustine means by “great” in this context. I argue that he does not intend this term to have a sovereign meaning, but that he refers to it as a way to reference an individual that others would aspire to be. In other words, “great” describes a person worth leading others in some way. Some may argue that this idea was what Augustine had in mind when he wrote the *Confessions*, and that he wrote to gain attention. However, Augustine counters this claim by explaining to God his intention for writing the *Confessions*. “Behold thou lovest the truth, and he that does the truth comes to the light. I wish to do it in confession, in my heart before Thee, in my writing before many witnesses” (189). In reality, Augustine’s first and primary mode of exposing himself was to lay his life out before God, even with the acknowledgment that God already knew everything from Augustine’s life. Ultimately, Augustine’s belief was that in writing the *Confessions*, he might lead some to follow his example just as he followed the examples of others.

Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine exemplifies humility through the honesty of his writing, as well as in his actions. After his conversion in the garden, he immediately endeavors to do everything for God, which changes his heart and leads him to becoming a priest soon after. The last model for humility that Augustine gives in his writing is in his admission that he still presently struggles with temptation. Even as a bishop, which he eventually becomes, Augustine is truthful about his human weaknesses.

He admits he has impure thoughts, and still struggles to keep vanity and gluttony in check. He does not offer excuses, but rather owns that he is powerless towards progress without God's assistance. In a prayerful voice, he writes:

I confess to my good Lord what I still am, in this way of evil; rejoicing with trembling in what Thou hast given me and grieving that I am not yet made perfect, hoping that Thou wilt perfect Thy mercies in me unto the fullness of peace: the peace which my inward being and my outward shall have with Thee when death shall be swallowed up in victory (213).

Here Augustine reflects Aquinas' theory that humility takes first grace and then human effort. These lines show that in Augustine's heart, perfection will only happen when he reaches the afterlife that unites him at last with God. Until then, he rejoices that God has given him the grace to desire a changed life, while remaining honest about the progress that still needs to be made.

## **Conclusion**

Accepting that he will always struggle with temptations in some way has profound healing power for Augustine of Hippo, because surrendering removes the pressure to be perfect. By no longer striving to put himself first in everything, he opens himself to the benefits of serving God and others. In willingly deciding to persevere for God's sake, Augustine no longer seeks to impress others, but instead seeks to do what is right. His *Confessions* illustrate how owning our wrongs gives us the openness to humility and its capacity for healing.

Humility is essential to human development. It opens people up to growth, it heals from the effects of pride and sin, and it allows for greater human connection. For example, all human relationships may be strengthened by trust and respect. Augustine illustrates how humility is foundational to these things. He also demonstrates how humility reveals the true self by getting rid of false forefronts placed by pride. When people begin to understand themselves, their strengths along with their weaknesses become clearer. The right knowledge of the self allows for understanding, self-compassion, peace, and freedom from anxiety over what others think. With an accurate understanding of the self, there is less room for self-judgment, or judgement towards others.

Augustine also shows how humility can help a person understand their place in the world as part of creation. As Norman Wirzba points out, humans can learn humility by recognizing themselves to be members of the created community. He depicts humans amidst all of creation, and beneath a Creator. Accepting this depiction lessens the chance of overestimation of one's abilities or importance. Augustine's conversion demonstrates how humility helps when we admit there is always room for improvement. And this help keeps the self from becoming arrogant. It also allows a person to own their mistakes instead of making excuses for things done wrong. Augustine's *Confessions* demonstrates how humility incites an apology. Whether that apology is directed towards God, acquaintances, or to oneself, an honest admission of guilt opens the door to healing, growth, and self-acceptance.

Augustine's apology in the *Confessions* parallels the penitent going to the priest for absolution. What proved significant was the publicity of Augustine's confessional.



Rather than keeping his past life a secret between himself, his priest, and God, he exposes himself on the page. The typical rite of confession holds that the penitent reveals his or her sins privately to an ordained priest, and through the ministry of the church, the repentant sinner receives forgiveness. However, Augustine breaks out of this tradition to share intimate details from his past life through his writing. Why does he choose to do this? Augustine suggests that confession should not only be made privately, but the repentant sinner should fully own the sins committed even at the cost of humiliation to the individual. Through the narrative of his work in the *Confessions*, Augustine does just this – bringing forth his own humiliations and expounding the very concept of humility in a genuine way.

Augustine, along with many other saints and scholars of humility, holds a common appreciation for the truth that humility reveals about the human self. His truth revealed how his actions had corrupted him. Augustine laid the framework for other practitioners to acknowledge and contend with their failings. St. Thomas Aquinas was an avid scholar of Augustine and undoubtedly learned about humility through studying Augustine's *Confessions*. Aquinas' definition of humility reflects an understanding of the way Augustine exemplifies the virtue in his life and in his writing.

The concepts outlined by St. Augustine show how confessional writing leads to breaking the bonds that trap people in negativity, self-doubt, hurt, depression, grief, despair, and shame. If people can take ownership of their past failures, as well as accept the things that have been done to them, then there is potential to experience forgiveness from others and experience real healing. I continue to be fascinated by the concepts and examples presented by Augustine, who provides a wonderful example of humility

through his writing. I believe that by imitating his example, people can examine how they became who they are, and appreciate where they have come from. Examining humility in Augustine's *Confessions* provides the ability to reckon with humble failures while experiencing a revolution that can lead to accepting all the joyful *and painful* truths that make a person who they are.

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