

JUNE 4, 1928

SAINT AUGUSTINE.

A Man Who "Moulded the Mind of Europe for 1,500 Years."—By Very Rev. Dr. Prior, Vice-Rector English College, Rome.

New York Freeman's Journal.

PART I.—AUGUSTINE AT HOME.

In these days of keen interest in autobiography, when students of history are ransacking libraries and archives to present the past to us in its own circumstances and coloring, when a far-spread psychological school of romance seeks to probe the inner life of man and reveal its deep currents of religious thought and feeling, it must be interesting to study that

MASTER SPIRIT OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT S. Augustine, of whose life and character we have such abundant materials in the voluminous works which he has left to posterity. To Catholics this theme should appear with peculiar force, for it may be said without fear of exaggeration that there has not been since the time of the Apostles a greater champion of the Christian cause.

And there are few great men of any period of whom we have such an opportunity of forming an intimate and personal knowledge as of the Great Doctor of the Western Church. He has bequeathed to us a faithful picture of himself in his writings. In his Book of Confession he traces the story of his life from the first opening of his mind to the beginning of his episcopate. It is not a mere narrative of events, but a vivid likeness of his soul, with all its hidden depths, its yearnings and aspirations, its waywardness, its shameless falls, its noble rise to a higher and purer life. He unburdens his mind of its teeming memories and throws them on the page without reserve.

AUGUSTINE OPENS HIS SOUL.

He was a saint when he wrote, and no doubt his sensitive conscience gave too deep a shade to the recital of his wrong doing, but the note of sincerity marks his work throughout. His errors and sinful wanderings, his talents and achievements, are spoken of with like simplicity and candor.

It is a pilgrim's progress, but in St. Augustine's pages Hypocrisy, Money-love, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the Giant Despair, were not mere allegory, but the stern realities of his own individual experience. He recounts in bitterness the wasted years, and lays bare his soul in the white light from the throne of God, in Whose presence he writes, and in Whom in the course of his narrative he is ever lifting up his heart in adoration, thanksgiving and love.

"To whom tell I this?" he writes in the second book of his confessions, "Not to Thee, my God, but before Thee to my own kind, even to that small portion of mankind as may light upon these writings of mine. And to what purpose? That whosoever reads this, may think not of what depths we are to cry unto Thee. For what is nearer to Thy ears than a confessing heart and a life of faith?" This spontaneous outpouring of his heart presents to us a picture of the saint, which is something more than a portrait; it is a living counterpart, as superior to a portrait as are the delicate hues of the blossom instinct with the fresh life of the plant to the muddy colors of the flower on the painter's canvas.

SPEAKS TO FRIENDS.

His strong individuality shines out, too, in other works, where he is not set purpose writing autobiography. He has left us more than two hundred letters, many of them to intimate friends, where he unveils his secret heart, and unconsciously reveals himself as he pours out without restraint his views, impressions, convictions, feelings, his sorrows, burdens, and anxieties. Some of his speculative treatises were written in the familiar form of dialogue; others are reports of conversations between S. Augustine and his friends, and are interspersed with details of his daily life.

A FAMILY PARTY.

"De Beata Vita," or the treatise on "True Happiness," is a record of conversations which he had with his friends on the occasion of his thirty-third birthday. There were present his mother, St. Monica, and his brother Navigius, his two cousins Lætidius and Rusticus, his pupils Licentius and Trygetius and his little son Adeodatus—"the least of all" as the Saint describes him, "but whose talent, if my love does not deceive me, gives promise of great things." Their festivity, which lasted three days, was more a feast of the mind than of the body. Augustine draws a lively picture of the scene. He tells how as the rain threatened, they sought a retired and sheltered spot in the public baths. He directed the course of the discussion, which flows on with unabated interest, sparkling here and there with playful humor.

TRYGETIUS TRAPPED.

All were free to express their views, but one rule of the debate, which acted as a wholesome check on the disputants, was that every remark should be reported on the tablets. Trygetius, who was somewhat obstinate, stumbled in his argument, and tries to evade the relentless logic of Augustine by a piece of pleasant irony, delivered with a smothered laugh.

"The thing is quite clear," he said, "that man is happy who has not got what he wants."

"Write it down," said Augustine. "I never said it," he exclaimed. "Write that down as well," replied the Saint.

"Yes, I said it," Trygetius confessed. Later on S. Monica breaks into the debate with a plump demand for information.

"But who are those Academicians, and what is their aim?"

When S. Augustine had given a concise and learned explanation of their tactics, St. Monica remarked: "Why, these men are epileptics," and she rose to go. Then they all rose amid joyous laughter, and the first day's debate was at an end.

It is hard to imagine, when we glance at his stern-looking tomes as they frown on us from the shelves of the library, that they contain scenes of such human interest. Yet there are numerous passages in which the personality of Augustine is presented to us in unaffected attitudes, with all the charm of natural ease. We feel that we are in his company as we read. I may be permitted one or two quotations.

The book "De Magistro," a treatise on the philosophy of words, is a dialogue between S. Augustine and his son Adeodatus when the latter was sixteen years of age. While it affords proof of the extraordinary talents of the boy, which even S. Augustine, with the recollection of his own precocious youth before him, looked upon as something appalling—"Norro mihi erat illud ingenium"—it reveals their deep mutual attachment, and the tender heart of the father in the Saint. There is all the freshness of life in their interchange of ideas.

WITH HIS LITTLE SON.

At one part of the discussion S. Augustine had thrown out a difficulty which he did not solve; so, later on, in recapitulating the course of the argument, Adeodatus said, "At this point you evaded the real tenor of the question with a joke, and deferred your answer to another time, and you must not imagine that I shall forget your debt to me."

Further on in the book S. Augustine reminds Adeodatus that, though they may indulge in a little playfulness from time to time, it is not for the sake of amusement that he holds this argument with him, but to exercise their mutual powers that they might feel and love the warm light of truth.

"Let us continue, then," said the boy, "for I shall never consider that trifling which you think should be said or done."

"Then tell me, first of all, 'utrum homo sit homo?'—whether man is man?" (We should remember that they are discussing the philosophy of words.)

Adeodatus replies: "Now, I do not know whether you are joking or not?" Augustine, "How so?"

Adeodatus, "Because you think fit to ask me whether man can be anything else but man?"

And so the dialogue runs on through grave comment and subtle distinction, full of the sunshine of kindly feeling, and brightened by frequent flashes of merriment.

Another of his minor works, "De Ordine," abounds in homely incidents and allusions, and detailed description, that seem to reproduce the Saint in his surroundings before our very eyes. It opens with a night scene.

CHAFFING HIS PUPILS.

Trygetius and Licentius are in bed in the same room with Augustine. He is turning over some question in his own mind when silence is broken by Licentius kicking the boards of his bed to frighten away the mice that threatened his sleep. At this sign of wakefulness, S. Augustine has no compunction in addressing him.

"I see, Licentius," he said, "that the muse has lit your lamp for a night study, so, can you throw any light on this question?" an allusion to his pupil's absorption in the study of poetry, which did not commend itself to Augustine's notions. Licentius was drawn into the train of thought, though somewhat reluctantly, as it appeared later. They had not gone far when he begged to be excused, for his mind was intent on far other things.

THE HOWLING POET.

This elicits another good-humored taunt from the Saint about his everlasting singing and howling of verses in every conceivable metre, which were raising a wall between him and truth more cruel than the one that separated the lovers of his poem (he was engaged at the time on verses about Pyramus and Thisbe) "for they could at least feel each other's breath through the traditional chink."

The next morning as S. Augustine goes to the baths he sees a cock fight, of which he gives a graphic description, and is led on by it to some deep philosophical reflections. Instances of this kind might be easily multiplied, but I must pass on to the story of his life.

HIS BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD.

St. Augustine was born of comparatively poor parents at Tagaste, a small town in the northern part of Numidia, in the year 354. His father, Patricius, was a pagan; though of a kind and generous nature, he had an ungovernable temper, and was a harsh and unfaithful husband. Augustine's mother was the well-known St. Monica. From her lips in his childhood he learned the rudiments of the Christian faith; and so deeply did she implant the fear of God and the love of Jesus in his heart that even in the wildest dissipation of his after-life the impression was never effaced.

HIS MOTHER.

"By thy great mercy, O Lord," he writes in the third book of his Confessions, "my tender heart imbibed with my mother's milk the sweet name of Christ, Thy Son, my Saviour; and ever after, nothing, be it ever so learned, ever so polished, ever so true, could, if devoid of this name, entirely carry me away."

And again, "Nor was it anything else that drew me at last from the depths of vice but the fear of death and

judgment, which had never left my heart in all its wanderings." (Book vi., c. 16.)

HIS BOYHOOD—HE ABOMINATES GREEK. He grew to be a bright, intelligent boy, gentle and warm-hearted. He devoured eagerly the Latin classics and wept over Virgil, but abominated Greek. He does not seem to have learnt this language until late in life, when he girded himself for the struggle against Pelagius.

NICE BOY—BRIGHT, CHEERFUL. Generous and frank, he hated all meanness and hypocrisy. He soon won his way to the affections of his companions, who gave him their love and esteem all the more readily, perhaps, that together with his mental gifts, sunny disposition and sympathetic nature, he united prowess in games and often neglected his lessons to indulge in play.

THE BIRCH WAS THE PENALTY FOR HIS FAULT: and it excited a dread in his young heart, for he feared it no less, he writes, than grown-up men fear racks and hooks and other torments, that he begged of God in His mercy to preserve him from a thrashing. "For so I began as a boy to pray to Thee, my aid and refuge, and broke the fetters of my tongue to call on Thee, praying Thee, though small, with no small earnestness, that I might not be beaten at school."

His imperfect prayer was not heard, and the lash continued to be applied. "This was judged right by our forefathers," he says, "and many passing the same course before us, framed for us weary paths through which we were fain to pass, undergoing toil and grief upon the sons of Adam."

YOUTH—BAD EXAMPLE.

After receiving the rudiments of education at Tagaste, he was sent to the more important town of Madaura, and thence to the metropolis of Carthage, to pursue his studies. He was thus released from the wholesome restraints of home, removed from the watchful eye of his Christian mother, and thrown into an atmosphere almost entirely pagan. Sensuality, wickedness, incentives to passion, were rife, and Augustine was carried away by the stream of example around him. "Woe is thee thou torment of human custom!" he writes of this time, "who shall stand against thee? How long shalt thou not be dried up? How long roll the sons of Eve into that huge and hideous ocean which even they scarcely overpass who climb the cross?"

A MAN OF THE WORLD.

He did nothing to outrage the prevailing standard of morality around him, and certainly he fell not so low as many of his companions. He preserved an exterior of respectability, was polished and elegant in manner, affable, kind; but he had drunk in freely the breadth of evil and the poison had corrupted his heart.

WENT AHEAD IN STUDIES.

He did not, however, allow self-indulgence to paralyze his energies. His native talents developed rapidly under the spur of ambition. Eager for distinction, he threw himself into the struggle for success and easily outdistanced every rival. His mind responded readily to every demand upon its resources, and he mastered almost without effort the most difficult subjects of knowledge.

In a bitter lament over this portion of his life he let us see something of his extraordinary talents and the wide range of his acquisitions. He begins with an allusion to the Predilections of Aristotle, and any one who has studied in this field of philosophy will appreciate the feat of genius of which he makes mention.

"And what did it profit me that scarce twenty years old a book of Aristotle, which they call the Ten Predilections, falling into my hands (the very name of which I revered as something great and divine, so often as my rhetoric masters of Carthage and others accounted learned, mouthed it with cheeks bursting with pride I read and understood it unaided?"

WONDERFUL TALENTS.

"And on my conferring with others, who said they scarcely understood it with the help of very able tutors not only orally explaining it, but drawing many figures in sand, they could tell me no more of it than I had learned reading it by myself. And the book appeared to me to speak very clearly. And what did it profit me that all the books I could procure of the so-called liberal arts, I, the vile slave of vile affections, read by myself and understood? . . . Whatever was written either on rhetoric or logic or geometry, music and arithmetic by myself without difficulty or any instructor I understood. Though both quickness in understanding and acuteness in discerning is Thy gift. What profited me good abilities not employed to good uses? For I felt not that these arts were attained with great difficulty even by the studious and talented until I attempted to explain them to such, when he most excellent in them who followed me not altogether slowly."

MANICHEAN SNARE.

When he was nineteen years old he fell into the snare of the Manicheans. They were a widespread sect with a materialist system, pretending to large and enlightened views. They adopted a Christian terminology to beguile the unwary, but in fact there was nothing Christian about them.

They were in reality a secret society hostile to the Church. They had their initiations and passwords and like accessories that are found in the modern craft of Freemasonry; their officers or elect were styled bishops, those of the rank and file, according to their grades, auditors, catechumens, faithful; they spoke of God, Christ and Par-

aclete, but not in a Christian sense; their boast was to rise above the simple, vulgar notions of Catholics and give a sublime interpretation of Christian mysteries united to men of superior intelligence and culture.

Their proud conceits took the very heart out of revealed truth. The essence of their system as far as they treated of God was drawn from Persian pantheism. They taught that there were two great kingdoms—the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness—ruled over respectively by God and Satan, the principles of good and evil. Christ was an emanation from the principle of light, assumed the appearance of body, and suffered only in appearance. His doctrine had been corrupted by his followers, and Manes, the founder of the Manicheans, was the Paraclete promised by Him who had come to restore the true teaching.

FREE THOUGHT.

Two main points in their teaching allured St. Augustine—their rejection of the principle of authority in religion, and the doctrine of fatalism in regard to the ruling of the passions—free thought and self-indulgence.

"Thou knowest, Honocatus," he writes in his *Utility of Belief*, "that for this reason alone did we fall into the hands of these men, namely, that they professed to free us from all error and bring us to God by pure reason alone, without that terrible principle of authority."

"For whatever induced me to abandon the faith of my childhood and follow these men for nine years, except this assertion that we were terrified by superstition into a faith blindly imposed upon our reason, while they urged no one to believe until the truth was fully discussed and proved. Who would not be seduced by such promises; especially if he were a proud, contented young man, thirsting for truth, such as they found me?"

"I fell, therefore, into the hands of men carnal and loquacious, full of insane pride, with the snares of Satan on their lips and a birdlime made up of syllables of Thy name and that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost the Paraclete. These names were ever on their lips; but their hearts were void of truth, and they incessantly repeated to me, 'Truth, Truth,' but there was no truth in them. They taught what was false not only about Thee, my God, who art the very truth, but even about the elements of this world, Thy creatures."

HIS MOTHER'S FEAR AND PRAYERS.

Poor Monica, his mother, was well-nigh heart-broken. She saw him falling farther and farther away from God, the victim of a perverted intellect and the slave of vile passion. She admonished, entreated, pleaded with tears, but all to no purpose. Augustine considered her remonstrances as the result of womanish fears and he had learned to scorn the simple faith that satisfied his mind and heart. So she turned to God in her desolation and in anguish of spirit by day and by night for thirteen long years; with all the strength of her mother's love and the constancy of a saint, she begged of Him to save her son. After many years her persevering prayer was answered in a way that went beyond her fondest hopes.

AUGUSTINE'S SUFFERING.

If they were years of distress for St. Monica they were no less years of unrest and affliction for Augustine. His mind was a chaos and his heart ill at ease. His whole nature would assert itself and cry out against the tyranny of passion and the darkness of error that encompassed him. But he saw no way of escape. "Woe! Woe! by what steps was I brought down to the depths of hell! toiling and tumbling through want of truth, since I sought after Thee, my God, not according to the understanding of the mind, wherein thou willedest that I should excel the beasts, but according to the sense of the flesh. But thou wert more inward to me than my most inward part, higher than my highest."

CRAVING FOR TRUTH.

"O Truth, truth, how earnestly did even then the marrow of my soul pant after thee, when they often and diversely and in many and huge books echoed of Thee to me, though it was but an echo; and these were the dishes wherein to me hungering after Thee they instead of Thee served up the sun and moon, beautiful works of Thine, but yet Thy works not Thyself."

"But I hungered and thirsted not after these works of Thine, but after Thee Thyself, the truth in whom is no change, no shadow of alteration; yet still they set before me in these dishes glittering fantasies."

GOD IS THE TRUTH.

"Because I thought them to be Thine, I fed thereon; not eagerly for Thou didst not in them taste to me as Thou art; for Thou wast not these emptinesses; nor was I nourished by them, but exhausted rather. For verily was I straying from them." (Book iii., c. 6.)

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