

16 BLACK  
SAINTS &  
ADVOCATES



FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

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# 16 BLACK SAINTS AND ADVOCATES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

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# Introduction

In proposing saints as our models of life, the Church wants to encourage us to follow their example of virtue in order to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is our primary model, the Way, the Truth, and the Life for all of us. But in the saints the Church gives us examples of people like us, ordinary men and women who lived what Jesus taught, even to the point of heroic sacrifices.

The saints come from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They are found in every age of history and from places all over the world. Why a book on Black saints? The saints in this volume were selected because they represent the unique and special contribution of people of color. Since the sin of racism is unfortunately still alive, it is important for us as Catholics to honor and celebrate those saints who often faced obstacles and hatred because of the color of their skin. Their love for Jesus overcame all of those obstacles and can greatly move us as we struggle in our own lives.

The Church's teaching is very clear in condemning the sin of racism. The popes and the bishops have issued strong statements through the years that racism is an evil that we as Christians cannot allow to continue to poison society. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "The equality of men

[and women] rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it. Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design" (no. 1935). It is not just a matter of individual racism but of institutional racism. Unfortunately there can be policies in place in institutions that result in minorities not having equal access to resources in a systemic way. Most communities, including that of the Church, are improved by inclusion of various types of people.

One way of overcoming racism is to learn about and recognize the tremendous contributions that people of color have made throughout history. All of the saints in this volume made remarkable contributions to the life of the Church. That is because holiness is the greatest good and our ultimate goal. Simply through their holiness they have forever enriched us. But even beyond that, they have also made substantial contributions in other ways. The great Saint Augustine of Hippo, for example, is one of the most remarkable thinkers in the Church. His contributions to philosophy and theology are unparalleled and have never ceased to awaken interest and further study. His mother, Saint Monica, was the spiritual force behind his conversion. Her prayers and tears for him shed for over twenty years bore fruit in bringing him to faith in Christ.

Other saints noted here gave brave witness in shedding their blood for Christ, thus winning the crown of martyrdom, such as the heroic Charles Lwanga and his companions. By the generous gift of their lives they helped to deeply root the



Gospel in their countries and bring many others to faith. Some of them, such as Saint Josephine Bakhita, overcame tremendous obstacles, including slavery, to dedicate their lives to Christ. These saints came from all walks of life. Some were members of religious orders, such as Saint Martin de Porres and Saint Benedict the Moor. Others were married, such as Blessed Isidore Bakanja and Blessed Victoria Rasoamanarivo. Two of the saints selected, Peter Claver and Katharine Drexel, were Caucasian. But they dedicated their whole lives to working for people of color, which is why they are included here. Their example of love for neighbor can inspire us to act in the same manner toward all of our brothers and sisters today. Their work for social justice helped to bring attention to the plight of those whose human dignity was not being respected. Claver called himself “the slave of the slaves.” He not only did what he could to help alleviate their suffering, but reproached the wealthy landowners who exploited them. While everyone regardless of their color has to be willing to fight against racial injustice, Saints Peter Claver and Katharine Drexel made it the focus of their life’s work.

While this small volume is not comprehensive of all Black saints, it is meant to make better known the contributions and holiness of the saints included. We might ask ourselves: what would the world be like without these great saints? What would our theology be like without the genius of Augustine? What has the wonderful witness of holiness by all these saints added to our Church? Saint Martin de Porres, Venerable Pierre Toussaint, Servant of God Thea Bowman and the others in this volume have all enriched the fabric of our Catholic

life of faith. It is our prayer that this book will help in some way to promote greater racial harmony in our society and our Church today.

# Saint Augustine

## *Seeker of Truth*

Alipius studied his friend's abstracted face while they ate. Augustine was his former teacher, a cherished friend, and a brother on the journey of seeking the truth. Augustine's great mind and heart had led Alipius to follow in his footsteps. And now, it was clear that Augustine's attention wandered far from the fascinating table conversation.

Their guest for lunch, a Christian named Pontitianus, had been describing the life of a holy man, Anthony of Egypt, who was inspiring other Christians—including two of his friends—to dedicate their whole lives to God. Augustine had listened eagerly, until now.

As Pontitianus rose to leave, Alipius said goodbye, then followed Augustine to the next room. As he entered, Augustine whipped around to face to him and almost shouted in agitation, "What are we doing, Alipius? The unlearned are seizing heaven by force and what are we doing? We, with all our knowledge, are heartless cowards, wallowing and sinking in the mire!"

Alipius was astonished, not so much by Augustine's words but by the anguish in his eyes and tone. Augustine turned and

went into the garden, and Alipius followed. He could not desert his friend, whom he had never seen so distressed.

For a while, they sat together in silence. Finally, Augustine got up and walked a short distance away. Alipius watched as his friend sank to the ground. Alipius glanced back at the house where Augustine's mother, Monica, was clearing up after their meal. Should he call her? He had never seen Augustine so upset.

Sitting alone under the fig tree, Augustine poured out years of grief and regret through his tears. Even now, when so much had finally become clear, Augustine's doubts tormented him.

His doubts had begun as a youth, when he had left his devoutly Christian mother to study at the university of Carthage. In those days, it was the custom to be taught the faith, but not receive Baptism until adulthood. But the skepticism prevalent at the university made a deep impression on Augustine, and he gradually rejected the teachings of the Church as too simple and impractical to live. At age 19, impressed by the writings of the Roman orator Cicero, Augustine began his lifelong search for truth. Discounting the Christianity in which he had been raised but which he had never truly explored, he found himself drawn to Manichaeism, a religious cult that attempted to synthesize all known religions into one.

A brilliant student, Augustine quickly became a teacher, but he continued to explore various philosophies and religions. Eventually, he grew disillusioned with Manichaeism, but he continued to search. In his need to seek the truth

without restraint, he had even deceived his mother and left for Rome without her. Eventually, he had ended up teaching in Milan. Here, Augustine had begun listening to the preaching of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, because he admired his rhetoric. But soon he found himself agreeing with much of what Ambrose was saying. Augustine started to study Christianity.

Augustine's intellectual doubts finally started to melt away in the light of Christ. He felt he had at last found the truth. But Augustine wasn't ready to embrace Christianity, because he knew he couldn't live the Church's teaching on purity. Augustine had been faithful to one woman for decades—a woman he deeply loved but never married, who had given birth to his son, Adeodatus. At Monica's prodding, Augustine had recently broken up with the woman, but he found he could not bear the solitude, and he had started living with another woman while his mother arranged for his marriage. It was too late, too hard, for him to learn to live chastely.

At lunch, the story Pontitianus told had shone a brilliant light that had cast Augustine in a deep shadow. Augustine felt he finally saw his true self—a self that was deformed by sin. How could he, with all his studies and intellect, not have the courage to embrace the truth? If others could follow Christ so single-heartedly as to leave everything behind, why couldn't he leave behind his life of sin? In the midst of his tears and self-loathing, Augustine started to pray, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

Suddenly, Augustine heard a child's voice chanting, "Take up and read! Take up and read!" Augustine looked around for the child. Seeing no one, he realized that what he heard was

the voice of inspiration. Hadn't Pontitianus said that Anthony of the Desert's conversion had come from reading one line of the Gospels? Rising to his feet and going back to Alipius, Augustine picked up the Letters of Saint Paul that he'd been reading. Eagerly, like a man crazed with thirst, he opened the Scriptures and read, "Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:13–14). As he read the words, a light suddenly filled his entire being, dispelling not only his doubts but his inner turmoil. Closing the book, Augustine joyfully turned to Alipius. "I am abandoning the past and embracing Christianity!"

Alipius read as Augustine had, and found a line that inspired him. Together, Augustine and Alipius went to tell Monica the good news. Monica hugged her son, weeping and sobbing, "Thanks be to God! At last! Thanks be to God!"

An uncontainable happiness finally filled Augustine's heart. He had been so afraid to lose the pleasures of his former life, but now they seemed like trifles compared to the delights of the spirit he enjoyed in God's love. He withdrew from public life to prepare himself for his baptism—praying, fasting, and doing penance. He wrote a prayer that revealed his regret at having waited so long before surrendering to God:

O Jesus Christ, amiable Lord, why did I, in all my life, ever love and desire other things instead of You? Jesus, my God, where was I when I was not thinking of you? Oh, at least from this moment on, may my heart have no other desires

than for you. O desires of my soul, hasten and run from now on, you have lingered too long already; hasten to reach the goal to which you aspired. Really seek him whom you seek. God of my heart, Divine Jesus, let my heart consume itself for you. May the glowing ember of your love burst into flame in my breast and be the beginning of a divine conflagration: may it continuously burn upon the altar of my heart, inflame the intimacy of my being and consume my entire soul, so that on the day of my death I may appear before you, consumed by love for you. Amen.

Finally, on Easter in the year 387, Saint Ambrose of Milan baptized Augustine; he died to his former life and began his new life in Christ. Joining him were his good friend Alipius and his son, Adeodatus, who was about fifteen years old. Grateful for the treasure of new life he had received, Augustine still feared his own weakness and constantly begged God in prayer for the strength he needed to resist temptation.

Shortly after his conversion, Augustine's mother, Monica, died. Augustine returned to Tagaste, his hometown, and dedicated his life to God through a monastic life of prayer, chastity, and study. He gathered friends around him who shared in his simple lifestyle. Despite Augustine's hesitancy and protests, the bishop of Hippo ordained him a priest, and encouraged him to preach. A few years later, the bishop ordained him a bishop and proclaimed Augustine his successor.

Although he was initially hesitant and remained committed to a simple lifestyle, Augustine became an energetic and prolific herald of the Gospel, tirelessly and enthusiastically explaining, defending, and clarifying the teachings of the Church and the Scriptures. Daily, sometimes twice a day, he

preached to the faithful. More than 400 of his sermons are still in existence.

Many of Augustine's writings and sermons focused on the errors and crises of his day. He convincingly addressed the theological or philosophical errors that were popular or seemed particularly deceptive, such as Manichaeism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and Arianism. As the Roman Empire collapsed around him, Augustine wrote *City of God* to address the relationship between the kingdom of God and earthly kingdoms.

The most widely read of all his books is his *Confessions*, which Augustine wrote to share his experience of the mercy and goodness of God. He wanted others to know him as he truly was—and, in his humble opinion, to stop giving him too much credit. In his own words:

The caresses of this world are more dangerous than persecutions. See what I am from this book: believe me and not what others say of me. Pray for me that God may complete what he has begun in me and that I may never destroy myself through pride and vainglory. I have written this book to incite myself and others to praise God who is ever just and good and to raise our minds and hearts to him.

Ironically, in writing his *Confessions* Augustine was not only one of the first to write a true autobiography, but he actually created a new genre of literature: the spiritual autobiography.

At the age of seventy-six, after forty years of intense service to Christ and the Church, Augustine was stricken with a fever.



Despite his fears of temptation and his own weakness, Augustine had faithfully lived his dramatic baptismal commitment to Christ, maturing to the fullness of life in Christ. Afire with the love of God, as he lay dying, he could hardly bear the vehemence of his love. What a desire he had to go to heaven, to see face-to-face the gracious God who had sought him out and won him, showering him with mercy and forgiveness; that God who had sought him relentlessly and to whom he had finally surrendered.

When he became too ill to rise from his bed, Augustine asked for the penitential psalms to be written out and hung on the wall in front of his bed. He also requested that no one visit him except the doctor and those who brought his meals. The last ten days of his life became a kind of retreat, in which he prayed the psalms continually and was moved to an even greater sorrow for his sins and more profound gratitude for God's goodness and mercy. He died peacefully on August 28, 430.

Augustine had no material goods to bequeath, for long before he had given everything away. Yet, in bridging the gap between the early Church Fathers and later Church Doctors, he left a profound legacy to the Church: his example of conversion and holiness chronicled in his *Confessions*, and his profound theological and philosophical preaching and writings (about forty volumes' worth), which undergird the understanding of all Christians up to the present day. Because Augustine's personal experience of God's gracious embrace shapes all of his writings, he is known as the Doctor of Grace.

## Prayer

Saint Augustine, you sincerely and fearlessly  
sought to discover and live the Truth,  
no matter where it led you.  
May we listen as attentively to the Word of God,  
and respond to God's invitation  
as fully as you did.  
Help us to celebrate God's beauty, love, and goodness in  
our own lives,  
to trust that God has a plan for us  
and that God gives us the grace to live it every day.  
May we live as you did, in continual conversion,  
seeking to live always more fully  
the grace of our baptism. Amen.

## About Saint Augustine

*Born:* November 13, 354, in Tagaste, Numidia (now  
Algeria)

*Died:* August 28, 430, in Hippo (now Annaba, Algeria)

*Feast Day:* August 28

*Canonized:* Augustine was canonized by popular acclaim,  
and later recognized as a Doctor of the Church in  
1298 by Pope Boniface VIII.

*Patron:* brewers, printers, theologians

Saint Augustine is considered one of the greatest Fathers  
and Doctors of the Church, often called the Doctor  
of Grace.

## Notes on His Life

- In Augustine's day, it was the custom to wait for Baptism until becoming an adult, so although Augustine was raised Christian, he was a catechumen until he rejected his faith as a teenager.
- Augustine speaks disparagingly of the sins of his youth, but he was known to be a man of good manners and principles. He was faithful to the one woman he loved—who was also the mother of his son—for many years.
- His conversion journey was lengthy, but his immediate inspirations were the example of the life of Saint Anthony of Egypt and a passage from the Letter to the Romans (13:13–14). The reading from Romans occurred on August 15, 386; he was baptized the following Easter, April 25, 387, at age thirty-two.
- Augustine was ordained a priest in 391, although he was very reluctant; he preferred monastery life. As a priest and later as a bishop, he continued living the monastic life.
- Since both his parents were from Tagaste in Africa and his mother Monica was a Berber, it is likely that Augustine was dark-skinned.
- Literary milestones: his *Confessions*, published in 401; *The Trinity*, published in 420; *The City of God*, completed and published in sections from 413–425; his *Retractions*, (426–428), which are a revision of his previous writings.

## Lesser-Known Facts

- Augustine was not an eager student in his youngest days—his parents and teachers had to force him to study.
- Augustine listened to Saint Ambrose because he was interested in his rhetoric. Gradually, he became intrigued with what Saint Ambrose was saying.
- Upon returning to Africa, Augustine settled in Hippo partly because it already had a bishop and Augustine didn't feel called to priesthood or pastoral ministry.
- Augustine not only lived a monastic lifestyle himself but, as a bishop, he asked his priests to live the monastic lifestyle as well. He wrote a rule of life for his priests and for the community of women he founded.

## In His Own Words

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new; late have I loved you!”

— Confessions, Book X