

The Child of So Many Tears

For years, Monica's second son was a source of staggering grief to his mother. Her oldest son was exemplary and her daughter was devout. But her second son, Augustine, the most gifted of her children, was also the biggest disappointment.

At 16, he stole fruit from their neighbors for the sheer thrill of stealing. When he went off to university at 17, he entered into a long-standing affair with a mistress from a lower social class. He claimed to love her, but refused to marry "beneath him," even after she gave birth to his son. Rejecting his mother's faith, Augustine espoused Manichaeism, an aberrant Christian heresy. He drank and caroused. Monica was so upset by his behavior that for some time she refused even to allow Augustine into her home.

Augustine may not have been in her home, but he was always in her heart. Monica prayed for him constantly. Augustine later wrote, "my mother . . . wept to thee on my behalf more than mothers are accustomed to weep for the bodily deaths of their children." She tried to arrange a meeting between her wayward son and a pastor who had been converted from the Manichaen heresy, but the pastor refused. He viewed Augustine as argumentative and temporarily unteachable. The pastor counseled Monica to "let him alone for a time, only pray to God for him. He will of his own accord, by reading, come to discover what an error it is and how great its impiety is."

He also comforted Monica, saying, "It is impossible that the child of so many tears should perish." Encouraged by these words, Monica continued to intensely entreat God for the soul of her son. Augustine wrote, "I cannot adequately tell of the love she had for me, or how she still travailed for me in the spirit with a far keener anguish than when she bore me in the flesh."

If Monica was like the rest of us, she probably wondered if she had done something wrong—if her parenting might have been in part to blame for her younger son's rejection of her faith. And, granted, their home situation hadn't been perfect. Monica's nominally Christian parents had arranged for her marriage to an older, pagan man named Patricius. He was a wealthy Roman official, given to fits of anger and flagrant unfaithfulness to his wife. Monica did the best she could in this situation. She endured his tirades silently, having learned that she could not reason with him until he calmed down. She ignored his affairs, believing that God would make him chaste *after* He made him alive in Christ.

Even though he treated her poorly, Monica obeyed her husband and sought every opportunity to silently win him to Christ through her example. She refused to speak ill of him, but because of his behavior their home was emotionally tumultuous.

And Monica wasn't perfect, either. Although she didn't realize it, she believed and taught her children doctrine that was seriously in error. But she had at least one thing right—she knew that her parenting skills and theological acumen would never be the final cause of her son's conversion. She was totally dependent on the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

For years, Monica's constant prayers for her son seemed to go unanswered. He disappointed her again and again, leaving one mistress and taking another, lying to his mother and even purposely abandoning her at a seaport as they traveled to Rome. None of these disappointments caused Monica to stop praying for Augustine. In each instance, she trusted God, who "didst not grant what she was then asking in order to grant to her the thing that she had always been asking."

And finally, God did grant her desire. Augustine was converted to the Christian faith in August 386, when he was 32 years old. Under the influence of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, Augustine came to understand the error of his former religious system. He intellectually assented to the faith, but was stymied by his own fleshly desires. In his youth he had prayed, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet," and over the years little had changed—he remained a slave to his lust even while despising it.

Finally, he cried out to God, weeping in torment and powerless desperation. He opened his Bible to Romans 13:13-14 and read ". . . but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof." Augustine wrote, "I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away."

Augustine described what happened next. "Then we went in to my mother, and told her what happened, to her great joy. We explained to her how it had occurred—and she leaped for joy triumphant; and she blessed thee, who art 'able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.'" The faithful mother's "child of so many tears" had come home at last.

Monica died when she was 56, just a few months after her son's conversion. Augustine deeply mourned the loss but thanked God for giving him "such a mother." Ten years later, Augustine became the Bishop of Hippo. His writing about original sin, predestination and grace laid a firm foundation for the early church and for the Reformation.

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