

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), *Confessions*

Lord, grant me to know and understand which is first, to call upon you or to praise you, and also which is first, to know you or to call upon you? Lord, let me seek you by calling upon you, and let me call upon you by believing in you, for you have been preached to us. Lord, my faith calls upon you, that faith which you have given to me, which you have breathed into me by the incarnation of your Son and through the ministry of your preacher.

Too narrow is the house of my soul for you to enter into it; let it be enlarged by you. It lies in ruins; build it up again. I confess and I know that it contains things that offend your eyes. Who will cleanse it? Or upon what other than you shall I call? Lord, all of this you know. Have I not accused myself to you, my God, of my sins, and you have forgiven the iniquity of my heart.

Graciously hear my prayer, O Lord, lest my soul falter under your correction, lest I falter in confessing to you your mercies, by which you have delivered me out of all my most wicked ways. Grant this, so that you may grow sweet to me above all the allurements that I followed after. May I love you most ardently, may I cling to your hand with all my heart. Do you deliver me from all temptations even to the end.

In the bitterness of my remembrance, I tread again my most evil ways, so that you may grow sweet to me, O sweetness that never fails, O sweetness happy and enduring, which gathers me together again from that disordered state in which I lay in shattered pieces, wherein turned away from you, the One, I spent myself upon the many.

Behold my heart, O Lord, behold my heart upon which you had mercy in the depths of the pit. Foul was the evil, and I loved it. I loved to go down to death. I loved my fault, not that for which I did the fault, but I loved the fault itself. Base in soul was I, and I leaped down from your firm clasp even towards complete destruction, and I sought nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself.

Lord, I will love you, and give thanks to you, and confess to your name, since you have forgiven me so many evils and so many impious works. To your grace and to your mercy I ascribe it that you have dissolved my sins as if they were ice. To your grace I ascribe also whatsoever evils I have not done. For what evil is there that I, who even loved the crime for its own sake, might not have done? I confess that you have forgiven me all my sins, both those which I have done by my own choice and those which, under your guidance, I have not committed.

Therefore, by humble devotion return is made to you, and you cleanse us from our evil ways, and are merciful to the sins of those who confess to you, and graciously hear the groans of those shackled by sin, and you free them from the chains that we have made for ourselves.

Let proud men, who have not yet for their good been cast down and broken by you, my God, laugh me to scorn, but in your praise let me confess my shame to you. Permit me, I beseech you, and enable me to follow around in the present recollection the windings of my past errors, and to offer them up to you as a sacrifice of jubilation. For without you, what am I to myself but the

leader of my own destruction? Let the strong and mighty laugh us to scorn, but let us, the weak and needy, confess ourselves to you.

Accept the sacrifice of my confessions from the hand that is my tongue, which you have formed and aroused to confess to your name. Heal all my bones, and let them say, "Lord, who is like you?" No man who makes confession to you teaches you what takes place within him, for a closed heart does not close out your eye, nor does a man's hardness turn back your hand. You loose it when you will, either in mercy or in vengeance, and there is no one who can hide himself from your heat. Let my soul praise you, so that it may love you, and let it confess your mercies before you, so that it may praise you.

Ponticianus told us this story [about St. Anthony], and as he spoke, you, O Lord, turned me back upon myself. You took me from behind my own back, where I had placed myself because I did not wish to look upon myself. You stood me face to face with myself, so that I might see how foul I was, how deformed and defiled, how covered with stains and sores. I looked, and I was filled with horror, but there was no place for me to flee to away from myself.

Who am I, and what am I? Is there any evil that is not found in my acts, or if not in my acts, in my words, or if not in my words, in my will? But you, O Lord, are good and merciful, and your right hand has had regard for the depth of my death, and from the very bottom of my heart it has emptied out an abyss of corruption. This was the sum of it: not to will what I willed, and to will what you willed.

Lord, before whose eyes the abyss of man's conscience lies naked, what thing within me could be hidden from you, even if I would not confess it to you? I would be hiding you from myself, not myself from you. But now, since my groans bear witness that I am a thing displeasing to myself, you shine forth, and you are pleasing to me, and you are loved and longed for, so that I may feel shame for myself, and renounce myself, and choose you, and please neither you nor myself except because of you. Therefore, before you, O Lord, am I manifest, whatever I may be.

Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold, you were within me, while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you. They kept me far from you, those fair things which, if they were not in you, would not exist at all. You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shone upon me, and you have put my blindness to flight! You have sent forth fragrance, and I have drawn in my breath, and I pant after you. I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst after you. You have touched me, and I have burned for your peace.

Within me are those lamentable dark areas wherein my own capacities lie hidden from me. Hence, when my mind questions itself about its own powers, it is not easy for it to decide what should be believed. For even what is within it is for the most part hidden away unless brought to light by some experience. In this life, the whole of which is termed a trial, no one should be sure whether one who can pass from worse to better might not also pass from better to worse. One hope, one trust, one firm promise—your mercy!