

## Complete Surrender Narrative

### Slide 1 – Complete Surrender

This is the second and final devotional taken from “Preparing for the Spiritual Life” section out of the *Renovare Devotional Classics* book. There were a lot of other devotionals we could have used - and if any one of you, who have read through the various devotionals in the book, have a devotional in mind and would like to see it presented in this forum, please let me know – but all the devotionals in this first section which we are closing out now, are focused on the grace of God that is freely offered, but still not without costs. This may seem a bit contradictory, but for grace to be accepted, it does require a transformation and it is in the process of transformation that we learn how to overcome the conflicts in our lives that are created from the other gift that is freely offered, and that is free choice or free will.

What we have learned from Doyt’s introduction to this season’s Spiritual Formation series and from CS Lewis devotional “Giving all to Christ” which was taken out of “Mere Christianity” last week and from St Augustine’s book, “Confessions” is that there is a process that involves recognition of a conflict (and usually the conflict boils down to a battle between doing what you want to do or what others want you to do and what God would like us to do), then there is a desire to change or to resolve the conflict and finally the ability through a willingness to progress to change or transformation.

In this first section of the *Devotional Classics*, the main point in all the devotionals is about the challenge between free will (our will) and the inherent feeling that my will is not always God’s will and the conflict in trying to reconcile these two competing wills. St Augustine was always driven by the search for truth. In his book *Confessions*, he recounts a lengthy journey through a series of deep dives into various religions, philosophies and also for his early life dedicated to the fulfilling his love of carnal pleasures.

Today’s format will be similar to what we use in these round tables. I will give a brief overview on St Augustine and *Confessions* and then frame the devotional “Complete Surrender” along with a reflection question that you can discuss at your table.

## Slide 2 – Confessions

Last week we started off with Jon Roberts giving us a backgrounder on CS Lewis' life and the history of Mere Christianity. This week, I wanted to introduce Augustine's book, Confessions, first, and then talk a little bit about Augustine.

I have never read all of Confessions. Only bits on occasion when I was treating Confessions as a research resource. Someday, I would like to go through all 300 pages, but that will be a time in the future. The title of the book, Confessions, carries a conscious double meaning for which the book explores both. First, the title could imply this is a confession of praise, much like we do during the liturgy every Sunday. The other meaning could be of confession as acknowledgement of faults, also what we do on Sundays. The book explores these meanings with a lot of depth and literary beauty which has allowed it to be one of the most influential books and recognized as instrumental by almost every noted Christian theologian, pastor, philosopher and apologist throughout the history of the church. St Augustine is widely regarded as the church's most influential philosopher and theologian. And in this book as well as City of God and others that he wrote (and he wrote extensively), he explored, debated, taught and defended many of the basic beliefs and practices of the church today.

This book is far from being a simple autobiography by a sensitive man, in youth captivated by beauty and enthralled by the quest for sexual fulfillment, but then dramatically converted to Christian faith through a grim period of distress and frustration, finally becoming a bishop known for holding pessimistic opinions about human nature and society.

In Confessions, and for the main point of today's forum, it is his study of the human nature and the source of evil that lays out the battle of our wills – do what my nature wants without lasting satisfaction, or do what my nature needs that creates lasting satisfaction. Confessions is a *polemical* work – it is a very forceful argument (and Augustine was famous for both his ability to argue, being argumentative) about truth. As an example, I would like to quote from the Devotional:

*“My inner self was a house divided against itself. Why does this strange phenomenon occur? The mind gives an order to the body and is at once obeyed, but when it gives an order to itself, it is resisted. What causes it? The mind commands the hand to move and is so readily obeyed that the order can scarcely be distinguished from its execution. Yet the mind is mind and the hand is part of the body. But when the mind commands the mind to make an act of will, these two are one and the same and yet the order is not obeyed.*

*Why does this happen? The mind orders itself to make an act of will, and it would not give this order unless it willed to do so; yet it does not carry out its own command. But it does not fully will to do this thing and therefore its orders are not fully given. It gives the order only in so far as it wills, and in so far as it does not will, the order is not carried out.... The reason why the command is not obeyed is that it is not given with the full will.... So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will, and each possesses what the other lacks.”*

A good example of this conflict of the wills is the subtitle of this slide which is a very famous quote from a prayer Augustine uttered during his journey into truth. “Lord give me chastity and continence, but not yet.”

### Slide 3 – Who was Augustine

**Problem Child** - Augustine was a Numidian, one of those strange people who inhabited the northern coastal plains of Africa, who like the Basques in Spain and France, originated from an earlier race of settlers that was neither indigenous to Africa or Europe. He was born on Sunday, November 13, 354 in the town of Thagaste in what is now Algeria. It was a pleasant Roman town that had a theater, a forum, baths, long colonnades and a marketplace that was regionally significant. Augustine's family were noble but of modest means. His father, Patricius was a pagan and had very little to do with his upbringing which created an opportunity for Augustine to develop a nature that was known early on for its bad behavior – whether it was stealing and lying at an early age or sexual immorality at a later age. As a counter weight to his father's lack of interest, Augustine's mother was a devout Christian and reminded me of all those mothers whose belief their purpose in life was to guide their child into a state of salvation. And as many of you can assume, when you have an overbearing mother with an uninterested father, the opportunities to rebel and misbehave are pretty hard to avoid. Despite all this, Augustine did show unique intelligence that enabled him to get the best education available.

**Young Lust** – At 12 Augustine was sent to school at Madaura, an old Numidian city, it was here, he was first introduced to Virgil and he fell in love with the study of letters, especially poetry. Augustine always had keen senses, and in this hot North African city, his first experiments in sensuality occurred. It was not sensuality, but pure, unadulterated lust. He writes:

*"I dared to roam the woods and pursue my vagrant loves beneath the shades. Lord, how loathsome I was in Thy sight. Lust stormed confusedly within me, whirling my thoughtless youth over the precipices of desire, and so I wandered still further from Thee, and Thou didst leave me to myself: the torrent of fornications tossed and swelled and boiled and ran over."*

Augustine's father died when he was 16 but fortunately, one of Thagaste's leading and very wealthy citizens took Augustine under his wing and provided the funding necessary for his education. This opened the door for him to go to Carthage, Rome's second city and a cross-roads for all the diversity of the Roman empire. Before he left for Carthage, his mother gave him a solemn warning:

*"My mother commanded me not to commit fornication, and especially that I should not defile any man's wife. This seemed to me no better than women's counsels, which it would be a shame for me to follow...I ran headlong with such blindness that I was ashamed among my equals to be guilty of less impudence than they were, whom I heard brag mightily of their naughtiness; yea, and so much the more boasting by how much more they had been beastly; and I took pleasure to do it, not for the pleasure of the act only, but for the praise of it also."*

**Fevers of Mind** – this last quote is disturbing to us as it indicates a problem that we are dealing with very publicly today. There is no doubt that Augustine was a misogynist. But as his fevers of the flesh remained, it was in Carthage that he now started to confront his fevers of the mind. He excelled in his study of rhetoric, mathematics, music and philosophy. He read *Hortensius* by Cicero, which, he acknowledges became a starting point for him to ponder a personal worldview – why did he exist and what was he supposed to do with his life.

Now he began a long exploration of religions. The Empire at this time, was a world of religions – some very old like the pagan Greek and Roman gods, or the ancient beliefs of the Hebrews. But there were also many cults emerging from Christianity. One of these cults came out of Persia and was called Manicheism, which had a lot in common with Gnostic Christianity. I won't go into the details of this cult, but it was the last straw for his mother who disowned him over his following the Manichean "truth". Eventually his attraction to Manicheism collapse when a very close friend of his, also a practicing Manichean, fell gravely ill and converted to Christianity on his deathbed.

**Putting away old loves** - Confronted by this death, Augustine fell into a depression that completely changed his perception on truth, with his mother always insisting that truth lay with Christ. Augustine wasn't quite ready for that, but he was ready for a change. He decided he needed to be in Rome where he could pursue truth through a legal career. As soon as he arrived in Rome, he came down with Malaria which added to his relentless self-debate about where truth could be found. In due time and because of his extraordinary abilities as a young disputant in Rome, he was recognized by the prefect and recommended as the new teacher of rhetoric to the imperial university in Milan, which was the seat of imperial power at that time.

Also in Milan at this time was Ambrose and soon Augustine was calling on this very well known and respected Christian bishop. There eventually became a series of sessions between Ambrose and Augusting, and in Ambrose, he discovered how different Christian faith was from what he had supposed. Ambrose's sermons opened a different way to interpret the Bible that also combined an aversion from pagan religions but with a large ingredient of Neoplatonism. What is Neoplatonism?

**Neo-platonism (or Neoplatonism) is a modern term used to designate the period of Platonic philosophy beginning with the work of Plotinus and ending with the closing of the Platonic Academy by the Emperor Justinian in 529 C.E. This brand of Platonism, which is often described as 'mystical' or religious in nature, developed outside the mainstream of Academic Platonism.**

**"Why not now?"** - This exposure to Ambrose, while enlightening to Augustine, also created the most painful period in his life.

**"At times, he wrote *I am conscious of something within me that plays before my soul and is light dancing in front of it; were this brought into steadiness and perfection in me, it would surely be eternal life.*"**

Well, there was a chance encounter that happened at Augustine's villa in Milan where a person from the imperial court came to visit him. This person was named Pontitian who, like Augustine, was from Africa, but also a Christian. Augustine, by chance, had the letters of Paul on a table in the villa's reception, and Pontitian, upon seeing the book, he spoke to Augustine of his own conversion and a praise of the ascetic life. For whatever reasons, this discussion with Pontitian lit a fire under Augustine and over the next few days finally got him to confront the problem of will. Alone in a garden one day where he was battling with his wills, he cried out **"How long, how long? Tomorrow? Tomorrow? Why not now? Why should there not be an end to my uncleanness now?"**

It was in this garden where he heard a child's voice singing "Take up and read". He looked for the source of the voice but couldn't see anything. He assumed then it was the voice of an angel. He went back to the villa and to the room where Paul's epistles were and opened the book to Romans 13:13-14, **"Let us**

*live honorably, as in the day, not 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."*

And this is where I can say "the rest is history". Augustine converts; he tells his mom who feels her life's goal has been achieved and soon after dies; he returns to Thegaste to start a monastic community; but get called to become a priest and eventually a bishop; he devotes the remainder 34 years of his life to being a pastor, a teacher, a philosopher and a prolific writer whose works form the base of much of Western Christianity's theology.