



EXCERPTS FROM

## ***CONFESSIONS***

BY AUGUSTINE, BISHOP OF HIPPO

# **Complete Surrender**

**Renovaré Devotional Classics | Preparing for the Spiritual Life**

**9/23/2018 @ 10.00 am**

**Epiphany Neighborhood Seminary**

**Forum Series on Spiritual Formation**

## Background

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St Augustine (354 – 430), the bishop of Hippo, was the great doctor of the Latin church. He was born in North Africa in 354, the son of a pagan father and a devoutly religious mother. He was brought up as a Christian and at the age of sixteen went to Carthage to complete his education in law. In 375 he became interested in philosophy and abandoned his Christian heritage. A skilled orator, Augustine was offered a professorship in Rome, where he founded his own school of rhetoric.

There he came under the influence of the philosophy of Plato and the teachings of St Ambrose. After a long inner struggle he renounced his earlier philosophical beliefs and embraced the Christian faith. He then returned to Africa where he formed a religious community. In 391 he was ordained a priest (against his wishes) as the Vandals began an invasion of Hippo.

For thirty-four years he lived in this monastic community. He wrote a vast number of books and became known for his eloquence, logic, and spiritual passion. These three combined to make Augustine one of the most significant thinkers in the history of the Christian Church. Perhaps no one except St Paul has been so widely read for so long. His theological insights shaped not only the age he lived in, but all the subsequent centuries of Christianity. It is difficult to find a theologian – from any age – who has not been influenced by the teachings of St Augustine.

The following selection comes from Augustine's autobiographical work, *Confessions*. In this passage he sheds light on the eternal struggle of the will and its surrender to Christ by retelling his own conversion to the life of faith.

## Reflections

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Few can match St Augustine for insight into moral theology. In these selections he uncovers for us the dilemma of conflicting wills that we all experience. We are at odds with ourselves, a house divided. Because we are stamped with the image of God, we long for the good, the true, the beautiful. Because we live in a good world gone bad, we hanker after the distortions of God's good creation. We try by sheer willpower to seek the good but we fail, always fail, because the will is in conflict with itself and is in need of redemption. Merely to think good thoughts or to desire good things is not enough. We need as did Augustine and Paul before him – the transforming power of Jesus Christ alive and present among us. Then our conflicting will can come under the rule of the divine Arbitrator.

Richard J. Foster

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## 1. A House Divided

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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.

## 2. Weighed Down by Habit

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For the will commands that an act of will should be made, and it gives this command to itself, not to some other will. The reason, then, why the command is not obeyed is that it is not given with the full will. For if the will were full, it would not command itself to be full, since it would be so already.

It is therefore no strange phenomenon partly to will to do something and partly not to will to do it. It is a disease of the mind which does not wholly rise to the heights where it is lifted by the truth, because it is weighed down by habit. So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will, and each possesses what the other lacks.

## 3. Torn Between Conflicting Wills

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When I was trying to reach a decision about serving the Lord my God, as I had long intended to do, it was I who willed to take this course and again it was I who willed not to take it. It was I and I alone. But I neither willed to do it nor refused to do it with my full will. So I was at odds with myself. I was throwing

myself into confusion. All this happened to me although I did not want it, but it did prove that there was some second mind in me besides my own. It only meant that my mind was being punished. My action did not come from me but from the sinful principle that dwells in me (Rom 7:17). It was part of the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, my first father.

When we try to make a decision, we have one soul which is torn between conflicting wills. Some say that there are two opposing minds within us, one good and the other bad, and that they are in conflict because they spring from two opposing substances or principles.

For you, O God of truth, prove that they are utterly wrong. You demolish their arguments and confound them completely. It may be that both the wills are bad. For instance, a person may be trying to decide whether to spend his money extravagantly or hoard to commit theft instead. Since he cannot do all at once, his mind is torn between these wills which cannot be reconciled.

#### **4. The Full Force of the Will**

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It is just the same when the wills are good. If I am trying to decide between reading one of St Paul's epistles or one of the Psalms – or perhaps one of the gospels – some will say that in each case the will is good. Supposing, then, that a person finds all these things equally attractive and the chance to do all of them occurs at the same time, is it not true that as long as he cannot make up his mind which of them he most wants to do, his heart is torn between several different desires? All these different desires are good, yet they are in conflict with each other until he chooses a single course to which the will may apply itself to a single whole, so that it is no longer split into several different wills.

The same is true when a higher part of our nature aspires after eternal bliss while our lower self is held back by the love of temporal pleasure. It is the same soul that wills both, but it wills neither of them with the full force of the will. So it is wrenched in two and suffers great trials because while truth teaches it to prefer one course, habit prevents it from relinquishing the other.

## 5. On the Brink of Resolution

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This was the nature of my sickness. I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain. I hoped that my chain might be broken once and for all, because it was only a small thing that held me now. All the same it held me. And you, O Lord, never ceased to watch over my secret heart. In your stern mercy you lashed me with the twin scourge of fear and shame in case I should give way once more and the wrong and slender chain should not be broken but gain new strength and bind me all the faster.

In my heart I kept saying, “Let it be now, let it be now!” and merely by saying this, I was on the point of making the resolution. I was on the point of making it, but I did not succeed. Yet I did not fall back into my old state. I stood on the brink of the resolution, waiting to take fresh breath. I tried again and came a little nearer to my goal, and then a little nearer still, so that I could almost reach out and grasp it.

But I did not reach it. I could not reach out to grasp it, because I held back from the step by which I should die to death and become alive to life. My lower instincts, which had taken hold of me, were stronger than the higher, which were untried. And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from it in horror. But it did not drive me back or turn me from my purpose: it merely left me hanging in suspense.

## 6. My State of Indecision

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I was held back by all my old attachments. They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, “Are you going to dismiss us? From this moment we shall never be with you again, for ever and ever. From this moment on you will never again be allowed to do this thing or that.” What was it, my God, when they whispered “this thing or that”? Things so sordid and shameful that I beg you in your mercy to keep the soul of your servant free from them!

These voices, as I heard them, seemed less than half as loud as they had been before. They no longer barred my way, but their mutterings seemed to reach me from behind, trying to make me turn my head when I wanted to go forward.

Yet in my state of indecision, they kept me from tearing myself away, from shaking myself free of them and leaping across the barrier to the other side where you were calling me. Habit was too strong for me when it asked, “Do you think you can live without these things?”

## **7. Trembling at the Barrier**

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But by now the voice of habit was very faint. I had turned my eyes elsewhere and while I stood trembling at the barrier, on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continnence in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross over and hesitate no more. She stretched out loving hands to welcome and embrace me, holding up a host of good examples to my sight.

She smiled at me to give me courage, as though she were saying, “Can you not do what these men and women do? Do you think they find the strength to do it in themselves and not in the Lord their God? It was the Lord their God who gave me to them. Why do you try to stand in your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon him without fear, for he will welcome you and cure you of your ills.”

I was overcome with shame, because I was still listening to the futile mutterings of my lower self and I was still hanging in suspense. And again Continnence seemed to say, “Close your ears to the unclean whispers of our body, so that it may be mortified. It tells you of things that delight you, but not such things as the law of the Lord your God has to tell”

## **8. Why Not Now?**

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I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me. Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes. For I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in misery I kept crying, “How long shall I go on saying, ‘Tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?”

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the singing of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was a boy or girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, "Take it and read, take it and read." At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before.

I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. So I hurried back to the place where I had put down the book containing Paul's epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in the silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: *Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites (Rom 13:13,14)*

I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled. I marked the place with my finger and closed the book. You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith.

...And for a little extra credit...

Biblical reading – Romans 7:14-25

Notes:

Spiritual Formation Schedule

2018

2019

9/16	10 am Lecture <b>Preparing for the Spiritual Life*</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	1/13	10 am Lecture <b>The Incarnational Tradition*</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
9/23	10 am Round Table <b>CS Lewis Giving All To Christ*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	1/20	10 am Round Table <b>GK Chesterton A Magical Universe*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
9/30	10 am Round Table <b>St Augustine Complete Surrender*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	2/10	10 am Lecture <b>The Evangelical Tradition</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
10/14	10 am Lecture <b>The Contemplative Tradition*</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	2/17	10 am Round Table <b>Madame Guyon Praying the Scripture*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
10/21	10 am Round Table <b>Thomas Merton Ways of Meditation*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	2/24	10 am Round Table <b>John Chrysostom Sermon on Dying to Sin*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
10/28	10 am Round Table <b>Martin Luther Praying in Faith*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	3/10	10 am Lecture <b>The Social Justice Tradition*</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
11/11	10 am Lecture <b>The Holiness Tradition*</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	3/17	Round Table <b>Catherine of Sienna Overflowing with Love*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
11/18	10 am Round Table <b>Teresa of Avila Striving to Make Progress*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	3/24	10 am Round Table <b>Jeremy Taylor The Grace of Humility*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
12/9	10 am Lecture <b>The Charismatic Tradition*</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	3/31	10 am Round Table <b>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Christ in Community*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>
12/16	10 am Round Table <b>Catherine of Genoa Waiting Upon God*</b> 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>	4/14	10 am Presentation <b>Spiritual Formation Conclusion: Dallas Willard The Cost Of Nondiscipleship</b> 12 pm "What Just Happened Here?" 3.30 pm <b>Forum Rollover Conversation</b>