

(26) Those trifles of all trifles, and vanities of vanities,<sup>116</sup> my one-time mistresses,<sup>117</sup> held me back, plucking at my garment of flesh and murmuring softly: "Are you sending us away?" And, "From this moment shall we not be with you, now or forever?" And, "From this moment shall this or that not be allowed you, now or forever?" What were they suggesting to me in the phrase I have written, "this or that," what were they suggesting to me, O my God? May You in Your mercy keep from the soul of Your servant the vileness and uncleanness they were suggesting! And now I began to hear them not half so loud; they no longer stood against me face to face, but were softly muttering behind my back and, as I tried to depart, plucking stealthily at me to make me look behind. Yet even that was enough, so hesitating was I, to keep me from snatching myself free, from shaking them off and leaping upwards on the way I was called: for the strong force of habit said to me: "Do you think you can live without them?"

(27) But by this time its voice was growing fainter. In the direction towards which I had turned my face and was quivering in fear of going, I could see the austere beauty of Continnence, serene and indeed joyous but not evilly, honourably soliciting me to come to her and not linger, stretching forth loving hands to receive and embrace me, hands full of multitudes of good examples. With her I saw such hosts of young men and maidens, a multitude of youth and of every age, gray widows and women grown old in virginity, and in them all Continnence herself, not barren but the fruitful mother of children,<sup>118</sup> her joys, by You, Lord, her Spouse. And she smiled upon me and her smile gave courage as if she were saying: "Can you not do what these men have done, what these women have done? Or could men or women have done such in themselves, and not in the Lord their God? The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand upon yourself and so not stand at all? Cast yourself upon Him and be not afraid; He will not draw away and let you fall. Cast yourself without fear, He will receive you and heal you."

Yet I was still ashamed, for I could still hear the murmuring of those vanities, and I still hung hesitant. And again it was as if she said: "Stop your ears against your unclean members,<sup>119</sup> that they may be mortified. They tell you of delights, but not of such delights as the law of the Lord your God tells."<sup>120</sup> This was the controversy raging in my heart, a controversy about myself against myself. And Alypius stayed by my side and awaited in silence the issue of such agitation as he had never seen in me.

<sup>116</sup>See Eccles.(Sir.) 1:2.

<sup>117</sup>That is, not his concubine(s) but his carnal vices. The personalization of his lusts foreshadows the appearance of Lady Continnence (VIII.11.27).

<sup>118</sup>See Ps. 112(113):9.

<sup>119</sup>See Col. 3:5.

<sup>120</sup>See Ps. 118(119):85.

## XII St. Augustine's Conversion

(28) When my most searching scrutiny had drawn up all my vileness from the secret depths of my soul and heaped it in my heart's sight, a mighty storm arose in me, bringing a mighty rain of tears. That I might give way to my tears and lamentations, I rose from Alypius: for it struck me that solitude was more suited to the business of weeping. I went far enough from him to prevent his presence from being an embarrassment to me. So I felt, and he realised it. I suppose I had said something and the sound of my voice was heavy with tears. I arose, but he remained where we had been sitting, still in utter amazement. I flung myself down somehow under a certain fig tree<sup>121</sup> and no longer tried to check my tears, which poured forth from my eyes in a flood, *an acceptable sacrifice to Thee*.<sup>122</sup> And much I said not in these words but to this effect: *And Thou, O Lord, how long?*<sup>123</sup> *How long, Lord; wilt Thou be angry forever?*<sup>124</sup> *Remember not our former iniquities.*<sup>125</sup> For I felt that I was still bound by them. And I continued my miserable complaining: "How long, how long shall I go on saying tomorrow and again tomorrow?<sup>126</sup> Why not now, why not have an end to my uncleanness this very hour?"

(29) Such things I said, weeping in the most bitter sorrow of my heart.<sup>127</sup> And suddenly I heard a voice from some nearby house, a boy's voice or a girl's voice, I do not know: but it was a sort of sing-song, repeated again and again, "Take and read, take and read." I ceased weeping and immediately began to search my mind most carefully as to whether children were accustomed to chant these words in any kind of game, and I could not remember that I had ever heard any such thing. Damming back the flood of my tears I arose, interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the passage at which I should open. For it was part of what I had been told about Antony, that from the Gospel which he happened upon he had felt that he was being admonished, as though what was being read was being spoken directly to himself: *Go, sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me.*<sup>128</sup> By this experience he had been in that

<sup>121</sup>For the biblical use of the fig tree, see Gen. 3:7, Matt 21:19, and especially John 1:48, which Augustine interprets to mean being "under the condition of the flesh" (*Explanations of the Psalms* 31.en.2.9).

<sup>122</sup>Ps. 50(51):19.

<sup>123</sup>Ps. 6:4(3).

<sup>124</sup>Ps. 78(79):5.

<sup>125</sup>Ps. 78(79):8.

<sup>126</sup>See Persius, *Satire* 5.66–69.

<sup>127</sup>See Ps. 50:19(51:17).

<sup>128</sup>Matt. 19:21. St. Antony walked into church just as these words were being read during the Gospel (Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 2).

instant converted to You. So I was moved to return to the place where Alypius was sitting, for I had put down the Apostle's book there when I arose. I snatched it up, opened it and in silence read the passage upon which my eyes first fell: *Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.*<sup>129</sup> I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.<sup>130</sup>

(30) Then leaving my finger in the place or marking it by some other sign, I closed the book and in complete calm told the whole thing to Alypius and he similarly told me what had been going on in himself, of which I knew nothing. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him, and he looked further than I had read. I had not known what followed. And this is what followed: *Now him that is weak in faith, take unto you.*<sup>131</sup> He applied this to himself and told me so. And he was confirmed by this message, and with no troubled wavering gave himself to God's good will and purpose—a purpose indeed most suited to his character, for in these matters he had been immeasurably better than I.

Then we went in to my mother and told her, to her great joy. We related how it had come about: she was filled with triumphant exultation, and praised You who are mighty beyond what we ask or conceive:<sup>132</sup> for she saw that You had given her more than with all her pitiful weeping she had ever asked. For You converted me to Yourself so that I no longer sought a wife nor any of this world's promises, but stood upon that same rule of faith in which You had shown me to her so many years before.<sup>133</sup> Thus You changed her mourning into joy,<sup>134</sup> a joy far richer than she had thought to wish, a joy much dearer and purer than she had thought to find in grandchildren of my flesh.

<sup>129</sup>Rom. 13:13–14. In contrast to the animal skins of our mortality "put on" us by original sin (VII.18.24), Augustine construes this passage as a call to be baptized and to put on the robe given to a neophyte during the rite of baptism. See "Catechumenate," p. 327.

<sup>130</sup>How does this central event differ from the *Sortes Vergilianae* that Augustine rejects in IV.3.5? The fact that the book of Paul's epistles had previously been lying on a gaming table (*lusoria*, VIII.6.14) only amplifies the question. Augustine seems to be drawing our attention to the ostensibly minor but significant difference between a conscious attempt to divinize through chance events on the one hand, and an unscripted response to God's providential use of chance events in one's life. (Cf. Augustine's *Letter* 55.20.37, where Augustine frowns on a crude "Christianizing" of the *Sortes*.)

<sup>131</sup>Rom. 14:1.

<sup>132</sup>See Eph. 3:10.

<sup>133</sup>See III.11.19.

<sup>134</sup>See Ps. 29:12(30:11).

## BOOK NINE

### Aged Thirty-Two

#### I–VII *Reception into the Church*

- I The joy of conversion
- II Decision to abandon his professorship of Rhetoric
- III Verecundus unhappy, Nebridius happy: both die baptised.
- IV Vacation in the country; he reads Psalm IV; is cured of toothache
- V Ambrose advises him to read Isaias
- VI He is baptised with his son Adeodatus and Alypius
- VII Of chanting and how Ambrose had brought it to Milan

#### VIII–XIII *The Death of Monica*

- VIII They start back for Africa; account of Monica's childhood
- IX How she lived at peace with her husband and finally won him to Christianity
- X The window at Ostia: conversation upon beatitude
- XI Monica dies
- XII His grief, and his fear lest his grief may be weakness
- XIII He knows she was not sinless but is confident of her salvation: yet he prays for her soul and asks our prayers