

Early Christian Literature

Our Catholic Heritage

A Tradition of Producing Great Thinkers

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS
'Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.'

From the very beginning, the Church has demonstrated a strong respect for erudition. Ours has always been a faith seeking understanding. So spoke St. Justin the Martyr in the second century:

'It is our duty to make known our doctrine lest we incur the guilt and punishment of those who have sinned through ignorance.'

So spoke Pope Leo XIII in the 20th century:

'It is obvious that in the existing keen competition of talents, and the widespread, noble and praiseworthy passion for knowledge,

Catholics ought not to be followers, but leaders.'

It is the glory of the Catholic tradition that it can produce not only great saints but great thinkers — and frequently the unique combination of both. Ours is not only a faith seeking understanding, but an understanding seeking faith.

In the fourth and fifth centuries the Church experienced one of the great flowerings of learning in Her history. The challenge of pagan philosophies and Christian heresies called forth the Apologists and Doctors of Faith.

Bishop Eusebius (d.340) left us the first major attempt at a history of the Church. St. Athanasius led the attack on the Arians in his three great tracts on the Incarnation. St. Basil the Great (d. 379) assumed the mantle of Athanasius and captained the fight against heresy. His treatises on the monastic life still stand as the

title deeds of that epic movement.

St. Gergory of Nyssa (d. 395), the brother of Basil, and St. Gregory of Nazianzen (d. 389) carried on the work of theology, the search for an articulate faith, into the First Council of Constantinople (381). St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) defended the unity of Christ and the dignity of the Mother of God with a pen as mighty as a sword at the Council of Ephesus (431). St. Ephraim the Syrian (d. 373) wrote such beautiful poetry that he was known as 'the Harp of the Holy Spirit.' Pope St. Leo the Great taught the doctrine of the Incarnation with such power and brilliance that the Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon (451) cried out: 'Peter has spoken through Leo!'

Perhaps the most impressive and the most fundamental work of Catholic scholarship at the time was undertaken by St. Jerome (d. 420). He spent a lifetime translating the Scrip-

tures from Greek into Latin with the assistance of his friend and fellow scholar, St. Paula. The finished product became known as the Vulgate Bible. In his own blunt fashion Jerome spoke of the place of scholarship in the life of faith: 'To be ignorant of Scripture is not to know Christ!'

The Catholic Church awards a special place to the Doctors of the Faith, not only in this life, but in the next.

'The martyrs and the virgins have won the most perfect victory over the flesh and the world. Likewise, the most perfect defeat of the devil is accomplished by those who not only beat him themselves, but cast him out of others as well. This is done through preaching, and teaching. To the preachers and the doctors, as to the martyrs and virgins, goes the crown of added glory.'

St. Augustine — 'Doctor of Doctors'

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

'To late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new! Too late have I loved you!'

The Age of the Fathers reached its greatest glory in the African bishop, St. Augustine of Hippo. He is known as the 'Doctor of Doctors.' The power of his thought, the brilliance of his preaching, the depth and passion of his faith are unique in our history. He was born of a pagan father and an heroic Catholic mother, St. Monica. Like many another man, Augustine was what his mother made him.

All of Monica's patience was needed. Augustine was a problem child. By his own account he ran with a street gang, kept a mistress and fathered an illegitimate son. Even at his worst, though, Augustine's brilliant mind continued to seek the faith he needed. Like St. Paul he felt within himself the struggle of two laws, the flesh and the spirit.

The story of his conversion in the garden at Milan in 384 A.D. has become part of the lore of western civilization. He read the exhortation of St. Paul to put on the Lord Jesus (Rom. 13, 13), and in his own words: 'A light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty passed away.'

Within a year he was baptized. Monica sent

away his mistress. His son died tragically young. Soon Monica too died, a happy woman:



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

St. Augustine

'All my hope in this world is now fulfilled. All I lived for was to see you a Catholic and a child of heaven.'

Augustine returned to Africa to spend his remaining years in prayer and penance. In 395 A.D., the people of Hippo demanded that he accept election as bishop. He did so, and for 36 years blazed a trail of brilliant thought and humble service, untiring courage and heroic holiness unparalleled in our history. Nothing mattered now but the people of God.

'Why am I a bishop? . . . Only to live in Christ Jesus; but to live in Him with you. That is my passion, my honor, my glory, my joy and my riches!'

Augustine's conversion was the conversion of an age. In the life and work of Augustine, the City of God was made known to men. He developed Christianity into a world philosophy which carried the Church, and civilization through the Dark Ages.

In 431, as the Vandal armies attacked Hippo, Augustine and the Empire died together. In the legacy of faith and thought left by the Doctor of Grace, a new empire would be born, but only after learning the lesson of Augustine's life.

'You have made for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.'



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