



# ST. MONICA

*The Power of a Mother's Love*



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# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	<i>vii</i>
CHAPTER I	
Tagaste in Numidia. . . . .	1
CHAPTER II	
A Virtuous Child. . . . .	9
CHAPTER III	
Marriage to Patricius. . . . .	13
CHAPTER IV	
A Christian Wife and Mother . . . . .	19
CHAPTER V	
The Pious Widow . . . . .	27
CHAPTER VI	
The Son of So Many Tears . . . . .	33
CHAPTER VII	
On Augustine's Trail . . . . .	47

CHAPTER VIII	
Meeting St. Ambrose of Milan . . . . .	57
CHAPTER IX	
Toward Augustine's Conversion . . . . .	69
CHAPTER X	
The Countryside of Cassiciacum . . . . .	79
CHAPTER XI	
Monica the Philosopher . . . . .	85
CHAPTER XII	
The Great Triumph . . . . .	97
CHAPTER XIII	
Ostia on the Tiber . . . . .	101
CHAPTER XIV	
Death and Burial . . . . .	109
CHAPTER XV	
Beyond Death . . . . .	121
CHAPTER XVI	
Monica's Relevance for Families Today . . . . .	127
Notes . . . . .	137
Index of References . . . . .	141

## CHAPTER VI



# The Son of So Many Tears

**M**onica's glory will endure through the ages above all because she gave the great St. Augustine to the Church and the world. But this gift was the fruit of a life replete with tears.

She had brought him into the world like any other child, amid the sufferings of labor, but the sufferings of her spiritual labor were immensely greater. Augustine put it this way:

I can find no words to express how intensely she loved me: with far more anxious solicitude did she give birth to me in the spirit than ever she had in the flesh.<sup>20</sup>

Augustine used this idea of spiritual childbearing on other occasions. It effectively captures the intense attention with which Monica followed her children and their friends:

She had brought up children, in labor anew with them each time she saw them straying away from you. Finally, Lord, she took care of all of us who were your servants—for by your

gift you permit us to speak—who before her death lived together as companions in you after receiving the grace of your baptism; she took care of us all as though all had been her children, and served us as though she had been the daughter of all.<sup>21</sup>

When Augustine was born, the practice of baptizing children, though defended doctrinally, was not actually widespread. In Africa, Tertullian had recommended delaying baptism until a child was old enough to know Christ.<sup>22</sup> Cyprian, half a century after Tertullian and one century before the birth of Augustine—appealing to the Council of Carthage held in the autumn of 253—maintained that the mercy of God should not be denied to anyone who has been born.<sup>23</sup> He also rejected the opinion of Bishop Fidus, who said that baptism should not take place before the eighth day after birth in order to maintain a parallel with circumcision.

Monica did not have Augustine baptized—not because she was neglectful of the spiritual formation of her children or weak in faith. Monica wanted Augustine to understand his baptism and receive it after a long and intense period of preparation. For this reason, she had enrolled him in the registry of catechumens when he was still a little boy. Augustine himself wrote about the symbols of the catechumenate he received as soon as he was born:

While still a boy I had heard about the eternal life promised to us through the humility of our Lord and God, who stooped even to our pride; and I was regularly signed with the cross and given his salt even from the womb of my mother, who firmly trusted in you.<sup>24</sup>

Enrollment in the catechumenate signaled that membership in the Church was not far away. The enrollment would be followed by instructions given by the bishop or presbyter to

those making this journey of faith and intensified with daily meetings during Lent before the catechumen's reception of baptism at Easter. Remnants of these instructions, which were called *ad illuminandos*, are found among the writings of the Fathers of the Church during this period. There are the *Catecheses* by Cyril of Jerusalem, the *De Mysteriis* (On the Mysteries) and *De Sacramentis* (On the Sacraments) by Ambrose of Milan, and the *Baptismal Catecheses* of John Chrysostom. Augustine himself would give wise guidelines for the instruction of catechumens in the *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (The First Catechetical Instruction), which he wrote in reply to a request from the deacon Deogratias of Carthage.

Monica did not expect others to take care of that first and most important duty of parents: the education of their children. For her, education meant above all leading her children to the Lord. Augustine found his first catechist in her; from her he drew the name of Jesus Christ together with the milk that he sucked.<sup>25</sup> And he never forgot this name, even amid the darkest and stormiest moments of his life. When he was seemingly won over by the works of profane writers—for example, Cicero's *Hortensius*—he never felt fully satisfied, because he did not find in them the name of Christ, which his mother's instruction had rooted deeply in his heart.

One can imagine the tenderness with which Monica, holding her baby on her lap, spoke to him of the things at the center of her life: the love of the Father, the incarnation and redemption of Christ, the immense dignity of being a child of God and belonging to his Church, and the eternal triumph prepared for us in paradise. All of this came with a naturalness that imprinted the truth and beauty of the faith in a sweet and lasting way upon the heart of her son, molding him like clay.

No one can ever completely reject the instruction received from one's mother; even for those who consciously try to do so, there remains in the depths of one's soul an undercurrent that reemerges of its own accord and forms the basis for a return to the ideals learned during childhood. None of the many philosophical doctrines that Augustine embraced were ever able to convince him of the non-existence of God or divine Providence.<sup>26</sup> He was unable to accept the philosopher Epicurus, whose teaching he had considered and then immediately rejected, because Augustine had a firm faith in the immortality of the soul and the future judgment.<sup>27</sup>

Later in life, after having wandered about seeking the truth and coming to understand the falsehood—or at least the insufficiency—of human doctrine, Augustine would find the strength to return to God through

...that religion which is implanted in us in our childhood days and bound up in the marrow of our bones. She indeed was drawing me unknowing to herself.<sup>28</sup>

To ensure a Christian upbringing for her children, Monica had to deal with the obstacle of her husband, who was a pagan. She succeeded in making her house a believing home, and in instilling in her children's hearts faith in Christ. She made up for Patricius's parenting deficiencies by doing all she could to see that God became the father of her children.

My mother did all she could to see that you, my God, should be more truly my father than he was, and in this endeavor you helped her to win the argument against a husband to whom she, though a better person, was ordinarily subject, for in taking this course she was in fact subjecting herself to you, who so commanded her.<sup>29</sup>

Augustine was about seven or eight years old when he developed an intestinal blockage that endangered his life.

Moved by the faith that Monica had instilled in him, he asked both his earthly mother and Mother Church for baptism. Monica, torn by sorrow yet more concerned for her son's eternal salvation than for his physical well-being, hurried to make all the preparations. The Sacraments of Initiation were usually celebrated at the Easter Vigil, but in cases of extreme necessity, such as when a catechumen was in danger of death, baptism was administered immediately. Augustine, however, suddenly recovered from his grave illness, and since he was no longer in danger of death, his baptism was postponed. He would later complain of this in his *Confessions*,<sup>30</sup> asking why such a wonderful mother would delay his purification. But for Monica, baptism was too important and demanding; already knowing the fiery temperament of her son, she foresaw the passions that would be unleashed in him and the vices into which he would fall during his youth. Once baptized, his sins would be much more serious. So, in accordance with the practice of her day, Monica decided to delay baptism until the image of God would be better formed within her son and errors and vices would no longer defile him.

In the meantime, Monica and Patricius enrolled the child Augustine, who demonstrated from his earliest years a lively and promising sharpness of mind, for studies in Tagaste. Like all children, he did not enjoy going to school because of the effort study required. The teaching methods of the time did not leave much room for creativity or inventiveness but were based mainly on memorization and imitation. Coercive measures in response to any negligence in study or discipline were the order of the day.<sup>31</sup> Augustine remembered with terror his days spent in primary school, the *ludus litterarius*, and the many whippings he received from his teacher:



I would be beaten whenever I was lazy about learning. This punishment was taken for granted by grown-up people and many a pupil had undergone it before we did...so my stripes were laughed at by my elders and even my parents, who would not have wished anything bad to happen to me. But bad it was, and very dreadful for me.<sup>32</sup>

So even Monica, according to the pedagogy of the time and to the Bible's teaching that "those who spare the rod hate their children" (Prov 13:24; cf. 29:15), accepted corporal punishment as a means of education. This scholastic environment led Augustine to hate the subjects he studied, especially Greek, which he never fully assimilated, although he did find a certain enjoyment in studying Latin.

His father's pagan influence manifested itself in Augustine's relations with his peers through his bullying and lies. Notwithstanding this, he also had many gifts of intelligence and insight, and for this reason, Monica and Patricius were not content with his primary schooling in Tagaste. They sent him to Madaura, seventeen miles south of Tagaste, for his secondary, or "grammar," studies. Because he was still a child to Monica, it was difficult for her to be separated from him, and she did her best to provide for him through friends in the area. Unlike Tagaste, Madaura was not a calm and isolated place. One breathed the "big city" atmosphere in the schools, the squares, and the theaters. His attendance at the theater especially began to exert a negative influence on Augustine's sensitive spirit. He felt burning within him the feelings and emotions described in the works that he studied, and so the crisis of adolescence began.

Augustine returned from Madaura at the age of fifteen. He had profited intellectually from his grammar studies, but his spirit was restless and vulnerable to the passions of youth. He

spent his sixteenth year—a truly disastrous period for him—in Tagaste, waiting for a decision about the continuation of his studies. The fires of adolescence coursed through his veins; and, with neither study nor work to keep him busy and help channel this energy, he gave free rein to his passions, living in the kind of indolence that leads to vice.

Monica had not yet understood her son's struggles, and she believed him to be innocent and naive. Patricius, who had been a catechumen for a short time, had a much better understanding of his son's situation and began to speak to his wife of her responsibilities of guidance and vigilance. By the time Monica finally opened her eyes to the truth about the situation, she was seized with fear that her son, even though he had not yet been baptized, might go down the wrong road, never to return. Augustine acknowledges that his mother's words resounding in his ears were the same words God later used when he called Augustine back to himself.<sup>33</sup> At that point, however, the youth considered his mother's warnings as merely the worries of a fussy old woman and, glorying in his developing sexuality, continued recklessly along his way. Monica counseled him to abstain from illicit sexual relations with women and especially from adultery, but in despising his mother he despised God himself and fell headlong toward the abyss. He began to seek out immoral company. With these "friends" he was not ashamed of his sins but of his behavior when it was not as brazen as theirs.

Although concerned about her son's chastity, Monica did not consider channeling his sexual impulses by contracting for him a legitimate marriage, which at that time was frequently celebrated at a young age. As he wrote in his *Confessions*,<sup>34</sup> Augustine would have agreed to this solution, but his parents had something quite different in mind.

Patricius was aware of his son's virility and was already eagerly anticipating grandchildren, but he claimed that marriage, although perhaps satisfactory in some regards, would compromise the future of such a promising young man by abruptly interrupting his studies. Monica also wanted Augustine to continue his education, but for different reasons than her husband's. Patricius was hurriedly gathering money to complete his son's studies in Carthage—an end he intended to achieve at any cost. His ambition for Augustine to appear better than everyone else was uppermost in Patricius's mind, and for this he submitted to greater sacrifices than many of his more prosperous but less ambitious fellow citizens. Monica took another point of view. She also made sacrifices for her son's studies, not to obtain earthly glory through him but solely for the sake of his own good. She correctly believed that her son's greatness would proceed from his knowledge. True knowledge ultimately brings one closer to God, who is Truth. So the more her son studied, she reasoned, the more he would learn the truth and begin to walk along the right path. This is what eventually happened, of course, although various hardships arose along the way.

In 370, when he was seventeen years old, Augustine went to Carthage to begin higher studies in rhetoric. Although she was glad to see him moving forward in life, Monica was anguished to let him go. Circumstances proved she had every reason for concern. When she had said goodbye to him before he left for Madaura, she had felt a mother's anxiety for his tender years. Now he was going even farther away, into the midst of so many physical and especially spiritual dangers, which were particularly tempting because of Augustine's unbridled youthful passions. Monica intuited the storms that were about to assail and shipwreck him.

Patricius died during that scholastic year, and although Monica remained a widow, she continued to help provide for her son's studies.

Carthage, the great capital city of Africa—with its splendid monuments commemorating its glories, the intense merchant traffic, the bustle of the streets and the forum, the famous theaters, and the circuses with their provocative exhibitions—was tailor-made to provide a hedonistic and unruly life for the provincial Augustine. Additional negative influence came from the scholastic environment, replete with students whose only interest was to amuse themselves and wreak havoc throughout the city. If Augustine was looking for trouble, he quickly found it.

He became captivated by a woman he met in Carthage, and in 372 she bore him a son. The boy's name was Adeodatus. This, then, is what had become of Monica's advice: illegitimate sexual relations, concubinage, and a child outside of marriage. But this was not Monica's greatest sorrow. She was crushed when she learned that her son had become an active member and supporter of the Manichaean sect. She wept more than mothers do over the physical death of a child.<sup>35</sup> For her, in fact, the spiritual death into which her son had fallen was more terrible than physical death. In the deep faith and supernatural illumination God granted to her, she saw the situation clearly and bathed the ground with tears in every place she went to pray. The Lord did not despise her many tears and would ultimately grant her prayers.

Manichaeanism was the religion founded by Mani (215–274) in Persia. It was a mixture of various philosophical, religious, and mythological beliefs: from Zoroastrianism it took the fundamental dualism between good and evil that dominates all of creation; from Buddhism it took certain

norms of behavior; from Christianity it took the concept of messianic redemption; from Gnosticism, the doctrine of the various “aeons” or spiritual powers evolved by progressive emanation from the eternal Being; from Neo-Platonism, a few touches of pantheism and mysticism. To constitute a society, the Manichaean religion needed a firm organizational and hierarchical structure, so it was divided into two classes: the “elect,” who were able to embrace a strict ascetic rule of life, and the *auditores* or “hearers,” who supported the elect with alms and various works.

Augustine found in this sect an answer to many of his questions, an answer he would later see as false. The Manichaean religion satisfied his materialism; for the Manichaeans, who were dualists, material was evil and was associated with the evil creator god; the good god was immaterial. Augustine also found in Manichaeism the solution to the problem of evil, which had been bothering him for some time, with its twofold principle—good and evil—of creation. He found an answer to his problem regarding the “immorality” in the Old Testament, which the Manichaeans had solved in the same way the Marcionists did, by creating their own canon of Scripture. Above all, he found that the Manichaean religion perfectly suited his own personality, which was divided between lofty ideals and base passions.

Finishing his studies in Carthage in 374, Augustine returned to Tagaste with his lover, whose name he never revealed, and their two-year-old son, Adeodatus.

Monica would have been willing to extend a mother’s welcome to all three of them and seek a solution for their irregular situation, but the heresy into which her son had fallen held her back. If the Apostle John had given the instruction to avoid even greeting a heretic in order to steer clear of

participating in that person's evil works (cf. 2 Jn 10–11), how much less could one make room for a heretic in one's home? The fact that she, who loved Augustine more than anything else in the world, had arrived at such a point shows how tragic the situation was.

Augustine was forced to ask for hospitality from Romanianus, his wealthy patron, whose easygoing logic led him, together with some of his friends, to sympathize with the Manichaeans. A terrible period followed. Monica found no peace and would have died of a broken heart if God had not comforted her as only God knows how to do. One night, Monica had a hard time falling asleep, but as soon as she dozed off, God showed her in a dream the wonders he had prepared for the future. In her dream Monica was standing on a piece of wooden timber, afflicted and weeping. Suddenly a luminous and smiling young man drew near to her, asking why she was sad. She explained that the loss of her son's faith was the cause of her tears. The young man said to her, "Why are you crying? Don't you see that where you are, he is there as well?" And turning around, Monica saw that Augustine was standing on the same plank with her. The dream then ended. In the morning, she ran to her son and excitedly told him about it. Augustine was so infatuated with his new belief, however, that he explained the dream by predicting that his mother would become a Manichaean! But Monica had the certainty that comes from the Lord and she rebutted her son's interpretation, maintaining that the young man had not told her, "Where he is, you also will be," but rather, "Where you are, he also will be." She clung to the belief that her son would return to the faith she had instilled in him.

Augustine misled everyone with his false doctrines, but not his mother. Although Monica had not studied, her mind was

sharp and penetrating, and above all she had the help of God. She remained firm in her Catholic faith, the standard that guided every aspect of her life. Augustine continues:

The dream foretold, so long in advance, the joy in store for this devout woman many years later, and so gave her comfort in her present anxiety. Nearly nine years were to follow during which I floundered in the mud of the deep and the darkness of deception, often struggling to extricate myself but crashing heavily back again. Yet throughout these years my mother, a chaste, God-fearing, sensible widow of the kind so dear to you, though more eager in her hope was no less assiduous in her weeping and entreaty, never at any time ceasing her plangent prayers to you about me. Her pleas found their way into your presence, but you left me still wrapped around by the fog, and enveloped in it.<sup>36</sup>

After her prophetic dream, Monica welcomed her son back into her home with full confidence that he would return to the Catholic faith. Meanwhile, Augustine had to find a way to support the woman he was living with and their son, Adeodatus. He soon opened a school in Tagaste. Although teachers at that time barely managed to scrape together a living from their few paying students, Augustine had no other choice. He would begin modestly before becoming a famous teacher.

When he returned home each day, his mother would greet him lovingly but avoid any doctrinal discussion, knowing her son's proficiency in philosophical argument. She realized that it would take a person as learned as he to convince him of his error. So she began to look for authoritative, cultured, and pious men who would be able to speak to him and bring him back to the right way. She was not at all ashamed of being perceived as troublesome in her search; above everything else she had the spiritual well-being of her son at heart.

One day Monica learned that a bishop named Antigonus was passing through Tagaste, and she went to visit him. Tagaste did not currently have a bishop in residence, although it had been an episcopal see in the past and would become one again in 394 under Alipius, one of Augustine's closest friends. For the time being, however, the nearest bishop resided in Madaura, probably Antigonus's original home. When Monica went to meet him, he would have been an old man if he was the same Antigonus who had participated at the Council of Carthage in 349.

Monica explained her son's entire situation to the bishop. He apparently had already heard about Augustine, who was famous throughout the province on account of his speeches and public debates, from which he always emerged victorious. His pious mother insisted that the bishop should meet with her son and convince him of his errors. The bishop responded with great prudence, and Augustine later acknowledged that he had acted wisely. Antigonus remarked to Monica that it was not only a case of a doctrinal dispute with someone arrogant and unwilling to listen to others; Augustine was a brilliant speaker who had already confounded capable and educated men. Rather than confront the young man prematurely, the bishop suggested that Monica be patient and wait. Using no other weapon than prayer, she would one day see her son finally realize his error and return to sound principles. Monica, however, was not satisfied with these words and began again to weep and even to beg the bishop to do something for her son. Then, to reassure and encourage her, the bishop confided to Monica that as a child he had been entrusted by his mother to the Manichaeans. By reading and copying all of their books, he had fallen into the errors of that sect but later had emerged from them. This would happen for



Augustine as well. Still Monica persisted. Finally the venerable bishop lost his patience and, weary of her nagging, brusquely told her: "Go away now; but hold on to this: it is inconceivable that he should perish, a son of tears like yours."<sup>37</sup>

Monica received these words as if from heaven. She took them as another sign that the Lord in his goodness had granted to encourage her in her ceaseless prayer and copious weeping. The bishop's words were indeed an extraordinary summary of Monica's life: a life of tears for the conversion of her son. And her tears were so insistent and prolonged that God could not remain unmoved by them.