

## ST. MONICA



John 14:1 "Jesus said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also . . .'"

Her name was Monica and like many women of that time, she is better known only as the mother of her famous son, rather than as a person in her own right. And yet in her own right, she was a

remarkable woman, whom we would know nothing about at all, if not for the writings of her son.

St. Monica's life is thus well known to us from the detailed autobiography of her famous son, namely, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's *Confessions* is an extraordinary work of psychological insight that remarkably still makes excellent reading for Christians today. What Augustine wrote about in the *Confessions* was his inner self, his spiritual life, and the development of his faith and the evolution of his heart, and as is the case with many of us, Augustine's interior life was dominated by one figure --- his mother, Monica.

Monica was born in the year 331 in North Africa. Her parents were from a very old tribe, later called the 'Berbers' in Arabic. The Berbers descended from the Stone Age peoples of North Africa and were first mentioned in ancient Egyptian writings. They filled the entire expanse of North Africa west from Egypt and down the Atlantic side along the so-called Barbary Coast, misnamed after the tribe. Monica was brought up, we are told, in an austere Christian family and that she still clung to the traditional practices of the old African church, which educated men of the Hellenistic age dismissed as 'primitive.' Monica believed that a good classical education, although pagan, would make her son a better Christian. Above all, she was a woman of deep inner resources --- her certainties were unnerving at times and the dreams by which she foresaw the course of

her son's life were remarkable. Yet Monica could also be very strict and quite unforgiving as well.

Augustine early in his adult life became a Manichean, a follower of the prophet, Mani, a popular Persian religion that developed in the third century of the Common Era. Manichaeism, as the religion was called, was briefly the main rival to early Christianity in the competition to replace classical polytheism of the Greco-Roman world. However, in becoming a Manichean, Augustine had become a heretic in his mother's eyes, and so she banned him from her house. And then on another occasion, Monica made arrangements that forced Augustine to leave a woman with whom he had lived for fifteen years, and with whom he had a child, because Monica didn't approve of the situation. Monica, you see, was a determined woman, and we can see her determination played out in her son, in the manner in which Augustine later hounded his ecclesiastical opponents and stuck firmly to his own ideas as a Christian bishop in north Africa in the turbulent fourth century.

By contrast, Augustine's father Patricius, is almost lost to us. That he was an important civil servant in the Roman government of the city of Tagaste is about all we really know of him. Augustine passes him over coldly, noting that he while was generous in providing for Augustine's classical education, he was hot tempered. Monica, we are told, prayed for the conversion of this harsh pagan man of dissolute living, and when Augustine was about 15, Patricius did indeed convert

to Christianity, but died within a year, leaving Monica a widow, who though only 40, pledged never to marry again.

In Augustine's descriptions of his early life, Monica appears, above all, as a relentless figure: "She loved to have me with her," he wrote, "as is the way with mothers, but far more than most mothers." Whenever one of her sons got into trouble, "She acted," we are told, "as if she was undergoing again the pangs of childbirth." For this all-absorbing mother was deeply injured by her sons' rebellions, and their unwillingness to simply do what she wanted them to do. At the age of 28, a successful and conscientious young man, Augustine wanted to seek his fortune in the great city of Rome as a rhetorician. Rhetoric, the classical form of persuasion, was one of the three arts of discourse in the ancient world, along with grammar and logic. But Augustine was so afraid of his mother's disapproval and of his own guilt for leaving her, such that in the end he tricked his mother and slipped off to sail for Italy at night, without her knowing, while she was at church.

However, after Augustine set out for Rome in 383, Monica resolved to follow him. Once she arrived in Rome, Augustine fled to Milan. So, Monica followed him there. In Milan, Augustine came under the influence of St. Ambrose, the famous bishop of Milan, whose sermons shook Augustine's Manichean faith and whose holiness inspired him. The first time Augustine meant Ambrose; he was simply astounded to observe Ambrose reading without moving his lips! Augustine

suddenly began to take regular part in public worship at the cathedral and in 387, with his proud mother at his side, Augustine, arguably the greatest Latin Christian theologian up until St. Thomas Aquinas at least, was baptized by Ambrose and at last after 17 years of rebellion became a Christian, as his mother wished.

Shortly afterwards, while waiting for a ship to take them back to Africa, in the town of Ostia, the port city of Rome, Monica fell ill. Augustine writes, "One day during her illness she had a fainting spell and lost consciousness for a short time. We hurried to her bedside, but she soon regained consciousness and looked at my brother and me as we stood beside her. With a puzzled look, she asked, 'Where was I?' Then, watching us closely as we stood there speechless with grief, she said, 'You will bury your mother here.'"

Augustine's younger brother, Navigius, expressed great sorrow that she would die so far from her own country. But she said to the two brothers, "It does not matter where you bury my body. Do not let that worry you. All that I ask of you is that, wherever you may be, you should remember me at the altar of the Lord." Navigius persisted in his fear that she would die leaving her body in a foreign land? And she replied, "Nothing is far from God, and I need not fear that he will know where to find me."

When Monica died there in Ostia, Augustine wrote "I closed my eyes. An immeasurable sorrow flowed up into my heart . . . Because I had now lost the great comfort of her, my soul was wounded and my

very life torn asunder, for it had been one life --- made of hers and mine together. . . --- When the body was taken to burial, I went and returned without tears. . . Yet all that day I was heavy with grief within and in the trouble of my mind I begged of You (God) in my own fashion to heal my pain; but you would not. . . And then, little by little, I began to recover my former feeling about Your handmaid, remembering how loving and devout was her conversation with You, how pleasant and considerate her conversation with me, of which I was thus suddenly deprived. And I found solace in weeping in Your sight both about her and for her, (and) about myself and for myself."

In 1420 Pope Martin V transferred Monica's relics from the port of Ostia to city of Rome, where they were laid to rest in a side altar of the Church of St. Augustine, a church dedicated in honor of her son. But let us not forget to honor Monica as well.

Without Augustine's *Confessions*, we would know nothing of the life of St. Monica. We would know nothing of her influence on her famous son, or of her pain at her son's disobedience, or of her persistent prayers for his well-being and conversion, or of her love for him and her devotion to him. And there are surely many other mothers like her, whose stories we do not know.

My own mother died the week before I was ordained, a story I told a couple weeks ago, and mindful of St. Monica's request to her sons, that wherever they are, that they remember her at the altar of the Lord, I have tried to remember my own mother each time I

celebrate the Eucharist, and all her efforts and comfort and encouragement which she afforded me in my discernment process.

St. Monica's Feast was last Thursday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, and so, as we all begin to think of Mother's Day coming up next Sunday, let us all not forget the roles our mothers play and have played in our lives, and in the life of the Church. And let us prepare to give thanks to Almighty God for them all. AMEN.