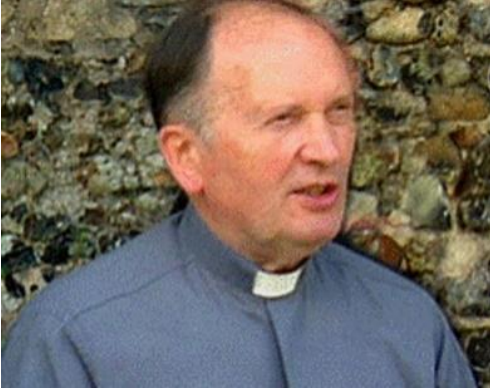


# FINDING YOUR HIDDEN TREASURE - by Benignus O'Rourke

*BENIGNUS O'ROURKE (1929-2019) was an Augustinian friar and a member of the Community at Clare Priory in Suffolk, who led hundreds of men and women, people of all faiths and none, on the way of silent prayer for more than forty years.*

## Chapter 5 - Searching for Truth and Wisdom



As Brian Lowery, founder of the Augustinian community in San Gimignano, said during a retreat, 'Augustine is probably more popularly known for what he was converted from than what he was eventually converted to. His earlier life with its youthful sexual wanderings and brash arrogance is more fascinating to most people than his later life as a monk, mystic and bishop.

Someone once said he was a saint that had his cake and ate it too.' When he was born, in Thagaste in 354, Augustine's mother did not have him baptised. Instead, she made the sign of the cross on his forehead to claim him for Christ.

As a young boy he was a believer of sorts, and as a young man, however much he poured scorn on her religion, he would always keep respect for the name of Jesus.

When Augustine writes his life story, in his Confessions, we read of a soul's struggles to be itself. We see how his inner life, at every step, was linked with his very deep need of God. But time and again he resisted taking the road that would lead him there because, as he said, he was 'led astray by the mists of a befouled heart'.

Augustine had a wayward adolescence. Success in his career went side by side with deep unhappiness. The conflict between his sensual life and his search for truth and wisdom and for God made him sick at heart. A gifted scholar who had won major prizes in public speaking, he studied law and philosophy before opting for a career in teaching, first in his home town and then in Carthage and Rome, where he became known as a very special teacher.

On the eve of his thirtieth birthday he moved to Milan - the centre of the Empire - to become professor of rhetoric and the city's public orator, and to seek honour and wealth. At this point, Augustine says, his spiritual life was at its bleakest.

It was then that he came under the influence of the great Bishop Ambrose. This was a turning point in his life and prepared the way for him to follow Christ.

His moment of conversion took place in a garden near Milan, in August 386.

Almost his first instinct, Augustine tells us, was to find time 'to be still and see God'. He resigned his post as professor of rhetoric and, with a group of close friends including his mother Monica and his son Adeodatus, withdrew to a villa in the country. In the foothills of the Alps they set up a little community, lived a life of friendship, prayer and discussion, and worked on the grape harvest.

The following spring, they returned to Milan to enrol and prepare for baptism. At the Easter Vigil on the night of 24-25 April 387 Augustine, his friend Alypius and his son were baptised by Bishop Ambrose.

Augustine left Italy for his homeland soon afterwards, hoping to find a place where he and his little group might be most useful in God's service.

There, in the city of Hippo, he agreed reluctantly to be ordained as a priest at the insistence of the Christian community and, soon afterwards, as bishop. Augustine worked and travelled tirelessly over the next 40 years and became one of the great leaders of the Christian church as preacher, writer, monk and bishop. The greatest philosopher in his day since Aristotle, he became one of Christianity's most influential theologians.

Augustinian thought is a common strand in both Catholicism and Protestantism today. Although he always loved the life of solitude, Augustine believed that the search for God was best pursued in the company of friends.

He lived in community even as a bishop, whenever his travels allowed. In community he prayed the prayer of the Church but he was conscious, too, of the importance of prayer without words. *'Prayer at its deepest is more than words.'*