

THE AUGUSTINIAN SERIES

VOLUME 1

**The Life
of
Saint Augustine**

by

Possidius
Bishop of Calama

Introduction and Notes

by

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edited by

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Part III

Last Years and Death
(Chapters 27, 6 — 31)

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Humility and Trust in God

6 He also told us that he had heard that same man of blessed memory give, just before his death, a very wise and devout response which he greatly praised and commended.

7 As that venerable man was in his final illness, some faithful with the rank of honorable were standing by his bed. Seeing him about to pass from this world to God, they were saddened at the thought that the Church was to be deprived of this great bishop's administration of the divine word and sacraments. They begged him therefore with tears to ask the Lord to prolong his life. But he told them: "My life has not been such as to make me ashamed of living among you; but neither am I afraid to die, for our Lord is a good Lord."⁴

8 Our own Augustine, now an old man, admired and praised this answer with its polished and balanced phrasing. He believed that the reason why Ambrose added, "nor am I afraid to die, for our Lord is a good Lord," was to keep his hearers from thinking that he was presuming on his own irreproachable life when he said, "My life has not been such as to make me ashamed of living among you." In fact, in saying this he had in mind what human beings can know of one another; but when it came to the scrutiny of divine justice he trusted rather in the good Lord, to whom indeed he daily prayed in the Lord's Prayer, *Forgive us our debts* (Matthew 6:12).

9 In this context he often referred to what a fellow bishop and close friend of his had said at the end of his life. He had gone to visit this man as he was close to death, and the man had indicated with a gesture that his departure from the world was at hand. Augustine had responded by saying that he should live on because the Church needed him. But the

man replied: "If I never had to die, fine; but if I must some day die, why not now?" 10 Augustine admired and praised this sentiment of a God-fearing man, one who had been born and raised on a country estate but had acquired little book learning. 11 Quite different were the sentiments of the sick bishop of whom Cyprian the martyr speaks in his letter on mortality: "One of our episcopal colleagues, wearied by illness and made anxious by approaching death, prayed that he might live on. As he prayed, almost at the point of death, a tall and radiant-faced young man stood beside him, clad in such awesome glory and majesty that mortal human eyes could hardly have looked upon him, and only one about to depart from the world could see him. The young man's disdain was evident in his voice as he snorted and said: "You are afraid to suffer but unwilling to depart; what I am to do with you?"⁵

Notes

4. Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 45.
5. Saint Cyprian, *Mortality* 19.

Revision of His Works

Vandal Invasion and Siege of Hippo

1 Not long before his death¹ he reviewed the books he had dictated and published, whether in the early days of his conversion when he was still a layman or in his years as priest and then bishop. He revised and corrected anything he found to be at odds with the Church's rule (things he had dictated or written at a time when he had less knowledge and understanding of ecclesial tradition). The result was two further volumes entitled *A Revision of My Books*.²

2 He complained, however, that some of the brethren had taken some of his books before he could carefully correct them, although he did correct them later on.³ Some of his books he left incomplete because death prevented him from finishing them.⁴

3 In order to help all, whether or not they were capable of reading many books, he extracted the divine precepts and prohibitions from the two inspired Testaments, the Old and the New. He wrote a preface for the collection and made it into a single book, so that those who wished might read it and see to what extent they were obedient or disobedient to God. This work he wished to be known as the *Mirror*.⁵

4 Not long after, by permission of almighty God,⁶ a vast army, equipped with varied weapons and experienced in war, came by ship from Spain across the sea and poured into Africa.⁷ It was made up of savage hordes of Vandals and Alans, intermingled with Goths and men of various other nations. 5 These overran the Mauretania⁸ and reached our own provinces and districts. In their rage they displayed an utterly atrocious cruelty and laid waste to everything

with looting, slaughter, and all kinds of tortures, fire, and countless other unspeakable enormities. They had no pity on either sex or age, or even on the priests and ministers of God, or on the ornaments or furnishings or buildings of the Churches.

6 The man of God did not think and judge as others did of this savage aggression and devastation that had been and was still being inflicted by the enemy. He looked to the deeper meaning of events and foresaw chiefly the dangers and even death they brought to souls. And because, as scripture says, *He who increases knowledge increases sorrow* (Ecclesiastes 1:18) and *an understanding heart is a worm in the bones* (Proverbs 14:30; 25:20),⁹ tears were more than ever his food by day and by night (Psalm 42:4). The part of his life that he endured almost at the very end was thus the bitterest and saddest of his old age. 7 For the man of God saw cities destroyed, farm buildings razed and their inhabitants either slaughtered by the enemy or put to flight and scattered, churches stripped of their priests and ministers, consecrated virgins and men vowed to continence scattered in all directions. Of the latter, some died of their tortures, others were killed with the sword, and still others fell into captivity, where they lost innocence of soul and body and even their faith in a baneful and harsh slavery to the enemy. 8 Hymns and praises of God had disappeared from the churches; in most places church buildings were put to the torch; the solemn sacrifices owed to God were no longer offered in the proper places; the divine sacraments were no longer requested or, if they were requested, no one was readily found to administer them.

9 Some people fled to the wooded hills, rocky caverns and caves, or any fortified place; others were overpowered and taken prisoner; still others, being robbed and deprived of the necessities of life, wasted away of hunger. The heads of churches and other clerics who by God's favor did not encounter the enemy or, if they did, escaped were despoiled of absolutely everything and forced in their utter need to beg, nor was it possible to supply all of them with what they

needed. 10 Of the countless Churches barely three survived — those of Carthage, Hippo,¹⁰ and Cirta, which by God's favor were not destroyed. These cities too have survived, having found divine and human aid (although after Augustine's death the city of Hippo was abandoned by its inhabitants and burned by the enemy).¹¹

11 Amid all this devastation Augustine found strength in the saying of a wise man: "No one is great who is amazed that wood and stone collapse and mortals die."¹² 12 In his own great wisdom he shed copious tears every day at these calamities. A new and intense grief was added when the same enemy came and besieged Hippo Regius, which until then had been left untouched because Boniface, then Count, and an army of Gothic allies had been defending it. The enemy enclosed and besieged it for almost fourteen months, having blockaded even the seacoast.¹³

13 I myself, along with fellow bishops from the neighboring districts, had taken refuge in the city and remained there throughout the siege. Therefore we talked together very frequently and would say, as we reflected on the fearful judgments of God that were displayed before our eyes: *You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is equitable* (Psalm 118:137). In our common sorrow we groaned and wept as we prayed to the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation (2 Corinthians 1:3) that he would deign to assist us in our trials.

Notes

1. Various dates have been suggested for the *Revisions*: 426, 427, or 428.
2. *Retractationes* (meaning "revisions") is the usual Latin title; it was used or suggested by Augustine himself at the end of the work and in other places where he refers to it (for example, Letter 224, 2; *The Gift of Perseverance* 55; *The Predestination of the Saints* 7-8) and passed on by Prosper, Cassiodorus, and Bede.
3. The reference is to the first twelve books of *The Trinity*, which Augustine had begun in 397; these were taken and passed around before he could correct them and finish Book 12; as a result, he decided not to complete the work, but he subsequently yielded to the entreaties of the brethren and completed what he had written, publishing it in about 416. He later added three more books which appeared in 418 or 419.

4. In his catalogue Possidius mentions the *Response to Julian's Second Answer and Heresies*.

5. The book in question is the one known from its opening Latin words as *Speculum, Quis ignorat* (Mirror: Who does not know . . .?) to distinguish it from three other works that also have the title *Speculum* (Mirror) and are wrongly attributed to Saint Augustine. This kind of compilation was more useful in that age when many could not read or possess their own bible. Saint Cyprian had provided a similar compilation in his *Testimonies Addressed to Quirinus*. In stating the content and purpose of the work, Possidius is faithfully summarizing what Augustine says in his preface to it.

6. Possidius means that divine justice was using the barbarian invaders to punish the sins of the Africans. According to Salvian of Marseilles, who paints a very black picture of African morals, the Vandals themselves admitted that they had acted not on their own initiative but in obedience to a divine command (*Divine Governance* 7, 54). According to Procopius (*Vandal War* 1 5, 25), this was Genseric's view.

7. The barbarians invaded Africa in 428 at the summons of Count Boniface.

8. There were two provinces: Mauretania Tingitana, in the west, opposite the coast of Spain, and Mauretania Caesariensis, further east.

9. According to a Latin version that predated the Vulgate.

10. The thesis of E. C. Howard in *Journal of Roman Studies* 14 (1924) 256f., that the reference here is to Hippo Diarrhytos (modern Bizerte) and not to Hippo Regius, where Augustine lived, was refuted by Holmes V. M. Dennis, *ibid.*, 15 (1925) 263-268.

11. In all probability this happened between 432 and 435 according to Dennis (see preceding note).

12. Augustine cites this saying in almost identical words in Sermon 279, 7; see *The City of God* 2, 2; Sermon 81, 9. The "wise man" was Plotinus in *Enneads* 1, 4, 7. In any case, the thought was a commonplace, especially in the literature of consolation to sufferers: see, for example, Cicero, *Letters to Friends* 4, 5, 4 (imitated by Saint Ambrose, Letter 39, 3); Seneca, Letter 91. On the transiency of human life see the fine passage in Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 109, 20.

13. The siege, which is also mentioned by Victor of Vita, *History of the Persecution of the Province of Africa* 1, 3, 11, and Procopius, *Vandal War* I, 3, 3, must have begun at the end of May or the beginning of June, 430.

Final Illness and Last Good Works

1 On one occasion he said, as we sat with him at table and were discussing these matters: "You know that during our present disaster I pray God to deliver this city from the enemies that surround it or, if he decide differently, to make his servants strong in accepting his will or at least to take me from the present world to himself." 2 He said this in part for our instruction; from that point on, therefore, we joined him in offering the same prayer for ourselves and all our fellow Christians and all who were in the city.

3 In the third month of the siege he took to his bed with a fever; it was his final illness. Nor did the Lord deprive his servant of the fruits of his prayer; for in due time he obtained what he had asked both for himself and for the city with tearful prayers.¹ 4 I know, moreover, that when as priest and as bishop he was asked to intercede for those afflicted by evil spirits he beseeched God with tears, and the demons departed from these persons.

5 Again when he lay sick in bed someone came with a sick relative and asked him to lay hands on the man in order that he might be cured.² Augustine answered that if he had any power in these matters he would have used it for himself first of all. The visitor replied that he had had a vision and had been told in a dream: "Go to Bishop Augustine and have him impose hands on the man, and the man will be made healthy." On hearing this, Augustine did not delay to do as he was asked, and the Lord immediately caused the sick man to leave Augustine's presence in good health.

Notes

1. For himself Augustine asked and obtained that the Lord should not delay in calling him to his heavenly home. As for the city, Possidius seems to corroborate the account in Procopius, *Vandal War* 1, 3, 34, according to which the barbarians, seeing that the siege would be long drawn out, lifted it so that the inhabitants might depart and be saved. They then torched the city; it was not completely destroyed, however, since Augustine's library could be salvaged (see Possidius, chapter 18, 9).
2. For the imposition of hands as a "rite of healing" see J. Coppens, *L'imposition des mains et les rites connexes dans le Nouveau Testament et dans l'Eglise ancienne* (Wetteren and Paris, 1925), 28-109.

CHAPTER 30

**Advice to Bishop Honoratus
on the Conduct of the Clergy in Face of the Invaders**

1 There is another incident that must by all means be recorded. While the enemies of whom I have spoken were threatening us, our holy fellow bishop, Honoratus of Thiabe,¹ wrote to Augustine, asking him whether or not bishops and clergy should leave their Churches at the arrival of the enemy. In his answer Augustine indicated what he thought was most to be feared from these destroyers of Romania.² 2 I have decided to include the letter³ in this biography because it is very useful and even indispensable in deciding on the conduct of God's priests and ministers.

3 "Augustine sends greetings in the Lord to his holy⁴ brother and fellow bishop Honoratus.

"I thought that by sending your Grace⁵ a copy of the letter I had written to our brother and fellow bishop Quodvultdeus⁶ I would be relieved of the burden you were laying on me when you asked advice on your course of action in these perilous times. 4 That letter was indeed a short one, but I believe I included everything the respondent needed to say and the inquirer to hear. I said, in fact, that on the one hand, those who wish to take refuge, if possible, in fortified places are not to be prevented and that, on the other, we are not to break the bonds by which love of Christ binds us to our ministry and to abandon the churches we are obliged to serve. 5 Here are the actual words I used in that letter: "If even a tiny portion of God's people remains in the place where we are, then, since our ministry is so indispensable that even that tiny portion must not be deprived of it, we can only say to the Lord: *Be for us the God who protects and a fortified place* (Psalm 31:3).

6 "But you have written in reply that this advice does not satisfy you, for you fear that in following it we will be acting against the command of the Lord who told us to flee from town to town; and in fact we recall his words: *When they persecute you in this town, flee to another* (Matthew 10:23).

7 "But can anyone believe the Lord meant by this that the flocks he bought with his blood are to be deprived of the ministry they need for their very life? 8 Is that what he himself was doing when as a child he fled to Egypt in the arms of his parents? Was he abandoning churches he had not even founded as yet? 9 When Paul the Apostle had himself lowered from a window in a basket and fled to avoid arrest by his enemy,⁷ was he depriving the Church in that place of the ministry it needed? Was this not rather supplied by the other brethren there? In fact, the Apostle acted as he did because these others wanted to preserve for the Church the very man the persecutor was seeking.

10 "Let the ministers of Christ, then, the stewards of his word and sacrament, do as he commanded or permitted. Let them by all means flee from town to town when someone of them is being especially sought by the persecutors, provided the others who are not being specially sought out do not abandon the Church but continue to supply their fellow servants with the food (see Matthew 24:45) without which, as they well know, they cannot survive. 11 But when the danger extends to all alike, that is, to bishops and clergy and laity, those who need others may not be abandoned by those whom they need. In this case, either let everyone move to fortified positions or let those who must remain not be abandoned by those who supply their ministerial needs. Let them all alike survive or let them all alike suffer what the Father of the family wills them to suffer.

12 "If indeed they be destined to suffer, whether equally or unequally, it will become clear which of them are suffering for others. I mean those who might have fled and saved themselves from these evils but chose instead to remain and not abandon others in their need. This is the supreme proof of that love which John the Apostle urges upon us when he

says: *As Christ laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren* (1 John 3:16). 13 Those who flee or, being unable to flee because prevented by their own interests, are caught and made to suffer, evidently suffer in their own behalf and not in behalf of others. Those on the other hand who suffer because they were unwilling to abandon the brethren who needed them for their salvation as Christians undoubtedly lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters.

14 "We have heard one bishop say: 'If the Lord has bidden us to flee amid persecutions that might have yielded the fruit of martyrdom, how much more should we flee the barren sufferings inflicted by an invading barbarian foe?' The saying is valid and can be accepted, but only by those not bound by the duties of an ecclesiastical office. 15 One who could flee a slaughtering enemy but does not do so lest he abandon the ministry of Christ without which men and women cannot become and live as Christians yields greater fruits of love than one who flees for his own sake rather than for the sake of the brethren, but then is captured and, refusing to deny Christ, suffers martyrdom.

16 "What, then, were you thinking of when you wrote in your earlier letter: 'I do not see what good we will do either for ourselves or for our people if we must remain in our churches only to see men slain, women raped, and churches burned before our eyes, and to die ourselves under torture as they seek from us what we do not have.' 17 God, after all, is powerful enough to hear the prayers of his family and avert the disasters they fear! Furthermore, all these disasters, which are uncertain, do not authorize what is certainly an abandonment of a ministry without which the people will certainly suffer loss, not in the affairs of the present life but in those of that other life that is to be sought with incomparably greater diligence and anxiety. 18 For if the evils which we fear may occur where we live were inevitable, all those people for whose sake we must remain would have already fled, thus freeing us of the obligation to remain. For no one will claim that ministers must remain where there is no one

left who needs their services. 19 Thus some holy bishops fled Spain⁸ when some of their people had fled, others had been killed, still others had died in the siege, and the remainder had been taken prisoner and dispersed. Many more bishops, however, remained in the midst of these dangers, because the people for whose sake they were remaining had themselves stayed. Some indeed abandoned their people, but this, I am saying, is what they should not have done. These individuals were not so instructed by divine authority, but were misled by human error or yielded to human fear.

20 "Why do they think they must obey without qualification the command to flee from town to town, but do not fear becoming hirelings who *see the wolf coming and run off because they are not concerned about the sheep* (John 10:12)? Both are true sayings of the Lord: the one allowing or commanding flight, the other rebuking and condemning it. Why do they not try to interpret them as compatible with one another, as in fact they are? 21 But they will not discover this compatibility unless they pay heed to the interpretation I gave above: that when persecution is imminent, we ministers of Christ are to flee from the places in which we are living, provided that there are none of Christ's followers there for us to serve or, if there are, others who do not have the same reason for fleeing can provide the needed ministries.

22 "Thus the Apostle, as I said above, was lowered in a basket and fled when he individually was being sought by the persecutor, while others not in similar straits could see to it that the Church was not — God forbid! — deprived of the ministry. So, too, holy Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, fled when Emperor Constantius was trying to lay hands on him specifically;⁹ but the other ministers did not abandon the Catholic people who remained in Alexandria. 23 But when the people remain and the ministers flee and leave them with no one to minister to them, can the behavior of the latter be described as anything but a despicable flight of hirelings who have no interest in the sheep? Then the wolf will come: not some human being, but the devil, who often

persuades the faithful to apostatize when they lack the daily ministry of the Lord's body.¹⁰ Then the weak brother for whom Christ died will perish, not through your knowledge but through ignorance.¹¹

24 "As for those who have correct ideas on this point but nonetheless are overcome by fear, why do they not rather struggle courageously against their fear, with the help of a merciful God, lest they suffer incomparably greater evils that are far more to be feared? 25 That is the course of action human beings follow when the love of God burns strong in them, and not the smoky passions of the world. For love says: *Who is weak, and I am not also weak? Who is scandalized, and I do not burn with indignation?* (2 Corinthians 11:29). But love has its origin in God. Let us pray, therefore, that he who commands love may also bestow it.¹² And let this love make us fear more the sword of spiritual wickedness (see Ephesians 6:12) that kills the hearts of Christ's sheep than the sword of iron that kills their bodies; in body, after all, they must someday suffer one or other kind of death. 26 Yes, let us fear more that the interior sense be perverted and lose the purity of faith than that women may be raped in the flesh; for chastity is not destroyed by violence as long as it is preserved in intention; in fact, even bodily chastity is not destroyed when the will of the sufferer does not deliberately use the flesh shamefully but only endures the action of another without giving consent to it.¹³ 27 Let us fear rather that the living stones may be deprived of life if we abandon them, than that the stones and wood of earthly buildings may be burned in our presence. Let us fear rather that the members of Christ's body may be slain through deprivation of their spiritual food than that the members of our own bodies may be overwhelmed by the attack of the enemy and subjected to torture. 28 I do not mean that all these sufferings should not be avoided if possible; but if they cannot be avoided without our failing in our duty, then they must be endured. Or will someone maintain that a minister is not wicked who refuses his ministry, which is always necessary for religion, and does so at the very time when it is most needed?

29 "Do we not reflect that when these dangers become most pressing and flight is impossible, a great throng of people of both sexes and all ages usually flocks to the Church, some of them asking for baptism, others for reconciliation, others still for a penance to be performed,¹⁴ and all of them for strength and for the consecration and distribution of the sacraments? 30 If ministers are then lacking, what ruin awaits those who leave this world still not reborn¹⁵ or still bound by their sins! What grief for their brothers and sisters in the faith who will not enjoy their company in the repose of eternal life! What lamentations on all sides and, in some cases, what blasphemies at the absence of ministries and ministers!

31 "See what effects the fear of temporal evils produces and what terrible evils it causes in eternity! If, however, ministers are present, they help everyone according to the strength the Lord gives them: some are baptized, others are reconciled, no one is deprived of communion in the Lord's body, all are strengthened, built up, and encouraged to pray to God who has power to ward off all the evils they fear. All are prepared for whatever comes, so that if this cup may not pass from them, his will may be done (see Matthew 26:42) who cannot will anything that is evil.

32 "You surely see now what you said you did not see, that is, how greatly Christian peoples benefit if in the present calamities they have Christ's ministers present among them. You see, too, what great harm these ministers do by their absence as they seek their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:21).

"Such men do not have that virtue¹⁶ of which it is said: *It does not seek its own interests* (1 Corinthians 13:5), nor do they imitate him who said: *Seeking not my own advantage but the advantage of the many, that they may be saved* (1 Corinthians 10:33). 33 He would not have fled the snares of the persecuting prince,¹⁷ were he not saving himself for the sake of others who needed him. That is why he says: *I am pulled in two directions: I desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but I must remain in the flesh for your sake* (Philippians 1:23).

34 "At this point someone may say that Christ's ministers ought to flee when such disasters are imminent, in order that they may survive to be of use to the Church in more tranquil times. Some do so, and they act rightly, provided others are available who will carry on the ministry of the Church and not let it be completely abandoned. Athanasius, for example, whom I mentioned earlier, acted in this way, and the Catholic faith, which he defended by word and by love against the Arian heretics, is aware how much the Church needed him and how much it profited from his remaining alive. 35 But by no means should a minister act in this way when everyone is in danger and it is to be feared that his conduct will be attributed more to fear of death than to a desire to provide for others; in other words, when the harm done by the example of his flight outweighs any advantage to be gained by his dutifully remaining alive. 36 Finally, when holy David did not risk the perils of battle lest, as it is put there, *the lamp of Israel be quenched* (2 Samuel 21:17), he was yielding to the pleas of his followers and not taking the decision upon himself. For if it had been his own spontaneous decision, many would have imitated him out of cowardice, thinking that he was acting not from concern for the good of others but simply from fear of the danger to himself.

37 "Another question arises that is not to be taken lightly. If the advantage of others is not simply to be left out of account and if, therefore, when a disaster is imminent, some ministers may flee precisely in order to serve the needs of those who survive the calamity, what is to be done when there is reason to believe that all will perish if some do not flee? What if the persecutors seek out only the ministers of the Church?

38 "What are we to say? That the Church's ministers should flee and abandon it lest it be even more abandoned if they die! Moreover, if the laity are not being sought for execution, surely they can somehow manage to hide their bishops and clerics with the help of him who has all things under his control and whose wonderful might can save even those who do not flee.

39 "We ask, nonetheless, what we ought to do so as not to

seem to tempt the Lord by always looking for miracles from on high.

"A storm of persecution that endangers laity and clergy alike cannot be compared to a storm that endangers merchants and sailors alike aboard a ship. Far be it from us to set such little value on this ship of ours as to say that its sailors, and especially its pilot, should abandon it in moments of danger, even though they might save themselves by taking to a small boat or by swimming.

40 "Why so? Because the death we fear for others who may die as a result of our desertion is not temporal death, which must come to them someday in any case, but eternal death, which may come to them if care is not taken but can be avoided if care is taken. 41 Why, then, do we think that in the shared dangers of this life, as, for example, when an enemy invades, all the clergy will die but not all the laity and that all will not end together this life during which the clergy are required? Or why do we not hope that just as some of the laity will survive, so also will some of the clergy and be able to supply them with the ministry they need?

42 "If only the disagreement among God's ministers were about which of them are to remain lest the Church be abandoned by the flight of all, and which of them are to flee lest the Church be abandoned by the death of all! That is the kind of disagreement that arises when both sides are inspired by love and are pleasing to Love.¹⁸

43 "If such a disagreement cannot be otherwise settled, then, in my opinion, the choice of who is to stay and who to flee will have to be made by drawing lots. For those who say they ought to flee will seem either fearful, as though unable to endure the imminent disaster, or arrogant, as though believing themselves more necessary to the Church and therefore to be rescued. 44 Furthermore, the best will probably choose to lay down their lives for the brethren, while those whose lives are less useful because they have less ability to counsel and govern will be saved by flight. But the latter, if they have the Christian mind, will oppose those whom they see preferring death to flight when in fact they

have a duty rather to continue living. 45 Therefore, as it is written, *the lot puts an end to disputes and decides between powerful contenders* (Proverbs 18:18). In this kind of doubt God is a better judge than human beings, whether he deign to call the better to the palm of martyrdom while sparing the weak or to strengthen the weak for suffering and to take them from the present life since their lives here cannot be as useful to the Church as the lives of the others. Drawing lots is indeed an unusual procedure, but if it is used who will dare find it blameworthy? Who but the ignorant or the malicious will not praise it as it deserves?

46 "If this procedure be found unacceptable because there is no precedent for it, then let no one by fleeing deprive the Church of the ministry that is all the more necessary and owing to it in such times of danger. Let no one give preference to himself and say that because he has this or that excellent quality he deserves to live and therefore to flee. Anyone who thinks in this way is overly pleased with himself; anyone who talks in this way is displeasing to everyone else.¹⁹

47 "In the view of some, bishops and clerics who do not flee such dangers but remain in them mislead their congregations because when the latter see their leaders remaining they too remain. 48 But this charge and the malice that inspires it can easily be avoided by addressing the people and telling them: 'Do not be misled by our failure to flee. We are remaining not for our own sake but for yours, so as not to deprive you of any ministry which we know you need for your salvation in Christ. Therefore, if you flee, you will at the same time release us from the obligation that keeps us here.' 49 I think that this kind of thing has to be said when it seems really more advisable to take refuge in safer locations. After it has been said, all or some may say: 'We are in the power of him whose anger none can flee no matter where they go and whose mercy can be found by all, wherever they are, even if they refuse to go elsewhere because they are prevented by definite obligations or are

unwilling to hunt out an unsure refuge and to exchange dangers rather than end them.' Such people are certainly not to be abandoned by Christ's ministers. If, on the other hand, the people heed the words of their leaders and decide to flee, then those who would have remained for their sake need no longer remain, since those for whose sake they would have been obliged to remain have themselves departed.

50 "Those, then, whose flight does not deprive the Church of the ministry it needs act in accordance with the command or permission of the Lord. Those, on the other hand, whose flight deprives Christ's flock of the food for its spiritual life are hirelings who see the wolf coming and flee because they care nothing for the sheep (John 10:12).

51 "Dear brother, you have asked me for guidance; I have told you what I think right and, in any case, have answered with unfeigned love; if you find better counsel, I make no claim to tell you what you ought to think. Be that as it may, our best course in the present dangers is to pray to the Lord our God to have mercy on us. It is by his gift that various prudent and holy men have found the desire and strength not to abandon their churches, and have persevered in their firm resolve in the face of detractors."

Notes

1. Or Tiabena (according to Augustine, Letter 73, 1), a small town located probably between Thagaste and Hippo.
2. *Romania*, a name modelled on *Gallia*, *Graecia*, *Brittania*, and others, occurs first in Orosius, *History against the Pagans* 3, 20, 11; 7, 43, 5.
3. The letter is number 228 in the collection of Augustine's letters. D. De Bruyne (*Revue benedictine* 42 [1930] 300) thinks that Possidius himself published this letter, which was probably Augustine's final composition; once the siege began, Augustine no longer had the leisure to publish his letters, as he had done previously. The fortunes of this particular letter in the manuscript tradition seems to support De Bruyne's view, which would also explain why Possidius includes so lengthy a document: he would have found it in the library of the Church of Hippo and realized that it would otherwise not come to the attention of readers.
4. See above, note 1 of Chapter 4.
5. Literally, "Your Charity" (*Caritas tua*).

6. The letter has not survived. We do not know who this Quodvultdeus was; it was certainly not the better known Quodvultdeus, Bishop of Carthage, since he became bishop only in 437. Several other bishops contemporary with Augustine bore this same name.

7. The reference is to Aretas, ethnarch of Damascus; see 2 Corinthians 11:32-33.

8. In 410, when Alaric was capturing Rome, barbarian tribes — Sueves, Vandals, Alans — entered the Iberian peninsula, laying it waste and dividing up the territory among them; a short time later, the Visigoths settled there under Athaulf, who was succeeded in 415 by Wallia.

9. Athanasius twice fled to safety from persecution by Constantius, in 339 and 356; Augustine seems to be referring to the second episode.

10. In eucharistic communion; see below, section 30 of this chapter.

11. As in the case to which Saint Paul refers in his rebuke, 1 Corinthians 8:11.

12. A thought familiar to Saint Augustine, especially in the Pelagian controversy; see *Confessions* 10, 29, 40: "Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will." Latin: "Da quod iubes, et iube quod vis."

13. Same thought elsewhere in Augustine: *The City of God* I, 16; *Against Julian* 4, 14; Letter 3, 9.

14. The public penance required for more serious sins had to be requested by the guilty party. The time for its performance was not specified, and since such penance was not permitted more than once, many individuals put it off to the end of their lives (see Ambrose's objections to this thinking in his *Penance* 2, 98-100). Reconciliation, that is, readmission to full communion with the Church, was granted after completion of the penance or even before it when there was danger of death; it is this latter situation that Augustine has in mind here.

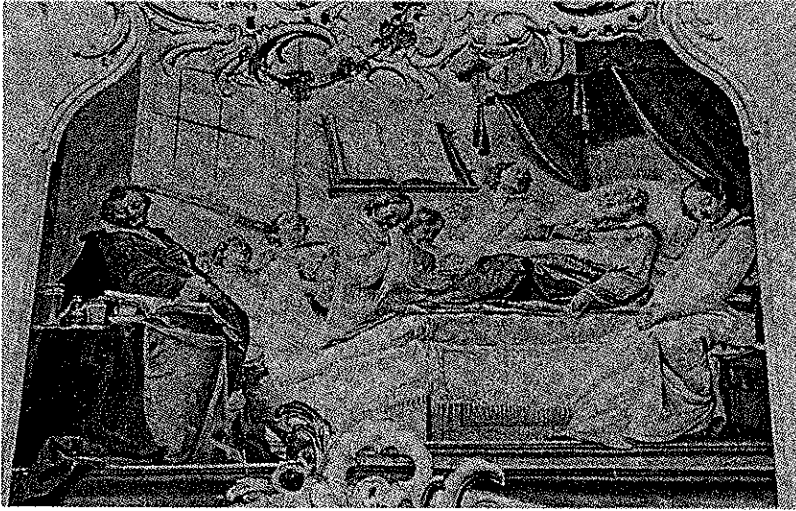
15. Through baptism.

16. The virtue of charity.

17. Aretas (see note 9).

18. That is, to God, of whom it is said: *God is love* (1 John 4:16).

19. Same play on words in Ambrose, *Virginity* 1, 28, who is cited by Augustine in his *Christian Instruction* 4, 50.



Last Days of Augustine by Mattäus Günther, 1755, Indersdorf, West Germany.



Death of Augustine by Ottaviano Nelli (1375-1444/50), Church of Saint Augustine, Gubbio, Italy.

CHAPTER 31

Last Days and Death

A Legacy of Holy Deeds and Example

Conclusion

1 God granted this holy man a long life for the benefit and prosperity of his holy Church (he lived seventy-six years, almost forty of them as a cleric and bishop).¹ In intimate conversations with us he used to say that after receiving baptism even exemplary Christians and bishops should not depart from this life without having repented worthily and adequately. 2 That is precisely what he himself did in his final illness; he had the very few Davidic psalms on repentance² written out and the sheets attached to the wall opposite his bed; then, while he lay ill, he looked at them, read them, and wept continually and copiously.

3 In order that his recollection might not be broken, about ten days before departing from the body he asked us who were present not to let anyone in to see him except when the doctors came to examine him or his meals were brought to him. His wish was carefully respected, and he spent the entire time in prayer.

4 Right down to his final illness he preached the word of God in the church uninterruptedly, zealously, and courageously, and with soundness of mind and judgment. 5 Then, with all his bodily members still intact and with sight and hearing undiminished, as we stood by watching and praying, he fell asleep with his fathers (as scripture says)³ in a good old age.⁴ A sacrifice⁵ was offered to God in our presence to commend his bodily death,⁶ and then he was buried.

6 He did not make a will because as a poor man of God he had nothing to leave. He always intended that the library of

the church and all the books in it should be carefully preserved for posterity. Any money or ornaments the church might have were entrusted to the care of the priest who was in charge of the church house while he himself was superior.⁷

7 Neither in life nor in death did he treat his relatives, whether in monastic life⁸ or outside it, as others usually treat theirs. While he was still alive, he gave to them, if need be, as he did to others, not to make them rich but to keep them from want or at least to make them less needy.

8 His legacy to the Church was a very numerous clergy and monasteries filled with men and women vowed to continence under the guidance of their superiors, as well as libraries containing his own books and discourses and those of other holy men.⁹ From these, God be thanked, we can know his quality and importance as a churchman; in them he will always be alive for the faithful. So too, one of the secular poets dictated the following epitaph for the tomb which he ordered built for himself by a public road:¹⁰ "Traveller, would you know how a poet, dead, lives on? When you read, I speak, and your voice is mine."¹¹

9 From the writings of this priest, so pleasing and dear to God, it is clear, as far as the light of truth allows humans to see, that he led a life of uprightness and integrity in the faith, hope, and love of the Catholic Church. This is certainly acknowledged by those who read his writings on the things of God. I believe, however, that they profited even more who were able to hear him speaking in church and see him there present, especially if they were familiar with his manner of life among his fellow human beings. 10 Not only was he a teacher learned in the kingdom of heaven, who brings forth things new and old from his storeroom (Matthew 13:52), and one of those merchants who on finding a precious pearl sells what he has and buys it (Matthew 13:45-46). He was also one of those regarding whom it was written: *So speak and so act* (James 2:12), and of whom the Savior says: *He who does these things and teaches them to others will be called great in the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:19).

11 I earnestly beseech you, my readers, that in your charity you would join me in thanking almighty God and blessing the Lord who has given me understanding (Psalm 16:7) and made me willing and able to bring these matters to the knowledge of all both here and elsewhere, both now and in the future. I ask you also to pray for me that after having by God's gift lived with this man for almost forty years, without bitterness or dissension and in sweet familiarity, I may emulate and imitate him in the present world and enjoy the promises of almighty God with him in the world to come.

Notes

1. From the early months of 391, when he was ordained a priest.
2. In the liturgy as we know it today Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 (Vulgate: 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142) are known as the "penitential psalms." It is to these that Possidius is apparently referring when he speaks of "the very few Davidic psalms on repentance."
3. See 1 Kings 2:10: *Then David slept with his fathers*, and 2 Chronicles 29:28: *Then he [David] died in a good old age*.
4. On 28 August 430.
5. The Mass, according to a traditional practice already attested by Saint Cyprian (Letter 1, 2), Saint Ambrose, *On the Death of His Brother Satyrus* 1, 80; On the Death of Valentinian 56, 78; Letter 39, 4; Paulinus (*The Life of Ambrose* 48), and Saint Augustine himself (*Confessions* 9, 12, 29 and 32; *Handbook* 110; *The Care To Be Taken of the Dead* 22; Sermons 159, 1; 172, 2; *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 84, 1; *Virginity* 46). And see J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (*Missarum Solemnia*, trans. F. A. Brunner, 1) (New York, 1951), page 170.
6. *Depositio* often means burial, which Christians understood as a simple entrusting of the body to the earth, which would give it up again at the resurrection; but "*depositio*" can also mean death, and certainly does so here.
7. See Chapter 24, 1.
8. In Sermon 365, 3 Augustine speaks of a nephew, Patricius, as being a cleric in his monastery.
9. The adjective "holy" indicates here, as often elsewhere, ecclesiastics or, perhaps, simply "good Christians." "Libraries" in the plural: monasteries of women also had libraries (see Letter 311, 13).
10. For this meaning of *agger publicus* see *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* I, 1309 (where, however, this passage is not cited).
11. Verse of an unknown pagan poet in the *Anthologia Latina*, no. 721. The thought was in all probability a commonplace.



Augustine in his study by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

English Titles of the Works of Augustine

- Adulterous Marriages (De adulterinis conjugiiis)
- The Advantage of Believing (De utilitate credendi)
- The Advantage of Fasting (De utilitate ieiunandi)
- Against Lying (Contra mendacium)
- Agreement among the Evangelists (De consensu evangelistarum)
- Answer to Adimantus, a Disciple of Mani (Contra Adimantum Manichaei discipulum)
- Answer to an Arian Sermon (Contra sermonem Arianorum)
- Answer to Centurius' Report on the Donatists (Contra quod attulit Centurius a Donatistis) *Lost*
- Answer to Cresconius (Contra Cresconium)
- Answer to the Donatist Party (Contra partem Donati) *Lost*
- Answer to an Enemy of the Law and the Prophets (Contra adversarium Legis et Prophetarum)
- Answer to Faustus, a Manichean (Contra Faustum Manichaeum)
- Answer to Felix, a Manichean (Contra Felicem Manichaeum)
- Answer to Fortunatus, a Manichean (Contra Fortunatum Manichaeum)
- Answer to Gaudentius, a Donatist Bishop (Contra Gaudentium Donatarum episcopum)
- Answer to Hilary (Contra Hilarium) *Lost*
- Answer to the Jews (Adversus Judaeos)
- Answer to Julian (Contra Julianum)
- Answer to the Letter of Donatus the Heretic (Contra epistulam Donati heretici) *Lost*
- Answer to the Letter of Mani Known as "The Foundation" (Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant "Fundamenti")
- Answer to Maximinus the Arian (Contra Maximinum Arianum)
- Answer to the Letter of Parmenian (Contra epistulam Parmeniani)
- Answer to the Questions of Januarius (Ad inquisitiones Ianuarii - Letters 54-55)
- Answer to Secundinus (Contra Secundinum)
- Answer to the Skeptics (Contra Academicos)
- Answer to Two Letters of the Pelagians (Contra dua epistulas Pelagianorum)
- Answer to an Unidentified Donatist (Contra nescio quem Donatistam) *Lost*
- Answer to the Writings of Petilian (Contra litteras Petiliani)