



# “So many voices”: The Piety of Monica, Mother of Augustine

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In *The History of St. Monica*, Émile Bougaud (1823–1888) introduced his subject with the lofty claim that readers should sing such a biography rather than read it.<sup>1</sup> Believing Monica had possessed “the most beautiful love that perhaps ever existed,” Bougaud encouraged mothers to look to her example and recognize “how divine is the strength with which God has endowed them in the interest of their children’s eternal salvation.”<sup>2</sup> While such a statement may sound admirable, Bougaud goes on to explain that a mother’s divine strength consists of her ability to bring about her children’s salvation through her own steadfast will.<sup>3</sup> Bougaud continues, “As regards the life of the body, a mother can do much; with regard to the life of the soul she can do all; and the world would be saved could we succeed in convincing mothers of this truth.”<sup>4</sup> The author closes his work by praying to Monica and asking her to intercede for mothers throughout the world.<sup>5</sup> Such erroneous conclusions,

often built on hagiographic depictions, are common in the many Catholic biographies of Augustine’s mother.<sup>6</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, modern secular scholars have examined Monica from seemingly every angle and yet few have focused on her personal piety. From Elizabeth Clark’s literary theory study of the “Monica-functions” in *Confessions* to Anne-Marie Bowery’s conclusion that Monica provides “the feminine face of Christ,” many of these works reveal more about the presuppositions of the author than Monica.<sup>7</sup>

Modern readers of Augustine’s *Confessions* may wonder if there are other options for appreciating this fourth-century woman. To put it more bluntly, one might ask, “What can an evangelical Protestant learn from Monica, the mother of Augustine?” This essay will endeavor to answer that question by examining the life and piety of Monica as set forth in *Confessions*, with particular reference to her final days recounted in Book 9.17–37. As this study demonstrates, Monica is a helpful model of Christian piety because she practiced the biblical virtues of persistent prayer, confident faith, and humble service to others.<sup>8</sup>

## THY HANDMAID: THE LIFE OF MONICA

Augustine (354–430) wrote *Confessions* a decade after his mother’s death, and yet, Monica (331–387) is more prominent in the narrative than any of his

contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> Peter Brown notes that *Confessions* is ultimately a portrait of Augustine's inner life, which was "dominated by one figure—his mother, Monica."<sup>10</sup> Given the prevalence of Monica in *Confessions*, many details of her life are available in this work.

Monica was born in Thagaste, where she received a Berber name reminiscent of a pagan god.<sup>11</sup> Although her hometown was under Donatist influence at the time, her parents trained her in the Catholic faith, with the help of a particularly godly servant in their home.<sup>12</sup> She married a man named Patricius (d. 371), who was unfaithful to her throughout their early years together. Despite his hot temper and infidelity, Monica was a faithful wife and her husband became a Christian at the end of his life.<sup>13</sup>

Monica gave birth to Augustine in 354 when she was 23 years old. From an early age, Augustine recognized, "My mother placed great hope in [God]," and she "was in greater labor to ensure my salvation than she had been at my birth."<sup>14</sup> Amidst years of tearful prayers, Monica became convinced that her wayward son would eventually return to the Catholic Church. She believed God had promised as much in a personal vision and had confirmed this promise through the prophetic words of her bishop, who proclaimed, "It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost."<sup>15</sup>

For her part, Monica did all she could to ensure that the bishop's words would come true. Although Augustine moved to Rome without her, she joined him in Milan when he settled there, braving the perilous journey over the Mediterranean courageously.<sup>16</sup> In Milan, she befriended Ambrose, the well-known bishop of the city, and became a devoted member of his congregation.<sup>17</sup> Soon, Augustine would famously turn from his sins to the Savior his mother had so long commended to him. Monica was the first to find out and rejoiced to see her many prayers coming to fruition. After years of faithfully crying out to God on behalf of her son, the Lord had turned her sadness into, in Augustine's words, "joy far fuller than her dearest wish."<sup>18</sup>

Monica continued to live with her son after his conversion, when the two moved to Cassiciacum with several of Augustine's friends. Many scholars have noted that Monica was not merely present at Cassiciacum but

was active in the philosophical discourses that Augustine recorded.<sup>19</sup> Brown contends that Augustine set forth Monica as "an oracle of primitive Catholic piety" in these works.<sup>20</sup>

While Augustine and his mother intended to return to North Africa, Monica would only survive as far as Ostia, where she contracted a fever and soon died. His mother's final days produced some of the most memorable scenes in the pages of *Confessions*, to which we will now turn our attention.

### THE DEATH OF MONICA

Two weeks before Monica's death, she and her son shared an experience that has intrigued scholars for centuries.<sup>21</sup> In Augustine's own words, "We were talking alone together and our conversation was serene and joyful."<sup>22</sup> In their discussion of the eternal life of the saints, Augustine describes the pair as ascending toward Truth until they "passed beyond" their own souls and reached "that place of everlasting plenty, where [God] feed[s] Israel forever with the food of truth." In a climactic moment, Augustine exclaimed, "For one fleeting instant we reached out and touched [eternal Wisdom]." Such a preview of the world to come left Monica with little interest in this present life. God had answered her prayers for her son and she was now ready to die in peace.

While scholars have long been fascinated with the apparent mysticism in this scene, Augustine's primary purpose for the story was to demonstrate Monica's readiness for her pending death.<sup>23</sup> Unlike various other scenes in *Confessions*, he did not slow the narrative with philosophical reflection, but rather quickly moved on to his point: "It was about five days after this, or not much more, that she took to her bed with a fever."<sup>24</sup>

On her deathbed, Monica told her sons that she was not concerned about the place of her burial, which Augustine saw as fruit of her spiritual maturity and detachment from the world.<sup>25</sup> Within days, he reported, "Her pious and devoted soul was set free from the body."<sup>26</sup> Monica's sojourn in this world came to a quiet end, but she left behind a legacy that has endured for generations.

## REFLECTIONS ON MONICA'S PIETY

One can appreciate Monica's devotion to the Lord and humble faith, despite misgivings about some of the particulars of her theology.<sup>27</sup> This section will briefly highlight the commendable elements of Monica's piety.

### PERSISTENT PRAYER

For centuries, the church has recognized Monica as a model of persistent prayer and motherly devotion.<sup>28</sup> From the beginning of his life to the end of hers, Monica faithfully prayed for her son and sought his conversion. Although Wills contends that "too much is often made of her role in Augustine's life," this opinion can be traced to Augustine himself.<sup>29</sup> He understood her prayers to be instrumental in his conversion and praised her persistent prayer in several of his works.<sup>30</sup>

Bougaud was correct to identify the divine strength available to mothers through prayer, but he was woefully wrong about its source. There are no "divine powers attached to maternity," as he argued.<sup>31</sup> However, Christian mothers have access to something far greater. Rather than looking inside themselves as Bougaud recommends, mothers can seek out the Lord and trust their children to His sovereign mercy. Monica understood this doctrine better than many of her biographers have, and God, in His grace, did not "despise her tears when she asked...that the soul of her son might be saved."<sup>32</sup>

### CONFIDENT FAITH

A second noteworthy aspect of Monica's piety was her confidence in the Lord. Once she received a dream confirming that her son would one day become a Christian, she appeared to rest in this promise.<sup>33</sup> Her unwavering confidence was evident in the noticeable change in her demeanor and strategy toward Augustine after the dream. When she learned of her son's rejection of the Manichees, for example, she calmly viewed it as only the beginning of his transformation.<sup>34</sup> While Monica had taken matters into her own hands in Thagaste and frequently implored her bishop to speak with her son, in Milan she seemed to wait quietly on the Lord, even with the eloquent Ambrose available as a resource.<sup>35</sup> Her faith had matured and it altered her approach to her wayward son.

## HUMBLE SERVICE

A final significant aspect of Monica's piety was her humble service to others. While Monica's marriage with Patricius was hardly a model Christian union, her faithfulness to him and patience with his infidelity are commendable. Augustine recognized that she submitted to Patricius with an evangelistic aim and praised her for her commitment to her husband's salvation. As Augustine saw it, "The virtues with which [God] had adorned her, and for which [Patricius] respected, loved, and admired her, were like so many voices constantly speaking to him of [God]."<sup>36</sup> The "many voices" of Monica's piety were pivotal in both her unfaithful husband and wayward son eventually coming to Christ.

Whether in her home or at the country estate in Cassiacum, Monica strived to be a servant who considered the needs of others greater than her own.<sup>37</sup> Such humble service caught the attention of Ambrose, won her husband to Christ, and earned the admiration of Augustine and countless others since.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is much to appreciate about Monica, the mother of Augustine. Through persistent prayer, confident faith, and humble service, she remained faithful through a difficult marriage, the wayward wanderings of her son, and even in her final days. Her legacy commends to future generations not a divine strength inherent to the office of motherhood, but rather the incredible way that God can use someone devoted to himself and his purposes. Despite the confusion that may surround her history, Monica remains a worthy subject for study and reflection. When properly understood, the "many voices" of her piety can speak of God in the present day even as they did so long ago.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Émile Bougaud, *The History of St. Monica*, trans. Anthony Farley (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1885), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Bougaud, *St. Monica*, ix, xi.

<sup>3</sup> Bougaud, *St. Monica*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Bougaud, *St. Monica*, xv.

<sup>5</sup> Bougaud, *St. Monica*, 368–369.

<sup>6</sup> W. Atkinson provides a helpful survey of Catholic

writings on Monica in “Your Servant, my Mother: The Figure of Saint Monica in the Ideology of Christian Motherhood” in *Immaculate and Powerful. The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Atkinson (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 139–172.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Clark, “Rewriting Early Christian History” in *Theology and the New Histories* vol. 44, ed. Gary Macy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 97. Anne-Marie Bowery, “Monica: The Feminine Face of Christ,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, ed. Judith Chelius Stark (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007). This work contains four articles devoted to Monica.

<sup>8</sup> This does not mean, of course, that every aspect of Monica’s piety is exemplary. This essay will focus primarily on the commendable elements of her personal piety.

<sup>9</sup> Quotations from this work are from Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 17. Clark has noted that the references to Monica provide “one of the fullest extant portraits of an early Christian woman” in ancient literature. Clark, “Rewriting Early Christian History,” 97.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Wills notes that the Berber spelling would have been “Monnica” and that the name is related to the Libyan god Mon. Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1999), 2.

<sup>12</sup> The biographical account of Monica’s childhood in the following paragraph comes from Augustine, *Confessions* 9.17–22 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Augustine reported little about his father in *Confessions*, seemingly mentioning him only to illustrate Monica’s piety. Even his death receives a mere parenthetical reference. By contrast, Augustine reflects upon Monica’s death from 9.17–9.37 and the death of his young friend from 4.7–10.

<sup>14</sup> *Confessions* 1.17 (Pine-Coffin, 31–32).

<sup>15</sup> *Confessions* 3.21 (Pine-Coffin, 70). For the description of her vision, see *Confessions*, 3.19–20.

<sup>16</sup> *Confessions* 5.14, 6.1.

<sup>17</sup> Ambrose would have an influence on both mother and son. Monica deeply admired the bishop and even

altered some of her personal practices according to his wisdom. Although Augustine initially resisted Ambrose’s teaching, he eventually respected him as a man of God who spoke truth. *Confessions* 6.1–2.

<sup>18</sup> *Confessions* 8.30 (Pine-Coffin, 179).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Augustine, *On Order* 2.1.1, trans. Silvano Borruso (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 47; and Augustine, *The Happy Life* 2.10, trans. Ludwig Schopp (B. Herder Book Company, 1939), 67. Agostino Trapé has a helpful collection of the scenes in which Monica plays a role in *My Mother by St. Augustine*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 1987), 97–110.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 118. Clark agrees, noting that Monica represents “a second means of faith: not the approach through study that he enjoys, but a way of holiness that simple people of no education can embrace.” Clark, “Rewriting Early Christian History,” 102.

<sup>21</sup> For a summary of the scholarly debate on this passage, see J. Kevin Coyle, “In Praise of Monica: A Note on the Ostia Experience of *Confessions IX*,” *Augustinian Studies* 13 (1982): 87–90.

<sup>22</sup> The quotations from this paragraph come from Augustine’s retelling of the experience in *Confessions* 9.23–26 (Pine-Coffin, 196–199).

<sup>23</sup> Coyle agrees with this assessment, noting, “In the Ostia account this mutual exploration serves as a preamble to Monica’s death, which follows on her declaration that there is nothing more she wants from this earthly life.” Coyle, “In Praise of Monica,” 96. For more on Augustine and mysticism, see John Peter Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> *Confessions* 9.27 (Pine-Coffin, 199).

<sup>25</sup> *Confessions* 9.27–28.

<sup>26</sup> *Confessions* 9.28 (Pine-Coffin, 200).

<sup>27</sup> For example, her practice of making offerings at the tombs of saints and her pressure on Augustine to dismiss the women he lived with are both highly questionable.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the historical appreciation of Monica, see Atkinson, “The Figure of Saint Monica.”

<sup>29</sup> Wills, *Saint Augustine*, 57.

<sup>30</sup> *Confessions* 5.13. See also *The Happy Life* 1.6 and *Order* 2.20.52.

<sup>31</sup> Bougaud, *St. Monica*, xi.

<sup>32</sup> *Confessions* 5.17 (Pine-Coffin, 103).

<sup>33</sup> In fact, Monica's firm trust in this promise impressed Augustine more than the dream itself. *Confessions*, 3.20.

<sup>34</sup> *Confessions*, 6.1.

<sup>35</sup> Compare *Confessions*, 6.1-2 with *Confessions*, 5.17.

<sup>36</sup> *Confessions*, 9.19 (Pine-Coffin, 194).

<sup>37</sup> Augustine notes that she cared for the Cassiciacum company like a mother in *Confessions*, 9.22.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine noted that Ambrose was impressed with Monica in *Confessions* 6.2. The language of 1 Peter 3:1–6 is intentionally echoed here and by Augustine in his description of how Monica “won” Patricius to Christ. *Confessions* 9.22 (Pine-Coffin, 196).