**Bishop Barron’s “The Pivotal Players”**

***St. Augustine: The Teacher***

*Introduction*

* St. Augustine of Hippo is not only one of the three of four most important players in the history of the Church, but he is also a pivotal figure in the development of western civilization.
* He is the most significant bridge between the culture of ancient Rome and the Christian culture that would follow.
* As a theologian and philosopher, he has practically no rivals with the possible exception of St. Thomas Aquinas.
* He brought trinitarian theology to its most articulate expression. He found the discipline of philosophy of history.
* In writing **The Confessions** he invented the literary genre of autobiography. After his conversion he lived a life of heroic sanctity becoming one of the best known and most influential saints in the history of the Catholic Church.

*The Confessions*

* St. Augustine’s autobiography, **The Confessions**, is a masterpiece but more importantly it is a self-portrait of a soul. It is a prayer overheard.
* The entire text of **The Confessions** is addressed to God in attitudes of imploring, begging, cajoling, praising, and confessing sin.
* Through the constant literary skill of Augustine, the reader is given the opportunity to listen in.
* In **The Confessions** there is a combination of high intellectualism and profound emotion.
* *“Lord you made us for yourself and therefore our heart is restless until it rests in you.”*
* We are hardwired for God. Our very desire proves it, for nothing in this world finally satisfies the restless longing of the soul.
* Despite all our relatively superficial differences we all come together in hungering and thirsting for God.
* In Augustine’s own story we are meant to see our own.
* Augustine was born in 354 AD in the North African town of Thagaste. He was the son of a pagan man and a Christian woman who would become known as St. Monica.
* Though Augustine had received a basic instruction in Christianity he was not a committed Christian.
* Augustine was gifted intellectually and was highly ambitious. Augustine was educated and read the classical authors of the Latin tradition (Virgil, Cicero). He longed to be like them. A master of the spoken word.
* The most significant moment of his childhood was something that conventual biographers would overlook. With a group of his friends the young Augustine snook on the property of a neighbor and stole one of the man’s pears.
* He was not hungry and the fruit itself turned out to be no good. He took a perverse delight in the crime itself.
* The theft provided a window into the soul of a fallen human being. At the root of the self is a twisting and distortion impossible to explain in physiological or psychological terms.
* Even in the petty offence of a child, Augustine could see the problem that we all have.
* A perversion so profound that only the intervention of grace could adequately address it.
* When Augustine was a teenager, he made his way to Carthage to engage in the formal study of Rhetoric. Carthage was the largest city in this part of the Roman world.
* In **The Confessions**, Augustine describes Carthage as a caldron of sin and sensual pleasure.
* While in Carthage at the age of 17 he lived with a woman without marrying her. This was a common arrangement at that time.
* He stayed with her for fifteen years. She became the mother of his only child. His son was named Adeodatus which means “God given”.
* She is never named in the **The Confessions** prior to his formal conversion he dismissed her.
* Augustine traveled to Rome and then to Milan. He secured a position of professor of Rhetoric in Milan.
* This required more than teaching. He was also obliged to compose speeches on behalf of the emperor.
* After his arrival in the great city in 384 AD, Augustine found himself frustrated
* To understand the reasons for his frustrations we must look at two crucial conversions that he had in his student years in Carthage.
* The first was his conversion to philosophy. The second was his conversion to Manichaeism.
* His conversion to philosophy was brought about in reading Cicero’s **Hortensius**. **Hortensius** was an exhortation to lead the philosophical life.
* Until his dying day he never lost the conviction that the highest life is the one dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom.
* The second conversion was equally decisive. Augustine became an enthusiastic companion of the Manicheans.
* The Manicheans were the followers of Manichaeism. The Manicheans proposed an intellectually clarifying metaphysics which presented to the world as a battle ground between good and evil, between spirit and matter.
* They proposed a form of life in line with this vision. One that involved the escape of the soul from the body through a series of intellectual and ascetic disciplines.
* Augustine would practice Manicheanism for nine years of his life. He believed that in Manicheanism he found a solution to the problem of evil and suffering.
* His conversion to this heretical sect was a shock to his mother. A source of deep sorrow to her.
* It was at this time that Monica’s practice or praying for her son’s return to the Catholic faith began in earnest and would last up to the moment of his Baptism.
* When Augustine got to Milan, he found himself deeply torn. On the one hand he had fulfilled his loftiest professional ambition.
* On the other hand, he knew that he was not living up to the Ciceronian ideal of cultivating a life of the mind.
* He was becoming increasingly inpatient with the Manicheans and Manichaeism.
* In the midst of this turmoil, he met the Bishop of Milan. Bishop Ambrose would become a spiritual father to him.
* He had heard that Bishop Ambrose was a great preacher. Augustine found himself entranced by the content of Ambrose’s preaching.
* He was fascinated by Ambrose’s allegorical manner of reading the Scriptures. The subtle interpretations of Bishop Ambrose showed Augustine a way beyond literalism.
* Previously, Augustine found the God of the Bible to be repugnant to reason for when reading the Bible, he read it literally.
* During this time of searching, Augustine had an experience of extraordinary power. He was traveling to a place when he was to deliver a speech for the emperor. He came across a man on the street who was drunk.
* Initially he viewer the man with a condescending pity but then it occurred to him that tomorrow this man would be sober while he would still be drunk on ambition.
* Inspired by Ambrose, Augustine turned to a serious study of the Bible. Especially the letters of St Paul and the Gospel of John.
* He found articulate speech on the Word of God becoming flesh for the sake of saving sinful humanity.
* A friend introduced him to the story of St. Antony and the monks of the Egyptian desert. The tales of heroic ascetism stunned him.
* Augustine was in a state of turmoil for he increasingly recognized the truth in Christianity but was hesitant to practice Christianity. At this time in his life, he was still attached to the things of the world.
* While in his residence he heard the voice of a small child saying, “take and read”.
* He immediately opened his Bible and read the first line on which his eyes fell: ***“Not in reveling in drunkenness; not is lust and wantonness; not in quarrels and rivalries, rather put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh and its lusts.”*** *(Rom. 13:13)*
* Augustine had lived a life of pleasure. This verse spoke to his heart and it was enough to compel him to assent.
* Augustine did not immediately seek baptism but with a group of friends he went to an estate.
* His purpose was to live a life of refined leisure engaging in serious study, debate, and writing. Developing a Christian philosophy in the company of like-minded companions.
* After a few months of this intense intellectual activity, Augustine actively sought baptism.
* Augustine returned to Africa with his son Adeodatus. He established himself as a head of a Christian philosophical school.
* When Augustine traveled to the seaside community of Hippo, he was pressed into service by the people to be their priest.
* Augustine was hesitant at first but eventually gave in. He committed himself to the study of the Scriptures to prepare himself for this ministry.
* In short order he gained a reputation as a master preacher and skillful administrator.
* When the reigning bishop died, Augustine became the bishop of Hippo. He served as bishop of Hippo from 395 to 430.
* As bishop of Hippo, Augustine produced a library of books and essays of the highest literary and theological quality.
* Augustine commenced work on **The Confessions** shortly after becoming the bishop of Hippo. He labored on his masterpiece, **The City of God**, between 412 and 418.
* He wrote the seminal study on the Trinity, **De Trinitate**, between 400 and 428.
* The struggle with the Manicheans was the principal preoccupation of Augustine prior to his conversion.
* His struggle with the Donatists and the Pelagianism was his concern in the years following his conversion.
* The Donatists saw a tight correlation between the validity of the sacraments and the moral integrity of the administrator of the sacraments.
* If a priest had apostatized and left the faith during a time of persecution and then returned as far as the Donatists were concerned, his priesthood was compromised. The sacraments offered at his hands were invalid.
* Augustine maintained that the efficaciousness of the sacraments is not a function of the minister’s worthiness but of the grace of God gratuitously given.
* In making this clarification, Augustine saved the church. He traced its power not to the fallible human beings but to the infallible God.
* The struggle with Pelagianism would preoccupy Augustine in the last years of his life.
* St. Augustine died in 430 AD as the Vandals were laying siege to Hippo.
* St. Augustine is one of the great philosophers and theologians of the church.
* St. Augustine’s conversion was not a smooth process but was a great struggle in which there was turmoil in his life.
* Prior to St. Augustine there were no autobiographies. There were historical writings and biographical writings of great figures but no autobiographies.
* In St. Augustine’s **The Confessions** we can see Augustine’s struggle with the things of the world and his desire for peace. It is in Augustine’s struggle that we can better understand our own struggle.

The City of God

* Augustine’s massive work, **The City of God**, is the founding work of what would come to be called the philosophy of history.
* It is a masterpiece of Biblical interpretation, systematic theology, and theological anthropology.
* St Augustine himself referred to it as a big and difficult book.
* **The City of God** is Augustine’s answer to a charge that troubled thoughtful Christians in the wake of the sack of Rome in 410 AD.
* Many people claimed that Rome had fallen because it had abandoned the traditional piety of Cesar, Cicero and Teutonius and had adopted the strange cult of Christianity.
* Augustine maintained that Rome fell not because of Christianity but because of the vices that were inherent in its own political and religious system.
* Augustine believed that Rome was grounded in self-love. Any city that is produced by the inward-looking egotism, Augustine characterized as the *“earthly city”*.
* In the *“earthly city”* you will find some form of false worship as the basic problem.
* In **The City of God**, Augustine does a thorough critique of the Roman gods and goddesses.
* Augustine was conveying that Rome was a compromised political order because of its indulgences in the worship of false deities.
* The Roman gods were petty, jealous, violent, resentful, promiscuous, and vain.
* Augustine identifies them with the demons spoken of in Scripture.
* To discover what a society worships is to discover what it values most highly and what it seeks to imitate. Bad worship leads to bad government.
* The gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon were marked through and through by the lust to dominate. Roman social order was similarly determined.
* The lust to dominate of the Roman gods and goddesses became the lust to dominate of the Roman political authorities.
* In the pagan stories the world comes to be through a primal act of violence and conquest. Saturn devouring his children; Jupiter conquering and killing his father and then parceling out earth sea and sky to his siblings.
* According to the Bible the true God does not wrestle anything into submission when he creates, nor does he conquer any rival power.
* In a purely generous and nonviolent act of love he brings the universe into existence. Order comes through peace not violence or domination.
* Augustine insists that when such a God is worshipped a fundamentally different kind of social order comes into existence. One based upon compassion, forgiveness, and solidarity.
* This is the city grounded in the love of God is the “city of God”. It is the earthly community which mirrors the heavenly community.
* Augustine saw a correlation between the founding myth of Rome and the Biblical story of Cain and Abel.
* In the myth of the founding of the city of Rome there were two brothers: Romulus and Remus. Romulus killed his brother Remus and found the city of Rome.
* In the account of Cain and Abel in Genesis, Cain in a fit of jealousy kills his brother Abel. Cain after killing his brother becomes a founder of cities. Cain is a blood brother to Romulus.
* Romulus is the hero of the Roman legend while Cain is cursed in the Biblical story.
* Augustine saw that both Romulus and Cain in their violence were progenitors of the “earthly city”.
* In the Roman myth the gods sanctioned the death of Remus at the hands of his brother.
* In the Biblical account God sides with the murdered victim.
* Augustine understands the whole of history as a sort of tensive struggle between the “city of God” and the “earthly city”.
* The “earthly city” seems to always hold sway. Most nations, empires, institutions, and societies are expressions of the “earthly city”. The “city of God” is something like Noah’s ark. Floating on an immense sea of dysfunction and sin.
* On the other hand, “the city of God” is the bearer of the divine presence to the world and subsists under the divine providence so that it strangely endures age after age. It functions as a challenge to the dominant social arrangement.
* The struggle between the two cities exists in the heart of the Christian community itself.
* The two are intertwined in complex ways like the wheat and the weeds in Jesus’ famous parable.
* The “city of God” is not to take flight from the world. The “city of God” is not to withdraw from the earthly city to the heavenly city.
* The “City of God is a guidebook for pilgrims to the heavenly city.

Augustine’s teaching of the “just war”.

1. A war is just only in the measure that it is fought for a morally praiseworthy cause.
2. That it is declared by a competent authority.
3. The combatants are fighting with the right intention.

* Augustine maintained an extremely strong prejudice against war. His moral acceptance of warfare under certain conditions should by no means therefore be construed as a justification of war but rather as a concession to the sinful world.
* This was Augustine’s attempt to restrict war while acknowledging that there are instances when war is justified.

*Augustine against Pelagianism*

* Pelagianism proposed an interpretation of Christian life that was to many of his contemporaries and to many today extremely attractive.
* Pelagius believed that moral perfection was something that human beings can achieve through the exercise of the will.
* He felt that God would never have given so many instructions and exhortations in the Bible unless He knew that men and women were capable of fulfilling them.
* This “can do” optimistic theory ran counter to the idea an original sin which would render human beings incapable of achieving moral excellence.
* This theology was so appealing that pelagian cells began to appear in Rome and then throughout the empire.
* Disciples of Pelagius were eager to spread their teacher’s message.
* Pelagianism exists in our own culture in an even more radical form. Not only do we believe that we are capable of perfecting ourselves, but we are convinced that we can determine the meaning of our lives.
* Augustine saw Pelagianism as an assault on the very nature of Christianity
* If we are upright and just along with some moral guidance than we do not stand in need of a savior.
* In Pelagianism, Jesus is not Savior of all but rather is a moral teacher exhorting us to do our best.
* If this is the case, then Christianity is a slightly modified version of all the other programs of self-perfection.
* What Augustine saw with clarity is the Biblical claim that there is something so fundamentally wrong with us, so off kilter and twisted that we are incapable of saving ourselves.
* Augustine understood that we require much more than a teacher our guide. We require a savior.
* Sin is a condition in which we find ourselves. It is a state of affairs in which we are always already implicated.
* Therefore, to say to a sinner, “well, turn your life around”, is about as counter indicated to say to a confirmed alcoholic, “well, just stop drinking”.
* In both cases something far more fundamental than free will needs to be addressed and healed.
* The Twelve-Step program for people with addictions is very spiritual. There is an acknowledgement that we are dependent on God.
* Both the sinner and the addict need to turn their life over to a higher power.
* This is what Augustine meant when he spoke of sin as a state or condition which rendered us helpless.
* Augustine spoke of a Savior whose healing must come from outside of the dysfunction.
* It was St. Augustine who described the concept of “original sin”. A sin that is passed on from our first parents and effects every person who comes into the world.
* A frank acknowledgement that the problem that most basically bedevils us is one that we cannot even in principle solve through our own efforts.

Why is Augustine of Hippo a pivotal player?

* Through his literary genius and spiritual perception, he has allowed nunberkess people over the centuries to see their own stories of sin and grace in his.
* His our famously restless heart has become the paradigm for spiritual seekers across the ages.
* He taught us that we are citizens of a higher society. One based on the right praise of God.
* We are resident aliens in any of the earthly cities that we inhabit. This crucial distinction has helped the Church survive as worldly culture have risen and fallen.
* He reminded human beings of the intractability of the problem of sin and thereby taught them to look not just for another teacher but for a savior.