

# Augustine's baptism: Its significance once and today

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The article describes in broad outline Augustine's baptism in Milan (386) and stresses its significance for Augustine's transition from Manichaean Christianity to Nicene Catholic Christianity.

This very night it will be 1625 years ago that the future Church father Augustine from Hippo in North Africa was baptised in the North Italian city of Milan by its Nicene Christian bishop Ambrose.

In those days Christian baptism was an extensive ceremony.<sup>1</sup> Its preparations started weeks before the actual baptism took place. A person who would like to receive baptism should first 'turn in his name' (the so-called *nomen dare*) to be inscribed by the Church official, who as a rule, was the bishop.<sup>2</sup> After that he<sup>3</sup> received an extensive catechetical instruction. Baptism took place at dawn on Easter Sunday. We do not know the exact rites of the Church of Milan at the time of Augustine, but from two works by Ambrose, his so-called *On the Sacraments (De sacramentis)* and *On the Mysteries (De mysteriis)* we seem to be able to reconstruct how baptism was administered in 387. It was accompanied by rites such as a washing of feet (symbolising the forgiveness of sins, a symbol dear to Ambrose), anointments, the laying on of hands, and so on. Also, the newly baptised person received the sign of the cross on the forehead: from then onwards he belonged to Christ. This sign was originally an X, derived from the old-Hebrew sign of Tau already mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel (ch. 9), and also in St John's Apocalypse (cf. e.g. Daniélou 1964:154f., 330f.). This sign was considered a mark of property and protection.

Augustine's baptism took place in the baptistery of Milan's main church. A couple of years ago, when excavations were conducted for the construction of an underground, the ancient baptistery from Ambrose's times was discovered.<sup>4</sup> When visiting present-day Milano, you can still see it: after entering the cathedral at the back, left side, you should immediately turn to the right and then go downstairs. I mention this, because only few persons visiting the immense cathedral of Sta. Thecla are aware of this possibility. When seeing the ancient baptistery, you may learn how the adult Augustine, by then 32 years old, was immersed in 'living' (that is: flowing) water. This immersion took place three times, after he had heard three questions: 'Do you believe in God the Almighty Father?'; 'Do you believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and his cross?'; 'Do you also believe in the Holy Spirit?' and after that he subsequently answered three times: 'Credo, I believe!' (Ambrosius *De sacramentis* 2, 20; cf. Ambrosius *De mysteriis* 21; 28). It is from the baptismal rite with its three questions and answers that we still have our tripartite confessions (see e.g. Kelly 1960:30–61, esp. pp. 36–37 on Ambrose).

Who was the person then baptised? Many popular tales (and even handbooks of history, philosophy and theology!) still have it that a certain *pagan*, after a dramatic conversion, became a Christian. This representation is wrong. What really happened was this: an ambitious young man from Africa – for a few years already even the most important professor of rhetoric of the whole Roman Empire, the man who delivered speeches for the Emperor and a consul<sup>5</sup> – had resigned from his position and received baptism in the Catholic Church. Originally, in North Africa, he was raised in some sort of Catholic environment; as a student he became a member of a gnostic-Christian Church and stayed with its adherents for at least ten years; for a short time he was a sceptic; and by now he had become a Catholic Christian. The change was not from paganism to Christianity, but from one form of Christianity to another.

1.The following lines provide a very brief overview. The best recent book on early Christian baptism is the extensive study by Ferguson (2009). Also important is the rather brief overview by Jensen (2012), as well as her specialist study (2011). In my presentation I mainly focus on the rites as they may be reconstructed from Ambrose's works (see below).

2.See, for example, Ferguson (2009), with reference to Cyril of Jerusalem's *Procatechesis* 1 and 4.

3.As a matter of fact, women were baptised as well. When simply speaking of 'he', I follow the ancient rites' inclusive language.

4.This baptistery was discovered and excavated by the archaeologist Roberti in the 1960s. See, for example, Roberti and Paredi (1974).

5.Augustinus, *Confessionum libri XIII* VI, 6, 9; Augustinus, *Contra litteras Petilianus* III, 25, 30. Cf. Courcelle ([1950] 1968:79–83).

It is only recently, based on a number of important discoveries, that we have become aware of this fact. Augustine made a dramatic change from 'gnostic' Christianity to so-called Nicene (orthodox) Christianity. And this will be the very essence of our conference: examining this change and studying the still most hidden period of Augustine's life, the time from his 18th until at least his 28th year, the years when he was an adherent of the gnostic-Christian Church of the Manichaeans. It is our aim to ask what this meant for his theology, philosophy, spirituality, church polity, in brief: for his whole life and thought.

It is curious that Augustine himself always stated that he had been a Manichaean for *nine* years, although it is crystal clear from his writings that the period lasted for at least *ten* years (cf. e.g. Courcelle 1954:81–85). This may be due to his rhetoric: nine is an imperfect number and thus, looking back, Augustine considered the Manichaean period of his life as being imperfect (Ferrari 1975:210–216). But he spoke of *nine years*. Rather recently a famous Roman Catholic Augustine specialist still tried to play down the duration of his Manichaean period by speaking not of *nine years*, but of *nine months!* (Studer 1993:167). Besides, the present pope Benedictus, an ardent student of Augustine, in his previous capacity as the scholar Joseph Ratzinger, once stated that Augustine, during the period before his baptism (i.e. as a Manichaean) was not really interested in religious matters, and he also spoke of a '*vorchristliche*' [pre-Christian] Augustine, that is to say an Augustine who only became a Christian at the time of his conversion and baptism in 386 and 387 ([1965] 1967:217–222, esp. 222).

Through Augustine's own writings, however, we are instructed otherwise. Nowhere does he hide his early search for truth and *Christian* spirituality and he clearly states that this search started very early in his life and, moreover, that it was fully continued, and even intensified, when he was an adherent of Manichaeism.<sup>6</sup> Recent discoveries make us understand this fact. New texts from the Dakleh Oasis, some 800 km SSW from Cairo in the Egyptian-Libyan desert, testify to the essential *Christian* character of Manichaeism.<sup>7</sup> We are proud, that researchers from Australia who work on these texts have joined us here and that they are going to compare these new findings with Augustine's testimonies. Also, from a pivotal find such as the *Mani Codex* – a very small booklet with very thin leather pages of only 3.5 cm by 4.5 cm (a photo of one double page is on the conference programme) – we learn that Mani, the prophet from present-day Iraq who lived in the third century (216–276), was raised in a Jewish-Christian community and considered himself to be an apostle of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

6. One may, first of all, read the *Confessions* from the first lines onwards. In Book III, 3, 6, 10, in the narrative of his making acquaintance with Manichaeism, it runs: 'O truth, truth, how inwardly even then did the marrow of my soul sigh after you.'

7. Some main publications: Gardner (1996, 2007); Gardner, Alcock and Funk (1999). See also Gardner and Lieu (2004) for key texts from Kellis in English translation.

8. See the main publications of the original text (with German translation): Henrichs and Koenen (1970:97–216); Koenen and Römer (1988); Römer (1994). There are also English translations of the main fragments in Gardner and Lieu (2004).

It is not feasible to give a full description of Mani or Manichaios or *Mānī ḥajjā* [the living Mani] here. Those interested in the main particulars of his life and message may read a rather recent article published in the University of Pretoria's journal *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Van Oort 2009b). Manichaeism, the religion or church (*ekklesia*) established by Mani, turned out to be – in any case in Roman North Africa, such as for instance in Italy, Palestine or Egypt – a deviant form of Christianity. It also fully belonged to the currents which still are commonly termed as 'Gnosticism'. Christian Gnostics like the Manichaeans stressed the importance of inner knowledge or *gnōsis*. Augustine, in his decade-long search for truth and the self, did the same.

Or should we say: Augustine *continued* to do the same, also after his conversion to Nicene Christianity? Personally I'm inclined to say that he learned a lot from the Manichaeans' Christ-centred spirituality (see Van Oort 2002). And, curiously, although he later considered them to be dangerous heretics, he once explicitly stated: 'Thus what I had learned among them that is true, I hold ...'.<sup>9</sup> By and then deviant Christians may testify to certain aspects of the truth which other Christians forgot.

When asked about the relevance of our conference for today, my answer would be along these lines. We may learn from both Augustine and the Manichaeans because of their living, Christ-centred spirituality. And in order to understand Augustine and his immense influence on the mainstream forms of Christianity such as Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism and most varieties of Protestantism, we should also see that this spirituality centred on the human inner self. It was *personal* spirituality and Augustine kept this as a characteristic of his theology. So, for Christians who know their inspiring sources, it is not necessary to go to India or the Far East, in order to discover the inner self. This discovery was part and parcel of the Christian tradition, and Augustine in particular may be our guide. His stress on 'Call' and 'Answer', his emphasis on the importance of the preached Word as being an address liberating humans – an essential point of view which became so important with Augustine-inspired Reformers like Luther and Calvin (see e.g. Van Oort 2009a) – may be seen as instigated by this 'gnostic' past as well.

Furthermore, here in Africa we may be extra aware of the fact that he was an African. In the age-long tradition of Christian iconography, we usually find Augustine depicted as some sort of white European bishop.<sup>10</sup> But, in all probability, this is a severe mistake. The oldest representation of Augustine we have, namely a fresco in the Lateran library in Rome, dates from about *circa* 600.<sup>11</sup> One may still see some African characteristics when looking at this fresco. But there is more. His mother's name is Monnica, with double 'n', and without

9. *De utilitate credendi* 36: 'Ita quod apud eos [sc. Manichaeos] uerum didiceram, teneo ...'

10. For example, Courcelle and Courcelle (1965), and the subsequent volumes in a whole series.

11. See, for example, Wilpert (1931:1–3) (+ full-colour plate). As a matter of fact, the fresco has been duplicated in many other publications until the present day.

a doubt this is a so-called theophoric name, that is a name in which a godhead is mentioned: in this case the name of Mon, a Berber deity (e.g. Frend 1942:188–191; cf. Frend 1951: esp. 230). Thus, in all likelihood, it was (at least) through his mother that Augustine descended from Africa's indigenous people, the Berbers. He also says himself that he is an African for the Africans (*Afer pro Afris*) (*Epistula* 17,1) and he tells that, when overseas in Italy, his accent betrayed him (*De ordine* II, 17, 45). And, last but not least, we have the testimony of the Italian Catholic bishop Julian of Eclanum who, at the end of Augustine's life, accused him of still being a Manichaean: 'if a leopard could change his spots and an 'Aethiops' (a Black person) his skin, only *then* it would be possible for you to cleanse yourself from the mysteries of the Manichaeans.'<sup>12</sup>

There seems to be even a double amount of truth in this venomous remark. During the next two days, we'll particularly look at the Manichaean 'spots' of the greatest African ever.

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