

Free Chapter

A CATHOLIC PRAYER COMPANION

LARGE
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EDITION

"I pray for my children to return to the faith."

Praying Them Home

For parents and grandparents praying for **the children
and grandchildren who have left the Church**

*The true stories of the saints who never stopped praying for their
own, and the prayers they left us*



WITH

Martin Caldwell

Saint Monica: The Son of These Tears

Free sample chapter from Praying Them Home: A Catholic Companion for Parents and Grandparents of Children Who Have Left the Faith



Ary Scheffer, Saint Augustine and Saint Monica (19th century). Mother and son at Ostia, the scene Augustine describes in Book IX.



A note before we begin

My name is Martin Caldwell. On my channel I look into old Catholic stories and ask three plain questions. What was really written? What was added later? What did the people involved actually say?

I am not here to tell you what you must believe. I am here to set the record in front of you, as carefully as I can, and to leave you room to pray with it.

Every quotation here comes from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, in Edward Pusey's 1838 translation, with book and chapter so you can check it yourself.

Martin Caldwell

A woman at a bishop's door

Somewhere in North Africa, in the 370s, a widow keeps coming back to the same bishop.

She wants one thing. Her son is clever, ambitious, and lost to a sect called the Manichees. She asks the bishop to sit down with him, argue with him, and put him right.

The bishop says no. Her son, he tells her, is still “unteachable”, too pleased with his new ideas. “Let him alone a while,” he says, “only pray God for him” (Book III, chapter 12).

She does not accept it. She “urged him more, with entreaties and many tears”. At last the bishop, a little tired of her, sends her away with a sentence she never forgot:

“Go thy ways and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish.” (Book III, chapter 12)

The widow was Monica. The son was Augustine. And she took that answer, he tells us, “as if it had sounded from heaven”.

What the record says

Who wrote it down

Almost everything we know about Monica comes from her son. Augustine wrote the *Confessions* about ten years after her death, as a long prayer addressed to God. Monica left no writings of her own. When we hear her voice, we hear it through him.

So the story is told by the very person she prayed for.

The tears

Augustine does not soften it. He says his mother was “weeping to Thee for me, more than mothers weep the bodily deaths of their children” (Book III, chapter 11).

He says her tears “watered the ground under her eyes in every place where she prayed” (Book III, chapter 11). She was a widow by then. Her husband Patricius had died when Augustine was about seventeen.

The dream of the wooden rule

During these years Monica had a dream. She saw herself standing on “a certain wooden rule”, a measuring rod, grieving. A young man came to her, “cheerful and smiling”,

and asked why she wept. She told him she was mourning her son. He told her to look, and see, “That where she was, there was I also” (Book III, chapter 11). She looked, and Augustine was standing beside her on the same rule.

When she told her son, he tried to turn it round. Perhaps it meant she would one day come over to his side? She answered at once:

“No; for it was not told me that, ‘where he, there thou also’; but ‘where thou, there he also’.” (Book III, chapter 11)

Augustine admits her answer moved him more than the dream. He also records something easy to miss. After the dream she let him eat at her table again, which she had begun to refuse because of his mockery of the faith.

A word about that bishop

Here I must correct a very common error. You will read in many places, including Catholic websites, that the bishop who spoke of “the son of these tears” was Saint Ambrose of Milan.

The text does not say so. Augustine calls him only “a certain Bishop brought up in Thy Church, and well studied in Thy books” (Book III, chapter 12). The scene takes place in Africa, in Book III. Augustine does not reach Milan or meet Ambrose until Book V, years later. The bishop at the door has no name. I find that oddly comforting. The most famous words of hope in Monica’s story came from a man history did not bother to remember.

The night at the harbour

Around 383, Augustine decided to leave Carthage for Rome. Monica did not want him to go. She followed him down to the sea, holding on to him, determined either to keep him or to sail with him.

He lied to her. He said he was waiting to see off a friend. He persuaded her to spend the night “in a place hard by our ship, where was an Oratory in memory of the blessed Cyprian”, a chapel to the martyr bishop of Carthage. Then he slipped away.

“That night I privily departed, but she was not behind in weeping and prayer.” (Book V, chapter 8)

In the morning the ship was gone. He writes that she was “frantic with sorrow”. And then comes a short line I keep returning to. After her grief, “she betook herself again to intercede to Thee for me, went to her wonted place, and I to Rome” (Book V, chapter 8). She went home and kept praying.

Looking back, Augustine saw a hard mercy in it. God, “hearing the main point of her desire”, refused what she asked that night to give her what she had always asked (Book V, chapter 8).

Following him to Milan

In Rome Augustine fell dangerously ill. His mother, far away, “knew not, yet in absence prayed for me” (Book V, chapter 9). She asked, he says, “not gold or silver” but “the salvation of her son’s soul”.

He moved on to Milan to teach. Monica came after him, “following me over sea and land, in all perils confiding in Thee” (Book VI, chapter 1).

When she arrived, he told her he was no longer a Manichee, though not yet a Catholic. She was not overjoyed, as if surprised. She simply answered that “she believed in Christ,

that before she departed this life, she should see me a Catholic believer” (Book VI, chapter 1).

Ambrose

In Milan, Monica went to church and “hung upon the lips of Ambrose” (Book VI, chapter 1). This is where Ambrose truly enters her story.

Ambrose, for his part, admired her. Augustine writes that when Ambrose saw him he “often burst forth into her praises; congratulating me that I had such a mother; not knowing what a son she had in me” (Book VI, chapter 2).

The garden, and the baptism

In the late summer of 386, in a garden in Milan, Augustine finally gave way. The famous scene of the voice and the open book is in Book VIII, chapter 12. And then:

“Thence we go in to my mother; we tell her; she rejoiceth: we relate in order how it took place; she leaps for joy, and triumpheth, and blesseth Thee.” (Book VIII, chapter 12)

Augustine was baptised in Milan at the Easter Vigil of 387, together with his friend Alypius and his son Adeodatus (Book IX, chapter 6). The Confessions do not give the date or name the minister. Historians place it on the night of 24 to 25 April 387, with Ambrose baptising.

Ostia

That year the family set out for home and waited for a ship at Ostia, the port of Rome. One evening, at a window over a garden, mother and son talked about the life of the saints in heaven. Then she said:

“One thing there was for which I desired to linger for a while in this life, that I might see thee a Catholic Christian before I died.” (Book IX, chapter 10)

About five days later she fell ill with a fever. Her other son wished aloud that she might die at home, not in a strange country. She stopped him:

“Lay this body any where; let not the care for that any way disquiet you: this only I request, that you would remember me at the Lord’s altar, wherever you be.” (Book IX, chapter 11)

Friends asked whether she was afraid to be buried so far from home. “Nothing is far to God,” she replied (Book IX, chapter 11).

She died on the ninth day of her illness, “the fifty-sixth year of her age, and the three-and-thirtieth of mine” (Book IX, chapter 11). That puts her death in 387 and her birth around 331 or 332.

How long did she wait?

You will often read that Monica prayed “seventeen years” or even “thirty years” for her son. The Confessions give no such figure. Here is what the text does allow.

Augustine says he was a Manichee for nine years, “from my nineteenth year to my eight-and-twentieth” (Book IV, chapter 1). His nineteenth year was about 373. From 373 to his conversion in 386 is about thirteen years; to his baptism in

387, about fourteen. Her worry may have begun earlier, so the true number is unknown. “About thirteen or fourteen years” is my estimate from his dates, not a figure in the record.

What she actually did

It helps to set down plainly what the record shows Monica doing while she waited, and to keep it apart from what came later.

What the text says she did

- **She prayed, every day.** Augustine says she went to church “twice a day, morning and evening” (Book V, chapter 9).
- **She wept, openly, before God.** Her son does not treat her tears as weakness. He treats them as prayer.
- **She asked for help.** She went to a bishop and asked him to reason with her son.
- **She accepted the bishop’s “no”,** though not quietly.
- **She kept her son at her table.** After the dream she let him back into her house.
- **She followed him** to the harbour, and later across the sea to Milan.

- **She did not win him by argument.** There is no scene in the Confessions where Monica debates her son back into the faith. The bishop told her not to try, and the text shows her praying instead.
- **She asked to be remembered at the altar.** Her last request was not for a grand tomb but for prayer at Mass.

What tradition added later

- **Her relics.** Her body was moved to Rome in 1430, under Pope Martin V, to the church of Sant'Agostino.
- **Her patronage.** She became the patron of Christian mothers. An Association of Christian Mothers was founded under her name in 1850.
- **Her feast day.** It was kept on 4 May for centuries, and moved in 1969 to 27 August, the day before her son's.
- **"Saint Monica said..."** Online you will find dozens of sayings credited to her, such as "Patience is the companion of wisdom". I searched the full Confessions for them. None is there. Monica wrote nothing; her only recorded words are those her son kept. One popular line is genuine: "Nothing is far from God." In Pusey's words, "Nothing is far to God" (Book IX, chapter 11).

A prayer to Saint Monica

This prayer is not mine, and I have not modernised it. It comes from *The Augustinian Manual*, a Catholic prayer book printed in Dublin in 1885 with the imprimatur of Cardinal McCabe, Archbishop of Dublin. It is the prayer for the first day of a three-day devotion in her honour. Its language is that of its time. I have corrected only three obvious printing errors in the scanned copy.

Triduum in Honour of St. Monica: First Day

O glorious St. Monica, transfixed with sorrow when you saw your beloved child Augustine living in the dark and gloomy abyss of error and vice, and straying far from the right path which leads to true felicity in the possession of God and his holy grace; hear our prayer, O afflicted mother. By that cruel sorrow which, with so much patience, thou didst bear; and by those earnest sighs and bitter tears with which thou didst appeal to God to change the heart of thy prodigal son; by thy wondrous confidence in God, which was never shaken, O grant to us, thy children, that we may, like thee, place all our trust in God, and in our trials and troubles be ever resigned to his holy will; whilst we ask thee, O glorious mother St. Monica, to supply for us our special needs, we here earnestly ask you to pray for the erring children of Jesus, so many Augustines, straying from God and hurrying to ruin. Let that earnest prayer of thine go forth once more for us and for sinners, that we may live in the light of divine grace, and be united again hereafter to bless the bounty of a loving God for eternity. Amen.

The Manual directs that it be followed by the Our Father and the Hail Mary, three times.

A way to pray it (my suggestion, not part of the prayer)

At the words “so many Augustines”, you may wish to pause and say the name of your own son, daughter or grandchild. Then go on. On a hard day, when the old wording feels heavy, you can simply hold the bishop’s phrase, “the son of these tears”, with a name beside it.

A reflection

I want to be honest with you about what this story does and does not promise.

It does not promise that your child or grandchild will come home. Monica’s story ended in a baptism. Many stories have not, or have not yet, and the Confessions make no rule out of one family. Neither does the Church. Prayer is not a coin put into a machine.

Nor does Monica's story say that a parent whose child has left simply did not pray enough. Look again at what Augustine wrote. His mother prayed every day for years, and he still went his own way. Her prayers did not stop him from lying to her at the harbour. The leaving was his. So was the coming back.

What the record does show is a woman who kept praying without knowing the end. When she sat in Cyprian's chapel that night, she did not know about Milan, or the garden, or the font. She went "to her wonted place" and went on.

Nor was she alone. A bishop sent her home with a sentence. Ambrose praised her. Her son asked every reader of his book to remember her at the altar. People prayed alongside her, and they still do.

That may be enough for today. Not a guarantee. A companion.

PRAYING THEM HOME

Those I Am Praying Home

Date I began: _____

*“we here earnestly ask you to pray for the erring children of
Jesus, so many Augustines”*

The Augustinian Manual, Dublin, 1885

Print, cut along the dotted line, fold in the middle.

Prayer to St. Monica

O glorious St. Monica, ... by thy wondrous confidence in God, which was never shaken, O grant to us, thy children, that we may, like thee, place all our trust in God ... we here earnestly ask you to pray for the erring children of Jesus, so many Augustines, straying from God ... Let that earnest prayer of thine go forth once more for us and for sinners, that we may live in the light of divine grace ... Amen.

Excerpt, Triduum in Honour of St. Monica, *The Augustinian Manual*, Dublin, 1885. The full prayer is in this chapter.

*“It is not possible that
the son of these tears
should perish.”*

St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, ch. 12
(trans. E. B. Pusey, 1838)

PRAYING THEM HOME · MARTIN
CALDWELL

Sources

Primary historical text

- Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Oxford, 1838). Public domain. Text used: Project Gutenberg eBook #3296.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3296> (plain text: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3296/pg3296.txt>)
 - Book III, ch. 11: Monica's tears, the dream of the wooden rule, her reply, return to her table.
 - Book III, ch. 4: his father dead two years before his nineteenth year.
 - Book III, ch. 12: the unnamed bishop, "Let him alone a while", "the son of these tears".
 - Book IV, ch. 1: "nine years (from my nineteenth year to my eight-and-twentieth)".
 - Book V, ch. 8: the harbour, the oratory of Cyprian, "she betook herself again to intercede".
 - Book V, ch. 9: illness in Rome, church "twice a day", "the tears of such an one".

- Book VI, ch. 1: follows him to Milan, “a Catholic believer”, “hung upon the lips of Ambrose”.
- Book VI, ch. 2: Ambrose’s praise of her.
- Book VIII, ch. 12: “she leaps for joy”.
- Book IX, ch. 6: baptism with Alypius and Adeodatus.
- Book IX, ch. 10: the window at Ostia; “that I might see thee a Catholic Christian”.
- Book IX, ch. 11: “Lay this body any where ... remember me at the Lord’s altar”; “Nothing is far to God”; her death in her fifty-sixth year.
- Book IX, ch. 13: “remember Monnica Thy handmaid”.
- Chapter numbering checked against the standard division as printed in the New Advent edition (trans. J. G. Pilkington, 1876, PD): Book III
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110103.htm> ; Book IX
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110109.htm>

Scripture

- Luke 7:11-15, the widow of Nain’s son. Augustine applies it to Monica in Book VI, ch. 1 (“Young man, I say unto thee, Arise”). Not quoted in the body.

Church prayer (approved, public domain)

- *The Augustinian Manual; comprising a “Practical Prayer Book” for the faithful in general...*, by an Augustinian Father (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1885). Nihil obstat: Henricus F. Neville, V.G. Imprimatur: Edward Cardinal McCabe, Archbishop of Dublin; William Delany, Bishop of Cork; William O’Sullivan, Provincial O.S.A. “Triduum in Honour of St. Monica, First Day”, p. 405.

<https://archive.org/details/TheAugustinianManual>

Later tradition and history

- Hugh Pope, “St. Monica”, *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1911): relics to Rome 1430 under Martin V; Association of Christian Mothers 1850; feast 4 May; bishop unnamed.
<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10482a.htm> (Note: it gives her birth as 333; the Confessions’ “fifty-sixth year” in 387 points to about 331 or 332.)
- Feast moved to 27 August in 1969: New Liturgical Movement, 3 May 2024.
<https://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2024/05/the-feasts-of-saint-monica-and-new.html>

- Baptism on the night of 24 to 25 April 387, by Ambrose: Augustinian Recollects.
<https://agustinosrecoletos.com/2011/04/24/agustin-se-bautizo-una-pascua-como-esta/?lang=en>

Errors and misattributions corrected

- Bishop named as Ambrose: for example, Rosary Confraternity, “The Tears of St. Monica”.
<https://rosaryconfraternity.org/the-tears-of-st-monica/> . The Confessions (III.12) leave him unnamed, and the scene is set in Africa years before Augustine met Ambrose.
- Sayings credited to Monica that are not in the Confessions: for example, the list at <https://onlycaptions.com/st-monica-quotes/> . Checked by a word search of the full Pusey text.

Martin’s interpretation (labelled)

- “About thirteen or fourteen years” of waiting: my estimate from Augustine’s own dates (Book IV, ch. 1; Book VIII, ch. 7 and 12; Book IX, ch. 6). Not a figure in the record.
- The reading of the harbour night as “a hard mercy” follows Augustine’s own comment in Book V, ch. 8; the wording of the reflection in section 5 is mine.