

St. Monica: Paradigm of the Feminine Condition

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Readers following Dr. Kristin Popik's series on St. Thomas' philosophy of woman may also be interested in a more popular treatment of the "woman question" by the French theologian Rev. Bertrand de Margerie, S.J. Taking up St. Monica, a holy woman with a profound impact on history, de Margerie examines the qualities of the Christian convert wife, mother and woman concerned with the lives of those in the surrounding community. Studying the lives of the saints is, of course, one of the best ways to learn how to live out one's own role in life, and St. Monica provides both women and men a perspective on the Christian transformation of self.

We know that more than ever in our world there is a preoccupation today about the feminine condition, and we know also that each woman is called to be a daughter, a sister, and, either according to the flesh or according to the spirit, a spouse and a mother. Monica of Tagaste is an extraordinary realization of the feminine condition, a realization which St. Augustine has exalted in his *Confessions*, in pages that are perhaps not well-known enough. In reflecting on her life, we find a wealth of guidance on Christian femininity. We shall see her as a convert, and, through the texts of the *Confessions*, as a wife, a mother, and a daughter.

CONVERT

The Monica presented to us by St. Augustine is herself a convert in two senses. She is a convert first in the sense that she turned away from an early addiction to alcoholism. Her son describes how this came to happen, in *Confessions* IX, 8, 18 (all references are to the English translation by Vernon Bourke):

She as a sober girl was told by her parents to draw wine from the cask, and . . . she used to take a little sip with the tips of her lips. . . . She did this not from any immoderate craving [this perhaps is the indulgence of her son!] but as a result of a certain overflowing of youthful spirits. . . .

So, by the addition of a little bit each day, to the original sip, she had fallen into the habit of eagerly gulping down cups almost full of wine, and then came an incident with a maid. . . . The maid with whom she used to go to the wine cask began to quarrel with her young mistress and as a result, when they were alone with each other, she cast up this misdeed, calling her a wine bibber, by way of most bitter insult. Stung to the quick by this goad, she looked upon her own foulness, immediately condemned it, and cast it from her.

It seems to me that in a time like ours, so preoccupied with alcoholism, this incident is thought-provoking (and it is interesting also to see how Augustine is preoccupied in his narration with promoting humility in the face of brotherly correction).

I also think that St. Monica was a convert in another way: her ultimate detachment from her primitively planned burial in her own native North Africa. When she was on the point of coming back with Augustine from Milan to North Africa, she stopped at Ostia to prepare for death even though she had already planned a tomb in North Africa for herself and for her husband, who had died a few years earlier. She renounced this plan of burial in order to submit herself to the will of God and to detach herself from a final attachment. As Augustine describes it (*Confessions*, IX, 11, 27 & 28):

Rather like a person in search of something she said to us, 'Where am I,' then seeing that we were overcome with grief, she said 'Bury your mother here'. I remained silent and restrained my tears, but my brother said something expressing the wish that she would die a happier death in her homeland rather than in a foreign country. When she heard this, her countenance was disturbed and she chided him with her eyes because he valued such things. Then, looking at me, she said, 'See how he talks.' Soon after, she addressed us both 'Bury this body anywhere, let its care give you no concern, one thing only do I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be.' When she had made this decision clear, with the words that she could manage, she fell silent and was worn out by her increasing illness. But . . . remembering what I had known of the great concern which she had exhibited in regard to the burial place which she had arranged and

prepared for herself beside the body of her husband . . . I was joyful with wonder at what she had just disclosed to me.

So we see that in her own life there had been critical occasions of detachment, and this will appear still more perhaps in what we are to say about Monica as a spouse.

SPOUSE

Monica as a spouse showed an extraordinary success rooted in humility, and she viewed herself in a way which is quite out of harmony with a good part of the mentality reigning today. She considered herself as a slave towards her impatient husband. Augustine in *Confessions* IX, 9, 19 explains this point:

Brought up in this modest manner, made subject to her parents by fear rather than to Thee, given in marriage when she reached a suitable age, she served this man as her lord. She was eager to win him for Thee, speaking to him of Thee through her behavior in which Thou didst make her beautiful, reverently lovable, and wonderful to her husband. Thus she would put up with wrongs of infidelity, never permitting any dissension with her husband as a result of such a matter.

This, in itself, is already very beautiful, even amazing, to us who live among laws on divorce which tend to promote the transformation of the slightest conjugal conflicts into definitive separation. And Augustine continues:

Moreover, though he was outstanding for his kindness, he was also quick to anger, but she had learned not to oppose an angry husband, whether by action or even by word. Eventually, she would observe that his mood had changed and become tranquil, whereupon she would seize the opportune moment to explain her action to him, if by chance he had been thoughtlessly disturbed. . . .

Augustine concludes his discussion by noting how surprised other women were at Monica's attitude, and how successfully they implemented her approach when she explained it to them. It seems to me that this recalls to us that if the New Testament teaches that a woman owes obedience to her husband, the New Testament also teaches us that a Christian as such ought to make himself the slave of others in general, and that this willful and loving slavery is the door and the way to the experience of interior freedom and of exterior harmonious life. In this way Monica, without complaints, even avoiding complaints, won the battle, and her husband became a Christian and was baptized. She would never have won by complaints about his adultery, by exalting her own freedom and her own rights.

Here, a few asides are in order, for Monica not only won, but she became, as IX, 19, 21 explains, the peacemaker:

Thou hast also given to this good bondswoman of Thine . . . the great capacity of serving, whenever possible, as a peacemaker between whatever souls were in disagreement and discord. Thus, when she heard from both parties a good many very bitter remarks about each other, the sort of things which bloated and undigested discord usually vomits up when the indigestion of hatred belches forth into foul gossip with a present friend about an absent enemy, she would not reveal anything about one to the other, unless it would be useful in reconciling them.

We can well understand whence comes the famous custom of St. Augustine referred to by Van der Meer, his custom of never allowing detraction at his episcopal table.

Augustine was also probably influenced by Monica at least subconsciously in the elaboration of his doctrine about the "illumination," for he considers that God teaches all human minds — God is the sun of justice illuminating any and every human mind. He had been taught by God through the example of his mother, and in his mother he could see the truth of this divine illumination.

In her detachment, Monica developed all the qualities which her son later praised. O'Meara, writing about *The Young Augustine*, neatly summarizes for us those qualities, and leads us to further considerations:

. . . perseverance, discretion, respect for authority, love of peace. These same qualities are to be seen on a greater scale in the course of her life as mother of Augustine, and as she was loved and admired by her husband, so was she admired and loved by her son. The characteristics which seem most dominant are her perseverance, her power to endure, and her discretion, her ability to bide her time. Indeed both are connected,

and her life is a story of a controlled ambition, a constant striving upward towards temporal and especially spiritual goals which no present disappointment and no lapse of time could lessen or suppress.

In other words, she combined, as the saints do, in her own character most apparently opposite qualities, ambition and discretion and modesty. It is not of course that she was without defect, as we shall have the occasion of pointing out again later, and it even seems (according to the appreciation of some, like Guardini) that when Augustine left North Africa for Italy, he was perhaps flying away from his mother. But one of the great fruits of her “controlled ambition” was his conversion, and he would later beautifully say that he was flying away from the water of the sea to the water of baptism, and we might add, back to the tears of his mother (*Confessions* V, 8, 16). Indeed accepting this separation which had plunged her in so great a sadness, she probably contributed also in a new way to his conversion and became in that way, having generated Augustine according to the flesh, also his mother according to the spirit. Monica’s maternity therefore merits careful consideration.

MOTHER

When Augustine became a Manichean Monica wept more than if he had died physically. He was in her eyes spiritually dead, and she broke “diplomatic relations” with him. She refused him bed and board, as Augustine says, “because she . . . abhorred the blasphemies of my error.” In the *Confessions* (III, 11, 19), he also recounts the dream which caused Monica to receive him at home once again:

She saw herself standing on a wooden roof, and approaching her was a young man, resplendent, joyful and smiling at her, while she was grieving and overcome with her grief, and when he asked her the reason for her grief and daily tears, not to learn but as is customary to instruct, she replied that she was bewailing my perdition. He commanded that she be untroubled and he advised her to give attention and see that wherever she was there also was I, and when she looked, she saw me standing near her on that same roof.

Augustine notes further how his mother informed him about her vision adding: “I attempted to reduce its meaning to this, that she should not give up hope of becoming what I was. Immediately and without hesitation she answered, ‘No, what was said to me was not “where he is, you are,” but “where you are, he is.”’”

There is at least one thought-provoking point here. Monica played a role in the conversion of Augustine not only by her prayers, but also by narrating this dream to her son. In other words, the simple narration of the dream (and the interpretation that she was giving to the dream) was already a powerful invitation to his conversion in the future. In the prediction of the future conversion was included an invitation to the future conversion. Cardinal Newman, preaching about Christ in the memory, explained this point, noting that when Jesus was announcing in advance his Passion and Resurrection, the apostles not only did not understand, but were inclined to reject all this teaching. However, after the Passion and Resurrection, the Holy Spirit came down upon them and, according to the gospel of John, recalled to them what Jesus had said, and then they understood. Newman comments that when we exercise initiatives of Christian apostolate and feel immediately rejected — treated as if we were fools — we should recall that later, in a time of trial for the person who was rejecting a suggestion, the Holy Spirit puts these people on their knees in the presence of the cross of Christ, and recalls what we have told them. The point is that they could not recall if we had not told them. And so we must persevere, for later on Christian memory under the influence of the Holy Spirit will put in value what we have said, though we had the impression on the spot that it was so completely useless to say it.

This is precisely how Monica acted, and what emerges from the descriptions of St. Augustine is how Providence was consoling her in her persevering prayer. Indeed we can understand that Providence wanted to give extraordinary dreams to an extraordinary woman for an extraordinary purpose. She was the decisive instrument in a conversion decisive for the history of the universal Church. In this way, through her prayers and her tears, constant prayers, constant tears, she became the spiritual mother of Augustine, included in his *Confessions* for all time: “I shall not pass over whatever my soul brings forth concerning that servant of Thine who brought me forth into flesh so that I was born into the life of time, and in the heart, so that I was born into the light of eternity” (IX, 8, 17).

But the spiritual motherhood of Monica went even further in the mind of Augustine. He describes in *Confessions* IX, 9, 22 how his mother Monica became the spiritual mother of the Christian philosophical community of friends and disciples of Augustine, which shortly after his conversion had formed around him at Cassiciacum. He explains also in different writings how Monica, without any kind of philosophical training, took a very active, prominent part in the discussions of this philosophical group. He says (IX, 9, 22):

Finally, O Lord, she took such care of all of us whom in Thy bounty Thou dost permit me to call Thy servants, for before she went to her rest with Thee we were already living in a group after receiving the grace of Thy baptism, that it was almost as if she were the mother to us all and she served us in such a way that it was as if she were the daughter of us all.

This very beautiful sentence is explained in a deeper way in the book of Fr. Paul Henry, S.J. about the vision at Ostia. What I would like to point out here is the beautiful association of the spiritual motherhood with the spiritual sonship or daughtership, as one prefers, of Monica in relation to the Christian intellectual community gathered around her son. We see that, for Monica, it was impossible to be the spiritual mother without being at the same time the spiritual daughter towards all those whom she was spiritually regenerating through her prayers. And we can say also that when we read the writings of St. Augustine we feel that we are all amongst the group of this Christian community towards which she acted both as mother and serving daughter. Through her son we have all of us become spiritually indebted to Monica and we are happy, proud though unworthy of regarding ourselves her children, to be her spiritual children.

DAUGHTER

I pass now to this third aspect: she was not only the daughter of this community, but she was, in general, the daughter of the Church, and that is especially manifest in her relation with Ambrose, as described in *Confessions* VI, 1, 1 and VI, 2, 2. She was very keen in creating relations between Ambrose, the bishop of Milan and the incarnation of the authority of the Church, and her spiritually wandering son. Thus she manifested her submission to the Church. But an even greater manifestation is seen in the example that she gave of not stubbornly maintaining a certain custom she wanted to transfer from Christian Africa to Milan, as described in *Confessions* VI, 2, 2:

She brought gruel, bread and wine to the shrines of the saints as she had been accustomed to do in Africa. She was stopped by the doorkeeper at the cemetery. When she learned that the bishop had forbidden this, she accepted it so reverently and obediently, that I myself was amazed at how easily she became an incriminator of her own custom rather than an adjudicator of this prohibition.

We may conclude by pointing out that from Monica and mother earth, Augustine passed to mother Church and mother Mary. Monica was, in the eyes of Augustine, a saint, but a saint who manifested in his own education imperfections of even serious nature: she delayed his baptism and he did not approve of that; she showed insufficient vigil over his chastity during his adolescence, and he deplored this; and she also showed (*Confessions* V, 8, 15) at certain moments a kind of carnal attachment to her son. However, all this did not prevent these amazing declarations that we read in *Confessions* IX, 9, 22 which are close to the kind of canonization we might hear today from the lips of a pope.

Eventually, she won her own husband over to Thee. Right at the end of his earthly life. And she saw no cause for complaint in him when he was now one of the faithful, such as she had borne when he was not yet in the faith. She was also a servant of Thy servants, amongst them whoever knew her found much reason in her for praising, honouring and loving Thee for one felt Thy presence in her heart through the fruitful evidence of her saintly manner of life. She had been the wife of but one man, had made some return to her parents, had managed her own household in piety and possessed a reputation for good works. She had brought up her children, being in labor with them each time that she saw them wandering away from Thee. Finally, O Lord, she took such care of all of us, who in Thy bounty Thou dost permit to call Thy servants, for before she went to her rest in Thee, we were already living in a group after receiving the grace of Thy baptism, that it was almost as if she were a mother to us all.

Indeed I do not think that there are many sons and daughters inclined and able to make such a eulogy of their own mother. We notice, however, that Augustine, who invoked the intercession of Monica for himself during her lifetime, nowhere gives any sign in the *Confessions* of having invoked after her death her intercession for him. And he even asks help for her. He was conscious once more of her defects and limitations, and it is plain that he, who had a very clear, precise doctrine of Purgatory, did not think it useless to have masses celebrated, in full harmony with her own wish, for his own mother. Monica was in his eyes nonetheless a mystic, gifted not only with visions but also with the discernment of these gifts as distinct from natural phenomena (see, e.g. *Confessions* VI, 13, 23). She had the discernment of spirits.

CONCLUSION

Monica was, in the eyes of Augustine, an image of Christian life, and in that way an image of the Church. She was an image of what Augustine beautifully called mother charity, in harmony with Galatians 4:19 and Romans 5:5, and Monica, precisely through her charity — her supernatural charity — was in the mind of Augustine an image of the Church lovingly regenerating spiritually human persons in baptism. Without Monica's prayers, tears and influence, we would not have St. Augustine just as without Mary we would not have Jesus. We have contracted an immense debt of gratitude, with the universal Church, to the heart of Jesus Christ on account of the gifts given to Monica and, through her, to Augustine. One suspects that Augustine saw Mary's spiritual motherhood, which he beautifully expounded in his treatise on virginity (with the famous sentence indicating how Mary through her charity cooperated in the rebirth of all men), in the context of the experience that he had of the spiritual motherhood of Monica towards himself.

We might say that Monica was, after Mary, more than any other a mother of Christ in Augustine, and this is perhaps the greatest key to Monica's exemplification of Christian femininity. Our Lord himself said that "He who does the will of my Father is my mother" (Matt. 12:50), and we can certainly say that Christ was somehow regenerated in the person of Augustine by Monica, who thus shared in her way in the divine motherhood of Mary. In this she represents for us the universal vocation of all Christians to share in the divine motherhood. Augustine himself beautifully commented on all this, although he never lost his perspective. Mary's spiritual motherhood, of course, transcends Monica's in many ways, and, for instance, Augustine rejects prayers for the martyrs and for Mary (prayers for Mary which are still today offered in the Byzantine liturgy of the Catholic Church). But he does not reject prayers for Monica.

Nonetheless, with Augustine we can gain much from Monica. She is not at all a bad model for the women of our own day — nor for the men, who may have much in common with her son. And with Augustine we can come through Monica to Mary, the Lady of Continenence present to him at the conversion so desired by his earthly mother. And finally, with Augustine, we can learn at last that to approach the Mother is to receive the Son.

FURTHER READING:

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Van der Meer, F., **Augustine the Bishop** (trans. Brian Battershaw, G.R. Lamb) Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, N.Y.: 1965 (or Sheed & Ward, 1961).