

“THERE’S HOPE FOR ALL OF US”

by Fr. Clarence Kelly

The village of Naim was about six miles to the south of Nazareth and about thirty miles from the city of Capharnaum. Capharnaum was the place where Christ spent a good deal of time in the first part of His public ministry. Peter and Andrew lived there (Matthew 8:14). Christ Himself even lived there for a time. As the scripture says, it was there that He took up His abode (Matthew 4:13).

And this city so blessed by His presence would become the object of His holy wrath. Against it He issued a terrible judgment:

“And thou Capharnaum, shalt thou be exalted up to heaven? Thou shalt go down even unto hell. For if in Sodom had been wrought the miracles that have been wrought in thee, perhaps it had remained unto this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.” (Matthew 11: 23-24)

It was at Capharnaum that Christ cured the centurion’s servant. Shortly thereafter He raised the son of the widow of Naim from the dead.

One day Christ left Capharnaum with His disciples. They approached the gates of the city of Naim. As they did, they came upon a funeral procession. It was the funeral of a young man. He was the only son of a widow.

The sight of this poor woman touched the Heart of Jesus. She had lost her only son. She was a widow. And she was alone. Looking into the future, He saw another widow woman. She was standing on Calvary at the foot of the cross upon which He hung. She was a widow. She had one Son. And He was about to die.

He said to the widow of Naim what He could not say to that other widow, His mother. “Weep not.” For the Mother of Sorrows was meant to empty the chalice of suffering in perfect conformity to her Son. Her soul was pierced by a sword of sorrow. It would not be removed until Easter Sunday morning when He would go to her and slowly by the unction of His presence draw the sword from her Immaculate Heart. Now it was different. There would be no delay in restoring joy to the heart of the widow of Naim.

He went up to the funeral bier on which rested the dead body of the young man. He touched the bier. The men carrying it immediately stopped. He spoke to the dead man. How shocked they must have been to hear Him give a command to a dead man. Little did they know that the One who spoke had power over life and death. Indeed, from His cross He would one day put death ... to death!

“And He said: Young man, I say to thee, Arise: and he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And He delivered him to his mother.”

More than three hundred years later, there was another mother weeping for a dead son. But this time it was not physical death that caused the tears. It was spiritual death. The mother was Monica. The son was Augustine. He was the son of many tears. Once an old bishop told this mother: “Go, and God will bless your son. It cannot be that the child of such tears should perish.”

This Monica was to become St. Monica. The “child of such tears” would become St. Augustine. The holy tears of the mother would turn the son into a saint; indeed into one of the

greatest saints who ever lived.

Augustine was born in a small town called Tagaste. It was located in Numidia in Africa. Numidia occupied what is now the eastern portion of Algeria. He was born on the 13th day of November in the year 354. His father was named Patricius, or Patrick. He was a pagan. And he was a husband of many tears. He was, as one writer put it, "the slave of vices both nameless and countless." He was a man "of hasty and violent temper."

There are many good women today who carry Monica's cross. Their sons break their hearts. Their husbands cause them pain. There is nothing like a mother. Who can know her sufferings? Who can comprehend the depth of a mother's love? Who can know what a good wife suffers at the hands of inconsiderate children and cold and indifferent husbands!

Wives and Mothers! How they are taken for granted! It is a very sad thing that in too many Catholic homes they have been taken down from the pedestal upon which they belong. How many children stop to tell them of their appreciation? And how many husbands say the words they so long to hear: "I love you"? Indeed, all too often men think that they are not duty-bound to treat their wives with great love and consideration. But God has made it plain through the mouth of the Apostle Paul how he wants men to regard their wives.

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered himself up for it: that he might sanctify it, cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life: that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy, and without blemish. So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, as also Christ doth the Church." (Ephesians 5: 25-29)

A husband is to treat his wife as he treats himself. If he loves his wife he loves

himself. If he despises his wife he hates himself. He is to treat his wife with the same loving care that Christ directs to His Church. It is Our Lord's love for His Mystical Spouse, the Church, which has caused Him to remove the Church, as it were, from the indiscreet gaze of men. And so in the midst of the wickedness of the modern hierarchy that would wed the Church in an adulterous union with the world, Christ has eclipsed the Church for a time.

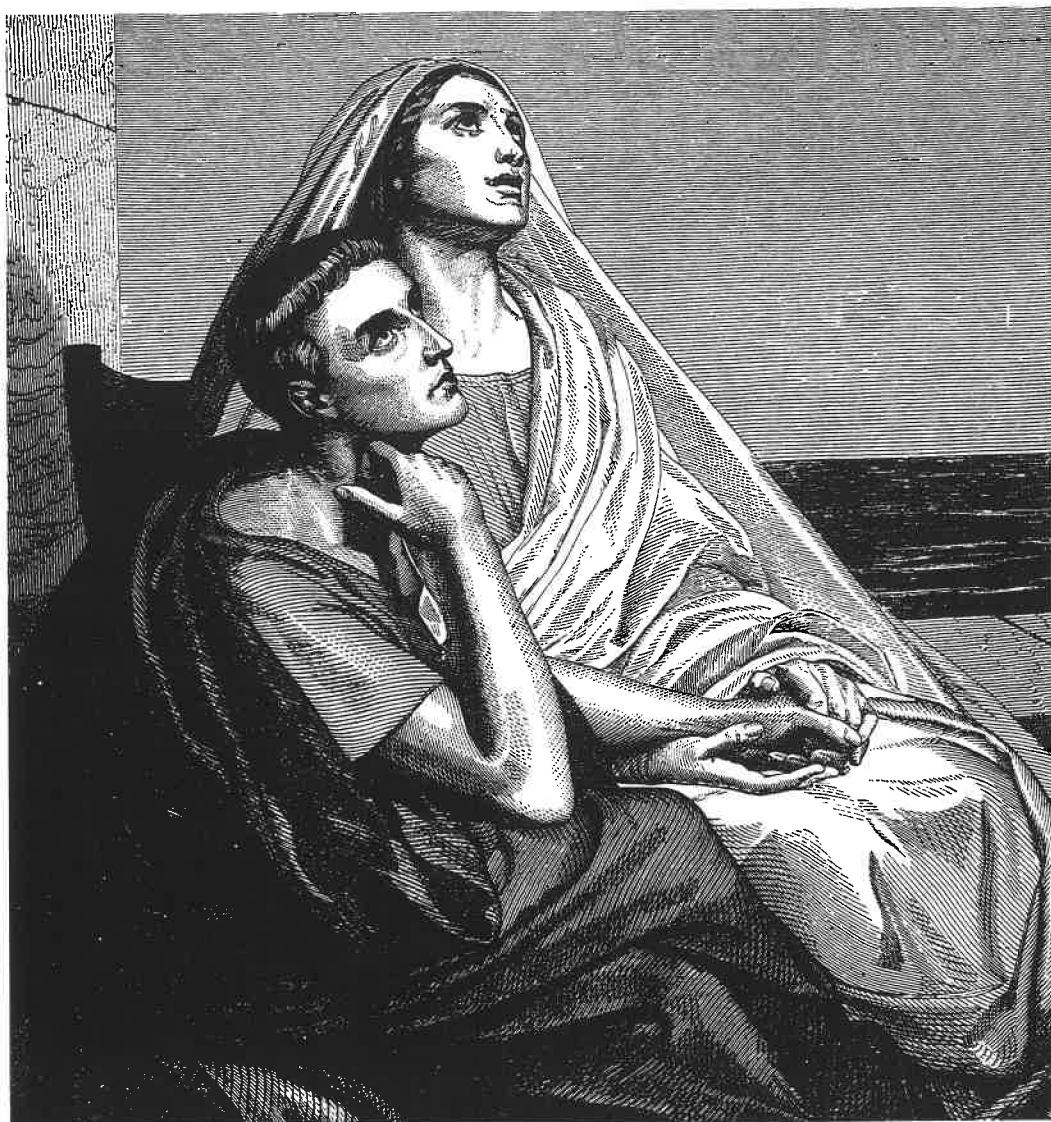
Now St. Monica did not have a husband after the mind of Christ. He caused her much pain and many tears. But being the good wife she was, she prayed unceasingly for his conversion. And in the end the fire of divine love that burned in her heart dissipated the coldness of his worldly heart. She won him to Christ. She inspired him by her humility and goodness. Her good example conquered him. She became for him an object of esteem. Because of her, he died a holy death. Such is the power of persevering prayer and good example.

But we are perhaps getting a little off the point. Augustine was a born genius. His father was quick to see this. And so he did not spare any effort to ensure his education. Augustine became a great scholar. But he fell in with bad company. This bad company was the first step leading to a life of sin. Down the slippery path he went. Along the highway of perdition he ran. As one poet put it:

*"He that once sins, like him that slides on ice,
Goes swiftly down the slippery ways of vice;
Though conscience checks him, yet, those rubs
gone o'er,
He slides as smoothly and looks back no
more."* (Dryden)

Augustine was cursed with wicked companions. He followed their bad example. He was seduced by the devices of the devil. He became thoughtless, weak in will and impure.

It is a story played out down through the centuries. Step by wicked step, Augustine went till he slid into a cesspool of impurity caused by bad company. He read the immod-



St. Monica and St. Augustine

est plays of the day. He did not pray. He did not avoid the occasions of sin. He fell and sank low.

His father did not care. But the heart of Monica was broken. She prayed and she admonished. Later when he was converted, Augustine would write of his beloved mother. He spoke of her words to him. He recalled:

“the admonitions of a woman, which I was ashamed to obey; but, O God! they were Thy admonitions, and I knew it not. By her Thou didst speak to me, and in her I despised Thee. Yet I knew it not, and with such blindness did I rush on [in the ways of sin] that among my equals I was ashamed of being less guilty than others when I heard them bragging of their atrocious actions. I had a mind to do the same.”

At the age of seventeen his father sent him to Carthage which was one of the great cities of ancient times. At one time it was twenty-three miles in circumference and had 700,000 inhabitants. There Augustine plunged into his studies with the same vigor that he pursued sin.

In his studies he even began to read the Holy Scriptures. But it was to no avail. At the age of nineteen, he fell into the heresy of the Manichees. And for nine years -- from the age of 19 to 28 -- he was a partisan of this wicked sect.

There is hardly a way to express the grief of his mother at his fall into heresy. It was even greater than the grief caused by his fall into vice.

Heresy is a worse sin than impurity. And as difficult as it is to overcome the slavery of impurity, it is more difficult to overcome the darkness of heresy.

Impurity is a sin of the flesh. Heresy is a sin of the mind. It is a sin of the mind which often parades itself under the guise of virtue. It feeds pride and makes a man blind.

It is not so easy to disguise sins of impurity under the mantle of virtue. Although we must say that in the age we live in men do this. The most wicked sins are paraded out in the open representing an "alternate life-style." The partisans of perversion are so powerful and influential, in our day, that even candidates for the office of President of the United States must either openly cater to them or carefully avoid offending them.

In the face of Augustine's sin and heresy, St. Monica prayed persistently. She wept unceasingly. She admonished continually. And yet at the same time she regarded her son, whom she loved so much, as worse than a heathen. And so, in as much as she pursued him and his conversion, she would not compromise.

She would not even eat at the same table with him because of his heresy and immorality. In fact, she would not let him enter into her house. She sought to break the hard shell around his sinful heart with a loving severity. But his heart was drugged with heresy and immorality. He was filled with pride and self-conceit.

Augustine opened his own school at Carthage. Later he went to Rome. There he fell deathly sick. He would later write about this and about how close he was to being damned for all eternity. He said: "Where would I have gone, if I had then died, but into those flames and torments which I deserved."

He recovered from his illness and opened another school at Rome. Students flocked to him from everywhere. He was regarded as among the greatest geniuses of his time. He later moved to Milan where the Emperor had his court.

St. Ambrose was then the Archbishop of Milan. Augustine began to attend the sermons of this great man. And little by little his pride and prejudice fell before the grace of God and the wisdom of Ambrose.

His eyes were opened to the wickedness of his ways and the beauty of a virtuous life. He was profoundly impressed by the sublime magnificence of the Catholic Religion.

By the grace of God through the prayers of Monica and the inspiration of Ambrose, Augustine was converted. He was converted in mind. But yet he felt himself a slave of sin. Augustine was no Mary Magdalen. He was not instantly changed into the purest of the pure by the fire of the Heart of Jesus -- as was the Magdalen. Augustine felt oppressed and enslaved. He would later write:

"I sighed and longed to be delivered [from impurity] but was kept fast bound, not with chains of irons, but with my own iron will. The enemy held my will and made a chain of it that fettered me fast."

Two men were striving within his soul. As the words of an old hymn have it:

*"My God! what war I wage--
Two men within me strive."*

Or to put it still another way in the words of another poet:

*"Within my earthly temple there's a crowd:
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud;
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins
And one who unrepentant sits and grins;
There's one who loves his neighbor as himself,
and one who cares for naught but fame and pelf.
From much corroding care I should be free,
If once I could determine which one is me."*

It was the sin of impurity that paralyzed him. In his mind -- having now received the faith -- he loved chastity. But the effect of a life of sin could not so easily be dispelled. His will

was yet enslaved.

But by the prayers of his mother and the grace of God, he persevered in his struggle to be pure and he triumphed.

It was in the year 386 that his conversion took place to the unspeakable joy of his mother, St. Monica. The following year (387) he was baptized by St. Ambrose on Easter Eve.

Soon after, his mother died. He returned to Carthage in 388 and for three years he lived a life of deep prayer and penance. He established a religious community, having given all his worldly possessions to the church.

In 390 he was ordained a priest at the insistence of the Bishop of Hippo. And five years later he was consecrated a bishop. St. Augustine was to become the "bishop of bishops."

He was a priest for over forty years. He died on August 28, 430. He is called "the prince of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church." He attained great holiness, profound wisdom, sublime humility, and flawless purity.

As an old nun once said to me as she rejoiced in her God: "Father," she said with the enthusiasm of a child, "God is great in his saints!" God is indeed great in His saints. He is great in St. Augustine. He is great in St. Monica.

He can even be great in us. This is evident from the example of St. Augustine, who like us, found it so hard to be good. There is indeed hope, with the help of our heavenly Mother, hope for all of us and for all your children.

There is nothing that the grace of God cannot do. There is no soul it cannot save. There is no problem it cannot overcome. There is no sadness it cannot penetrate and dissipate. There is no temptation it cannot conquer. There is no sinner it cannot convert. There is no enslavement it cannot free us from. The grace of God is there for us to receive.

Our Lord told St. Margaret Mary that His Heart was a treasure chest which contained all graces. The key that opened it was "confidence." We do not have to be good first to be the object of His mercy. All we need is

misery. If we are miserable, we are suitable objects of the mercy of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Misery is the object of His mercy. And mercy Our Lord prefers to justice. St. Alphonsus said:

"It is indeed very surprising that man, a worm of the earth, should dare to offend his Creator and turn his back upon him, by despising his graces after God has so favored and loved him as to lay down his life to save him. But it is still more surprising that God, after having been thus despised by man, should seek after him, invite him to repentance and offer him his pardon, as though God stood in need of us and not we of him." (*The Way of Salvation and Perfection*, p. 88)

We were made for God. We were made to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him. Nor will our hearts find rest, as St. Augustine said, until they rest in Him. And so we pray this beautiful prayer of St. Alphonsus with confidence:

"What good, O Lord! hast Thou ever derived from me? and what canst Thou expect from me, that Thou lovest me so much, and comest so near to me? Hast Thou then forgotten all the injuries and treasons which I have committed against Thee? But since Thou hast so much loved me, I, a miserable worm, must also love Thee, my Creator and my Redeemer. Yes, I do love Thee, my God; I love Thee with my whole heart, I love Thee more than myself, and because I love Thee I will do everything to please Thee. Thou knowest that nothing is so grievous to me as the remembrance of my having so often despised Thy love. I hope for the future to be able to compensate by my love for the frequent displeasure which I have given Thee. Help me for the sake of that precious blood which Thou hast shed for me. Help me also, O holy Mary! for the love of thy Son who died for me." (*The Way of Salvation and Perfection*, p. 89) †