



Ever Ancient, Ever New

*Reflections on the
Augustinian Windows of
the St. Thomas of Villanova
Church*

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***Reflections on the Augustinian
Windows of the St. Thomas of
Villanova Church***

written by

The Students of the Villanova University
Freshman Interdisciplinary Humanities Seminar

In Celebration of the 125th
Anniversary of the Dedication of the
Church of St. Thomas of Villanova

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INTRODUCTION

Visitors to the St. Thomas of Villanova Church often comment on the beauty of the building, especially when the sunlight streams through the multi-colored stained glass windows. But few people actually notice the images depicted in those windows: various incidents from the life of St. Augustine, as described in his famous spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*.

A parish goal for the 125th anniversary year of the church, which was dedicated on July 3rd, 1887, was to develop materials that would help people understand and appreciate the symbolism and meaning of the windows. Imagine our pleasure, then, when the Villanova University Honors program approached us about a project that they were assigning to one of their freshman classes. The students would interpret the windows, both in terms of their reading of Augustine, and their understanding of the implications for our lives as Catholics today. This booklet was born of a happy fusion of both our needs. The first-year students were excited by the idea that there was a real audience for their work, and we received a well-written and nicely designed booklet that will be a resource for years to come.

The students began the project by studying and writing about some of the major themes in *Confessions*. Many of these students attend the Campus Ministry Masses on a regular basis, but they were surprised and deeply moved when they realized that the texts that they were studying were so vividly illustrated in the scenes in the windows. I also met with the students and had a wonderful discussion with them about those scenes and their broader thematic meanings. All of their work came together in the chapters that follow. In each, they begin by discussing the events in Augustine's life as illustrated in the windows, then they talk about the Augustinian themes raised by each image, and finally they reflect on the message for our own lives. As an added bonus, this booklet also includes a

church scavenger hunt that will give children an opportunity to see new things in the windows, and to learn a little bit about Augustine and other saints.

Please take some time to read what the students have written and to study the beautiful reproductions of the windows. I trust you will learn more about St. Augustine's own spiritual journey and come away with a deeper understanding of this sacred space that is so important to the Parish, University, and Augustinian community. This booklet also may strengthen the bond between the students and our parish—we share the same house of worship, but do not always have an opportunity to share our thoughts and perspectives.

Rev. Joseph L. Narog, O.S.A.
Pastor, St. Thomas of Villanova Parish
2012

All quotations from St. Augustine are taken from *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997). In a few cases, the text has been slightly edited for readability.

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Stealing Pears

“The malice was loathsome, and I loved it”
(*Confessions* 2.4.9).



In the Window

We begin our tour of the windows with a detail that refers to St. Augustine's early life. In *Confessions*, Augustine tells how he and several friends stole pears from an orchard. In fact, they didn't even want the pears, and threw them away. Years later, when he writes *Confessions*, Augustine struggles to understand why he stole; eventually he comes to the realization that he found enjoyment from the act of sinning. This leads him to a meditation on the nature of sin. This detail (from the first window on the right as you enter the church) thus has a dual meaning. The fruit tree references Augustine's act of stealing the pears, but the serpent coiled around the trunk of the tree draws a parallel with the story of Adam and Eve. The pears on the tree reflect both the incident in Augustine's own life and the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The tree, the serpent, and the fruit are all crucial, connecting *Confessions* to Genesis and emphasizing the theme of sin.

In Augustines *Confessions*

As Augustine tries to understand this seemingly trivial incident, he evolves his theory of sin by asking what attracted him to this theft. He recalls that while stealing, he had found enjoyment in the action. In other words, he enjoyed the sin itself. From here, Augustine realizes that he would not have stolen the pears had he been alone. Augustine concludes that the underlying reason for his actions was that he had valued his friendship over doing what he knew to be right. In this realization lies the insight shown in the window: that each sin contains something which is inherently good. Augustine explains, "Sin gains entrance through these and

similar good things when we turn to them with immoderate desire, since they are the lowest kind of good” (2.5.10). It is not that the thing itself—in this case friendship—is bad; the sin is that we desire it over something that is more worthy. And yet, if sin is always a desire for some goodness, it stands to reason that there must be some goodness in all things. Augustine knows that all things are not equally good. This understanding leads Augustine to a value system where the highest level of goodness is God and everything else below God contains varying degrees of goodness. For Augustine, then, we sin when we desire lower things over higher things.

Augustine’s childhood decision to pursue the lower over the higher reflects a pattern present throughout his life. Prior to his conversion, he desired lower pleasures, such as materialism, sexuality, and prestige, when he should have been searching for God. He notes that he was “extremely miserable in adolescence, miserable from its very onset” (8.7.17). This misery is a direct result of Augustine’s failure to value the higher over the lower. In later life, Augustine saw that his suffering was part of God’s plan, since “to bring my steps back to the straight path you secretly made use of my perversity” (5.8.14). Through his suffering, he slowly begins to understand his own actions and motivations more clearly.

For Us Today

Even Saints make mistakes. The pear tree story explains sin but also emphasizes forgiveness and understanding. Augustine helps us see that sin is particularly tempting because when we are drawn to sin there is some good that is attracting us, even though we are choosing that lower goodness over something that would be better. Augustine explains how sin comes to be with the hope that by understanding the source of sin, we will be able to avoid the mistakes he made. He explains to us how he fell into temptation time and time again, but eventually overcame it with the

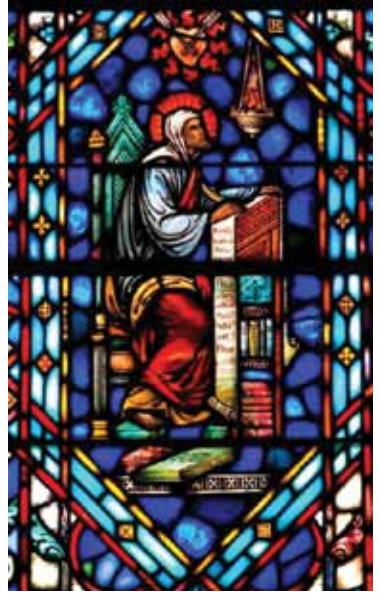
help of God. While stealing pairs may not seem so egregious to modern viewers, it haunts Augustine because it was symptomatic of his skewed priorities. Through his explanation of the hierarchy of goodness and the temptation of sin, Augustine hopes to caution us against falling into the same temptation. The lessons Augustine offers are still relevant today. By placing value in God over all other things, we will be more likely to make good decisions and attain happiness.

The Burning Heart

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you (1.1.1).

In the Window

In this window (the first on your left as you enter the church), we see St. Augustine writing at a desk. We know that he is writing his *Confessions* because of the date at the bottom of the scroll, 397 AD, which is when he began writing this book. If you look closely, you can read the titles of the books stacked under his desk. They represent the influences most significant to Augustine, namely, Plato, St. Ambrose (we'll see him again in some other windows), and Cicero's *Hortensius*.



Augustine, with a halo indicating his sainthood, is looking to the heavens, reminding us that throughout *Confessions*, he is conversing with God. Above Augustine is a burning heart pierced by arrows, a symbol suggestive of Augustine's "burning" desire for communion with God. Today the burning heart is a symbol for both the Augustinian order and for Villanova University. The Latin quote on the scroll is about the relationship between the role of God the Father in heaven and on earth, and though it does not appear in *Confessions*, or any other of Augustine's works, it is frequently attributed to him.

In Augustine's *Confessions*

The "burning heart" image indicates an encounter that Augustine had as a young student. Long before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine read Cicero's *Hortensius*. Previously, he desired only earthly things, but this book ignited his heart to burn for higher things.

Augustine tells us that the book changed his feelings towards God, when he says, “with unbelievable intensity my heart burned with longing for the immortality that wisdom seemed to promise” (3.4.7). This serendipitous moment reminds us that inspiration can be found in unexpected places.

Still burning with desire to right his relationship with God, Augustine seeks to learn more about God by looking at the Old Testament. Augustine, however, still struggling with pride and vice at this point, is unable to fully accept Christianity. When he looks at the Bible, he cannot grasp how to examine the holy text with anything but a literary sense. Augustine considers himself to be a master of literary style; the Bible seems to him to be written in an awkward and clumsy style. He rejects the words as beneath him. Many more years will lapse before his final conversion.

Hortensius and the “burning heart” mark the roots of Augustine’s long journey to conversion. Reading *Hortensius* sets off a passion within Augustine that inspires him to start asking questions and seeking answers about his faith. Though Augustine does not yet complete the process of conversion, his later understanding of God leads him to the realization that “with the arrows of your charity you had pierced our hearts” (9.2.3).

For Us Today

Augustine’s slow conversion to Catholicism, which begins in the next window, reminds us that faith is a process. All of us will face big questions throughout our lifetime, and like Augustine, we should actively strive to seek out answers. Our hearts should burn with the need to acquire wisdom and truth in God, as this is what makes us active members of our faith. Many people are born into religious communities without understanding. Augustine shows us that, though it may be easy enough to go through the motions, actively seeking wisdom is imperative. Though our relationships with God may not be perfectly realized, our “restless hearts” should continually drive us to carry on living the process of our faith.

Meeting St. Ambrose

Unknowingly I was led by you to him, so that through him I might be led, knowingly, to you (6.13.23).

In the Window

Throughout our tour, we naturally focus our attention to the center window panels, as they tend to provide most insight into St. Augustine's life. However, in this case, the side panel, depicting St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan (then the capital of the Roman Empire), offers a significant element in Augustine's story. Augustine had heard about Ambrose' brilliant preaching and had originally sought out Ambrose strictly to learn about rhetoric and style. Soon, however, Ambrose became Augustine's mentor and a key aid to his conversion to Catholicism. Upon first interacting with Ambrose, Augustine writes, "I had not yet come to accept the Catholic Church's teachings as true, but at least I now knew that it did not teach the doctrines to which I had gravely objected" (6.4.5). Ambrose eventually inspires a change of heart in Augustine by guiding him to overcome his pride, especially with regard to comprehending scripture. "I heard some difficult passage of the Old Testament explained by Ambrose figuratively; such passages had been death to me because I had been taking them literally" (5.14.24). This is essential to overcoming his obstacles to God. Augustine finally recognizes that he cannot come to understand the scripture with a literal perspective. To come to true religious understanding, a certain measure of pride must be given up and a change of heart must be embraced.





In addition to the side panel, the middle panel depicts a parallel scene in which Augustine meets a small boy who is attempting to pour the entire sea into a small hole using a seashell. Augustine, who is writing a book on the Holy Trinity, tells the boy that what he is trying to do is impossible. The boy explains that pouring the sea into a hole is “No more difficult than trying to put three Gods into one, as you are doing in your book on the Trinity.” This humbling event is reminiscent of Ambrose’s role as a mentor in the life of Augustine. Just as the boy

humbles Augustine with his comment, Ambrose also humbles and guides Augustine in his spiritual development.

For Us Today

The themes illustrated in the window, as well as the story of Ambrose in *Confessions*, still offer many lessons to a contemporary audience. Contemporary mentors—in the form of peers, teachers, family, friends, and countless others—are as important today as they were in the time of Augustine. But just as Augustine had to humble himself in order to deepen his understanding, many today have to humble themselves on the path to development. This act of humbling often involves throwing off some set of formerly held rigid beliefs in order to accept new beliefs that can help us grow in understanding. To truly learn, a person must first realize what he does not know. This is what Ambrose teaches Augustine—and it changes his entire view on religion and life itself, preparing him for the conversion that we will see in the next window.

Tolle Lege

Pick it up and read (8.12.29).

In the Window

This window (in the front of the church on your right) portrays perhaps the most important event in the life of Augustine: the story of his conversion from love of earthly things to love of God. Unfortunately, the window is hard to see because it is on an internal wall. Here Augustine is seen kneeling under a fig tree in a garden suggestive of Eden. Adam and Eve began the cycle of human sin in the garden, but now Augustine turns away from sin in a similar setting. Augustine's liberation is further illustrated by an angel representing the gift of God's grace descending on his right shoulder, even as a demonic creature illustrating Augustine's earthly vice flees the scene on his left. Augustine is looking up at the Latin words "*Tolle Lege*", or "pick it up and read," the words that spurred Augustine's conversion when he heard children singing as he prayed. The book at his feet is marked Romans 13, the passage that Augustine first turned to after responding to the call to "pick it up and read." There Augustine reads "Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:13-14). It is at this precise moment that he is first able to gather the courage to fully devote himself to God.



In Augustine's *Confessions*

In *Confessions*, Augustine describes his experience as abrupt and transformative, saying, “no sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away” (8.12.29). He recognizes that his conversion was made possible by God, praying, “You converted me for yourself” (8.12.30). He receives God’s gift of grace, so long sought after, and it immediately begins to change his outlook on life. Soon he will embrace baptism (see our next window) and resign from teaching rhetoric where, in his own words, he was “selling talkative skills apt to sway others because greed swayed me” (4.2.2). While he had earlier famously prayed for “chastity and continence, but not yet” (8.7.17), he now accepts celibacy and the unmarried life to express his true and full commitment to God.

This window, therefore, is a symbol of the invisible saving power of God’s grace. Although it is unseen, and its giving cannot be earned, we need grace in order to rest in God, as “our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (1.1.1).

For Us Today

Augustine’s story still rings true today. There are many moments when we may not be the person we would like to be, and we may not know how to put things right, even if we would like to. We all have our own mountains to climb, and at times, it can seem as though we are alone in our desperation. Augustine shows us, however, how to be open to assistance in whatever form it may come, whether the kind words of a friend or even the innocent voice of a child singing. Augustine’s conversion reminds us that inspiration and grace are present in places that many of us may dismiss as “random,” but can have a truly meaningful impact on our lives if we are able to let ourselves be changed. By embracing little signs, we open ourselves to God’s grace, and only then can we realize what it means to rest in God.

Baptism

And so we were baptized, and all our dread about our earlier lives dropped away from us (9.6.14).

In the Window

This window depicts St. Augustine's baptism in Milan on Easter Day, 387. In the window, we see St. Ambrose once again, the mentor who guided him with "fatherly kindness" (5.13.23); the recurring presence of St. Ambrose throughout the church is a testament to his strong influence on Augustine. Also present in the window are his mother, St. Monica (her own window is discussed later) and Adeodatus, his beloved son by an unnamed concubine from his earlier years. The figures present in this baptismal scene all play instrumental roles in Augustine's life, and their importance is emphasized by their presence at one of the most significant moments on his path to Catholicism.



The window also cleverly represents both ancient and modern Church rituals. Augustine stands in a pool depicting a full-body immersion, characteristic of baptisms in his time period. Additionally, Adeodatus holds a candle as Ambrose pours water over Augustine's head, a mode of baptism more familiar to modern Christians. The water used in baptism, emphasized with an array of predominantly blue hues throughout the window, is one symbol which connects baptism in Augustine's time period to the rituals we are accustomed to today.

Milan is an important place for Augustine; here he meets Ambrose, is converted in the garden, and is eventually baptized. Archeologists have uncovered the remnants of the cathedral of Milan as it was in Augustine's day. Their most exciting find is the large octagonal baptismal pool where Augustine himself must have been baptized.



The floor just inside our own church's entrance has pink tiles laid in an octagonal pattern identical in size and shape to the baptismal pool from Augustine's

time. In Augustine's day, people walked into the pool with all of their sins upon them and walked out with their sins washed away. Today, visitors to the church re-enact this process every time they enter the Church, symbolically renewing their baptismal promises. And like Augustine, through the saving waters of baptism, they are renewed and ready to grow further in faith.

Likewise, leaving the church and stepping out of the octagonal pool reminds us that we are called to live as Christians. The theme of baptism is so significant that it extends beyond the window and into the entire church.

In Augustine's *Confessions*

In *Confessions*, baptism represents Augustine's final step in his journey to true conversion. The *tolle lege* moment inspires Augustine to truly change his life, but the experience was fully realized only through his baptism. Before this point, this conversion, while powerful, was incomplete. It is only when he translates that inspira-



tion into a formal joining of the church through baptism that the “dread about” his past life “drops away from” him. Now he writes that he could not “get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled” him (9.6.14). It is only after baptism that his restless heart could finally rest in God.

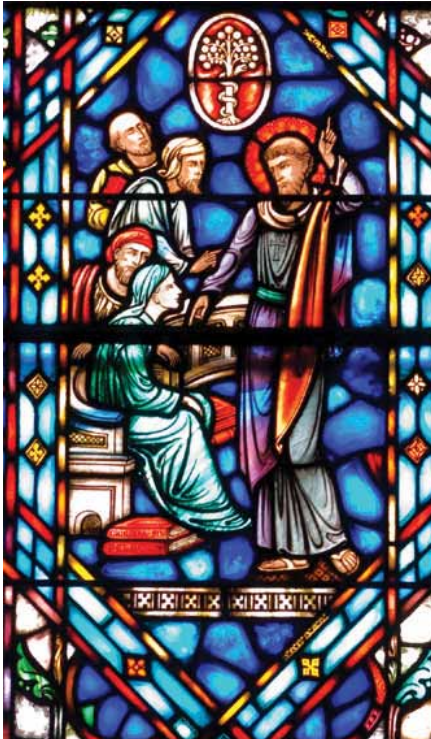
For Us Today

Augustine’s baptism affirms the importance of action over intention and the significance of translating inspiration into commitment.

We have all attended a retreat, or had some other experience that has inspired us to change our lives. Often, however, that inspiration fades as we return to the comfortable routine of our daily lives. We have to make a concrete change in our lives, or else the inspiration we experienced will go to waste. For Augustine, that concrete change was baptism. For us, it may be something different entirely. The idea, however, is the same: we need to move from the inspiration to a real change in our lives.

Sin

I ached for a like chance myself, for it was no iron chain imposed by anyone else that fettered me, but the iron of my own will (8.5.10).



In the Window

In this window, St. Augustine appears to be teaching a group of people. He is pointing towards the sky with one hand and downwards with the other, suggesting a choice between right and wrong, good and evil (see our discussion of the serpent in the tree). This emphasizes Augustine's teaching on the benefits of loving the higher over the lower. In the bottom left corner, two stacked books can be seen, one on top labeled "Original Sin" and the other, beneath it, labeled "Pelagianism." These

books represent opposing ideas about the role of God's grace in regard to sin; their arrangement, with Original Sin on top of Pelagianism, illustrates Augustine's view that Original Sin is the correct principle. The doctrine of Pelagianism suggests that humans can be saved from sin by their own efforts, and although God's grace is helpful, it is not necessary. The concept of Original Sin, which Augustine supports over Pelagianism, at its core asserts that humans cannot be freed from sin without God's help and gift of grace.

In Augustine's *Confessions*

Augustine believes that God's grace is absolutely necessary because of the habit-forming quality of sin. In his *Confessions*, Augustine often discusses sin by illustrating how humans' poor choices can lead to unbreakable habits. He believes that humans form these habits of their own free will but that we then become constrained by them unless we have God's help. This is most concisely stated when Augustine, lamenting his inability to repair his relationship with God, says, "the law of sin is that brute force of habit whereby the mind is dragged along and held fast against its will, and deservedly so because it slipped into the habit willingly" (8.5.12).

Augustine uses chains to emphasize that our sins have the power to restrain us from a good relationship with God. He says that the "chain" binding him was made of "the iron of his own will" (8.5.10) which was driven by "carnal habit" (7.17.23). These chains drag him down. Later, Augustine expresses his desire to break free of his "chain" by calling on God to help him to change his ways; "I strove to tear free from the chain completely, for slender indeed was the bond that still held me. But hold me it did" (8.11.25).

In *Confessions*, two significant sins damage Augustine's relationship with God: his preoccupation with what others think of him and his obsession with sex. The first habit forms when Augustine, as a young student who thrives on status (1.13.21), reflects that "I believed that living a good life consisted of winning the favor of those who commended me" (1.19.30). This obsession with status follows Augustine to college, where he was "elated and vain and swollen with pride" (3.3.6) and where his studies were motivated by "the damnably proud desire to gratify his human vanity" (3.4.7). With his relationships with women, Augustine, as a young adult, realizes that he is unable to make genuine connections because he is simply "in love with loving" (3.1.1). Instead, these relationships only leave him susceptible to the "iron rods and burning scourges of jealousy

and suspicion, of fear, anger and quarrels” (3.1.1). Although sexuality is a gift from God, for Augustine, the habit-forming quality of poor choices led to obsession. Beginning in his adolescence, this obsession escalates until Augustine feels that he is powerless to break from his sinful cycle without God’s grace.

For Us Today

Confessions remains extremely relevant because the struggles Augustine faced in his time are, indeed, sins that people still struggle with today. His sins become relatable to ours. Just as Augustine hundreds of years ago, we often measure our success by the wealth, status, and “love” we can attain. Augustine’s sins prove that human nature has not changed. However, these sins also prove that through personal discovery of one’s own vices and the grace of God, individual change is quite achievable.

In addition to this, *Confessions* brings hope to Catholics today. The mistakes Augustine made prove that it is not necessary to be “perfect.” The true beauty of Augustine’s story is that he still managed to gain God’s grace, despite his sinfulness. Catholics today are reminded that there is always a way to return from sinfulness. Augustine may not have led a perfect life, but, today, his story serves as the perfect example for how we, with God’s help, can break free of our “iron chains” (8.5.10).

St. Monica

Where she stood, there also stood I (3.11.19).



In the Window

In this window, we see St. Augustine with his mother, St. Monica, a key role model for Augustine on his path to conversion. Monica is holding her son's hand, illustrating both their deep spiritual connection and the love they share. Augustine is standing, suggesting that after his conversion, he is less dependent on Monica's encouragement as motivation for his spirituality; he is now able to rely on his own resolve and God's grace. Monica's seated position illustrates that, after all of her guidance and prayer for her son's conversion, she is finally able to "sit down" and rest. Her deepest desire, to see her son change his

way of life, has been fulfilled. When Augustine was young, Monica acted as the guiding force behind Augustine's faith, and prayed that he would turn away from sin and focus on God, "warning him to live chastely" (2.3.8). For most of their time together, Augustine was what an unnamed bishop described as "a son of tears" (3.12.21). This window shows that through Monica's compassion for her son, Augustine becomes an honorable son. Indeed, Monica and Augustine are the only example where the church recognizes both a mother and her son as saints.

In Augustine's *Confessions*

By giving him a foundation for his faith, Monica plays a critical role in Augustine's spiritual journey. Because of Monica's strong faith, Augustine is introduced to Catholicism even before birth; he "was regularly signed with the cross and given Jesus' salt even from the womb of his mother, who firmly trusted in God" (1.11.17). Monica becomes for Augustine a living model for how to do God's will, leading by the example of her devotion to God, chastity, temperance, service, and faith.

Monica's role in helping Augustine on his path to conversion is so significant because Augustine's own toils parallel the struggles that Monica herself encountered in her youth. Just as Augustine is controlled by obsession with status and sexual desires, as a young woman Monica struggles with desire for material success, high social status, and especially wine (5.8.15). Though Monica overcomes her sin more quickly than her son, this parallel gives deeper meaning to the vision Monica has at her lowest point, when she has nearly given up on Augustine. A figure in a dream assures her that there is reason to hope for Augustine, that "where you are, he will be" (3.11.20). Though Augustine seems so thoroughly entrenched in his sinful ways, this message shows Monica how it is possible for him to put right his relationship with God simply by following her example and remaining open to God's grace.

For Us Today

Monica's relationship with Augustine reminds us to be open to guidance from those willing to help us. Augustine learned from Monica despite the fact that she struggled with sin as a young woman. Rather than seeing Monica's sinful past as damaging her credibility, we should understand that her experience crucially provides the specific guidance that Augustine needs. Monica shows us that after acknowledging each other's flaws, we can learn valuable lessons from each other's mistakes.

Monica also teaches us about our roles as both parents and children. She inspires parents with the incredible patience and perseverance she demonstrated before Augustine truly heeded her advice. As children, Monica reminds us how crucial and worthwhile the guidance of a parent can be. Augustine's dynamic relationship with Monica can help us to be both better parents and better children.

The Vision at Ostia

Should there be life eternal, would not “Enter into the joy of your Lord” be this, and this alone? And when, when will this be? When we rise again (9.10.25).



In the Window

Now we need to look at a smaller detail in the window that depicts St. Augustine and his mother. If you look closely, you will notice there is a square above their heads. This detail references another meaningful event in Augustine's life. Shortly before Monica's death, Augustine and his mother gaze out of a window that

overlooks a garden in the town of Ostia (the port city of ancient Rome). As they converse, they share a mystical vision, often referred to as the Vision at Ostia. Through their vision, Augustine and Monica experience a transient moment where they truly know and understand God. However, a level of separation remains between Augustine and Monica and the reality of their vision. They can peer out of the window to glimpse “that which is,” but the wall keeps them from walking through to the other side to witness the fullness of God completely.

In Augustine's *Confessions*

Initially in *Confessions*, Augustine tends to describe God using paradoxical statements. God is “supremely merciful and supremely just, most hidden yet intimately present, infinitely beautiful and infinitely strong, steadfast yet elusive” (1.4.4). These seemingly contradictory statements demonstrate that Augustine believes that human beings cannot fully grasp God's nature. As he struggles to recognize God's presence and to build a relationship with

God, he naturally has difficulty finding the language to describe God clearly. However, after he and Monica “touched the edge of that which is by the utmost leap of their hearts,” Augustine gains a fuller understanding of God (9.10.24). From then on, instead of describing God with paradoxical statements such as “steadfast yet elusive,” Augustine describes his vision as a full understanding of Matthew 25:21, which reads in part “enter into the joy of your Lord.”

Although Augustine describes his vision as an instance when he could, “in a flash of thought touch that eternal Wisdom who abides above all things,” he applies the moment to the whole of his life moving forward (9.10.25). Following the vision, he finds that God is ever present, and that if he were able to quiet the noises of his life, he would always hear the voice of God.

For Us Today

Historically, saints, like Augustine, have had more intense experiences of God than what is given to the rest of us. But their experience can touch us indirectly. Although we will not necessarily have a mystical vision ourselves, Augustine’s vision helps us to know God as present in all aspects of life, waiting for a chance to speak to us. Through God’s constant presence, we are offered an opportunity to see him in everything and everyone around us. We are encouraged to look for God in our everyday lives. Augustine’s vision provides both inspiration and explanation for the modern day Catholic.

Death

Death is swallowed up into victory (4.3.11).



In the Window

This window depicts the death of Augustine; it is also a representation of death itself, which all people must face. We see a cluster of people surrounding St. Augustine, who has a red halo and is holding a book. Augustine is seated on a chair with candles on either side. A dark bar cuts through the middle of the window, and though it is structurally necessary, it is also used artistically to differentiate the lower from the higher region of the window. The lower, or earthly, group surrounding the body is grieving

and praying as they cope with loss, while in the higher portion, Augustine is being crowned by an angel of God. This higher region is representative of the glorious celebration of death as one is united with God. Together the regions signify two different experiences of death, each described in *Confessions*.

In Augustine's *Confessions*

In *Confessions*, Augustine's two experiences with death highlight two different paths people can take when coping with the

death of a loved one. First, Augustine is faced with the death of a friend. At this point, Augustine did not have a relationship with God, and viewed physical death as a permanent end. The death of his friend brought him “unbelievable misery” (4.4.9). Afterwards, he longed for the physical presence of his friend, while completely overlooking the possibility of the continuation of the soul’s existence. Augustine saw death as “a hideous enemy... ready to devour all human beings” (4.6.11). With this view of death, Augustine was never capable of finding true closure.

Later in his life, Augustine meets death once again when his mother, Monica, dies just a few days after their joint vision of God (described in the previous section). By now, Augustine has converted to Catholicism and he understands death as “a new life in Christ” (9.12.35), a view inspired by his new relationship with God and the development of his faith. Because of his faith, Augustine is confident that Monica “never died in misery nor died altogether” (9.12.29). Though Augustine still grieves over his mother, he also recognizes that death does not have to lead to complete desolation. By turning to God in prayer, and viewing death from a spiritual rather than physical perspective, Augustine copes with the death of his mother.

This window shows both the grief and blessing involved in death. The bar between the lower and higher highlights the contrasting emotions we experience as humans. The mourners naturally grieve the physical loss of a loved one, but also rejoice at the joining of God and soul. Augustine finds that although we cannot fully understand death, with faith death is not something to fear. Rather, death is the entrance into “life that cannot die” (7.6.8).

For Us Today

Although facing the death of a loved one is a difficult experience, Augustine's contrasting experiences of misery and acceptance point to some ways of coping with death by turning to God. Most people's response to death is very similar to Augustine's first reaction. Through *Confessions*, Augustine hopes to provide an example of how to cope with death. It is natural to succumb to misery, yet Augustine suggests that this will not resolve the hurt. By turning to God, it is possible to move on. As his audience, we are called to apply his lessons to the trials we face in life, and to remember that with God, death is not the end, but the beginning of new life. As scripture says, "Life is Christ, and death is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

THE OTHER WINDOWS

Our discussion so far has focused on the windows that tell the story of Augustine's own life as told in *Confessions*, but there are a number of other beautiful windows in the church that draw on other themes. In this section we briefly describe them.

St. Thomas of Villanova

In the back of the church, above the choir loft, you will see the beautiful window of St. Thomas of Villanova, the patron saint of the parish and of Villanova University. Thomas is dressed in a green robe and red coat with a bishop's mitre on his head and a staff in his left hand. Although he wears the standard clothing of medieval bishops, Thomas'



clothing seems more worn and threadbare. This symbolizes Thomas' reputation as the "Father of the Poor," because he often made his own clothing, donating the extra money to the poor. As a boy, he was even seen walking around the town un-dressed because he gave all his clothing to the poor. Thomas' call to his community to imitate his devotion and charity towards the poor, sick, and disabled is symbolized through his coin bag for alms.

This window makes Thomas appear to stand watch over the activities of the church as a guarding presence. Once again, he calls his community to be charitable. As Thomas once said, "Charity is not just giving, rather removing the need of those who receive charity and liberating them from it when possible," meaning that by helping out these individuals, the receivers and the givers would spread charity and God's gifts to others.

The Rule of Augustine



This window (in the front of the church on the left side) depicts Augustine dressed as a bishop giving his rule for religious life to a man and woman who kneel before him. The “Rule of St. Augustine” is a set of principles that Augustine wrote to guide men and women who wanted to live together in a religious community. The rule addresses charity, devotion, prayer, fasting, poverty and other religious ideals. Many groups of religious men and

women followed Augustine’s rule over the centuries, but in the 13th century Pope Innocent IV integrated many of these groups, creating the Augustinian order that exists today.

Some people believe that the window also evokes the image of a wedding, with Augustine blessing the newly married couple. Indeed, many people have been married in the church, both from the Parish and from the University.

The Four Evangelist Windows



Four distinct windows behind that altar depict four animals: a human, ox, lion, and eagle. These different animals are linked to the four evangelists or Gospel writers: Mathew, Luke, Mark, and John.

The tradition of the animals comes from the Book of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation, which depicts four “living creatures” that lead God’s chariot. Mathew is depicted as a human

of humanity and reason. This parallels Mathew's Gospel because it begins with the genealogy of Jesus, illustrating his human nature and highlighting Jesus as the Incarnation. Luke is depicted as an ox which symbolizes sacrifice, service, and strength. This parallels Luke's Gospel because it begins with the temple duties of Zacharias and highlights Jesus' Passion. Mark is depicted as a lion, which symbolizes the reign of God and courage. This parallels Mark's Gospel because it begins with John the Baptist, who is sometimes described as preaching "like a lion roaring." John is depicted as an eagle which is a symbol of the sky, heaven, and spirits. This parallels John's Gospel because it begins with Jesus being Logos (the Word) and highlights Jesus' Ascension. Each animal is depicted with wings symbolizing that they are a holy, Biblical source of God's truth. When the weather is right, you can see the light from a fifth window in the center of the church, now covered up by the organ. Recently, some brave people got up on the roof behind the window to see what it depicted. It is in the same style as the Evangelist Windows, but it depicts an image of a lamb, representing Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who will give up his life for us. This image is directly behind the altar where the transfiguration occurs further enforcing Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation.

St. Nicholas of Tolentine

You will easily notice the stained glass of St. Nicholas of Tolentine, an important Augustinian saint, because it looks so different from the other windows (it is all of the way in the front on the left side). It is the last example of the earlier set of windows that were replaced when the church was renovated. In the window, Nicholas is dressed in simple clothing, symbolizing his oath of poverty as an Augustinian. In his left hand,



he holds a lily flower which can symbolize his pure spirit. Nicholas is gazing at a crucifix illustrating his devotion to God and Jesus. At the bottom of the window, you can see a symbol that looks a bit like a dollar sign “\$”. It is actually the three letters “IHS” superimposed on each other. These letters are an ancient symbol for the name of Jesus, and further show Nicholas’ strong faith. Centered directly in his chest is a burning star. This is linked to the story of Nicholas’ birth because on the night he was born a bright star lit the sky, similar to the Star of Bethlehem in Jesus’ birth. Nicholas is also linked to Jesus’ supernatural powers: he is documented as performing 300 miracles and three resurrections. On the right side of the panel, are two arms illuminated in light. After Nicholas died and was buried in the Church of St. Nicholas of Tolentine in Italy, two grave robbers chopped off his arms. Suddenly, however, his arms started to bleed.

Eventually, the arms were returned and today they are stored in the church’s “Chapel of Arms.” On the left side of the panel, there is another crucifix, but above it there seems to be a piece of the Eucharist. There are a number of stories linking St. Nicholas to bread; there is even a tradition of baking “St. Nicholas Bread.”

The church and the adjoining Monastery are physically connected to one of the University’s largest and oldest buildings, called “Tolentine Hall,” another honor to this important Augustinian saint.

Note: the information for this section was taken from a variety of sources. One very useful reference is: www.villanova.edu/homepage/artofvillanova/stv-church.htm

THE ST. THOMAS OF VILLANOVA CHURCH SCAVENGER HUNT

Hundreds of years ago many people could not read or write. So the people who built churches used the colorful windows in the church to tell important stories. The beautiful windows for the St. Thomas Church follow this custom and tell stories that are important to the church. This is an Augustinian parish, so many of the stories are about St. Augustine. See if you can answer these questions by studying the windows:

1. Today most people are baptized as babies, but in St. Augustine's day people were usually baptized when they were adults. In fact, Augustine wasn't baptized until he was 33 years old. In one of the windows, you will see Augustine's baptism. There are four people in the scene. There is a Bishop who is baptizing him, Augustine himself, Augustine's mother (Monica), and a fourth person, Augustine's son. You can tell which one is the son because he doesn't have a halo around his head. What is the son holding in his hand?

- a. candle
- b. book
- c. pitcher of water
- d. towel

2. When he was young, St. Augustine didn't want to join the church because he had many doubts about religion. One day he was in a garden sitting under a tree and he heard children singing the Latin words *tolle lege* ("pick it up and read it.") There was a Bible right there so he picked it up and read a verse that seemed to answer his questions. Find the window where Augustine is under a tree hearing the words *tolle lege* and then see if you can figure out which Bible chapter he read.

- a. Psalm 23
- b. Genesis 3
- c. Romans 13
- d. John 3

3. One day Augustine was walking along thinking about the problem of how God could be both three (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) and also one. He saw a little boy playing and asked the boy what he was doing. Augustine gave the boy some advice but then, amazingly, the boy gave Augustine some advice too. The boy said, "Figuring out how God can be both three and one might be too big a mystery for you!" Just then the boy disappeared. Augustine realized that the boy had been sent by God. Where was Augustine walking when he saw the boy?

- a. in a forest
- b. on a beach
- c. in a church
- d. in a grave yard

4. Augustine's most famous book is called *Confessions*. In this book, he tells all about his life and the questions he had about Christianity as a young man. He also tells how he eventually came to accept Christianity. In one of the windows, you can find Augustine writing this book. Look very carefully and see if you can tell what year Augustine started to write *Confessions*.

- a. 127
- b. 1945
- c. 1423
- d. 397

5. In the old days, some people worshipped trees. A great Christian saint chopped one of these trees down. The tree-worshippers thought that the tree-god would punish the saint, but nothing at all happened. Instead, the saint had his followers build a Christian church with the wood from the tree. There is a picture of the saint in one of the side windows holding something related to this story. What is his name?

- a. St. Justin
- b. St. Nicholas
- c. St. Christopher
- d. St. Boniface

6. One of the windows shows Augustine talking to some people. At the top of the window is a small tree. There is an animal climbing up the tree. What animal is it?

- a. squirrel
- b. monkey
- c. snake
- d. bird

Do you know what Bible story this picture refers to?

7. The church is 125 years old. At some point, new windows were made for the Church. However, one of the old windows was never replaced and is still in the church. You can tell because it looks completely different from the rest. At the bottom of that window is a funny looking symbol in a circle: three letters written on top of each other. What are the three letters?

- a. IHS (an ancient symbol for Jesus Christ)
- b. CVS (the store that paid for the window)
- b. BVM (blessed Virgin Mary)
- c. OSA (Order of St. Augustine)

8. There was a Pope famous for doing a lot of work with the music that is sung in churches. The pope is holding something that has something to do with music. What is the Pope's name?

- a. Gregory
- b. John Paul
- c. Dumbledore
- d. Justin

9. St. Thomas of Villanova was famous for how much he cared about poor people. To show all the money he gave to poor people, one of the windows has a picture of St. Thomas with a money bag in his hand. What color are his shoes? Hint: Because the church is named after St. Thomas of Villanova, his window is in a very special place.

- a. yellow
- b. blue
- c. red
- d. he gave his shoes to a poor person so he is barefoot.

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