

SAINT MONICA, WIDOW—332-387

Feast: May 4

Our knowledge of Monica comes almost entirely from the writings of her much-loved son, the great Doctor of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo. His relationship with his mother was a close one, especially during Monica's last years.



In Book IX of St. Augustine's <Confessions> he gives us many details of her life, and expresses his gratitude for her devotion in moving terms. Monica was born about the year 332 in Tagaste, North Africa, of a Christian family of some substance. We are given one episode of her childhood which suggests a possible origin for her firmness of will. She was sometimes sent down to the cellar to draw wine for the family, and fell into the habit of taking secret sips. She developed such a passion for wine that before long she was drinking great draughts of it whenever opportunity offered. One day a family slave who had been spying on the little girl denounced her as a wine-bibber, and Monica, covered with shame, gave up the habit. Soon afterwards she was baptized, and thenceforth seems to have led a life of irreproachable virtue.

As soon as Monica had reached marriageable age, her parents found a husband for her, the pagan Patricius. He was a man of violent temper and their home could scarcely have been a happy one. Monica endured his outbursts with the utmost patience, although he was critical of Christians and their practices. The daily example of her gentleness and kindness finally had its rewards, and a year before his death, which occurred when Augustine was seventeen, Patricius accepted his wife's faith. Monica and Patricius had three children, Navigius, who seems to have been an exemplary son, Augustine, and Perpetua, a daughter, who became a religious. Augustine, the more brilliant of the sons, was sent to Carthage, so that he might develop his talents and become a man of culture.

He took to learning naturally but he also spent time in youthful carousing. This caused his mother great anguish, and when he returned to Tagaste, she disapproved so strongly both of his loose living and of his espousal of the popular heresy of Manichaeism that she refused at first to allow him to live at home. She relented only after having seen a vision. One day as she was weeping over his behavior, a figure appeared and asked her the cause of her grief. She answered, and a voice issued from the mysterious figure, telling her to dry her tears; then she heard the words, "Your son is with you." Monica related this story to Augustine, and he replied that they might easily be together if she gave up her faith, for that was the main obstacle keeping them apart. Quickly she retorted, "He did not say I was with you: he said that you were with me." Augustine was impressed by the quick answer and never forgot it. Although his conversion was not to take place for nine long years, Monica did not lose faith. She continually fasted, prayed, and wept on his behalf. She implored the local bishop for help in winning him over, and he counseled her to be patient, saying, "God's time will come." Monica persisted in importuning him, and the bishop uttered the words which have often been quoted: "Go now, I beg you; it is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish."

Augustine was twenty-nine and a successful teacher when he decided to go to Rome. Monica opposed the move, fearing that his conversion would be indefinitely postponed. Her son went on with his plan, and set off with his young mistress and little son Adeodatus for the seaport. His mother followed him there, and when he saw that she intended to accompany him, he outwitted her by a deception as to the time of sailing. He embarked while she was spending the night praying in a church. Although this grieved her deeply, Monica was still not discouraged about her wayward son, for she continued on to Rome. The ship on which she took passage was tossed about by a storm, and she cheered those on board by her serene confidence in God's mercy. On reaching Rome, Monica learned that her son had gone to Milan. There he had come under the influence of the great Bishop Ambrose. When his mother finally

found him in the northern city, he had given up Manichaeism, although he was not yet a Christian. Monica's friendship with Ambrose is worth touching upon. She apparently made a friend of this eminent churchman and he entertained the highest opinion of her. Here in Milan, as at home in North Africa, Monica was foremost among the women in all charitable works, and also in her devotions. The bishop, however, persuaded her to give up some of the customs practiced by the Christians of her homeland, for they were derived from ancient pagan rites; carrying food and wine to the tombs of the martyrs was one of the customs which Monica now relinquished.

The joyous day of Augustine's conversion, which will be fully described in the life of that saint, came at last. For some time his mother had been trying to end her son's illicit relationship of so many years' standing. She hoped to find a suitable bride for him, but after his mistress went back to Africa Augustine informed her that he would now adopt a celibate life and devote himself to God's service. The <Confessions> give us glimpses of the period of preparation preceding his baptism. The time was passed in the house of a friend, where a close-knit group, consisting of his mother, brother, Adeodatus, and a few companions occupied themselves with discussions of religion and philosophy. At Easter, when Bishop Ambrose baptized Augustine, his mother's cup was full to overflowing.

Augustine and the members of his family now set out for their return to Tagaste. At the port of Ostia, Monica fell ill. She knew that her work had been accomplished and that life would soon be over. Her exaltation of spirit was such that her sons were unaware of the approach of death. As Monica's strength failed, she said to Augustine: "I do not know what there is left for me to do or why I am still here, all my hopes in this world being now fulfilled. All I wished for was that I might see you a Catholic and a child of Heaven. God granted me even more than this in making you despise earthly felicity and

consecrate yourself to His service." Shortly afterwards they asked her if she did not fear to die so far from home, for she had earlier expressed a desire to be buried beside her husband in Tagaste. Now, with beautiful simplicity, she replied, "Nothing is far from God," and indicated that she was content to be buried where she died. Monica's death plunged her children into the deepest grief, and Augustine, "the son of so many tears," in the <Confessions> implores his readers' prayers for his parents. It is the prayers of Monica herself that have been invoked by generations of the faithful who honor her as a special patroness of married women and as an example for Christian motherhood. Her relics are alleged to have been transferred from Ostia to Rome, to rest in the church of San Agostino. Her emblems are a girdle and tears.

Saint Monica, Widow. Celebration of Feast Day is May 4.

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