

# St. Augustine

St. Augustine of Hippo, born Aurelius Augustinus to a respectable family in the year 354 CE, is now considered one of the foremost theologians in the history of the Catholic Church. His writings, including his philosophy regarding life in the womb and the moral worth of embryos, influenced many other great thinkers of his time and throughout history.

St. Augustine began his life in Algeria, an apt student devoted early to the Church and seeking the Truth. His professors recognized his great skill at philosophizing and writing. As Augustine devoured writings both ancient and of his contemporaries, he fell away from the Church and toward a religious dualism sect known as the Manicheans. His mother, a very devoted Christian (later St. Monica), prayed for his return to the faith for many years to no avail; Augustine fathered a child out of wedlock, named Adeodatus, who died in his teens. He completed his studies in Tagaste and Carthage and decided to move to Cassisiacum, his family's estate in Northern Africa, to study in peace and further his writings.

St. Augustine, his son, and his close friend, St. Alypius, converted to Christianity slowly. This is evident in a series of deep discussions recorded in the multiple Dialogues and in Augustine's very disappointing interview with the leader and foremost thinker of the Manicheans, Faustus. Augustine, St. Alypius, and Adeodatus were baptized together by St. Ambrose in Milan in 387, and Augustine's powerful Christian arguments and writings came pouring out soon after. He was ordained by popular demand in 391 and immediately thereafter established a monastery for education and study. His skill for public speaking and thoughtful arguments made him a key figure at the Plenary Council of Africa, also known as the Council of Hippo, in 393. Augustine's career focused on combating heresy, mainly of the Manicheans, and he was so successful that he was appointed Bishop of Hippo in 396.

Augustine continued his legacy of brilliant literary arguments and efforts for the Church throughout his life, and died at the age of seventy six in the year 430. His works went on to substantially influence the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas and many other theologians and philosophers since his time. His work was so foundational for the Catholic Church that in 1303, Pope Boniface VIII named Augustine a Doctor of the Church.

Some of Augustine's principal works, and those most relevant to embryology, include *Enchiridion*, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, *Against Julian*, *The City of God*, the various *Dialogues*, and *Confessions*. It is commonly known that Augustine followed the tradition of Aristotle in that he considered the progression of life in the womb to begin with a vegetative or plant-like existence and soul, then an animal soul, and finally a human soul with (according to Augustine) the complete moral value of a human being. Though Augustine's writings indicate he struggled over the idea of delayed hominization or ensoulment, Augustine chose not to delve too deeply into when exactly this occurred and whether the embryo should be considered a valuable human entity from the moment of conception. Indeed, these struggles resulted in part from his belief in the Immaculate Conception (the accepted belief that Mary became pregnant without Original Sin, indicating that she had a human soul at the moment of her conception). He did make it clear, however, that abortion at any stage was considered a serious sin, though perhaps less so if performed before ensoulment.

Another main reason Augustine considered abortion of the embryo or fetus a perverse act is because of his strict interpretation of the role of sex as solely for procreation. Thus, aborting any life conceived by this act disturbs a natural outcome of sex and rejects its intended purpose. Augustine's views on this topic are often brought up by modern defenders of abortion. While little attention is given to the fact that science has progressed immensely since Augustine's time, and that even with

his belief in the vegetable and animal stages he still believed abortion to be a grave sin, much is made of his statements regarding the pre-ensouled embryo as a non-human entity.

Overall, St. Augustine of Hippo has contributed greatly to the Catholic Church's historical interpretation of the moral status of embryos and fetuses. Though they are now less influential to the Church's modern position on such matters, his theology and philosophy regarding a wealth of issues has influenced many scholars, and his classic writings continue to explain and reflect the bulk of the Church's other teachings.

## Sources

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