

St. Monica

BORN 332; DIED 387

WIDOW

FEAST DAY: AUGUST 27

MANY WOMEN EXPERIENCE unhappy marriages, and many parents see their children fall into serious sin and abandon their Catholic faith. St. Monica, whose marriage was never happy, led a life of holiness that converted her husband. As the mother of a son who fathered an illegitimate child, resisted virtue, and was blind to the true faith until after he was thirty, she besought God for the grace of his conversion.

Monica was born of Christian parents, probably at Tagaste in Numidia (modern Souk-Ahras, Algeria), then part of the Roman Empire. She was largely raised by a family retainer. The most notable story of her early years is her brush with alcoholism. As she was growing up, she was eventually entrusted with the task of drawing the household's wine. Sneaking little sips of wine gave way to sneaking whole cups. Scorned as a little drunkard by a servant, she was so shamed that she drank only greatly diluted wine for the rest of her life.

Monica was married to a man who had been raised a pagan, probably in her late teens. Patritius was dissolute, unfaithful to Monica, could not control his temper, and was critical of her piety and charitable giving. His mother, who lived in the household, was also difficult. Yet Patritius respected his wife and never abused her, at a time when wife-beating was common enough that she had seen other women's bruises. Over time her prayers, humility, gentleness, and silence in the face of her husband's wrath led both him and his mother to love her and to embrace Christianity.

Patritius died shortly after his Baptism, leaving Monica, then about forty, with three children, Augustine, Navigius, and Perpetua, the oldest seventeen and a student living about sixty miles away from home. Monica dedicated the remainder of her life to charity and to bringing her wayward older son to God (gentle, pious Navigius married, as did Perpetua, who entered a convent after her husband died).

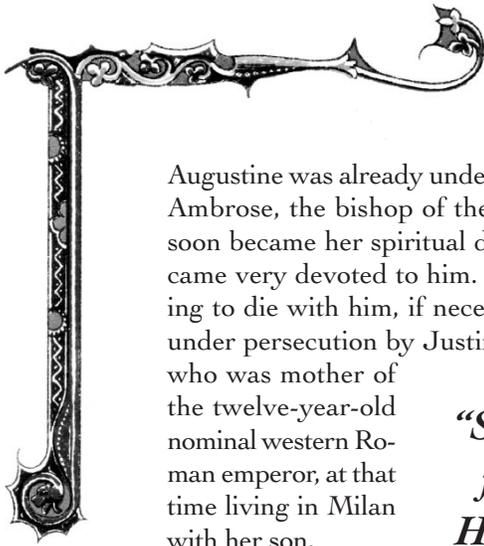
Monica raised her children as Christians, but Patritius had not permitted their Baptism (this was a time when many parents deferred this sacrament). Brilliant but lazy and addicted to pleasure, Augustine was her chief worry. In his mid-teens when he left home for his advanced education in Carthage, he discovered in that city both heresy and vice. He became involved with a cult, the Manichaeans, lived with a woman, and fathered an illegitimate child, Adeodatus. On his first vacation home, Monica at first barred him from her home and the family table.

Yet Monica had hope that her son would repent and come to accept the true faith. She intensified her life of prayer, fasting, and charity, storming Heaven with tears of supplication that her son not be lost. A bishop whom she asked to exert his influence on Augustine replied, "It is impossible that a son of so many tears should be lost."

Monica also embarked on a study of philosophy and theology so that she might understand and discuss these subjects with her son.

When he was twenty-nine, Augustine left for a teaching position in Rome, not telling his mother of his planned departure. Within the year, Monica followed him, but discovered that he had in the meantime moved on to Milan. By the time she got to Milan, she learned to her great joy that





Augustine was already under the influence of St. Ambrose, the bishop of the city. St. Ambrose soon became her spiritual director, and she became very devoted to him. She was even willing to die with him, if necessary, when he was under persecution by Justina, an Arian heretic who was mother of the twelve-year-old nominal western Roman emperor, at that time living in Milan with her son.

After three years, Augustine knew he had found the true faith, and began preparing for Baptism. Monica lived with Augustine and Navigius, Adeodatus, and some of Augustine's friends during this period. Her learning and intense prayer life became evident in her knowledge and wisdom when the group discussed Sacred Scripture. It was with unspeakable joy that she witnessed Augustine's

Baptism when he was thirty-three. Adeodatus was baptized then as well.

The little family prepared to return to Africa, but soon thereafter Monica fell acutely ill. Four days later, she died at the Italian port town of Ostia. She told her sons that she didn't

mind being buried far from home, for she knew that God would find her body "and raise it with the rest." She requested only that they remember her "at the altar of the

Lord" wherever they might be.

Augustine went on to become a bishop, a saint, and the first great doctor of the Western Church. Through Monica's holy example of the power of perseverance in prayer and of a life of faith and charity, she brought her husband and her mother-in-law to God as well.

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