

REPENT AND BELIEVE

In fourth-century Milan, there lived a talented professor of rhetoric. While his Catholic mother continually tried to get him to convert to Christianity, he had decided to study and practice many of the pagan philosophies of his day. Through a series of friendships, the professor began to reconsider Christianity, and over time, he became convinced that it was true. There was just one problem: His attachment to lust overwhelmed him and kept him from conversion.

The professor tried to forget about his struggle until one day a Christian named Ponticianus came to his house for business. Upon seeing the professor's copy of St. Paul's epistles, Ponticianus told the story of how he converted to the Catholic Faith. While they were speaking, the professor was reminded of his own story and became ashamed at his inability to give up his sins.

After saying goodbye to Ponticianus, he went into his garden to weep. There he considered the choice that lay before him, and his mind began to race. On the one hand, his lust seemed to taunt him: It reminded him that, if he chose Christ, he would have to give up lust forever. On the other hand, the life of chastity also began to speak to him: He recalled all of the men and women who were able to abandon lust, as well as the support the Lord would give him if he decided to do the same.

During this interior battle, he heard a voice like a child repeat the phrase "take and read, take and read." He believed the voice was a divine command to pick up his book of Paul's epistles and read the first passage that he found. He read: "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." (Rom 13:13-14).

At this, a light of certainty flooded the professor's heart, and all of his doubt faded away. He went on to be baptized, and eventually he became a priest and then a bishop. He was renowned for his ability to communicate the Faith and, over time, he became one of the greatest saints and theologians that the Church has ever known—St. Augustine of Hippo. His autobiography, *Confessions*, where his conversion story is found, is one of the most read books in history.

Repentance

At the beginning of their ministries, Jesus and John the Baptist had one central message: "The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe!" (Mt 3:2, 4:17; Mk 1:15). On the day of the first Pentecost, Peter has a similar message: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Repentance is a key component of the Christian life. In its simplest sense, to repent means to "turn back." Belief and trust in Jesus allow us to receive the grace to turn away from sin and attain our ultimate purpose.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end to sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed" (CCC 1431).

While repentance is a key component of Jesus' message and a much-needed practice in our own lives, it can be difficult. Just like Augustine, we might see what we need to do—and yet we resist. What keeps us from repenting of our sins, and what can we do to have the breakthrough that Augustine experienced?

Do I Need to Repent?

First, we have to be convicted of our sins. Our culture often steers clear of making definitive decisions about what is right or wrong. Because of this, it is easy to look at our own lives and think, "I'm a good person. I haven't committed any horrible crimes, and I know other people who are much worse than I am." But God doesn't grade on a curve. Scripture tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Romans 6:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death."

Our sin causes an infinite divide between us and God, something we cannot bridge ourselves. Out of love for

us, Jesus died on the cross. Because Jesus is fully human, He can represent the human family and offer an act of love on our behalf. However, because He is fully divine, His act of love on the cross takes on infinite value. Thus, Jesus alone is able to bridge this infinite divide. His death gives us an opportunity to overcome sin and to go to heaven. (See CCC 615 for more.)

Do I Want to Repent?

Augustine was convicted of his sins, but he still had a hard time repenting. Before his conversion, he noted that his prayer was, "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet!" He wanted to repent, but his sins held him back. Paul reflected this feeling when he said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom 7:15).

While we might realize the sins that we carry, just like Augustine or Paul, we struggle to give them up. We fear what will happen to us if we decide to let them go. We wonder if life will lose its joy or fun if we leave our past life. Just like Augustine, we need the courage to do what's right even in the face of challenges and obstacles. We need to trust what we know to be true in our hearts and our mind.

Do I Think I'm Ready to Repent?

Augustine doubted whether repentance was even possible for him. At times, he believed that his sins were so horrible that he wouldn't be able to change his life. Just like Augustine, we can doubt that repentance is even possible. We can convince ourselves that maybe later, when we have our lives put together, we can repent and believe in God.

The reality is that the Christian faith doesn't work like this. We don't need to get our life in order to believe in Jesus; we need to believe in Jesus so that He can put our life in order. He is the one that can transform us. God makes all things new. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

Acts 2:42

One of the key turning points for Augustine was when he remembered other sinners who trusted in the Lord and were able to change their lives. We can look at Augustine's story and many others and remind ourselves that the same thing is possible for us. In fact, we can follow the same path that they did in order to find transformation. After the first Pentecost, when Peter preached "repent and believe," the first believers went through a process of transformation as they became Christians. In Acts 2:42, St. Luke tells us that they were devoted to four key habits: "the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The next few articles go over these crucial areas that will help us repent from our sins and live lives of faith in Jesus and His Church.

Discussion Questions

1. What were your initial reactions to the story of St. Augustine?
2. What do you struggle with more, understanding your need to repent, or having the desire to actually do it?
3. Why is it so dangerous to wait until we get our lives together to repent? How can repenting help us improve our lives?
4. What can we do to have a breakthrough with repentance like Augustine experienced?

Leader's Guide: Transferrable Concepts

- 1. Why is repentance important?** John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter make “repent and believe” a central message in their ministries. (Mt 3:2, 4:17; Mk 1:15, Acts 2:38)
- 2. What is repentance?** “Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end to sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed” (CCC 1431).
- 3. Why is repentance needed?** We aren't supposed to be just “good people” but to take on a whole new identity. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”