

Chapter 10

I Want to Die in Order not to Die:

Augustine and His Association with Death¹

By Hans Alderliesten

“Life is a mist; death beckons every hour.” Certainly in ancient times. Hans Alderliesten discusses Augustine’s description in *The Confessions* of the death of his mother’s friend during her youth. He demonstrates that the way Augustine related to their death and to his own life’s end still contains important lessons for us.

The death of a loved one is an existential experience. Death determines our mortality and is absolute in its irreversibility. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes an extensive report of the death of a friend and of his mother. As psychologist *avant la lettre* he sometimes describes contradictory emotions and shows how he deals with death. He reacts very differently to these deaths as we shall see in paragraphs 1 and 2. This makes the contemplation of death interesting. In paragraph 3, I will reflect on the manner in which Augustine approached his own death.

1. The Death of a Youth Friend: “Wherever I looked, there was death.”

Thagasta, about 374 AD—Augustine is now twenty years old and is appointed teacher of rhetoric. He establishes friendship with a man whose name we do not know. He was of the same age and they both grew up together and shared the same interests. It is not clear whether they were friends from their childhood or whether their friendship began later. However it came about, it was a delightful friendship, matured in the glow of similar interests.”(1) Augustine had convinced him to say farewell to his simple faith and to become Manichean. “I persuaded the young man to accept the Manichean superstitious and destructive fables, about which my mother wept,” he writes later.(2) Somewhere along the line, the friend becomes seriously ill. He has high fever and becomes unconscious. Floating in the sweat of death, he was baptized without knowing it, most likely by his relatives as was the custom at the time. At the time, Augustine saw little value in baptism; in fact, he mocked it. His friend improves somewhat and appears to have changed. When

¹ Original title: “Sterven wil ik om niet te sterven: Augustinus en de omgang met de dood.”

Augustine meets him later, he mocks his baptism. His friend looks at him “shivering with disgust as if I were an enemy.” The friend is converted to Christianity and bid Manicheism farewell. Not much later, he dies.

Augustine is devastated. Observe what he writes in his *Confessions*: “Wherever I looked there was death. My home town was torture to me and my parental home a strange misery. Everything that I had shared with him was changed into an appalling torment without him.”(4) Augustine is so beside himself that he no longer recognizes himself. He became a mystery to himself. “I had become a deep question for myself and I kept interrogating my soul why it was so sad and why it so alarmed me. It did not give a single answer.” (5) He missed his friend and their amicable association, “Chatting together, laughing together, helping each other, together reading books in various languages, praying together and becoming serious together, and now and then differing in opinions without hatred.”(6) Love for his friend makes him hate death. (7) He writes that he finds rest in bitterness. (8) His tears taste sweet, “They had replaced my friend in the joys of my soul.” (9)

2. The Passing of Mother Monica

No less compelling, but Augustine reacts very differently to the passing of his mother in 387 AD. At the time, he was 33 years old, not long after his conversion. His conversion brought great joy to Mother Monica, who was always praying for this and saved neither efforts nor expenses to follow her son around. Augustine had intended to return to Africa. He bid his academic career farewell and decided to withdraw together with a number of kindred spirits to form a commune. Having arrived in antique Ostia, an Italian port city, he prepared himself to sail to Africa. Monica dies there at around age 56. (10)

Most likely Monica died suddenly. There was a brief sickbed stay prior to her dying. “After barely five days, she went to bed with a fever. While convalescing, she lost her consciousness and with it all her senses.(11) Augustine and Navigius, Monica’s two sons, were with her at her death, which probably took place in an inn, as well as Adeodatus, her grandson, and Evodius, a friend of Augustine Jr., with whom a few days earlier she had an intimate discussion. Augustine Sr. describes the event in intense language in his *Confessions*: “I pressed her eyes closed and in my innermost an immeasurably deep sadness overcame me; the tears

threatened to become a flood. But immediately, on a sharp demand in my spirit, the eyes dried up again. The struggle made me feel very bad.” (12)

Why does Augustine not allow his tears a free run? He provides the answer himself: “We did not find it appropriate to demonstrate our participation in this dying by weeping complaints and lamentations, because usually such sadness is accompanied with a certain commiseration aroused in dying folk about their assumed complete annihilation.” (13) Was Monica’s death not to be mourned? Was there no reason to be sad? He wrote, “My mother’s death did, however, not arouse this special commiseration.” Why not? She did not totally die. That was our conviction, guaranteed by her life and resting on a faith and certain rational arguments that were not mere fantasy.” (14)

3 Fear Death; Love Life

When Augustine feels the end of his life approach, he has penitential psalms plastered on the wall of his bedroom on sheets of parchment. He leaves life while doing penance. He knew he would fail God's test, but he also knew that Christ had carried his guilt away and renewed his life. It was only through thanks to Christ’s sacrifice that Augustine could now speak of a fulfilled life. He died just before the Vandals invaded Hippo Regius. “If you fear death, at least love life,” he once said in a sermon. (15) It is in line with him when we consider this life as *the Life*: the Ruler of Life, *Christus Triumfator*.” In the words of Augustine, “Believe and you will live, even if you have already died. If you don’t believe, you are dead, even if you’re still living.” (16) In another sermon he once characteristically explained how we can survive death and how we are to regard it.

We know that the dead do not leave us forever. No, for a short time they are ahead of us and then we will follow. But when death, the enemy of nature, takes away a loved one, in our love we mourn that person. That’s why the Apostle Paul does not tell us not to mourn. No, it’s only that we are not to mourn like the rest of mankind; they have no hope. Thus we mourn the death of our loved ones because we unavoidably lose them, but do so in the hope of seeing them again. The first makes us fearful; the second offers consolation. Our weakness makes us sick; our faith, better. Our human condition pains us; the promise of God heals. (17)

Augustine and Death

We can learn much from Augustine's interaction with death. In the first place, death digs in deep; it is an external enemy from without that threatens life and takes it. The manner in which death affects us on the one side says something about the relationship we had with the dead person, and on the other side, it says something about our vision of death. Death as either terminal station or as gateway makes a real difference, especially when expressing sorrow. He shows us two opposite reactions as examples to us. There is he, the man with the gift of tears, the sensitive church father of the West who pits death over against life and life against death. Mourning is allowed; loving is mandatory. Through death to life; facing and going through death; dying to death in order to live eternally. Augustine did not fully die. Put stronger, after his death he lives on—for eternity.

Hans Alderliesten (1987) serves as senior researcher at the Knowledge Institute Movisie and is currently doing doctoral research in Augustine's views on justice and compassion.

Notes:

1 Belijdenissen IV, 4, 7 (vertaling van Gerard Wijdeveld).

2 Belijdenissen IV, 2, 2. 3 Belijdenissen IV, 4, 8. 4 Belijdenissen IV, 4, 9. 5 Belijdenissen IV, 4, 9.

6 Belijdenissen IV, 8, 13. 7 Belijdenissen IV, 6, 11. 8 Belijdenissen IV, 4, 10.

9 Belijdenissen IV, 4, 9.

10 Augustinus houdt het zelf op 56 jaar (Belijdenissen XI, 11, 28), tegenwoordig wordt ervan uitgegaan dat Monica leefde van 333-387. In dat geval was ze 53 of 54 jaar, afhankelijk van haar geboortedag.

11 Belijdenissen XI, 20, 26. 12 Belijdenissen IX, 12, 29. 13 Belijdenissen IX, 12, 29.

14 Belijdenissen IX, 12, 29. In deze formulering zien we Augustinus' weerzin ten opzichte van het manicheïsme terug ('gefantaseerd geloof') en zijn voorliefde voor de Griekse filosofie ('argumenten van de rede').

15 Augustinus (2011). *Leven in hoop : Preken over teksten uit de brieven aan de christenen in Rome en Korinte [sermones de scripturis 151- 162B] / Aurelius Augustinus; ingeleid, vertaald en van aant. voorzien door Joke Gehlen-Springorum, Vincent Hunink, Six-Wienen en Hans van Reisen.* Budel: Damon. Sermo 161, 7.

16 Augustinus, 365x Augustinus. Zijn mooiste citaten, Zoetermeer 2010, p. 85.

17 Augustinus (2013). Geloof is het begin [sermones de scripturis 162C183]; ingeleid, vertaald en van aant. voorzien door Gehlen-Springorum, Vincent Hunink, Six-Wienen en Hans van Reisen. Budel: Damon. Sermo 172.