Sunday December 1, 1974

"WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING OUT!"
St. Augustine -- No. 1 in a series

On the face of it, nothing could be of less use to us human beings in the computer age than a study of the lives of some of the Saints. We usually think of Saints as being pious, sanctimonious, other wordly, in other words "out of it," But such is not the case.

What is a saint? In the very early Christian Church all Christians were called saints. Thus when the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Church at Rome and addressed it to "all of God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints," he was writing to all of the church members there.

However later in Christian history, the heroes of the faith, those who stood out because of what they were and did were officially designated "Saints" with a capital "S." Now the Saints were persons with an added dimension.

They are persons who discovered how to live in two worlds at once and were the better for it. Because of their spiritual discipline they were able to accomplish things that we find difficult.

Think of two goldfish in a bowl. One of them makes a leap into the air and for a split second, suspended between two worlds, he sees creation from an entirely different perspective. The "world" is no longer all wet, nor does it come to a bent end. The goldfish who took the leap has seen new things in the larger world. To the fish that remains in the bowl this may mean nothing. But the fish to has made the leap entered for a brief moment a larger world of reality and will never be the same again.

The Saints are like that. Because of their higher leap into the spiritual world, they are unique even as they continue to live and work in the common sense everyday world. However they are now able to cope with everyday life more effectively than most of us. They are able to withstand the corroding effects of daily living. Fatigue and despair nibble away our good intentions, but the Saints master their environment in a way that we do not. Thus we can learn much from them.

Incidentally, a study of the lives of the Saints shows that far from being "out of it," the were outstanding administrators, people who were fun to be with and they thoroughly enjoyed life in all of its aspects.

St. Augustine is a good case in point. He was born in North Africa in 354, A.D. of a mixed marriage. His father was a pagan landowner, his mother, Monica, a devout Christian.

He lived in a world as materialistic as ours. His parents were determined to force on their clever son an education which would fit him for that material world and make him a financial success. There were not great corporations then, no law firms or scientific profession to make his fortune.

The quickest route to fame and fortune was being master of a school. Many a prominent person of that day had become famous by establishing an academy of rhetoric where scholars flocked to study and dispute.

So Augustine was early set to work at Greek and Latin and mathmetics. In his book called "The Confessions," he tells us all about his life and his struggles. He held resentments against the systems of his time and he tells us that he always hated Homer because of the beatings he received as a schoolboy trying to master Greek. Latin he learned in his infancy from his nurse.

In his book of Confessions he leaves nothing out. We read of a person in search of his own soul and in search of the meaning of life. Everything is set down with perfect honesty. There is the child who shirked his lessons. There are his academic successes. He tells us about the beginning of his affair with the mistress who bore him a son.

In his search for meaning, he got involved with many of the popular cults and fads of his time. In search for students at his academy, he settled in Milan with his mistress and son and there his reputation as an outstanding teacher spread.

But by this time, God was at his heels. Even while he was plunging deeper into frivolity and lust, he was agonizingly trying to believe in a spiritual existence.

He began to attend the lectures of St. Ambrose. They became friends. Augustine yearned to be delivered from his depravity, from sloth and greed and irregular sexual behavior. Yet like the rest of us, he kept putting off the decision to reform.

He read Paul's letters in the New Testament. He ached to become a Christian and to have a more settled life with discipline and rhythm, but bodily delights and the fear he would have to give them up came between him and baptism. His mother had not had him baptized as an infant or young person because she accepted the belief of that time that Baptism washed away sins committed before it was administered, and she wished him to defer it until after the heat of youth was passed, so that all of his sins would be washed away at once.

Just give me a little more time, he kept saying to God. Like the rest of us, he hoped an impossible hope, that his will would not have to be exerted, that temptations would by some miracle cease to bother him and his bad habits would simply roll of his shoulders by themselves.

Then came the famous moment in the garden when Augustine heard a child's voice chanting the refrain, "Take up and read, take up and read." He had on a table beside him the Bible and on opening it, he read the passage upon which his eyes first fell, from one of St. Paul's letters -- "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."

He was only 32, but the way was set. There were to be many wrestlings thereafter but no crises. From then on his life changed. He was baptized and became a Christian. He had not planned to become a priest, but in those days any outstanding Christian scholar was likely to be drafted into some clerical seat; and he found himself being made Bishop of Hippo, where he was to work and rule for nearly 40 years. And all the while he tried with every fiber of his soul for holiness and temperance, for meekness and charity, and succeeded very well.

For all of his human flaws, this extra-ordinary person possessed one virtue that makes him a Saint. That quality which he had above all others was -- hope.

By the year 413, the world of Augustine was toppling and at the brink of dissolution. Rome had been plundered. The vandals were preparing to invade North Africa. The civilization that he had known was falling apart. Yet it was during this time that he wrote the book entitled THE CITY OF GOD, which gave to his world and to our the kind of Christian hope which leads us on even in the midst of catastrophy.

What can we learn from a Saint like Augustine?

1. A disciplined spiritual life can focus our energies. Thus St. Augustine and others like him were able to transcend the painful and negative aspects of everyday life and to live with a serenity , an inner peace, a joy and a capacity to love. He came to have a joyousness of faith and a kind of courage which dares the mad whirl of the world and plucks victory from the jaws of the impossible--victor over life, not victim of it.

2. Every Christian is called to be a saint. We may not attain the heights of an Augustine, but we can add a zest and joy to our lives more than we now have. Such is the promise of the Gospel.

More about what we can learn from the saints in the next two sermons.