CATH 370: Topics in Catholic Studies  
WINTER 2021  
The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354–430)

A close reading of Augustine’s monumental *Confessions* - the odyssey of a restless soul seeking rest in God alone (*conf. 1.1.*)

*Tuesdays & Thursdays 2:35 pm-3:55 pm (Birks 203)*


“I am resolved to make truth in my heart before [God] in my confession, and to make truth in my writing before many witnesses” (Augustine, *Confessions* 10.1)

What does the *truth* of confession make of Augustine, and what does it make of us, his witnesses? This course charts Augustine’s adaptation of the classical heroic ideal in the *Confessions* and the role of praise (confession) in the metamorphosis of the Christian hero’s odyssey.
CATH 370: TOPICS IN CATHOLIC STUDIES
The Confessions of Saint Augustine

Winter 2021
Tues. & Thurs.: 2.35 pm-3.55 pm (Virtual/Zoom)

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Virtual Office Hours: By appointment only.

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A. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces the Confessions of Saint Augustine, a monumental 4th century Christian figure. Augustine famously wrote, ‘I am resolved to make truth in my heart before [God] in my confession, and to make truth in my writing before many witnesses’ (conf. 10.1). What does the truth of confession make of Augustine and what does it make of us, his witnesses? This course charts the (re)making of the classical heroic ideal in the Confessions and the role of praise (confession) in the metamorphosis of the Christian hero. To this end, we shall read Augustine carefully by deploying a comprehensive approach of analysis, according to three axes of interpretation: contextual, intercontextual and systematic.

1. Contextual Axis. A number of important contextual factors and sources inform the Confessions including scripture, Augustine’s life experience and encounters, the works of Saint Paul, and pastoral engagement, as well as theological and speculative reflection. Augustine also masterfully deploys Latin rhetoric, paradox and philosophy. Thus, the contextual axis of interpretation aims at understanding how the various contextual forces shape the narrative of the Confessions.

2. Intercontextual Axis. Augustine was a profound and prolific writer. Accordingly, the Confessions must be situated within the spectrum of the Augustinian corpus, which spans four decades. It is crucial, therefore, to carefully draw from Augustine’s writings, composed before, during and after the Confessions. The intercontextual axis aims at understanding the interrelatedness and complexity of Augustine’s developing thought across writings and how this informs the
Confessions. Thus, we will draw from material of the broader Augustinian corpus to appreciate the significance of the Confessions.

3. **Systematic Axis.** For centuries, the Confessions has been a source of insight and controversy. Even during Augustine’s lifetime, it sparked a debate on the nature of grace, free will, sexuality and sin. Furthermore, the Confessions is full of traces of Augustine’s later key ideas on the Church, the state, original sin and biblical interpretation. The work, according to some, birthed the ‘Western self’ and constructed (post-) modern interiority. Accordingly, the systematic axis seeks to identify, articulate and understand the various philosophical and theological questions nascent in the Confessions, their impact in history, and their relevance today.

**B. REQUIREMENTS & OBJECTIVES**

There are no requirements for joining this course. Anyone at McGill University is welcome to enroll. The Confessions will be of special relevance to anyone interested in religion, classics, literature, philosophy, theology, history and political science. In the course of our class, the student will:

1. Learn to do philosophy and theology by turning to early Christian sources for insight.

2. Become familiar with the content of the Confessions.


4. Articulate a research question, identify relevant sources, and present an articulate and well-developed answer in the form of a research paper.

5. Engage with specific texts according to the three axes of interpretative analysis, i.e., contextual, intercontextual and systematic.

6. Appropriate the material and understand the relevance of the Confessions today.

**C. READING & LECTURE SCHEDULE**

We will cover a book of the Confessions (there are 13 books) per week of scheduled lectures. Please read the assigned readings in preparation for the class. We will use the translation of the Confessions by Thomas Williams (2019). The lectures will rely on the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible. Students are expected to read Brown (1967) and are advised to consult Paffenroth (2003), Fitzgerald (1999), Rist (1994), Gilson (1949) and Mayer (1986) in the course of the semester. There is no course pack for this class.
D. Course Schedule

1. Lectures are delivered via Zoom on Tuesdays & Thursdays, from 2.35 pm to 3.55 pm.
2. You are encouraged to attend all lectures to be sure you stay on top of things. I will introduce myself and go through the syllabus during the first class. Please do not miss the first class.
3. Participation grades depend on attendance and quality contributions during discussion.
4. I suggest you read all of the Confessions before our first class. This will enhance your ability to appreciate the lectures. I suggest you actively engage with the text.
5. I will not share my notes. Please take notes during the lectures and pay attention to the various modes of interpretation I employ. The aim is not to repeat what I discuss, but to learn to confront the texts with questions and to offer insightful responses. We will
not only speak about philosophy and theology; we will be doing philosophy and theology.

6. I hold weekly NON-MANDATORY (but highly recommended) reading and Q&A sessions on Fridays from 3 pm – 4 pm (Montreal time). Email me to sign up: pablo.irizar@mcgill.ca

E. ASSIGNMENTS & EVALUATION

The course draws from a variety of pedagogical methods to present the material. A corresponding threefold method of evaluation is designed for the student to discover, engage and integrate the material. To discover, the student will carefully read the Confessions and write two philosophical and/or theological meditations. To engage, the student will participate actively during lectures and will prepare and deliver a presentation. To integrate, the student will write a systematic passage interpretation and a research paper. The learning experience will be greatly enhanced by consulting the online resources listed below (cf. H. Online Resources).

1. Participation (10 %). Students are expected to attend lectures. Participation points will be deducted per days of absence. Participation grades also include active and quality contributions during lectures and discussions.

2. Meditation 1 (15 %). Due on 12 January (at the beginning of class), max. 750 words. Chose a section from Book I of the Confessions and discuss its significance. What is the text about? What questions and paradoxes does it raise? What is its relation to praise (confession)? Offer insightful textual analysis.

3. Meditation 2 (15 %). Due on 26 January (at the beginning of class), chose a section from Book II or Book III of the Confessions and discuss its significance. What is the text about? What questions and paradoxes does it raise? How does it illustrate the metamorphosis of the heroic ideal? Offer insightful textual analysis.

4. Presentation (15 %). Presentations will be scheduled by the end of the first week and will take place throughout the month of February. A passage will be assigned to each student. The student will prepare a presentation of the passage based on the three axes of interpretation: contextual, intercontextual and systematic. Presentations are individual and last only 10 mins.

5. Interpretation (15 %). Due on 16 March (at the beginning of class). The interpretation is a written paper of exegesis based on the presentation component above. The interpretation is max. 1500 words.

6. Research paper (30 %). The research paper is due on 13 April (at the beginning of class). I will offer research topics early in the semester. All students (without exception) must submit a research paper proposal for approval by 2 February (earlier is preferable). This must contain a research question, a structure, at least 5 relevant passages for analysis from Confessions, a focused bibliography, and a tentative hypothesis/argument. The length of the paper excluding footnotes and
bibliography is max. 5000 words. Papers under 3000 words will not be accepted. All papers must follow

F. POLICIES & REGULATIONS

Please consult the various resources below on policies and regulations as need arises.

1. Student Rights and Responsibilities: https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/
3. McGill University Student Policies: https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/policies-
student-rights-and-responsibilities
4. Email. Please only contact me at the following email address: pablo.irizar@mcgill.ca The subject line should read “Lastname. CATH 370.” I appreciate full sentences and a clear question, inquiry or request. I will answer emails within 24 hours except on weekends. If I have not replied within 24 hours, please send a follow up email.
5. Assignment Submissions. I only accept assignments submitted by email (pablo.irizar@mcgill.ca). Late assignments not granted an extension will be deducted 5% per day. For an extension, please email me indicating your circumstances. For any other accommodations you may require, please contact me.
6. Assignment Feedback. I usually return assignments within 2 weeks of submission. I will discuss the assignments only 48 hours after I return them to you.

G. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Required Texts


Select Bibliography

Quinn, John M. *A companion to the Confessions of St. Augustine*. Peter Lang, 2002.

**H. Online Resources**

Encyclopaedias & Introductory Resources

- New Advent Encyclopedia: [https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/](https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/)
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: [https://iep.utm.edu/augustin/#H7](https://iep.utm.edu/augustin/#H7)
- Introduction by James J. O'Donnell: [https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/introconf.html](https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/introconf.html)
- Augustine’s Confessions by James J. O'Donnell: [https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/latinconf/latinconf.html](https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/latinconf/latinconf.html)
Chronologies of Augustine’s Life & Works
Chronology of the *Confessions*:  
https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/augchron.pdf
Chronology of Life & Works:  
https://exploringaugustine.weebly.com/chronological-list.html

Videos
The School of Life – Saint Augustine:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBAxUBeVfsk
Yale Lecture: https://oyc.yale.edu/history/hist-210/lecture-5
Why Study Saint Augustine – John Milbank:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDeP2qGpbDA
LibriVox Audio of the *Confessions* (full length):  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVPwXNfyT00

Podcasts
In Our Time: https://uk-podcasts.co.uk/podcast/in-our-time-philosophy/augustine-s-confessions
Partially Examined Life Ep. 121:  
https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/2015/08/10/ep121-augustine/
Partially Examined Life Ep. 122:  
https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/2015/08/24/ep122-augustine/
History of Philosophy without Gaps:  
https://historyofphilosophy.net/augustine-confessions

Search Engines & Resources
Library of Latin Texts:  
http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=LT-O
Zentrum Für Augustinus-Forschung:  
https://www.augustinus.de/
Perseus Digital Library:  
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/
Finding Augustine:  
http://findingaugustine.org/
Sant’Agostino:  
http://www.augustinus.it/latino/

Biblical Resources
Interlinear Biblehub:  
https://biblehub.com/interlinear/
Bible Gateway (ESV):  
Logos Bible Software (subscription required):  
https://www.logos.com/
The Vatican Bibles:  
https://www.vatican.va/archive/bible/index.htm

Stylistic Guidelines
What is the Chicago Manual of Style?  
Chicago Manual of Style:  
https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html
Purdue University Chicago Manual of Style:

I. SOME WELLNESS RESOURCES