

ST. AUGUSTINE

For those of us who suffer from a active hook, a most worthy role model and patron is St. Augustine, Bishop, Confessor, and Doctor of the Church, who lived from 354 to 430 AD. For our purposes, he is notable in that he lived quite a promiscuous life until he was around the age of 30. He was born to Placidus, a pagan, and to Monica, a Christian. He was pretty wayward in his early life especially to sexual sins. From the age of 19 he sought after "wisdom" but became ensnared by certain heresies that really aren't important for our discussion. He converted to the Faith around the age of 30 and eventually became a Doctor of the Church. He was brilliant and quite a prolific writer whose works are still read. The one I recommend to you is The Confessions of St. Augustine where he recounts in scathing honesty his search for wisdom and how he finally overcame his addiction to sins of the flesh to become one of the greatest philosophers and saints of the Catholic Church. I discovered him when I was teaching high school and I was "forced" to read it so that I could teach it. Please indulge me and read along on these rather lengthy passages. Personally, he speaks deeply to my own heart as he puts into words my own feelings about my struggle against my own addiction but he says it with such emotion and beauty that I could never hope to match it, let alone beat it. The translation is John K. Ryan's and the first selection is taken from Book 8, Chapter 5. Here are his thoughts on his own "hook", or in his words, a "chain". Compare them to your own:

"For this very thing did I sigh, bound as I was, not by another's irons but by my own will. The enemy had control of my will, and out of it he fashioned a chain and fettered me with it. For in truth lust is made out of a perverse will, and when lust is served, it becomes habit, and when habit is not resisted, it becomes necessity. By such links, joined one to another, as it were - for this reason I have called it a chain - a harsh bondage held me fast."

By this point in his life, he had become disillusioned with the heresy he was following and was enamored with becoming Catholic. He felt the pull of God's grace on his soul so his will began to struggle against his "chains":

"A new will, which had begun within me, to wish freely to worship you and find joy in you, O God, the sole sure delight, was not yet able to overcome that prior will, grown strong with age. Thus did my two wills, the one old, the other new, the first carnal, and the second spiritual, contend with one another, and by their conflict they laid waste my soul. Thus I understood from my own experience what I had read, how "the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh." (Gal v: 17) I was in both camps, but I was more in that which I approved within myself than in that other which I disapproved within me. For now, in the latter, it was not so much myself, since in large part I suffered it against my will rather than did it voluntarily. Yet it was by me that this habit had been made so warlike against me, since I had come willingly to this point where I now willed not. Who can rightly argue against it, when just punishment comes upon the sinner?"

This might be the point where you find yourself, my dear friend - struggling against yourself. Sometimes the spirit wins, but more likely, the flesh wins. Augustine further describes his struggle as one striving to awaken but still wanting to continue his slumber:

"Thus by the burdens of this world I was sweetly weighed down, just as a man often is in sleep. Thoughts wherein I meditated upon you were like the efforts of those who want to arouse themselves but still overcome by deep drowsiness, sink back again. ...yet a man often defers to

shake off sleep when a heavy languor pervades all his members, and although the time to get up has come, he yields to it with pleasure even although it now irks him. In like manner, I was sure that it was better for me to give myself up to your love than to give in to my own desires. However, although the one way appealed to me and was gaining mastery, the other still afforded me pleasure and kept me victim. I had no answer to give to you when you said to me, "Rise, you who sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ will enlighten you" (Eph v. 14). When on all sides you showed me that your words were true, and I was overcome by your truth, I had no answer whatsoever to make, only those slow and drowsy words, "Right away. Yes, right away." "Let me be for a little while." But "Right away-right away" was never right now, and "Let me be for a little while" stretched out for a long time."

We can certainly sense the deep love that Augustine has for Our Lord and he deeply regrets his inability to respond to God's grace. Both you and I must develop an equal love for God if we are to successfully master ourselves. Finally, the Doctor admits of his own inability to conquer self and what the only source of victory is:

"In vain was I delighted with your law according to the inward man, when another law in my members fought against the law of my mind, and led me captive in the law of sin, which was in my members. For the law of sin is force of habit, whereby the mind is dragged along and held fast, even against its will, but still deservedly so, since it was by its will that it had slipped into the habit. Unhappy man that I was! Who would deliver me from body of this death, unless your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord?"

Let us begin the struggle my friend! Regardless of your addiction, Sexual Addiction, Gambling, Alcoholism, Pornography, Eating Disorders, or something else, let us have confidence that the Good God, Who made us, wants our success in the struggle. If we rely upon ourselves, we will fail. But with sincere acceptance that it is only through God's grace and not our own efforts, we will surely succeed! Deus vult! (God wills it!).

HOOKS OR CHAINS?

Well, dear friend, if you've gotten to this point, I pray that you've seen that your experience with your own hook is not really so different than others – even great saints like Augustine. You are not the first to feel the way you do and there really isn't anything truly unique about your circumstances except for the details. If you were to tell your story to someone else with your hook, again, even to Augustine, he would listen to your words, nod his head, and say, "Man, I know exactly where you're coming from!" If he succeeded in conquering his hook (or in his terms, chains), then I know you must be thinking that it is also possible for you. Just so you know I have complete confidence in you as well.

In the last section, I introduced Saint Augustine's own words describing his struggle. If you were observant you noticed that he doesn't speak of a hook at all. He uses terms describing tools of restraint like chains, fetters, and shackles to describe his sinful addiction and that's fine. We will resort to these same references periodically. In his mind he saw his struggle as one of becoming free or liberated from a sin that bound him up, that denied him his true liberty of being free to love God in the way that he yearned. In his case, we know that once he was freed from his sexual addiction that he was given the grace of perseverance to remain free from it for the rest of his life – he's a canonized saint and that's our proof. Not being an expert on his life, I don't know if he ever suffered from temptations of the flesh ever again. Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. In his case, his release from his chains was permanent.

In my case and in your case, friend, we have no guarantee that, once victorious we will remain victorious for the rest of our lives. Therefore, we are never completely free from our addictions until our deaths. Even St. Paul wrote of his own temptations, his “sting of the flesh” well after the time of his conversion on the road to Damascus, “...there was given me a sting of the flesh, an angel of Satan, to buffet me. For which thing I thrice besought the Lord, that it might depart from me: And he said to me: My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity.” (II Cor xii. 7-9) If you refer to the commentary in the Haydock version of the Douay-Rheims Bible, you will see that what exactly this “sting of the flesh” was is disputed. For our purposes, it really isn’t important but whatever it was, it was important enough to Paul for him to ask Our Lord to remove it from him – even after he had been “caught up to the third heaven” (II Cor xii. 2). In other words, Paul was tempted to sin until the day he was beheaded in Rome.

If even the holiest of saints are tempted with their hooks, what can we who are but dust and filth expect? For this reason, I think that “hook” more adequately expresses our situation. It’s not external to us but actually embedded within us. It is something that we cannot remove and it is something that is always a menace to our salvation.

Makes sense? Good, let’s move on to an explanation of why the Catholic 12-Steps has to be Catholic.