

THE POWER OF PERSISTENT PRAYER: ST. MONICA

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(comeintotheword.com)



“Pray without ceasing,” St. Paul urged his fellow Christians in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Today we honor a woman who did just that: St. Monica, who prayed through years of tears and against all odds for her pagan husband and wayward son. That son, who became Saint Augustine, later wrote gratefully of his mother: “She said little, preached not at all, loved deeply, prayed without ceasing.” Prayer allows us to invite God into not just our own brokenness but also into the brokenness of others, to do his healing work. Saint Monica stands as proof of the power of love and

tears and above all persistence in prayer.

In honor of her feast day, August 27th (and St. Augustine’s August 28th), I offer this reflection on St. Monica in hopes it will encourage other parents to persist in prayer. It is excerpted from *Becoming Women of the Word: How to Answer God’s Call with Purpose and Joy* with permission of Ave Maria Press, the publisher:

When I was still a fairly new Catholic, a friend gave me a medal with an image of St. Monica imprinted on one side and St. Augustine on the other. She thought it suited me as a Bible teacher-scholar and mother of boys. Today I wear it frequently, together with medals of St. Helena, “seeker of the true cross,” and St. Walburga, missionary and patron saint of authors. I look to their example and ask their intercession related to the three most important things in my life: my family, both biological and spiritual; my growth in faith; and my teaching and speaking and writing.

For a long time, though, the St. Monica/St. Augustine medal lay untouched in my jewelry box. I’d spent thirty years as a Protestant suspicious of things like medals because of my misunderstanding of Catholic devotion to the saints. Although I’d come to accept the truth of Catholic teaching, asking saints to pray wasn’t something that came naturally to me. And as much as I appreciated the gift, I couldn’t bring myself to wear the medal.

Until, that is, I got to know St. Monica.

Mark and I had been praying hard for one of our children, who had gotten tangled up with some bad friends and questionable activities. It was like we were watching a train barreling forward on a broken track: unless something changed, there could only be disaster ahead. I went for advice to a wise woman I knew whose children were grown. “I always ask St. Monica to pray for my kids,” she said, “and to pray for me, too—that I’ll stay strong and keep praying.” I’d

never thought to ask a saint to pray. “What else is St. Monica doing up there,” my friend continued, “besides worshiping God and praying for people like us? You should ask her.”

I knew that Monica had prayed for decades for her profligate son, who ended up becoming a brilliant spokesman for the faith and a Doctor of the Church. Now I started reading up on her, figuring it would be easier to approach someone I knew something about. I learned that she developed a secret passion for wine when she was a young girl, but when a family slave called her out on it, she was so ashamed, she never touched a drop again (which is why people who struggle with addictions seek her prayers, as well.) While she was still young, Monica was married off to a pagan man with a violent temper who was critical of her faith. She met his rage with patient kindness and by the end of his life, won him over to Christianity.

Monica’s brilliant son Augustine drove her to her knees because of his loose lifestyle and his love of Manicheism, a dualistic heresy that sees (instead of one almighty God) conflicting worlds of good spirit and evil matter. Augustine challenged his mother to give up her faith to overcome the split between them, but she insisted that he was the one who was out of line. The more he strayed, the more she prayed and fasted and cried on his behalf. When she followed him to Rome, afraid he would never convert, he eluded her and moved to Milan, where he met St. Ambrose, under whose influence he eventually entered the Church. It was an answer to decades of his mother’s prayers.

‘Wow’, I thought. ‘Here’s a woman who understands not only the broken-hearted mom but also the wayward kid. She’s had troubles of her own to battle. She’s not some self-righteous fanatic, she’s real.’ What really impressed me was that she didn’t wear her worry on her sleeve, moaning and nagging at her son. She took her tears to God and left them in his care; and she never stopped praying. I want to be like that.

Monica makes me think of Hannah in the Old Testament, whose tears and prayers caught the attention of the Lord long before there was a Monica or an Augustine. The Lord answered her request by sending her a son: the great judge and prophet Samuel. Like Monica, Hannah is known for her prayers; like Monica, her prayers contributed to the raising of a faithful, holy son. May their examples encourage us to redouble our prayers for the children in our care and for those who have no one to pray for them.

(The above excerpt introduces the chapter on “Hannah: God Listens to Our Prayers” in *Becoming Women of the Word*, pgs. 91-93.)

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

Saint Monica, pray for us!