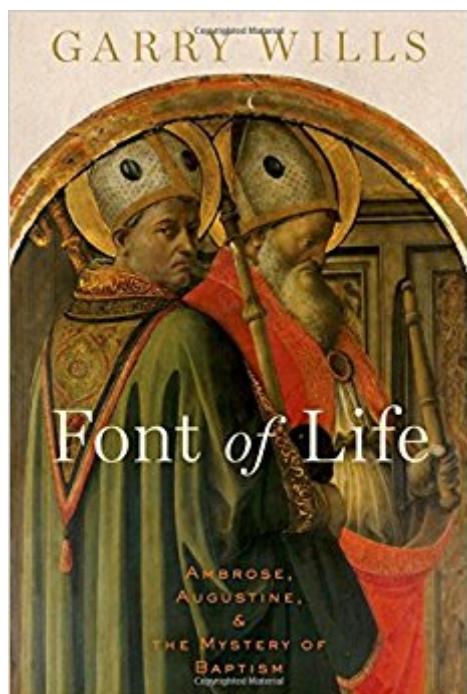


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Font Of Life: Ambrose, Augustine, And The Mystery Of Baptism (Emblems Of Antiquity)



Synopsis

No two men were more influential in the early Church than Ambrose, the powerful Bishop of Milan, and Augustine, the philosopher from provincial Africa who would write *The Confessions* and *The City of God*. Different in background, they were also extraordinarily different in personality. In *Font of Life*, Garry Wills explores the remarkable moment when their lives intersected at one of the most important, yet rarely visited, sites in the Christian world. Hidden under the piazza of the Duomo in Milan lies part of the foundations of a fourth-century cathedral where, at dawn on Easter of 387, Augustine and a group of people seeking baptism gathered after an all-night vigil. Ambrose himself performed the sacrament and the catechumens were greeted by their fellows in the faith, which included Augustine's mother Monnica. Though the occasion had deep significance for the participants, this little cluster of devotees was unaware that they were creating the future of the Western church. Ambrose would go on to forge new liturgies, new forms of church music, and new chains of churches; Augustine would return to Africa to become Bishop of Hippo and one of the most influential writers of Christianity. Garry Wills uses the ancient baptistry to chronicle a pivotal chapter in the history of the Church, highlighting the often uncomfortable relationship between the two church fathers and exploring the mystery and meanings of the sacrament of baptism. In addition, he brings long overdue attention to an unjustly neglected landmark of early Christianity.

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Customer Reviews

"Unusually instructive...But he does more than bring us down from the fairy-tale roof of the Duomo of Milan (the usual goal of tourists) to the ruins that now lie hidden beneath the ground. He takes us for a vertiginous drop of almost 1,800 years into a Christianity profoundly different from our own."

--New York Review of Books "Wills shows where Ambrose and Augustine differed from each other in theology, temperament, and even ritual preference. He engagingly offers insight into the religion, politics, and culture of the time." -- Library Journal "A small masterpiece of exposition." --Booklist" A well-researched and fascinating historical look at Ambrose, Augustine, and the sacrament of baptism." --Publishers Weekly"Garry Wills is as deft and compelling when he untangles the ideas and politics of the age of Augustine as when he writes about John Wayne or Abraham Lincoln. This is a work of fresh and genuinely original scholarship told with verve and a keen sense of why the issues of fourth-century Milan still matter today."--James J. O'Donnell, Georgetown University"The font in the Milan baptistery where Ambrose baptized Augustine at Easter 387 provides the setting for Garry Wills's dramatic evocation of the relations between two of the most powerful and influential figures in the early Christian church. He reveals the personal and theological distance that separated them in the years before and after the baptism. Wills's depiction of Augustine's confrontation with Ambrose is like a magnificent diptych in which the figures take on shifting forms and colors as the light changes. This is a nuanced, perceptive, and utterly persuasive account of two great men."--G. W. Bowersock, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton "The author's affection for his subjects fills out the human picture...The book surveys the intersection of the lives of two of the Latin patriarchs who left great, if different, marks on the church. It explores theology with narrative flow. It makes serious points with grace."--America"An interesting and evocative addition to Wills's impressive corpus." -- Christian Century ""Font of Life is an engaging read as well as a provocative contribution to the scholarship of Ambrose and Augustine. Like all good histories, it combines a thorough knowledge of period and personality with a spark of imaginative creativity. All who seek to know more about Ambrose and Augustine or who want to delve deeper into the late antique world in which they lived and wrote would do well to take up this book. It does not disappoint." --Books and Culture

Garry Wills is the author of many books, including *Bomb Power*, *What Jesus Meant*, *Why I Am a Catholic*, *Papal Sin*, and *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

This was an accessible and concise essay concerning Ambrose and Augustine in the early church. The author was most successful when discussing and describing life in classical-era Milan and the

role and teaching of Ambrose in that city. Less successful was the author's effort to relate and distinguish Augustine from Ambrose in their baptismal theology or practices. The energy of the book seemed to peeter out at this point. I think a much longer and more complex work would have been required to actually address the announced topic of the book. There was also a bit of modern travelogue about Milan in which the reader can see the architectural and historical "seeds" that probably gave rise to this book. Recommended for fans of the author and those interested in a glimpse at Ambrosian catechesis. For a deeper (and more systematic and scholarly) look at Augustine and the catechumenate, highly recommended is the work by that name by William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*

Font of Life offers the reader a close look at two 4th century bishops and their approach to baptism through the lenses of architectural, political, theological, and pastoral realities. Willis' seems to draw more heavily upon Ambrose, perhaps because he has more access to Ambrose's Milan than to Augustine's Hippo. This could also reflect his assessment that Augustine, by contrast with Ambrose, was a baptismal minimalist. The book is a good read for those who are interested in period history or in ancient ritual practice as it was shaped by contextual realities. I am a pastor/scholar deeply interested in the development of early catechumenate as it informs the church's practice today, so *Font of Life* was a really good read for me.

Garry Wills convincingly brings two Church Fathers to life (and they are like us). Philosophy and philosophical debate in the Greek tradition, I have learned in *Font of Life*, gave us many of the beliefs of our faith as Christians. This has caused me to rethink my own belief system to try hard not to philosophize. I love this book: it's well-written, interesting, informative, and has photos to bring the places Mr. Wills describes to life. I heartily recommend this book - and its writer!

All of Gary Wills books have been very good and this is no exception. I learned a great deal of Saint Ambrose and Augustine. Life in Milan and the politics of early Christianity. Imagine dealing with Roman Emperors who were still executing Christians. Imagine dealing with Pagan religions and then dealing with Christina beliefs that ran contrary to what we believe in today. Then imagine dealing with different geographical differences. Fascinating times, fascinating person and fascinating book. Worth the read.

Garry Wills does it again. Sound Christian theology serves the basis for documenting the

intersection of these two great early Christian theologians. We also get to see their differences and the circumstances that drove those differences. Highly recommended read.

I chose this rating because Garry Wills is a genius at explaining things, whether it is The Gettysburg Address, or why he is a Catholic, or whether or not priests are actually needed. In this book, he explains the origins and meaning of baptism. To say that it is an enlightening work, is an oversimplification. It increases your wisdom and intelligence.

Here is a fascinating, insightful work on a particular little slice of church history. Garry Wills' *Font of Life: Ambrose, Augustine, & the Mystery of Baptism* explores the nature of 4th century baptism in Milan and in Hippo through the stories of the two figures that dominated those two cities in that time: Ambrose and Augustine, respectively. The book also explores the complex relationship between Ambrose and Augustine and how, over time, Augustine was driven to a more explicit appreciation for Ambrose as he, Augustine, conflicted with the Pelagians (who likewise attempted to appeal to Ambrose). The baptismal details are utterly fascinating. Wills demonstrates Ambrose's almost theatrical approach to the act of baptism with persuasive detail. This is not to say that Ambrose indulged in empty, cheap theatrics. Rather, it is simply to say that Ambrose developed a much more exhaustive, detailed and visual pageantry around the act than Augustine would after his departure from Milan for Hippo. To some extent, Ambrose's approach to baptism was shaped by his battle with the Arians just as Augustine's will be by his battles with the Donatists and Pelagians. Augustine's more scaled-back approach would also be influenced by the more rustic and less-sophisticated nature of Hippo itself, in contrast to Milan. As a Baptist Christian, the details of the baptismal practices of both men challenged me in many ways. On the one hand, the seriousness with which they approached the preparatory rites for the catechumens has caused me to think long and hard about the amount of care we take in preparing people for baptism today. While Ambrose's approach was more exhaustive on the front end, he also held to an inappropriate (if I dare say it) degree of progressive revelation concerning the mysteries of the faith, many of which were only revealed in more detail after the act. Augustine's pre-baptism activities were less detailed overall but more forthright and, in this sense, preferable to Ambrose's. I was also appreciative of Augustine's freedom of thought in not tying the act of baptism so stridently to Easter and being willing to baptize whenever it was needed. In short, there was, I think, I kind of helpful reductionism in Augustine's approach to baptism whereby he honed the act more succinctly and more strategically (a relative term, I know) than Ambrose's more flamboyant approach. The relationship between the two men

was very interesting, as Wills demonstrates with great effect. In fact, it is legitimate to ask whether or not there really was a "relationship" *per se* between Ambrose and Augustine at all. The younger Augustine found Ambrose to be an admirable, imposing but somewhat aloof character as he prepared for his own baptism at the Milanese bishop's hands. One can feel the frustration in Augustine's complaint that all he wanted was a few minutes with the bishop to ask some important questions, but also the admiration in Augustine that the bishop was so busy and so focused in handling the behemoth amount of tasks before him that he could not grant such coveted one-on-one time. Augustine appears to have shaped some of his ecclesiastical practices in contrast to Ambrose, but there is no real hint that this is done vapidly or merely to make a point. Again, Augustine's circumstances and the nature of North African Christianity played their own parts here. In the end, Augustine is driven back to an appreciation for Ambrose and employs the man's name and writings effectively in his battle with the Pelagians. While a skeptical reading of this may suggest that Augustine simply needed Ambrose's name, it seems evident enough that, despite their differences, Ambrose did indeed leave a significant mark on Augustine that lasted throughout Augustine's life. This is a wonderful and very insightful book on a fascinating period in Christian history. Check it out.

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