Book Review. Font of Life: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Mystery of Baptism, by Garry Wills. Theology

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One of America's pre-eminent Catholic scholars, Garry Wills has written on subjects as diverse as the Kennedy family, Martial's *Epigrams*, Abraham Lincoln and the writings of St Paul. Departing from his previous focus on American history and politics, Wills now publishes mainly on the subjects of early Christianity and contemporary Catholicism. His latest book, *Font of Life*, takes up in greater detail subjects he has touched on in his biography *Saint Augustine* (1999), his new translation of Augustine's *Confessions* (2008) for Penguin Classics and Augustine's *“Confessions”: A Biography* (2011).

Although *Font of Life* is ostensibly about baptism, it becomes obvious in the final chapter that Wills is more interested in the relationship of Ambrose to Augustine. Thus, his book is really a dual biography, a study in contrasts. And when the reader begins to understand this, it becomes easier to fathom why Wills devotes two whole chapters to subjects that have nothing to do with baptism, namely Ambrose's public struggle with the Arian emperor Valentinian over control of Milan's churches and his epistolary exchange with Symmachus over the proposed restoration of the Altar of Victory in Rome. Wills digresses on these topics because Augustine was in Milan at the time of the struggle and Symmachus was his patron in Rome before his move to Milan. More to the point, Wills argues that, while Augustine initially distanced himself from Ambrose's more heavy-handed tactics, he later embraced them in dealing with the twin threats of Donatism and Pelagianism. Similarly, whereas Augustine is supposed to have downplayed relics and miracles in the period immediately after his conversion, he is shown to have later used relics of St Stephen in much the same way that Ambrose had earlier used the relics of SS Gervase and Protase.

Wills' primary argument is encapsulated in the title of his eleventh and final chapter, “Augustine Needs Ambrose.” It is not a question of Augustine's theology of baptism being deficient, although that would have made the book very interesting indeed, but of Augustine needing the force of Ambrose's personality. In order to illustrate (literally) his point, Wills introduces artistic depictions of the two saints. Whereas Ambrose is shown triumphing over his heretical foes, Augustine is portrayed as a scholar in his study. Wills also argues that Ambrose had little influence on Augustine at the time of his conversion, except for the baptismal instruction imparted. Instead, Augustine owed far more to Simplician, who had earlier baptised Ambrose and would succeed him as bishop of Milan.

A small and attractively produced book, *Font of Life* is a fascinating character study of two leading figures in the early Church. Along the way, it teaches the reader plenty about ancient baptismal rites, early Christian architecture and typological readings of Scripture. Garry Wills has shown once again why St Augustine – and St Ambrose, by extension – remains relevant to contemporary Christianity.

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