



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 9 January 2008*

Saint Augustine of Hippo (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the great Christmas festivities, I would like to return to the meditations on the Fathers of the Church and speak today of the greatest Father of the Latin Church, St Augustine. This man of passion and faith, of the highest intelligence and tireless in his pastoral care, a great Saint and Doctor of the Church is often known, at least by hearsay, even by those who ignore Christianity or who are not familiar with it, because he left a very deep mark on the cultural life of the West and on the whole world. Because of his special importance St Augustine's influence was widespread. It could be said on the one hand that all the roads of Latin Christian literature led to Hippo (today Annaba, on the coast of Algeria), the place where he was Bishop from 395 to his death in 430, and, on the other, that from this city of Roman Africa, many other roads of later Christianity and of Western culture itself branched out.

A civilization has seldom encountered such a great spirit who was able to assimilate Christianity's values and exalt its intrinsic wealth, inventing ideas and forms that were to nourish the future generations, as Paul VI also stressed: "It may be said that all the thought-currents of the past meet in his works and form the source which provides the whole doctrinal tradition of succeeding ages" (*Inaugural Address* at the Patristic Institute of the "Augustinianum", 4 May 1970; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 May 1970, p. 8). Augustine is also the Father of the Church who left the greatest number of works. Possidius, his biographer, said that it seemed impossible that one man could have written so many things in his lifetime. We shall speak of these

different works at one of our meetings soon. Today, we shall focus on his life, which is easy to reconstruct from his writings, in particular the *Confessions*, his extraordinary spiritual autobiography written in praise of God. This is his most famous work; and rightly so, since it is precisely Augustine's *Confessions*, with their focus on interiority and psychology, that constitute a unique model in Western (and not only Western) literature—including non-religious literature—up to modern times. This attention to the spiritual life, to the mystery of the "I", to the mystery of God who is concealed in the "I", is something quite extraordinary, without precedent, and remains for ever, as it were, a spiritual "peak".

But to come back to his life: Augustine was born in Tagaste in the Roman Province of Numidia, Africa, on 13 November 354 to Patricius, a pagan who later became a catechumen, and Monica, a fervent Christian. This passionate woman, venerated as a saint, exercised an enormous influence on her son and raised him in the Christian faith. Augustine had also received the salt, a sign of acceptance in the catechumenate, and was always fascinated by the figure of Jesus Christ; indeed, he said that he had always loved Jesus but had drifted further and further away from ecclesial faith and practice, as also happens to many young people today.

Augustine also had a brother, Navigius, and a sister whose name is unknown to us and who, after being widowed subsequently became the head of a monastery for women. As a boy with a very keen intelligence, Augustine received a good education although he was not always an exemplary student. However, he learned grammar well, first in his native town and then in Madaura, and from 370, he studied rhetoric in Carthage, the capital of Roman Africa. He mastered Latin perfectly but was not quite as successful with Greek and did not learn Punic, spoken by his contemporaries. It was in Carthage itself that for the first time Augustine read the *Hortensius*, a writing by Cicero later lost, an event that can be placed at the beginning of his journey towards conversion. In fact, Cicero's text awoke within him love for wisdom, as, by then a Bishop, he was to write in his *Confessions*: "The book changed my feelings", to the extent that "every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart" (III, 4, 7).

However, since he was convinced that without Jesus the truth cannot be said effectively to have been found and since Jesus' Name was not mentioned in this book, immediately after he read it he began to read Scripture, the Bible. But it disappointed him. This was not only because the Latin style of the translation of the Sacred Scriptures was inadequate but also because to him their content itself did not seem satisfying. In the scriptural narratives of wars and other human vicissitudes, he discovered neither the loftiness of philosophy nor the splendour of the search for the truth which is part of it. Yet he did not want to live without God and thus sought a religion which corresponded to his desire for the truth and also with his desire to draw close to Jesus. Thus, he fell into the net of the Manicheans, who presented themselves as Christians and promised a totally rational religion. They said that the world was divided into two principles: good and evil. And in this way the whole complexity of human history can be explained. Their dualistic morals also pleased St Augustine, because it included a very high morality for the elect: and those like him

who adhered to it could live a life better suited to the situation of the time, especially for a young man. He therefore became a Manichean, convinced at that time that he had found the synthesis between rationality and the search for the truth and love of Jesus Christ. Manicheanism also offered him a concrete advantage in life: joining the Manicheans facilitated the prospects of a career. By belonging to that religion, which included so many influential figures, he was able to continue his relationship with a woman and to advance in his career. By this woman he had a son, Adeodatus, who was very dear to him and very intelligent, who was later to be present during the preparation for Baptism near Lake Como, taking part in those "Dialogues" which St Augustine has passed down to us. The boy unfortunately died prematurely. Having been a grammar teacher since his twenties in the city of his birth, he soon returned to Carthage, where he became a brilliant and famous teacher of rhetoric. However, with time Augustine began to distance himself from the faith of the Manicheans. They disappointed him precisely from the intellectual viewpoint since they proved incapable of dispelling his doubts. He moved to Rome and then to Milan, where the imperial court resided at that time and where he obtained a prestigious post through the good offices and recommendations of the Prefect of Rome, Symmacus, a pagan hostile to St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan.

In Milan, Augustine acquired the habit of listening - at first for the purpose of enriching his rhetorical baggage - to the eloquent preaching of Bishop Ambrose, who had been a representative of the Emperor for Northern Italy. The African rhetorician was fascinated by the words of the great Milanese Prelate; and not only by his rhetoric. It was above all the content that increasingly touched Augustine's heart. The great difficulty with the Old Testament, because of its lack of rhetorical beauty and lofty philosophy was resolved in St Ambrose's preaching through his typological interpretation of the Old Testament: Augustine realized that the whole of the Old Testament was a journey toward Jesus Christ. Thus, he found the key to understanding the beauty and even the philosophical depth of the Old Testament and grasped the whole unity of the mystery of Christ in history, as well as the synthesis between philosophy, rationality and faith in the *Logos*, in Christ, the Eternal Word who was made flesh.

Augustine soon realized that the allegorical interpretation of Scripture and the Neo-Platonic philosophy practised by the Bishop of Milan enabled him to solve the intellectual difficulties which, when he was younger during his first approach to the biblical texts, had seemed insurmountable to him.

Thus, Augustine followed his reading of the philosophers' writings by reading Scripture anew, especially the Pauline Letters. His conversion to Christianity on 15 August 386 therefore came at the end of a long and tormented inner journey - of which we shall speak in another catechesis -, and the African moved to the countryside, north of Milan by Lake Como - with his mother Monica, his son Adeodatus and a small group of friends - to prepare himself for Baptism. So it was that at the age of 32 Augustine was baptized by Ambrose in the Cathedral of Milan on 24 April 387, during the Easter Vigil.

After his Baptism, Augustine decided to return to Africa with his friends, with the idea of living a community life of the monastic kind at the service of God. However, while awaiting their departure in Ostia, his mother fell ill unexpectedly and died shortly afterwards, breaking her son's heart. Having returned to his homeland at last, the convert settled in Hippo for the very purpose of founding a monastery. In this city on the African coast he was ordained a priest in 391, despite his reticence, and with a few companions began the monastic life which had long been in his mind, dividing his time between prayer, study and preaching. All he wanted was to be at the service of the truth. He did not feel he had a vocation to pastoral life but realized later that God was calling him to be a pastor among others and thus to offer people the gift of the truth. He was ordained a Bishop in Hippo four years later, in 395. Augustine continued to deepen his study of Scripture and of the texts of the Christian tradition and was an exemplary Bishop in his tireless pastoral commitment: he preached several times a week to his faithful, supported the poor and orphans, supervised the formation of the clergy and the organization of mens' and womens' monasteries. In short, the former rhetorician asserted himself as one of the most important exponents of Christianity of that time. He was very active in the government of his Diocese - with remarkable, even civil, implications - in the more than 35 years of his Episcopate, and the Bishop of Hippo actually exercised a vast influence in his guidance of the Catholic Church in Roman Africa and, more generally, in the Christianity of his time, coping with religious tendencies and tenacious, disruptive heresies such as Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism, which endangered the Christian faith in the one God, rich in mercy.

And Augustine entrusted himself to God every day until the very end of his life: smitten by fever, while for almost three months his Hippo was being besieged by vandal invaders, the Bishop - his friend Possidius recounts in his *Vita Augustini* - asked that the penitential psalms be transcribed in large characters, "and that the sheets be attached to the wall, so that while he was bedridden during his illness he could see and read them and he shed constant hot tears" (31, 2). This is how Augustine spent the last days of his life. He died on 28 August 430, when he was not yet 76. We will devote our next encounters to his work, his message and his inner experience.

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I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially the student groups from Australia and the United States. I greet the group of deacons from the Archdiocese of Dubuque, and I thank the choir for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings of joy and peace.

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