



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 27 February 2008*

Saint Augustine of Hippo (5)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With today's meeting I wish to conclude the presentation of the figure of St Augustine. After having dwelt on his life, works and some aspects of his thought, I would like today to return to his inner experience which made him one of Christian history's greatest converts. Last year, [during my Pilgrimage to Pavia](#) to venerate the mortal remains of this Father of the Church, I particularly dedicated my reflection to this experience of his. By doing so I wished to express to him the homage of the entire Catholic Church, but also to manifest my personal devotion and gratitude in regard to a figure to whom I feel very linked for the role he has had in my life as a theologian, priest and pastor.

Today, it is still possible to trace St Augustine's experiences, thanks above all to the *Confessions*, written to praise God and which are at the origin of one of the most specific literary forms of the West, the autobiography or personal expression of one's self-knowledge. Well, anyone who encounters this extraordinary and fascinating book, still widely read today, soon realizes that Augustine's conversion was not sudden or fully accomplished at the beginning, but can be defined, rather, as a true and proper journey that remains a model for each one of us. This itinerary certainly culminated with his conversion and then with baptism, but it was not concluded in that Easter Vigil of the year 387, when the African rhetorician was baptized in Milan by Bishop Ambrose. Augustine's journey of conversion, in fact, humbly continued to the very end of his life, so much so that one can truly say that his various steps - and three can be easily distinguished -

are one single great conversion.

St Augustine was a passionate seeker of truth: he was from the beginning and then throughout his life. The first step of his conversion journey was accomplished exactly in his progressive nearing to Christianity. Actually, he had received from his mother Monica, to whom he would always remain very closely bound, a Christian education, and even though he lived an errant life during the years of his youth, he always felt a deep attraction to Christ, having drunk in with his mother's milk the love for the Lord's Name, as he himself emphasizes (cf. *Confessions*, III, 4, 8). But also philosophy, especially that of a Platonic stamp, led him even closer to Christ, revealing to him the existence of the *Logos* or creative reason. Philosophy books showed him the existence of reason, from which the whole world came, but they could not tell him how to reach this *Logos*, which seemed so distant. Only by reading St Paul's Epistles within the faith of the Catholic Church was the truth fully revealed to him. This experience was summarized by Augustine in one of the most famous passages of the *Confessions*: he recounts that, in the torment of his reflections, withdrawing to a garden, he suddenly heard a child's voice chanting a rhyme never heard before: *tolle, lege, tolle, lege*, "pick up and read, pick up and read" (VIII, 12, 29). He then remembered the conversion of Anthony, the Father of Monasticism, and carefully returned to the Pauline codex that he had recently read, opened it, and his glance fell on the passage of the Epistle to the Romans where the Apostle exhorts to abandon the works of the flesh and to be clothed with Christ (cf. 13: 13-14). He understood that those words in that moment were addressed personally to him; they came from God through the Apostle and indicated to him what he had to do at that time. Thus, he felt the darkness of doubt clearing and he finally found himself free to give himself entirely to Christ: he described it as "your converting me to yourself" (*Confessions*, VIII, 12, 30). This was the first and decisive conversion.

The African rhetorician reached this fundamental step in his long journey thanks to his passion for man and for the truth, a passion that led him to seek God, the great and inaccessible One. Faith in Christ made him understand that God, apparently so distant, in reality was not that at all. He in fact made himself near to us, becoming one of us. In this sense, faith in Christ brought Augustine's long search on the journey to truth to completion. Only a God who made himself "tangible", one of us, was finally a God to whom he could pray, for whom and with whom he could live. This is the way to take with courage and at the same time with humility, open to a permanent purification which each of us always needs. But with the Easter Vigil of 387, as we have said, Augustine's journey was not finished. He returned to Africa and founded a small monastery where he retreated with a few friends to dedicate himself to the contemplative life and study. This was his life's dream. Now he was called to live totally for the truth, with the truth, in friendship with Christ who is truth: a beautiful dream that lasted three years, until he was, against his will, ordained a priest at Hippo and destined to serve the faithful, continuing, yes, to live with Christ and for Christ, but at the service of all. This was very difficult for him, but he understood from the beginning that only by living for others, and not simply for his private contemplation, could he really live with Christ and for Christ.

Thus, renouncing a life solely of meditation, Augustine learned, often with difficulty, to make the fruit of his intelligence available to others. He learned to communicate his faith to simple people and thus learned to live for them in what became his hometown, tirelessly carrying out a generous and onerous activity which he describes in one of his most beautiful sermons: "To preach continuously, discuss, reiterate, edify, be at the disposal of everyone - it is an enormous responsibility, a great weight, an immense effort" (*Sermon*, 339, 4). But he took this weight upon himself, understanding that it was exactly in this way that he could be closer to Christ. To understand that one reaches others with simplicity and humility was his true second conversion.

But there is a last step to Augustine's journey, a third conversion, that brought him every day of his life to ask God for pardon. Initially, he thought that once he was baptized, in the life of communion with Christ, in the sacraments, in the Eucharistic celebration, he would attain the life proposed in the Sermon on the Mount: the perfection bestowed by Baptism and reconfirmed in the Eucharist. During the last part of his life he understood that what he had concluded at the beginning about the Sermon on the Mount - that is, now that we are Christians, we live this ideal permanently - was mistaken. Only Christ himself truly and completely accomplishes the Sermon on the Mount. We always need to be washed by Christ, who washes our feet, and be renewed by him. We need permanent conversion. Until the end we need this humility that recognizes that we are sinners journeying along, until the Lord gives us his hand definitively and introduces us into eternal life. It was in this final attitude of humility, lived day after day, that Augustine died.

This attitude of profound humility before the only Lord Jesus led him also to experience an intellectual humility. Augustine, in fact, who is one of the great figures in the history of thought, in the last years of his life wanted to submit all his numerous works to a clear, critical examination. This was the origin of the *Retractationum* ("Revision"), which placed his truly great theological thought within the humble and holy faith that he simply refers to by the name *Catholic*, that is, of the Church. He wrote in this truly original book: "I understood that only One is truly perfect, and that the words of the Sermon on the Mount are completely realized in only One - in Jesus Christ himself. The whole Church, instead - all of us, including the Apostles -, must pray everyday: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (*De Sermone Domini in Monte*, I, 19, 1-3).

Augustine converted to Christ who is truth and love, followed him throughout his life and became a model for every human being, for all of us in search of God. This is why I wanted to ideally conclude my Pilgrimage to Pavia by consigning to the Church and to the world, before the tomb of this great lover of God, my first Encyclical entitled *Deus Caritas Est*. I owe much, in fact, especially in the first part, to Augustine's thought. Even today, as in his time, humanity needs to know and above all to live this fundamental reality: God is love, and the encounter with him is the only response to the restlessness of the human heart; a heart inhabited by hope, still perhaps obscure and unconscious in many of our contemporaries but which already today opens us Christians to the future, so much so that St Paul wrote that "in this hope we were saved" (Rom 8: 24). I wished

to devote my second Encyclical to hope, *Spe Salvi*, and it is also largely indebted to Augustine and his encounter with God.

In a beautiful passage, St Augustine defines prayer as the expression of desire and affirms that God responds by moving our hearts toward him. On our part we must purify our desires and our hopes to welcome the sweetness of God (cf. *In I Ioannis* 4, 6). Indeed, only this opening of ourselves to others saves us. Let us pray, therefore, that we can follow the example of this great convert every day of our lives, and in every moment of our life encounter the Lord Jesus, the only One who saves us, purifies us and gives us true joy, true life.

Vatican Basilica

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking visitors present here today. May your stay in Rome strengthen your faith, and grant you courage to continue your Lenten journey in prayer, fasting, reconciliation and compassion. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings of joy and peace!

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Paul VI Audience Hall

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present today, including the many student groups and the pilgrims from England, Sweden, Malta, Japan, Canada and the United States. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *youth*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear brothers and sisters, following the Lenten itinerary, the Church invites us to follow in Christ's footsteps, which direct us toward Jerusalem where he will complete his redemptive mission. Let yourselves be enlightened by his Word, so that in study, sickness or family life you may experience his presence and tread the path of authentic conversion in this holy time of penance.

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