



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 30 January 2008

Saint Augustine of Hippo (3)

Dear Friends,

After the [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#) we return today to the important figure of St Augustine. In 1986, the 16th centenary of his conversion, my beloved Predecessor John Paul II dedicated a long, full Document to him, the Apostolic Letter [Augustinum Hipponensem](#). The Pope himself chose to describe this text as "a thanksgiving to God for the gift that he has made to the Church, and through her to the whole human race". I would like to return to the topic of conversion at another Audience. It is a fundamental theme not only for Augustine's personal life but also for ours. In last Sunday's Gospel the Lord himself summed up his preaching with the word: "Repent". By following in St Augustine's footsteps, we will be able to meditate on what this conversion is: it is something definitive, decisive, but the fundamental decision must develop, be brought about throughout our life.

Today's Catechesis, however, is dedicated to the subject of faith and reason, a crucial, or better, the crucial theme for St Augustine's biography. As a child he learned the Catholic faith from Monica, his mother. But he abandoned this faith as an adolescent because he could no longer discern its reasonableness and rejected a religion that was not, to his mind, also an expression of reason, that is, of the truth. His thirst for truth was radical and therefore led him to drift away from the Catholic faith. Yet his radicalism was such that he could not be satisfied with philosophies that did not go to the truth itself, that did not go to God and to a God who was not only the ultimate cosmological hypothesis but the true God, the God who gives life and enters into our lives.

Thus, Augustine's entire intellectual and spiritual development is also a valid model today in the relationship between faith and reason, a subject not only for believers but for every person who seeks the truth, a central theme for the balance and destiny of every human being. These two dimensions, faith and reason, should not be separated or placed in opposition; rather, they must always go hand in hand. As Augustine himself wrote after his conversion, faith and reason are "the two forces that lead us to knowledge" (*Contra Academicos*, III, 20, 43). In this regard, through the two rightly famous Augustinian formulas (cf. *Sermones*, 43, 9) that express this coherent synthesis of faith and reason: *crede ut intelligas* ("I believe in order to understand") - believing paves the way to crossing the threshold of the truth - but also, and inseparably, *intellige ut credas* ("I understand, the better to believe"), the believer scrutinizes the truth to be able to find God and to believe.

Augustine's two affirmations express with effective immediacy and as much corresponding depth the synthesis of this problem in which the Catholic Church sees her own journey expressed. This synthesis had been acquiring its form in history even before Christ's coming, in the encounter between the Hebrew faith and Greek thought in Hellenistic Judaism. At a later period this synthesis was taken up and developed by many Christian thinkers. The harmony between faith and reason means above all that God is not remote: he is not far from our reason and our life; he is close to every human being, close to our hearts and to our reason, if we truly set out on the journey.

Augustine felt this closeness of God to man with extraordinary intensity. God's presence in man is profound and at the same time mysterious, but he can recognize and discover it deep down inside himself. "Do not go outside", the convert says, but "return to within yourself; truth dwells in the inner man; and if you find that your nature is changeable, transcend yourself. But remember, when you transcend yourself, you are transcending a soul that reasons. Reach, therefore, to where the light of reason is lit" (*De vera religione*, 39, 72). It is just like what he himself stresses with a very famous statement at the beginning of the *Confessions*, a spiritual biography which he wrote in praise of God: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (I, 1, 1).

God's remoteness is therefore equivalent to remoteness from oneself: "But", Augustine admitted (*Confessions*, III, 6, 11), addressing God directly, "you were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me", *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*; so that, as he adds in another passage remembering the period before his conversion, "you were there before me, but I had departed from myself. I could not even find myself, much less you" (*Confessions*, V, 2, 2). Precisely because Augustine lived this intellectual and spiritual journey in the first person, he could portray it in his works with such immediacy, depth and wisdom, recognizing in two other famous passages from the *Confessions* (IV, 4, 9 and 14, 22), that man is "a great enigma" (*magna quaestio*) and "a great abyss" (*grande profundum*), an enigma and an abyss that only Christ can illuminate and save us from. This is important: a man who is distant from God is also distant from himself, alienated from himself, and can only find himself by

encountering God. In this way he will come back to himself, to his true self, to his true identity.

The human being, Augustine stresses later in *De Civitate Dei* (XII, 27), is social by nature but antisocial by vice and is saved by Christ, the one Mediator between God and humanity and the "universal way of liberty and salvation", as my Predecessor John Paul II said (*Augustinum Hipponensem*, n. 3). Outside this way, "which has never been lacking for the human race", St Augustine says further, "no one has been set free, no one will be set free" (*De Civitate Dei*, X, 32, 2). As the one Mediator of salvation Christ is Head of the Church and mystically united with her to the point that Augustine could say: "We have become Christ. For, if he is the Head, we, the members; he and we together are the whole man" (*In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 21, 8).

People of God and house of God: the Church in Augustine's vision is therefore closely bound to the concept of the Body of Christ, founded on the Christological reinterpretation of the Old Testament and on the sacramental life centred on the Eucharist, in which the Lord gives us his Body and transforms us into his Body. It is then fundamental that the Church, the People of God in a Christological and not a sociological sense, be truly inserted into Christ, who, as Augustine says in a beautiful passage, "prays for us, prays in us and prays by us; he prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, and he prays by us as our God: let us therefore recognize him as our voice and ourselves as his" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 85, 1).

At the end of the Apostolic Letter *Augustinum Hipponensem*, John Paul II wished to ask the Saint himself what he would have to say to the people of today and answers first of all with the words Augustine entrusted to a letter dictated shortly after his conversion: "It seems to me that the hope of finding the truth must be restored to humankind" (*Epistulae*, 1, 1); that truth which is Christ himself, true God, to whom is addressed one of the most beautiful prayers and most famous of the *Confessions* (X, 27, 38): "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. "You called and cried aloud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours".

Here then, Augustine encountered God and throughout his life experienced him to the point that this reality - which is primarily his meeting with a Person, Jesus - changed his life, as it changes the lives of everyone, men and women, who in every age have the grace to encounter him. Let us pray that the Lord will grant us this grace and thereby enable us to find his peace.

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including groups from England, Scotland, Hong Kong and the United States of America. I greet especially the representatives of the Pontifical Mission Societies and the group who are preparing to be ordained deacons. Upon all of you, and upon your families and loved ones, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Tomorrow is the liturgical Memorial of St John Bosco, a priest and educator. Look to him, dear *young people*, especially you candidates for Confirmation from Serroni di Battipaglia, as an authentic teacher of life. You, dear *sick people*, learn from his spiritual experience and trust in every circumstance in the Crucified Christ. And you, dear *newly-weds*, have recourse to his intercession to take on your mission as spouses with generous commitment.

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