



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 20 February 2008

Saint Augustine of Hippo (4)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the interruption for the Spiritual Exercises last week, today we return to the important figure of St Augustine, about whom I have repeatedly spoken at the Wednesday Catecheses. He is the Father of the Church who left us the greatest number of works and I intend to speak briefly of them today. Some of Augustine's writings were of major importance, not only for the history of Christianity but also for the formation of the whole of Western culture. The clearest example is the *Confessiones*, undoubtedly one of the most widely read books of Christian antiquity. Like various Fathers of the Church in the first centuries but on an incomparably larger scale, the Bishop of Hippo in fact exercised an extensive and persistent influence, as already appears from the superabundant manuscript transcriptions of his works, which are indeed extremely numerous.

He reviewed them himself in the *Retractationum* several years before he died, and shortly after his death they were correctly recorded in the *Indiculus* ("list") added by his faithful friend Possidius to his biography of St Augustine, *Vita Augustini*. The list of Augustine's works was drafted with the explicit intention of keeping their memory alive while the Vandal invasion was sweeping through all of Roman Africa, and it included at least 1,030 writings numbered by their Author, with others "that cannot be numbered because he did not give them any number". Possidius, the Bishop of a neighbouring city, dictated these words in Hippo itself - where he had taken refuge and where he witnessed his friend's death -, and it is almost certain that he based his list on the catalogue of Augustine's personal library. Today, more than 300 letters of the Bishop of Hippo and almost 600

homilies are extant, but originally there were far more, perhaps even as many as between 3,000 and 4,000, the result of 40 years of preaching by the former rhetorician who had chosen to follow Jesus and no longer to speak to important figures of the imperial court, but rather, to the simple populace of Hippo.

And in recent years the discoveries of a collection of letters and several homilies have further enriched our knowledge of this great Father of the Church. "He wrote and published many books", Possidius wrote, "many sermons were delivered in church, transcribed and corrected, both to refute the various heresies and to interpret the Sacred Scriptures for the edification of the holy children of the Church. These works", his Bishop-friend emphasized, "are so numerous that a scholar would find it difficult to read them all and learn to know them" (*Vita Augustini*, 18, 9).

In the literary corpus of Augustine - more than 1,000 publications divided into philosophical, apologetic, doctrinal, moral, monastic, exegetic and anti-heretical writings in addition precisely to the letters and homilies - certain exceptional works of immense theological and philosophical breadth stand out. First of all, it is essential to remember the *Confessiones* mentioned above, written in 13 books between 397 and 400 in praise of God. They are a sort of autobiography in the form of a dialogue with God. This literary genre actually mirrors St Augustine's life, which was not one closed in on itself, dispersed in many things, but was lived substantially as a dialogue with God, hence, a life with others. The title "*Confessiones*" indicates the specific nature of this autobiography. In Christian Latin this word, *confessiones*, developed from the tradition of the Psalms and has two meanings that are nevertheless interwoven. In the first place *confessiones* means the confession of our own faults, of the wretchedness of sin; but at the same time, *confessiones* also means praise of God, thanksgiving to God. Seeing our own wretchedness in the light of God becomes praise to God and thanksgiving, for God loves and accepts us, transforms us and raises us to himself. Of these *Confessiones*, which met with great success during his lifetime, St Augustine wrote: "They exercised such an influence on me while I was writing them and still exercise it when I reread them. Many brothers like these works" (*Retractationum*, II, 6); and I can say that I am one of these "brothers". Thanks to the *Confessiones*, moreover, we can follow step by step the inner journey of this extraordinary and passionate man of God. A less well-known but equally original and very important text is the *Retractationum*, composed in two books in about 427 A.D., in which St Augustine, by then elderly, set down a "revision" (*retractatio*) of his entire opus, thereby bequeathing to us a unique and very precious literary document but also a teaching of sincerity and intellectual humility.

De Civitate Dei - an impressive work crucial to the development of Western political thought and the Christian theology of history - was written between 413 and 426 in 22 books. The occasion was the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410. Numerous pagans still alive and also many Christians said: Rome has fallen; the Christian God and the Apostles can now no longer protect the city. While the pagan divinities were present, Rome was the *caput mundi*, the great capital, and no one could have imagined that it would fall into enemy hands. Now, with the Christian God, this great

city no longer seemed safe. Therefore, the God of the Christians did not protect, he could not be the God to whom to entrust oneself. St Augustine answered this objection, which also touched Christian hearts profoundly, with this impressive work, *De Civitate Dei*, explaining what we should and should not expect of God, and what the relationship is between the political sphere and the sphere of faith, of the Church. This book is also today a source for defining clearly between true secularism and the Church's competence, the great true hope that the faith gives to us.

This important book presents the history of humanity governed by divine Providence but currently divided by two loves. This is the fundamental plan, its interpretation of history, which is the struggle between two loves: love of self, "to the point of indifference to God", and love of God, "to the point of indifference to the self" (*De Civitate Dei* XIV, 28), to full freedom from the self for others in the light of God. This, therefore, is perhaps St Augustine's greatest book and is of lasting importance. Equally important is the *De Trinitate*, a work in 15 books on the central core of the Christian faith, faith in the Trinitarian God. It was written in two phases: the first 12 books between 399 and 412, published without the knowledge of Augustine, who in about 420 completed and revised the entire work. Here he reflects on the Face of God and seeks to understand this mystery of God who is unique, the one Creator of the world, of us all, and yet this one God is precisely Trinitarian, a circle of love. He seeks to understand the unfathomable mystery: the actual Trinitarian being, in three Persons, is the most real and profound unity of the one God. *De Doctrina Christiana* is instead a true and proper cultural introduction to the interpretation of the Bible and ultimately of Christianity itself, which had a crucial importance in the formation of Western culture.

Despite all his humility, Augustine must certainly have been aware of his own intellectual stature. Yet it was far more important to him to take the Christian message to the simple than to write lofty theological works. This deepest intention of his that guided his entire life appears in a letter written to his colleague Evodius, in which he informs him of his decision to suspend the dictation of the books of *De Trinitate* for the time being, "because they are too demanding and I think that few can understand them; it is therefore urgent to have more texts which we hope will be useful to many" (*Epistulae* 169, 1, 1). Thus, it served his purpose better to communicate the faith in a manner that all could understand rather than to write great theological works. The responsibility he felt acutely with regard to the popularization of the Christian message was later to become the origin of writings such as *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, a theory and also a method of catechesis, or the *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*. The Donatists were the great problem of St Augustine's Africa, a deliberately African schism. They said: true Christianity is African Christianity. They opposed Church unity. The great Bishop fought against this schism all his life, seeking to convince the Donatists that only in unity could "Africanness" also be true. And to make himself understood by the simple, who could not understand the difficult Latin of the rhetorician, he said: I must even write with grammatical errors, in a very simplified Latin. And he did so, especially in this *Psalmus*, a sort of simple poem against the Donatists, in order to help all the people understand that it is only through Church unity that our relationship with God may be truly fulfilled for all and that peace

may grow in the world.

The mass of homilies that he would often deliver "off the cuff", transcribed by tachygraphers during his preaching and immediately circulated, had a special importance in this production destined for a wider public. The very beautiful *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, read widely in the Middle Ages, stand out among them. The practice of publishing Augustine's thousands of homilies - often without the author's control - precisely explains their dissemination and later dispersion but also their vitality. In fact, because of the author's fame, the Bishop of Hippo's sermons became very sought after texts and, adapted to ever new contexts, also served as models for other Bishops and priests.

A fresco in the Lateran that dates back to the fourth century shows that the iconographical tradition already depicted St Augustine with a book in his hand, suggesting, of course, his literary opus which had such a strong influence on the Christian mentality and Christian thought, but it also suggests his love for books and reading as well as his knowledge of the great culture of the past. At his death he left nothing, Possidius recounts, but "recommended that the library of the church with all the codes be kept carefully for future generations", especially those of his own works. In these, Possidius stresses, Augustine is "ever alive" and benefits his readers, although "I believe that those who were able to see and listen to him were able to draw greater benefit from being in touch with him when he himself was speaking in church, and especially those who experienced his daily life among the people" (*Vita Augustini*, 31). Yes, for us too it would have been beautiful to be able to hear him speaking. Nonetheless, he is truly alive in his writings and present in us, and so we too see the enduring vitality of the faith to which he devoted his entire life.

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Vatican Basilica

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking pilgrims gathered here in the Basilica of Saint Peter. Lent is a privileged time for all Christians to recommit themselves to conversion and spiritual renewal. In this way, we rekindle a genuine faith in Christ, a life-giving relationship with God and a more fervent dedication to the Gospel. Strengthened by the conviction that love is the distinguishing mark of Christian believers, I encourage you to persevere in bearing witness to charity in your daily lives.

Paul VI Audience Hall

I cordially greet all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's audience. I extend a particular welcome to parishioners from the Church of Our Lady of Loretto in New York, as well as Benedictines participating in an intensive course on the rule of their order. A blessed Lent to you all!

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