

ON ST. AUGUSTINE'S SEARCH FOR TRUTH

"Faith and Reason Are the Two Forces That Lead Us to Knowledge "

VATICAN CITY, JAN. 30, 2008 (Zenit.org).- Here is a translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered today at the general audience in Paul VI Hall. The reflection is the third in a series on St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo.

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Dear friends,

After the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we return today to the great figure of St. Augustine. In 1986, on the 1,600th anniversary of his conversion, my beloved predecessor John Paul II dedicated a long and detailed document to St. Augustine, the apostolic letter "Augustinum Hipponensem."

The Pope himself chose to describe this text as "thanksgiving to God for the gift he bestowed on the Church and on all humanity with that wonderful conversion" (AAS, 74, 1982, p. 802). I would like to return to the subject of his conversion in a future audience. It is a fundamental subject, not only for St. Augustine's own personal life but for ours too. In last Sunday's Gospel, the Lord himself summarized his preaching with the words "be converted." In following the path of St. Augustine we can consider what this conversion revolves around: It is definitive, decisive, but the fundamental decision must be developed and must be accomplished throughout our lives.

Today instead, the catechesis is dedicated to the subjects of faith and reason, which are the defining themes of St. Augustine's biography. As a child he learned the Catholic faith from his mother Monica. As an adolescent he abandoned the faith because he could not see how it could be reasoned out and did not want a religion that was not also for him an expression of reason -- that is to say, truth.

His thirst for truth was radical and led him away from the Catholic faith. His radicality was such that he was not satisfied with philosophies that did not reach truth itself, and that did not reach God -- not a God as a last cosmological hypothesis, but the true God, God who gives life and joins our very lives.

The intellectual and spiritual itinerary of St. Augustine is also a valid model for today in the relationship between faith and reason, a topic not only for faithful individuals, but for every person who seeks the truth, a central theme for the equilibrium and destiny of every human being.

These two dimensions, faith and reason, should not be separated nor opposed, but rather go forward together. As Augustine himself wrote after his conversion, faith and reason are "the two forces that lead us to knowledge" ("Contra Academicos," III, 20, 43).

To this end the two famous Augustinian formulas ("Sermons," 43, 9) express this coherent synthesis between faith and reason: "Crede ut intelligas" (I believe in order to understand) -- faith opens the way to step through the door of truth -- but also, and inseparably, "intellige ut credas" (I understand in order to believe), in order to find God and believe, you must scrutinize truth.

The two assertions of St. Augustine express the synthesis of this problem in which the Catholic Church sees its own approach expressed with depth and immediacy. Historically speaking, this synthesis was formed even before the coming of Christ, with the coming together of the Jewish faith and Greek thought in Hellenistic Judaism. Subsequently, this synthesis was taken up again and developed by many Christian thinkers. The harmony between faith and reason means above all that God is not far away; he is not far from our reasoning or from our lives; he is close to every human being, close to our hearts and close to our reason if we truly follow his path.

It is precisely this closeness of God to man that Augustine experienced with extraordinary force. The presence of God in man is deep and at the same time mysterious. It can however be discovered and recognized deep down in oneself: Don't look outside of yourself, says the converted one, "but go back into yourself -- truth resides in the interior man, and if you find that your nature is changeable, transcend yourself. But remember, when you transcend yourself, that you transcend a soul which reasons. Then reach beyond -- to where the light of reason is lit" ("De vera religione," 39, 72).

He emphasizes this with a well-known assertion at the beginning of the "Confessions," a spiritual autobiography written in the praise of God: "You made us for you, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (I, 1, 1).

Distance from God means distance from oneself. Addressing his words directly to God he acknowledges ("Confessions," III, 6, 11): "You are more intimately present to me than my inmost being and higher than the highest element in me," -- "interior intimo meo et superior summo

meo" -- so that, he adds in another passage remembering the time preceding his conversion, "you were in front of me, but I, instead, had gone far from myself and could not find myself again, and even less could I find you again" (Confessiones, V, 2, 2).

Because Augustine personally experienced this intellectual and spiritual journey, he managed to convey it in his writings with immediacy, depth and wisdom; in another two famous passages of the "Confessions" (IV, 4, 9 and 14, 22), he acknowledged that man is "a great enigma" (magna quaestio) and "a deep abyss" (grande profundum), an enigma and an abyss that Christ alone enlightens and saves.

This is important: A man who is distant from God is also distant from himself, estranged from himself, he can find himself only by meeting God. This path leads to himself, to his true self and identity.

In "De Civitate Dei" (XII, 27) Augustine underlines the fact that the human being is by nature a social animal, but antisocial in his vices. Man is saved by Christ, the only mediator between God and humanity, and as repeated by my predecessor John Paul II ("Augustinum Hipponensem," 21), he is "the universal path to freedom and salvation."

In the same text, Augustine affirms that "no one has ever found freedom or will ever find freedom" ("De Civitate Dei," X, 32, 2) other than by following this path which has always been accessible to man. Christ, as the only route to salvation, is head of the Church and inscrutably united with it. Augustine affirms, "We have become Christ. In fact, if he is the head of man and we are the body, together we make up the whole" ("In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus," 21, 8).

People of God and house of God: The Church in the Augustinian vision is closely associated with the concept of the Body of Christ, based on the Christological rereading of the Old Testament and on the sacramental life centered on the Eucharist, in which the Lord gives us his Body and transforms us in his Body. It is then essential that the Church -- people of God in the Christological and not sociological sense -- be really placed in Christ, who "prays for us, prays in us, is prayed to by us," as Augustine affirms beautifully on the written page: "He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our chief, he is prayed to by us as our God: so we recognize in him our voice, and in ours, his" ("Enarrationes in Psalmos," 85, 1).

In the conclusion of the apostolic letter "Augustinum Hipponensem," John Paul II asked St. Augustine what he would say to the men of today, and he answers with the words that Augustine

dictated in a letter shortly after his conversion: "It seems to me that men have to be guided toward the hope of finding the truth" (Epistulae, 1, 1); that truth is Christ himself, true God, to whom is dedicated one the most beautiful and famous prayers of the Confessions (X, 27, 38):

"Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new,
late have I loved you!
You were within me, but I was outside,
and it was there that I searched for you.
In my unloveliness
I plunged into the lovely things which you created.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
Created things kept me from you;
yet if they had not been in you
they would have not been at all.
You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.
You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.
You breathed your fragrance on me;
I drew in breath and now I pant for you.
I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.
You touched me, and I burned for your peace."

So Augustine found God and throughout his life experienced God to the point that this reality -- which was above all an encounter with a person, Jesus Christ -- changed his life, just as it changed the lives of so many men and women who have had the grace to meet him.

Let us pray that God grants us this favor and in so doing allows us to find his peace.

[After praying the Angelus, the Holy Father greeted pilgrims in six languages. In Italian, he said:]

I extend a warm welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet the bishops who came for the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Community of Sant'Egidio, I pray that everyone strengthens the firm wish to announce Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the world to all men.

I extend a particularly special welcome to the faithful of the Parish of Santa Caterina of Nardo -- which I am told has a beautiful sea -- with a special thought for the young musicians.

Dear friends, I thank you for your presence here and I hope that this meeting increases in each of you the desire to witness with joy the Gospel in your every day life. I accompany you with my prayer, so that you may build your projects on the solid foundation of faithfulness to God. I also greet the Caritas staff from the Diocese of Sabina-Poggio Mirteto, and I encourage them to continue with generosity their work for the those most in need.

Finally, I address the young, the sick and the newlyweds.

Tomorrow we celebrate the liturgical memorial of St. John Bosco, a priest and educator. Dear young people, look to him as a true master of life, especially those of you preparing for confirmation from Serroni di Battipaglia. Dear sick ones, learn from his spiritual experience to trust in Christ whatever the circumstances. And you, dear newlyweds, ask for his intercession to help you engage in your mission of marriage with generous enthusiasm.

[Translation by Laura Leoncini]

[In English, he said:]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we continue our catechesis on Saint Augustine of Hippo, I wish today to consider some of the teachings of this great Doctor of the Church. A passionate believer, he recognized the importance of bringing together faith and reason. It was he who taught that we should believe in order to understand, and understand in order to believe. God makes himself known to our reason, although he always transcends what we can know through reason alone. As Augustine beautifully expressed it, God is "more intimately present to me than my inmost being" and "higher than the highest element in me."

Saint Augustine taught that by belonging to the Church, we are so closely united to Christ that we "become" Christ, the head whose members we are. As our head, Christ prays in us, yet he also prays for us as our priest, and we pray to him as our God. If we ask what particular message Saint Augustine has for the men and women of today, it is perhaps his emphasis on our need for truth. Listen to the way he describes his own search for God's truth: "You were within me and I sought you outside, in the beautiful things that you had made. You were with me, but I was not with you. You called me, you cried out and broke open my deafness. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you." Let us pray that we too may discover the joy of knowing God's truth.

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.

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