

ON ST. AUGUSTINE

"All the Roads of Christian Latin Literature Lead to Hippo"

VATICAN CITY, JAN. 9, 2007 (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 first in a series on St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo.

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Dear brothers and sisters,

After the Christmas holidays I would like to turn to the meditations on the Fathers of the Church and speak today of the greatest Father of the Latin Church, St. Augustine: a man of passion and faith, of high intelligence and untiring pastoral zeal. This great saint and doctor of the Church is often well-known, at least by name, even by those who ignore Christianity, or who are little acquainted with it, because he made a deep impression on the cultural life of the Western world, and the world in general.

Due to his exceptional importance, St. Augustine has been enormously influential, so much so that it could be said, on one hand, that all the roads of Christian Latin literature lead to Hippo (today's Annaba, on the Algerian coast), the place where he was a bishop, and on the other hand, that from this town of Roman Africa, where Augustine was bishop from 395 to 430, branch out many other roads of future Christianity and of Western culture itself.

Rarely has a civilization encountered a figure so great, capable of embracing its values and of proclaiming its intrinsic richness, formulating ideas and methods that serve to nurture successive generations, as Paul VI also emphasized: "One can say all of antiquity's philosophy converge in his work, and from it derive currents of thought pervading the doctrinal tradition of the next centuries" (AAS, 62, 1970, p. 426).

Moreover, Augustine is the Father of the Church who has left the greatest number of writings. His biographer Possidius says: It seemed impossible that a man could write so much during his life. We will talk about his various works in a future session. Today we will focus on his life, a life that we can reconstruct from his writings, and in particular from the "Confessions," his extraordinary spiritual autobiography written in praise of God, and which is his most popular work.

Precisely because of the attention paid to interiority and psychology, Augustine's "Confessions" is a unique model in Western and non-Western literature, even including nonreligious literature, right through to modern times. The focus on spiritual life, on the mystery of self, on the mystery of God that hides in the self, is an extraordinary thing without precedent and remains, so to speak, a spiritual "vertex."

But, returning to his life, Augustine was born in Tagaste -- in the Roman province of Africa -- on Nov. 13, 354, to Patrick, a pagan who then became a catechumen, and Monica, a zealous Christian. This passionate woman, venerated as a saint, was a big influence on her son and educated him in the Christian belief. Augustine also received salt, as a mark of welcome in the catechumenate. He was always charmed by the figure of Jesus Christ; he says he had always loved Jesus, but he had grown more and more apart from the faith and practice of the Church, as happens with a lot of young people today.

Augustine also had a brother, Navigius, and a sister, whose name we do not know, and who, when widowed, became the head of a female monastery.

Augustine had a sharp intelligence and received a good education, though he was not always a model student. He studied grammar, first in his hometown and then in Madaurus, and beginning in 370 he took rhetoric in Carthage, capital of Roman Africa. He came to master Latin, but did not do as well in Greek or Punic, the language of his fellow countrymen.

It was in Carthage that he read "Hortensius" for the first time, a work by Cicero -- subsequently lost -- and which started him on the road to conversion. The text awakened in him a love of wisdom, as confirmed in his writings as a bishop in the "Confessions": "The book changed my feelings," so much so that "suddenly, every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardor in my heart" (III, 4, 7).

But, since he was convinced that without Jesus truth cannot really be found, and because in that fascinating book his name was missing, he immediately set to reading Scripture, the Bible. But he was disappointed. Not only was the Latin translation of the sacred Scripture insufficient, but also the content itself did not seem satisfactory.

In the narrations of wars and other human events, he could not find the heights of philosophy, the splendor of its search for the truth. Nevertheless, he did not want to live without God, and so he sought a religion that matched his desire for truth and his desire to be close to Jesus.

He fell into the net of the Manichaeans, who presented themselves as Christians and promised a totally rational religion. They confirmed that the world is divided into two principles: that of good and evil. This explained the complexity of human history. St. Augustine also liked the dualistic morality, because it entailed a very high morality for the chosen ones: and for those, like him, who adhered to it, it was possible to live a life more suited to the times, especially for a young man. He therefore became a Manichaean, convinced that he had found the synthesis between rationality, the search for the truth and the love of Jesus Christ.

And his private life benefited as well: Being a Manichaean opened career possibilities. To adhere to this religion, which included many influential personalities, allowed him to pursue a relationship he started with a woman, and to continue his career.

With this woman he had a son, Adeodatus, who was very dear to him, extremely intelligent, and who later on will be present in Augustine's preparation for baptism in Lake Como, forming part of the "Dialogues" that St. Augustine has passed on to us. Unfortunately, the boy died prematurely. After teaching grammar in his hometown at the age of 20, he soon returned to Carthage, where he became a brilliant and celebrated master of rhetoric. With time, however, Augustine distanced himself from the Manichaean faith. It disappointed him intellectually as it was not capable of resolving his doubts. He moved to Rome, and then to Milan, where he obtained a prestigious place in the imperial court, thanks to the recommendations of the prefect of Rome, the pagan Symmachus, who was hostile to the bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose.

At first with the purpose of enriching his rhetorical repertoire, Augustine began attending the impressive lectures of Bishop Ambrose, who had been a representative of the emperor in Northern Italy; he was charmed by his words, not only because of their eloquence, but because they touched his heart. The main problem of the Old Testament -- the lack of oratory and philosophical elevation -- resolved itself in the lectures of St. Ambrose thanks to the typological interpretation of the Old Testament: Augustine understood that the Old Testament is a journey toward Jesus Christ. So he found the key to understanding the beauty, the philosophic depth of the Old Testament, and he understood the 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 that became flesh.

Quickly, Augustine realized the allegorical reading of Scripture and the Neoplatonic philosophy practiced by the bishop of Milan helped him resolve the intellectual difficulties he encountered at a younger age, when he first approached the biblical texts, which he believed to be insuperable. Augustine continued to read the writings of the philosophers along with Scripture, and especially the letters of St. Paul. His conversion to Christianity, Aug. 15, 386, is therefore placed at the apex of a long and tormented inner journey of which we will speak in another catechesis; The African moved to the country north of Milan near Lake Como -- with his mother Monica, his son Adeodatus, and a small group of friends -- to get ready for baptism. At 32, Augustine was christened by Ambrose on April 24, 387, during Easter vigil in the Milan Cathedral.

After his baptism Augustine decided to return to Africa with his friends, with the idea of putting into practice a communal monastic life, in the service of God. But in Ostia, while waiting to leave, his mother suddenly fell sick and a little later died, leaving her son's heart in torment.

Back in his homeland he settled in Hippo to found a monastery. In this town on the African coast he was ordained presbyter in 391, despite his refusal, and began a monastic life with some companions, dividing his time between praying, studying and preaching. He wanted to serve truth alone, he didn't feel called to the pastoral life; then he understood that God's call was to be a shepherd among others, and to offer the others the gift of truth.

Four years later, in 395, he was consecrated bishop in Hippo. Deepening the study of Scripture and the texts of the Christian tradition, Augustine was an exemplary bishop in his untiring pastoral commitment: He preached to the faithful several times a week, he helped the poor and the orphans, he followed the education of the clergy and the organization of female and male monasteries.

In short, he affirmed himself as one of the most important representatives of Christianity of the time: Very active in the administration of his diocese -- with considerable civic results too -- in more than 35 years of episcopate, the bishop of Hippo had an immense influence in the leadership of the Catholic Church in Roman Africa and, in general, in the Christianity of his time, facing Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism, which were endangering the Christian faith and the one and only God full of grace.

Augustine entrusted himself to God every day, right up until the very end of his life. He was struck by fever, while Hippo was being besieged by invaders. The bishop -- as his friend Possidius tells us in the "Vita Augustini" -- asked to transcribe in large characters the penitential psalms, "and he had the sheets pinned to the wall, so that during his illness he could read them while in bed, and he cried endlessly warm tears" (31,2); this is how Augustine spent his last days. He died on Aug. 28, 430, at the age of 75. We will dedicate the next sessions to his works, his message and his interior experience.

[Translation by Laura Leoncini]

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our weekly catechesis, we now turn to the towering figure of Saint Augustine of Hippo. The great intellectual heritage of antiquity found expression in Augustine's many writings, which then became a rich source of inspiration and teaching for centuries to come. Augustine's spiritual autobiography -- "The Confessions" -- tells the story of his Christian upbringing, his secular education, his decision to devote his life to the pursuit of truth, and his eventual abandonment of the faith. Attracted at first by Manichean dualism, he gradually recovered the faith of his childhood, thanks to the prayers of his mother, Saint Monica, and the brilliant teaching of Saint Ambrose, then Bishop of Milan. "The Confessions" recount the tormented interior journey which led to his moral and intellectual conversion, culminating in his baptism by Ambrose. Returning to Africa to lead a monastic life, Augustine became a priest and then the Bishop of Hippo. In his thirty years as Bishop, he proved himself an exemplary pastor, an assiduous preacher and an influential champion of the Catholic faith. In coming weeks, we will turn our attention to the writings and the thought of this great Doctor of the Church.

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.