

ST. AUGUSTINE'S LAST DAYS

"Though the World Grows Old, Christ Is Forever Young"

VATICAN CITY, JAN. 16, 2007 JAN. 16, 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 second in a series on St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo.

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Dear brothers and sisters,

Today, as I did last Wednesday, I would like to discuss the great bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine. Four years before he died, he wanted to nominate his successor. To this end, on Sept. 26, 426, he gathered the people in the Basilica of Peace in Hippo so he could present them with his choice for this task.

He said: "We are all mortal, but no individual can be sure of his last day in this life. In any case, in childhood we hope to reach adolescence, in adolescence we aspire toward adulthood, in adulthood toward middle age and in middle age we look to reaching old age. We are never sure we will get there, but that is our hope.

"Old age, however, is not followed by another stage of life toward which we can aspire; its duration is unknown. I arrived in this city in the vigor of my life, but now my youth has gone and I am an old man" (Ep. 213,1).

At this point Augustine told them the name of his chosen successor, the priest Heracles. The people burst into applause of approval and repeated 23 times: "Thanks be to God! Praise be to Christ!" They continued to exclaim approval when Augustine told them of his plans for the future. He wanted to dedicate his remaining years to a deeper study of holy Scripture (Ep. 213,6).

The following four years were indeed of an extraordinary intellectual activity: Augustine carried out important works, he undertook new ones that were no less demanding, he held discussions with the heretics -- he always sought dialogue -- and he intervened to promote peace in the African provinces that were harassed by the southern barbarian tribes.

For this reason he wrote to Count Darius, who had come to Africa to put an end to the disagreement between Count Boniface and the Imperial Court, which the Mauri tribes were taking advantage of for their raids. "A greater title for glory," he affirmed in his letter, "is to kill war with words, rather than to kill men with the sword, and to get or maintain peace through peace and not through war. Certainly the fighters, if they are good, are also seeking peace, but at the cost of shedding blood. You, on the contrary, have been sent to prevent blood being spilt on any side" (Ep. 229, 2).

Unfortunately, the hope for peace in the African territories was not fulfilled: In May 429, the Vandals, invited to Africa out of spite by Boniface himself, crossed the Gibraltar strait and entered Mauritania. The invasion rapidly spread to other rich African provinces. In May or June 430, "the destroyers of the Roman Empire," as Possidius called these barbarians ("Vita," 30,1), laid siege to Hippo.

Boniface also sought shelter in town; he had reconciled too late with the Court and was now trying to stop the invaders, but to no avail. The biographer Possidius describes Augustine's pain: "More than usual, his tears became his bread day and night, and arriving almost to the end of his life, he was, more than others, dragging his old age into bitterness and mourning" ("Vita," 28,6). He explains: "That man of God was in fact witnessing the massacre and destruction of the cities; homes in the countryside destroyed and residents killed by the enemy, or forced to flee; churches deprived of their priests and ministers; sacred virgins and monks displaced; among them, some were tortured and killed, others murdered by the sword, others taken prisoners; they lost faith and the integrity of their soul and body, reduced to a grievous and long slavery by their enemies" (ibid., 28,8).

Despite being old and tired, Augustine remained strong, providing comfort for himself and others through prayer and meditation on the mysteries of God's will. He spoke of "the world's old age" -- and this Roman world really was old. He spoke of this old age as he had done years earlier to console the Italian refugees when the Goths from Alaric invaded the city of Rome. In old age sickness abounds: coughs, catarrh, anxiety, exhaustion. Though the world grows old, Christ is forever young.

So he invited them: "Don't refuse to be young again united with Christ, even in an old world. He tells you: Do not fear, your youth will be renewed like the eagle's youth" (cf. Serm. 81,8).

Therefore, the Christian should not be let down even in difficult situations, but he must help those in need. This is what the great doctor advised, answering Honoratus, bishop of Tiabe, who had asked him whether a bishop, a priest or any man of Church could flee to save his life when under barbarian invasions: "When the danger is shared by all -- bishops, clergymen and laymen -- those in need should not be left alone. In this case they should all be transferred to safe places; but if some need to stay, they should not be left alone by those who have the duty to assist them with the sacred ministry, so either they all save themselves together, or together they bear the disaster that the Father wants them to suffer" (Ep. 228, 2).

And he concluded: "This is the supreme test of charity" (ibid., 3). How could we not recognize, in these words, the heroic message that many priests have embraced and identified with along the centuries?

Meanwhile, the town of Hippo held fast. Augustine's house-monastery had opened its doors to the colleagues in the episcopate who were seeking refuge. Among them was Possidius, already his

disciple, who managed to leave us a direct account of those final, dramatic days. "In the third month of that siege," he tells us, "he was struck by fever: That was his last illness" ("Vita," 29,3). The holy, venerable, old man decided to dedicate his remaining time to intense prayer. He used to affirm that no one, bishop, monk or layman, however irreproachable his conduct may have been, could confront death without adequate penitence. That's why between tears he continually repeated the penitential psalms, that he had so often recited with his people (cf. *ibid.*, 31,2). As he worsened, the more the dying bishop felt the need for solitude and prayer: "About 10 days before he left his body, in order not to be troubled in his concentration, he begged us to not let anyone enter his room outside of the medical visiting hours or the eating time schedule. His wishes were carried out and during all that time he prayed" (*ibid.*, 31,3). He died Aug. 28, 430: His great heart finally rested in God.

"We assisted in the removal of his body," Possidius informs us, "dedicated to God, and then he was buried" (*Life*, 31,5). At a certain point -- date unknown -- his body was transferred to Sardinia, and from there to Pavia around 725, to the Basilica of San Pietro in Ciel d'oro, where he rests today.

His first biographer has the following conclusive judgment about him: "He left a large clergy to the Church, as well as male and female monasteries with people dedicated to the obedience of their superiors. He left us libraries with books and speeches by him and other holy men from which, with God's grace, we can deduce his merit and stature in the Church, and in which the faithful always rediscover him" (Possidius, "Vita," 31, 8).

We can associate ourselves with this judgment: In his writings we also "rediscover him." When I read St. Augustine's works, I don't have the impression that he died more or less 1,600 years ago, I feel he is a modern man: a friend, a contemporary who speaks to me, he speaks to us with his fresh and modern faith.

In St. Augustine, who speaks to us -- who speaks to me at us in his writings -- we see the permanent actuality of his faith; of the faith that comes from Christ, eternal word made flesh, Son of God and son of man. This faith does not belong to yesterday, though it was preached yesterday. It is always of today, because Christ is truly yesterday, today and always. He is the way, the truth and the life. St. Augustine encourages to entrust ourselves to the living Christ and to find through him the way to life.

[Translation by Laura Leoncini]

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Our catechesis this week is again centered on the life and writings of the great Doctor of the Church, Saint Augustine. Some four years before he died, Augustine designated his successor in the See of Hippo, desiring to devote the rest of his life to the study of the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, those proved to be years of extraordinary activity, as the aged Bishop sought to reconcile divided Christians and to bring peace to the troubled African provinces of the Empire. During the Vandal invasion of Africa, Augustine found solace in reflection on the mystery of God's providence. The world, he said, is growing old and failing, yet Christ remains eternally young and brings renewed youth to those who put their faith in him. Amid the calamities of the time, he encouraged the clergy not to abandon their flock, but to offer the supreme witness of Christian charity. Augustine died in 431, during the siege of Hippo, having devoted his last days to penance and prayer. At last his great heart found its rest in God. Today, as in past centuries, may Augustine's example and the rich treasury of his writings be a source of instruction, inspiration and strength as the Church makes her pilgrim way to the fullness of God's Kingdom.

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the students from Australia, Ireland, and the United States of America. May your time in Rome be one of uplifting spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings of joy and peace.

[In Italian, he said:]

The day after tomorrow, Friday, Jan. 18, marks the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which this year has special significance because a hundred years have passed since its inception. The theme is the invitation of St. Paul to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17); an invitation which I gladly make my own and address to the whole Church. It is indeed necessary to pray without ceasing, insistently asking God for the great gift of unity among all the Lord's disciples. May the endless strength of the Holy Spirit move us to a sincere commitment to seek unity, so that all together we may profess that Jesus is the one Saviour of the world.

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