

28. August 2020

St. Augustine
„A real conversion“

1. Thess 4,1-9

Finally, brothers, we urge you and appeal to you in the Lord Jesus; we instructed you how to live in the way that pleases God, and you are so living; but make more progress still. You are well aware of the instructions we gave you on the authority of the Lord Jesus. God wills you all to be holy. He wants you to keep away from sexual immorality and each one of you to know how to control his body in a way that is holy and honourable, not giving way to selfish lust like the nations who do not acknowledge God. He wants nobody at all ever to sin by taking advantage of a brother in these matters; the Lord always pays back sins of that sort, as we told you before emphatically. God called us to be holy, not to be immoral; in other words, anyone who rejects this is rejecting not human authority, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

As for brotherly love, there is no need to write to you about that, since you have yourselves learnt from God to love one another.

Today we look with great joy at the conversion of St. Augustine, who had brought so much blessing to the Church. Yesterday we heard that St. Monica wrestled with her Son and we can be sure that her prayer and suffering for the Son contributed to Augustine finally finding his way to God. He himself recorded his struggle in his book confession, which he wrote down after the light of faith had risen to him, and he understood, as the apostle's word tells us today, how to live to follow the Lord.

It was a long road for him with many steps. It was particularly difficult for him to overcome the desires of the flesh.

The following lines are taken from his confessions from the Eighth Book of the eleventh and twelfth chapters and give a moving insight into the decisive moments of his conversion.

„The very toys of toys, and vanities of vanities, my ancient mistresses, still held me; they plucked my fleshy garment, and whispered softly, “Dost thou cast us off? and from that moment shall we no more be with thee for ever? and from that moment shall not this or that be lawful for thee for ever?” And what was it which

they suggested in that I said, "this or that," what did they suggest, O my God? Let Thy mercy turn it away from the soul of Thy servant.

What defilements did they suggest!

What shame! And now I much less than half heard them, and not openly showing themselves and contradicting me, but muttering as it were behind my back, and privily plucking me, as I was departing, but to look back on them. Yet they did retard me, so that I hesitated to burst and shake myself free from them, and to spring over whither I was called; a violent habit saying to me, "Thinkest thou, thou canst live without them?"

But when a deep consideration had from the secret bottom of my soul drawn together and heaped up all my misery in the sight of my heart; there arose a mighty storm, bringing a mighty shower of tears. Which that I might pour forth wholly, in its natural expressions, I rose from Alypius: solitude was suggested to me as fitter for the business of weeping; so I retired so far that even his presence could not be a burden to me. (...) I cast myself down I know not how, under a certain fig-tree, giving full vent to my tears; and the floods of mine eyes gushed out an acceptable sacrifice to Thee. And, not indeed in these words, yet to this purpose, spake I much unto Thee: and Thou, O Lord, how long? how long, Lord, wilt Thou be angry for ever? Remember not our former iniquities, for I felt that I was held by them. I sent up these sorrowful words: How long, how long, "to-morrow, and tomorrow?" Why not now? why not is there this hour an end to my uncleanness?

So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; Take up and read. " Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find. For I had heard of Antony, that coming in during the reading of the Gospel, he received the admonition, as if what was being read was spoken to him: „Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor“ (Mk 10,21), and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me: and by such oracle he was forthwith converted unto Thee. Eagerly then I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I laid the volume of the Apostle when I arose thence. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: Not in rioting and

drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence (cf. Rom 14,17). No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.

Thence we go in to my mother; we tell her; she rejoiceth: we relate in order how it took place; she leaps for joy, and triumpheth, and blesseth Thee, Who are able to do above that which we ask or think; for she perceived that Thou hadst given her more for me, than she was wont to beg by her pitiful and most sorrowful groanings. For thou convertedst me unto Thyself, so that I sought neither wife, nor any hope of this world, standing in that rule of faith, where Thou hadst showed me unto her in a vision, so many years before. And Thou didst convert her mourning into joy.“

This moving testimony of St. Augustine, who came home to God after a long struggle, gives us the clear characteristics of true conversion from the path of sin to the holy faith.

With all the affection for God or in other words, when the love of God overwhelmed him, Augustine finally let go the old life. It did not stop him even if he had to overcome later battles.

A true conversion then leads to the concrete following of Christ. It is truly a resurrection from the dead. The Holy Ghost now continues to work in the converted and introduces him to his vocation. With St. Augustine we can see what has become fruitful. To this day, this grace continues: in the scriptures, in the sermons, in a rule of order that he wrote for religious life and in his example, which can encourage the seeker to look for the truth.

We will close the meditation of today with a beautiful word of the Saint:

"Late have I loved you, o Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!"

It was late when St. Augustine gave all his love to God, but thanks to the grace of God it was not too late!