

28. August 2021

“A true conversion”

1 Jn 4:7-16

Reading corresponding to the memorial of St. Augustine

'My dear friends, let us love one another, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love. This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him. Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins. My dear friends, if God loved us so much, we too should love one another. No one has ever seen God, but as long as we love one another God remains in us and his love comes to its perfection in us. This is the proof that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us a share in his Spirit. We ourselves have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son as Saviour of the world. Anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God. We have recognised for ourselves, and put our faith in, the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.'

Today we look with great joy at St. Augustine; whose conversion brought so much blessing to the Church. Yesterday was the memory of his mother, St. Monica, who fought for her son's conversion. We can be sure that her prayer and struggle for him played an important role in Augustine finally finding his way to God. He himself wrote down his struggles, in his so-called "Confessions"; a book that is always worth reading. He began to write them after the light of faith had shone upon him; after he had understood how to live the following of Christ.

St. Augustine had to travel a long road with many struggles. One thing that was particularly difficult for him was to overcome the appetites of the flesh. We will now listen to a passage taken from Book Eight of Augustine's Confessions, which gives us a moving insight into the decisive moment of his conversion:

It was, in fact, my old mistresses, trifles of trifles and vanities of vanities, who still enthralled me. They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered: "Are you going to part with us? And from that moment will we never be with you anymore? And from that moment will not this and that be forbidden you forever?" What were they suggesting to me in those words "this or that"? What is it they suggested, O my God? Let thy mercy guard the soul of thy servant from the vileness and the shame they did suggest! (...)

Still they delayed me, so that I hesitated to break loose and shake myself free of them and leap over to the place to which I was being called—for unruly habit kept saying to me, ‘Do you think you can live without them?’

Now when deep reflection had drawn up out of the secret depths of my soul all my misery and had heaped it up before the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by a mighty rain of tears. That I might give way fully to my tears and lamentations, I stole away from Aypius, for it seemed to me that solitude was more appropriate for the business of weeping.

I went far enough away that I could feel that even his presence was no restraint upon me (...) And so he stayed alone, where we had been sitting together, greatly astonished. I flung myself down under a fig tree—how I know not—and gave free course to my tears. The streams of my eyes gushed out an acceptable sacrifice to thee. And, not indeed in these words, but to this effect, I cried to thee: “And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities.” For I felt that I was still enthralled by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries: “How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour make an end to my uncleanness?”

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl I know not which—coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, “Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.” (...)

So, damming the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon. For I had heard how Anthony, accidentally coming into church while the gospel was being read, received the admonition as if what was read had been addressed to him: “Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me.” By such an oracle he was forthwith converted to thee.

So I quickly returned to the bench where Aypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostle’s book when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.”

I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full.

Let us now listen to the account of that moment when St. Augustine shared with his mother the experience he had just lived, for the grateful convert now understood how much St. Monica had suffered for his sake. His mother's joy was all the greater!

Then we went in to my mother, and told her what happened, to her great joy. We explained to her how it had occurred--and she leaped for joy triumphant; and she blessed thee, who art "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." For she saw that thou hadst granted her far more than she had ever asked for in all her pitiful and doleful lamentations. For thou didst so convert me to thee that I sought neither a wife nor any other of this world's hopes, but set my feet on that rule of faith which so many years before thou hadst showed her in her dream about me. And so thou didst turn her grief into gladness more plentiful than she had ventured to desire.

This moving testimony of St. Augustine, who after a long struggle returned to God, shows us the characteristics of a true conversion; the conversion from a life of sin to the holy faith. When the love of God conquered him, St. Augustine left his old life behind him once and for all. It could no longer hold him back, although he would certainly have to continue to struggle.

A true conversion then leads to a concrete following of Christ, as happened to St. Augustine in an exemplary way. It is truly a resurrection from the dead! Now, the Holy Spirit continues to act in the convert and introduces him to his vocation. In the case of Augustine, we are amazed at all the fruits that a life after conversion can produce. To this day he is still present: in his writings, in his sermons, in the monastic order he wrote, and, of course, in his example, which is to encourage the one who is in search of truth.

Let us end this meditation with a beautiful phrase of our saint:

"Late I loved you, beauty so old and so new, late I loved you!"

St. Augustine was tardy in giving all his love to God, but, thank God, it was not too late....