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James L. Heft S.M.
University of Dayton

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HOMILY: AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION

Rev. James L. Heft, SM

We are celebrating the solemn Vespers of the Ambrosian rite in honor of the conversion of St. Augustine. Our First Reading is taken from Book VIII of the *Confessions*, a word that means both *praise* and *penitence*. The first nine books of the thirteen books or chapters that make up the *Confessions*, are written in the form of an autobiography down to the time of his mother Monica's death (Book IX especially). Our selection this evening is taken, quite appropriately, from the last part of Book VIII.

Our Scripture reading from Romans was cited by Augustine in the First Reading. There, upon learning the voices of the children "take and read (Tolle et lege!)," Augustine simply opened the Bible, practicing a sort of biblical roulette I regularly discourage, and fell upon the passage exhorting the reader to live in the daylight, avoid drunkenness and sexual excess—and rather, to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" . . . not "put on" as one would assume a sort of surface expression or external demeanor, but rather, as Romans says elsewhere, to be plunged into the death and resurrection of the Lord through Baptism. Part of our special vesper service this evening recognizes the centrality of the baptismal rite in the process of conversion. As an adult, Augustine converted and was then baptized. One of our great pastoral challenges today is the number of adult Christians, baptized as infants, who are not yet converted.

Shortly after his conversion, Augustine was pressed into service as a bishop. Henry Chadwick, the Anglican patristics scholar, describes the moment well:

The old bishop of Hippo who had ordained Augustine presbyter feared lest some other church might carry him off to be their bishop. He therefore persuaded the primate of Numidia to consecrate Augustine to be coadjutor bishop of Hippo. The appointment (irregular in canon law) became surrounded by some controversy. The combination of Augustine's Manichee past and his extreme cleverness helped to make him distrusted. Hippo was not a city where people read books. Numidia was not a province where congregations expected to have a prodigy of intelligence on the episcopal bench. (Augustine noted that illiterate bishops were a favorite butt for the mockery of the half-educated: CR 13). Augustine's presence induced apprehension. He was known to be a terror for demolishing opponents in public disputations. Some did not quite believe in the sincerity of his conversion at Milan (66).

If at the time of Augustine's conversion some doubted it's sincerity, the next half century of his life surely proved its authenticity. Yet, a great mystery surrounds the reality of religious conversion.

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- Why are some people ready to hear the call to conversion? Is it that some allow themselves to understand, only after a long period of searching and struggling, that their interior restlessness can be quieted only in God?
- Is it an event that happens only to an individual? Rarely. Augustine tells us in the selection read this evening that he immediately went to share his joy with his friend, Alypius, and then, in an even more moving section of the *Confessions*, tells his mother, Monica, who had prayed for his conversion for years.
- Can true conversion take place in a moment or is it a life-long process? Surely, conversion has its “moments,” but the deepest conversions seem to unfold as a life-long process. Augustine’s conversion can be witnessed powerfully not only in the *Confessions*, but also in his sermons preached over the subsequent decades to ordinary Christians like you and me.

The end of the Romans reading exhorts the reader to “extend a kind welcome to those who are weak in faith. Do not enter into disputes with them.” As gentle as Augustine was with the members of his congregation, he remained, nonetheless, a terror for his heretical opponents, the Donatists and Pelagius, and even for irascible Jerome, orthodox though he was.

My dear friends, in our age and culture choked with materialism and mesmerized by the erotic, we can learn much from Augustine. “Though convinced that this world is God’s world [and therefore good], Augustine did not believe that human life can belong wholly to the secular and material order, or that the primary values can be power, honour, wealth and sex” (119). Let us give heartfelt thanks to God for Augustine whose life, brilliance, and love for the Lord Jesus have so enriched every generation, including our own.

Provost
University of Dayton

WORKS CITED

Chadwick, Henry. *Augustine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.