

St. Augustine, 2018

Dearly beloved,

Today we celebrate the feast of Saint Augustine, the great bishop and doctor of the Church, and the spiritual founder and father of this canonry. His actual feast day is August 28, the day on which he died in 430 and entered the joys of heaven, but we transferred his feast this year, as we often do, so that we could celebrate it with you, our little flock.

As I say every year, there are so many angles to pursue when preaching on this day that if one were to preach on this feast for a lifetime, there would still be things yet to be said about this tremendous and saintly man. This year it seems most fitting to speak about the trials he bore due to the time in which he lived, because it serves to give us perspective about our own days and it should also encourage us that the world and the Church have both known trying times and yet Christ has brought them to better days, even in this world.

Augustine was born into the Roman Empire in its waning days, and spent much of his early years in Italy, most notably in Milan and Rome. When he moved to northern Africa after his baptism, where he became a priest and then bishop, he maintained close ties with Italy via his friends and fellow clerics. In 410, when Rome was sacked by the Visigoths, he was 55, at the height of his fame and influence in the Church and in society. And he, like his contemporaries, was deeply shaken by the fall of the city which was a sign of power, stability and peace. As St. Jerome wrote in his commentary on Ezekiel, “When the bright light of all the world was put out, or, rather, when the Roman Empire was decapitated, ... the whole world perished in one city, 'I became dumb and humbled myself, and kept silence from good words, ... If Rome can perish, what can be safe?’”

The sack of Rome led to a sort of chaos in the Western Empire, with the lawful emperor opposed by two usurpers who controlled significant sections of France and Spain, and all but Italy and northern Africa under the hold of no less than seven different barbarian groups. Augustine's area was saved for a time, but not for long, for as he was dying in 430, his episcopal see of Hippo, together with most of Christian north Africa was being overrun by the Vandals. All his life's work of building the kingdom of God on earth was being destroyed before his eyes as he prayed the penitential psalms on his bed, weeping. For from the monastery that Augustine founded in 390 had come forth all the bishops of the region who, following in their superior's footsteps, had lived and preached the Gospel so fervently that it could be argued that northern Africa was a more important center of Christianity at that time than was Italy. And yet, as he died, all the visible traces of his work were burning up, and they were never to be seen again, for what the Vandals left standing, the Muslims razed to the ground and to this day Islam reigns where Christianity once flourished. Thus from a natural point of view, even Augustine's life and legacy are a parable for earthly fragility and disappointment and yet the one for whom he lived and died, Christ and his Church, lives on even though worldly empires fall. Because he served Our Lord with a pure heart, Augustine also lives on though the world he knew is gone.

In the Church life was no easier for him, for when he was not confronting the heresies of Manicheanism and Pelagianism, he faced a crisis from within the Church itself. Around the year 310, about 45 years before Augustine's birth, a controversy arose over whether clergy who had wavered in times of persecution retained their powers received at ordination. The Donatist faction, named after their leading

bishop, held that such clergy were no longer priests or bishops and they created a rival hierarchy, so numerous in Augustine's lifetime that in his own province, the Donatists outnumbered the Catholics and held more of the important episcopal cities. He preached and wrote against this division within the Church for thirty years, teaching, as Trent would confirm some thousand years later, that even the unholy of clergy retain their priestly character, and that even the holiest clergy outside of the visible Church damage her by their rebellion, if it is deliberate. Augustine's point was that sinners exist in the Church, both among the laity and the clergy, and Christ has told us as much by the parables of the wheat and the weeds and the net that draws in both the good and the bad. We should not be surprised that many within the Church are unworthy, when the Lord said that many are called, few are chosen.

But despite his balance on the issue, Augustine was angry; angry that his flock was torn apart by such men, angry that they refused to admit their error and sin. He said, putting words into the mouths of the unholy priests, "Their answer should be, if they feared God, "It was human to be mistaken, it's diabolical to remain in the mistake out of spiteful animosity. It would indeed have been better if we had never gone wrong; but at least let us do the next best thing and finally correct our error. We deceived you, because we were deceived ourselves. We preached untruths, because we believed others who preached untruths."

When the imperial government decided in favor of the Catholics in 411 and the Donatists were ordered to submit to the Catholic hierarchy, even though the Donatists had caused him such grief and sorrow, he told his people, "We, brothers and sisters, must be patient with them. The eyes we are trying to care for are inflamed and swollen. ... We should avoid provoking them to greater bitterness by crowing over them. Let us mildly give a reasonable account of the affair, not proudly brag about victory. The servant of the Lord, says the apostle Paul, should not wrangle, but be gentle with everyone, willing to learn, patient, correcting those who think differently with modesty, in the hope that God would grant them repentance, and they would recover their wits from the devil's snares, by whom they are being held captive according to his will." Thus in his dealings both within and without the Church, Augustine experienced our pain, he knew our distress, he knew our fear and anger.

So what would the holy bishop say to us today if he were to preach to us? I don't presume to speak in his place, but as his son in religion and a student of his works, I can guess at what he might say. First, do not be a people of itching ears. In the epistle for today's feast, St. Paul warns of such people; they are those who not only love novelty, but also those who love controversy, who feed off it and let it replace their prayer. They have no time to read Scripture because they must read the latest news in the Church and in the world. Their ears itch to hear of the downfall of their enemies; their eyes drink in every new headline. And yet they have no time to pray, no time to visit Our Lord in the Eucharist, no time to read the works of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church; there is only time for controversy and polemic; the internet has replaced the tabernacle. Augustine was not a man of polemics; he engaged in them because he had to; he like Paul, wanted nothing more than to be dissolved and to be with Christ. Let us imitate him rather the spirit of this world.

Second, love one another. It is said of St. John the Evangelist that in the last years of his life when he was in poor health, his disciples would wheel him in to preach to them. And every time he would say the same thing, "Love one another." Just as Augustine was a true disciple of Paul, so he was also of John. One of his favorite passages of Scripture was Galatians 6.2, Bear one another's burdens and you will fulfill the law of Christ. For Augustine, if all we ever did was bear one another's burdens, we

would be saved, for that is the totality of what Christ asks of us. And what does that mean? That we bear with one another's weaknesses, both bodily and spiritual, that we generously suffer one another's idiosyncrasies, that we learn to love in others what we would despise if it were not for the power of grace, that we do all we can to bring about the salvation of others, without exception. When Augustine preached on this passage, he used the example of deer—whether it is true in nature or not, it is a beautiful image—when they walk in single file, they lay their heads on one another, with only the leader not having a place to rest his head. When he is weary, another takes his place and thus they bear one another's burdens until they reach their destination. May we imitate the deer, and make constant acts of charity towards one another so that our souls can rest a little in this life, until we reach the place of total peace, our true homeland of heaven.

And third, Seek the face of God. If there is one thing more important to the Christian life than fraternal charity, it the pursuit of God. Though Augustine did many things in this life that shall remain until the end of time, his one great work was to strive after God, to desire to know and possess him as much as is possible in this life. In his work on the Trinity, he wrote, "Perfection in this life is nothing else than to forget those things which are behind, and to reach forth and press in purpose toward those things which are before us. For he that seeks has the safest purpose, who he seeks until he takes hold of the one whom he seeks, and for whom he reaches forth." Thus there is nothing more perfect than to desire God and to pursue him until our life's end, by the means of prayer and study. If to seek the face of God is the desire of our heart and drives our every action, we are not far from the kingdom of God; and if we want to desire to seek God, even if we don't know where to begin, let us ask with tears and pain of heart, and God will not deny our wish.

And so today let us take courage in the example of Saint Augustine, who, though he lived and died nearly 1600 years ago, is very close to us in spirit. Let us cry out to him who lived through so many trials of the Church that he will act as he did so many years ago: with courage, with power, with charity, and that he may, by the grace of God, raise up men worthy of the episcopal office, men who will lay down their lives for their sheep. May Our Lord in the Eucharist console us in our sorrow and weakness, and give us strength to love one another and to always seek his face, that we may look upon it with Augustine and all his saints in the happiness of the world to come, in the New Jerusalem for all eternity.