



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO VIGEVANO AND PAVIA (ITALY)

EUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*"Orti Borromaici" Esplanade, Pavia
Third Sunday of Easter, 22 April 2007*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Yesterday afternoon, I met the diocesan Community of Vigevano and the heart of my Pastoral Visit was the Eucharistic concelebration in Piazza Ducale; today, I have the joy of visiting your Diocese and a culminating moment of our encounter is also here at Holy Mass.

I greet with affection my Brothers who are concelebrating with me: Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, Archbishop of Milan, Bishop Giovanni Giudici, Pastor of your Diocese, Bishop emeritus Giovanni Volta, the retired Pastor, and the other Prelates of Lombardy.

I am grateful to the Government Representatives and local Administrations for their presence. I address my cordial greeting to the priests, deacons, Religious, leaders of lay associations, the young people, the sick and all the faithful, and I extend my thoughts to the entire population of this ancient and noble City, and of the Diocese.

During the Easter Season, the Church presents to us, Sunday after Sunday, some passages from the preaching with which, after Easter, the Apostles, particularly Peter, invited Israel to have faith in Jesus Christ, the Risen One, thereby founding the Church.

In today's reading, the Apostles stand before the Sanhedrin - before that institution which, having sentenced Jesus to death, could not tolerate that this same Jesus was now beginning to be active

again through the Apostles' preaching. They could not tolerate that his saving power was once more making itself felt and that his Name was attracting people who believed in him as the promised Redeemer.

They accused the Apostles. Their accusation is: "You want to make us responsible for that man's blood".

Peter, however, reacted to this accusation with a brief catechesis on the essence of Christian faith: "No, we do not want to make you responsible for his blood. The effect of the death and Resurrection of Jesus is quite different. God has exalted him as "Head and Saviour" of all, and of you, too, his People of Israel". And where will this "Head" lead us? What does this "Saviour" bring?

He leads us, St Peter tells us, to conversion - creates for us the leeway and opportunity to mend our ways and repent, begin again. And he offers us forgiveness for our sins: he introduces us into the proper relationship with God, hence, into the proper relationship of each individual with himself or herself and with others.

Peter's brief catechesis did not only apply to the Sanhedrin. It speaks to us all, for Jesus, the Risen One, is also alive today. And for all generations, for all men and women, he is the "Head" who shows us the way and the "Saviour" who straightens out our lives.

The two terms: "conversion" and "forgiveness of sins", which correspond to the titles of Christ "Head", *archegòs* in Greek, and "Saviour", are the key words of Peter's catechesis, words intended to move our hearts too, here and now. And what do they mean?

The path we must take - the path that Jesus points out to us - is called "conversion". But what is it? What must we do? In every life conversion has its own form, because every human being is something new and no one is merely a copy of another.

But in the course of history, the Lord has sent us models of conversion to whom we can look to find guidance. We could thus look at Peter himself to whom the Lord said at the Last Supper: "[W]hen you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22: 32).

We could look at Paul as a great convert. The City of Pavia speaks of one of the greatest converts in the history of the Church: St Aurelius Augustine. He died on 28 August in 430 in the port town of Hippo, in Africa, at that time surrounded and besieged by the Vandals.

After the considerable turmoil of a turbulent history, the King of the Longobards acquired Augustine's remains for the City of Pavia so that today they belong to this City in a special way, and, in it and from it, have something special to say to all of us, to humanity, but to all of us here in particular.

In his book, *Confessions*, Augustine touchingly described the development of his conversion which achieved its goal with Baptism, administered to him by Bishop Ambrose in the Cathedral of Milan. Readers of his *Confessions* can share in the journey that Augustine had to make in a long inner struggle to receive at last, at the baptismal font on the night before Easter 387, the Sacrament which marked the great turning point in his life.

A careful examination of the course of St Augustine's life enables one to perceive that his conversion was not an event of a single moment but, precisely, a journey. And one can see that this journey did not end at the baptismal font.

Just as prior to his baptism Augustine's life was a journey of conversion, after it too, although differently, his life continued to be a journey of conversion - until his last illness, when he had the penitential Psalms hung on the walls so that he might have them always before his eyes, and when he excluded himself from receiving the Eucharist in order to go back once again over the path of his repentance and receive salvation from Christ's hands as a gift of God's mercy.

Thus, we can rightly speak of Augustine's "conversions", which actually consisted of one important conversion in his quest for the Face of Christ and then in the journeying on with him.

I would like to mention briefly three important landmarks in this process of conversion, three "conversions".

The *first fundamental conversion* was the inner march towards Christianity, towards the "yes" of the faith and of Baptism. What was the essential aspect of this journey?

On the one hand, Augustine was a son of his time, deeply conditioned by the customs and passions prevalent then as well as by all the questions and problems that beset any young man. He lived like all the others, yet with a difference: he continued to be a person constantly seeking. He was never satisfied with life as it presented itself and as so many people lived it.

The question of the truth tormented him ceaselessly. He longed to discover truth. He wanted to succeed in knowing what man is; where we ourselves come from, where we are going and how we can find true life.

He desired to find the life that was right and not merely to live blindly, without meaning or purpose. Passion for truth is the true key phrase of his life. Passion for the truth truly guided him.

There is a further peculiarity: anything that did not bear Christ's Name did not suffice for him. Love for this Name, he tells us, he had tasted from his mother's milk (cf. *Confessions*, 3, 4, 8). And he always believed - sometimes rather vaguely, at other times, more clearly - that God exists and takes care of us (cf. *Confessions*, 6, 5, 8).

But to truly know this God and to become really familiar with this Jesus Christ and reach the point of saying "yes" to him with all its consequences - this was the great interior struggle of his youthful years.

St Augustine tells us that through Platonic philosophy he learned and recognized that "in the beginning was the Word" - the *Logos*, creative reason. But philosophy, which showed him that the beginning of all things was creative reason, did not show him any path on which to reach it; this *Logos* remained remote and intangible.

Only through faith in the Church did he later find the second essential truth: the Word, the *Logos*, was made flesh.

Thus, he touches us and we touch him. The humility of God's Incarnation - this is the important step - must be equalled by the humility of our faith, which lays down its self-important pride and bows upon entering the community of Christ's Body; which lives with the Church and through her alone can enter into concrete and bodily communion with the living God.

I do not have to say how deeply all this concerns us: to remain seekers; to refuse to be satisfied with what everyone else says and does; to keep our gaze fixed on the eternal God and on Jesus Christ; to learn the humility of faith in the corporeal Church of Jesus Christ, of the *Logos* Incarnate.

Augustine described *his second conversion* at the end of the 10th book of his *Confessions* with the words: "Terrified by my sins and the pile of my misery, I had racked my heart and had meditated, taking flight to live in solitude. But you forbade me and comforted me, saying: 'That is why Christ died for all, so that those who live should not live for themselves, but for him who died for them' (II Cor 5: 15)"; *Confessions*, 10, 43, 70).

What had happened? After his baptism, Augustine had decided to return to Africa and with some of his friends had founded a small monastery there. His life was then to be totally dedicated to conversation with God and reflection on and contemplation of the beauty and truth of his Word. Thus, he spent three happy years in which he believed he had achieved the goal of his life; in that period, a series of valuable philosophical and theological works came into being.

In 391, four years after his baptism, he went to the port town of Hippo to meet a friend whom he desired to win over for his monastery. But he was recognized at the Sunday liturgy in the cathedral in which he took part.

It was not by chance that the Bishop of the city, a man of Greek origin who was not fluent in Latin and found preaching rather a struggle, said in his homily that he was hoping to find a priest to whom he could entrust the task of preaching.

People instantly grabbed hold of Augustine and forced him forward to be ordained a priest to serve the city.

Immediately after his forced ordination, Augustine wrote to Bishop Valerius: "I was constrained... to accept second place at the helm, when as yet I knew not how to handle an oar.... And from this derived the tears which some of my brethren perceived me shedding in the city at the time of my ordination" (cf. *Letter 21*, 1ff.).

Augustine's beautiful dream of a contemplative life had vanished. As a result, his life had fundamentally changed. He could now no longer dedicate himself solely to meditation in solitude. He had to live with Christ for everyone. He had to express his sublime knowledge and thoughts in the thoughts and language of the simple people in his city. The great philosophical work of an entire lifetime, of which he had dreamed, was to remain unwritten.

Instead, however, we have been given something far more precious: the Gospel translated into the language of everyday life and of his sufferings.

These were now part of his daily life, which he described as the following: "reprimanding the undisciplined, comforting the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, refuting opponents... encouraging the negligent, soothing the quarrelsome, helping the needy, liberating the oppressed, expressing approval to the good, tolerating the wicked and loving all" (*Sermon 340*, 3).

"Continuously preaching, arguing, rebuking, building God's house, having to manage for everyone - who would not shrink from such a heavy burden?" (*Sermon 339*, 4).

This was the second conversion which this man, struggling and suffering, was constantly obliged to make: to be available to everyone, time and again, and not for his own perfection; time and again, to lay down his life with Christ so that others might find him, true Life.

Further, there was a *third, decisive phase in the journey of conversion* of St Augustine. After his Ordination to the priesthood he had requested a vacation period to study the Sacred Scriptures in greater detail.

His first series of homilies, after this pause for reflection, were on the Sermon on the Mount; he explained the way to an upright life, "the perfect life", pointed out by Christ in a new way. He presented it as a pilgrimage to the holy mountain of the Word of God. In these homilies it is possible to further perceive all the enthusiasm of faith newly discovered and lived; his firm conviction that the baptized, in living totally in accordance with Christ's message, can precisely be "perfect" in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount.

Approximately 20 years later, Augustine wrote a book called the *Retractations*, in which he

critically reviewed all the works he had thus far written, adding corrections wherever he had in the meantime learned something new.

With regard to the ideal of perfection in his homilies on the Sermon on the Mount, he noted: "In the meantime, I have understood that one alone is truly perfect and that the words of the Sermon on the Mount are totally fulfilled in one alone: Jesus Christ himself.

"The whole Church, on the other hand - all of us, including the Apostles - must pray every day: forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (cf. *Retract.* I 19, 1-3). Augustine had learned a further degree of humility - not only the humility of integrating his great thought into the humble faith of the Church, not only the humility of translating his great knowledge into the simplicity of announcement, but also the humility of recognizing that he himself and the entire pilgrim Church needed and continually need the merciful goodness of a God who forgives every day.

And we, he added, liken ourselves to Christ, the only Perfect One, to the greatest possible extent when we become, like him, people of mercy.

Let us now thank God for the great light that shines out from St Augustine's wisdom and humility and pray the Lord to give to us all, day after day, the conversion we need, and thus lead us toward true life. Amen.

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