



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 16 January 2008*

Saint Augustine of Hippo (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, like [last Wednesday](#), I would like to talk about the great Bishop of Hippo, St Augustine. He chose to appoint his successor four years before he died. Thus, on 26 September 426, he gathered the people in the Basilica of Peace at Hippo to present to the faithful the one he had designated for this task. He said: "In this life we are all mortal, and the day which shall be the last of life on earth is to every man at all times uncertain; but in infancy there is hope of entering boyhood... looking forward from boyhood to youth, from youth to manhood and from manhood to old age; whether these hopes may be realized or not is uncertain, but there is in each case something which may be hoped for. But old age has no other period of this life to look forward to with expectation: in any case, how long old age may be prolonged is uncertain.... I came to this town - for such was the will of God - when I was in the prime of life. I was young then, but now I am old" (Ep 213, 1). At this point Augustine named the person he had chosen as his successor, the presbyter Heraclius. The assembly burst into an applause of approval, shouting 23 times, "To God be thanks! To Christ be praise!". With other acclamations the faithful also approved what Augustine proposed for his future: he wanted to dedicate the years that were left to him to a more intense study of Sacred Scripture (cf. Ep 213, 6).

Indeed, what followed were four years of extraordinary intellectual activity: he brought important works to conclusion, he embarked on others, equally demanding, held public debates with heretics - he was always seeking dialogue - and intervened to foster peace in the African provinces

threatened by barbarian southern tribes. He wrote about this to Count Darius, who had come to Africa to settle the disagreement between Boniface and the imperial court which the tribes of Mauritania were exploiting for their incursions: "It is a higher glory still", he said in his letter, "to stay war itself with a word, than to slay men with the sword, and to procure or maintain peace by peace, not by war. For those who fight, if they are good men, doubtlessly seek peace; nevertheless, it is through blood. Your mission, however, is to prevent the shedding of blood" (*Ep* 229, 2). Unfortunately, the hope of pacification in the African territories was disappointed; in May 429, the Vandals, whom out of spite Boniface had invited to Africa, passed the straits of Gibraltar and streamed into Mauritania. The invasion rapidly reached the other rich African provinces. In May or June 430, "the destroyers of the Roman Empire", as Possidius described these barbarians (*Vita*, 30, 1), were surrounding and besieging Hippo.

Boniface had also sought refuge in the city. Having been reconciled with the court too late, he was now trying in vain to block the invaders' entry. Possidius, Augustine's biographer, describes Augustine's sorrow: "More tears than usual were his bread, night and day, and when he had reached the very end of his life, his old age caused him, more than others, grief and mourning (*Vita*, 28, 6). And he explains: "Indeed, that man of God saw the massacres and the destruction of the city; houses in the countryside were pulled down and the inhabitants killed by the enemy or put to flight and dispersed. Private churches belonging to priests and ministers were demolished, sacred virgins and Religious scattered on every side; some died under torture, others were killed by the sword, still others taken prisoner, losing the integrity of their soul and body and even their faith, reduced by their enemies to a long, drawn-out and painful slavery" (*ibid.*, 28, 8).

Despite being old and weary, Augustine stood in the breach, comforting himself and others with prayer and meditation on the mysterious designs of Providence. In this regard, he spoke of the "old-age of the world" - and this Roman world was truly old -, he spoke of this old age as years earlier he had spoken to comfort the refugees from Italy when Alaric's Goths had invaded the city of Rome in 410. In old age, he said, ailments proliferate: coughs, catarrh, bleary eyes, anxiety and exhaustion. Yet, if the world grows old, Christ is perpetually young; hence, the invitation: "Do not refuse to be rejuvenated united to Christ, even in the old world. He tells you: Do not fear, *your youth will be renewed like that of the eagle*" (cf. *Serm.* 81, 8). Thus, the Christian must not lose heart, even in difficult situations, but rather he must spare no effort to help those in need. This is what the great doctor suggested in his response to Honoratus, Bishop of Tiabe, who had asked him whether a Bishop or a priest or any man of the Church with the barbarians hot on his heels could flee to save his life: "When danger is common to all, that is, for Bishops, clerics and lay people, may those who need others not be abandoned by the people whom they need. In this case, either let all depart together to safe places or let those who must remain not be deserted by those through whom, in things pertaining to the Church, their necessities must be provided for; and so let them share life in common, or share in common that which the Father of their family appoints them to suffer" (*Ep* 228, 2). And he concluded: "Such conduct is especially the proof of love" (*ibid.*, 3). How can we fail to recognize in these words the heroic message that so many

priests down the centuries have welcomed and made their own?

In the meantime, the city of Hippo resisted. Augustine's monastery-home had opened its doors to welcome episcopal colleagues who were asking for hospitality. Also of this number was Possidius, a former disciple of Augustine; he was able to leave us his direct testimony of those last dramatic days. "In the third month of that siege", Possidius recounts, "Augustine took to his bed with a fever: it was his last illness" (*Vita*, 29, 3). The holy old man made the most of that period when he was at last free to dedicate himself with greater intensity to prayer. He was in the habit of saying that no one, Bishop, Religious or layman, however irreprehensible his conduct might seem, can face death without adequate repentance. For this reason he ceaselessly repeated between his tears, the penitential psalms he had so often recited with his people (cf. *ibid.*, 31, 2).

The worse his illness became, the more the dying Bishop felt the need for solitude and prayer: "In order that no one might disturb him in his recollection, about 10 days before leaving his body, he asked those of us present not to let anyone into his room outside the hours in which the doctors came to visit him or when his meals were brought. His desire was minutely complied with and in all that time he devoted himself to prayer" (*ibid.*, 31, 3). He breathed his last on 28 August 430: his great heart rested at last in God.

"For the last rites of his body", Possidius informs us, "the sacrifice in which we took part was offered to God and then he was buried" (*Vita*, 31, 5). His body on an unknown date was translated to Sardinia, and from here, in about 725, to the Basilica of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro in Pavia, where it still rests today. His first biographer has this final opinion of him: "He bequeathed to his Church a very numerous clergy and also monasteries of men and women full of people who had taken vows of chastity under the obedience of their superiors, as well as libraries containing his books and discourses and those of other saints, from which one learns what, through the grace of God, were his merits and greatness in the Church, where the faithful always find him alive" (Possidius, *Vita*, 31, 8). This is an opinion in which we can share. We too "find him alive" in his writings. When I read St Augustine's writings, I do not get the impression that he is a man who died more or less 1,600 years ago; I feel he is like a man of today: a friend, a contemporary who speaks to me, who speaks to us with his fresh and timely faith. In St Augustine who talks to us, talks to me in his writings, we see the everlasting timeliness of his faith; of the faith that comes from Christ, the Eternal Incarnate Word, Son of God and Son of Man. And we can see that this faith is not of the past although it was preached yesterday; it is still timely today, for Christ is truly yesterday, today and for ever. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Thus, St Augustine encourages us to entrust ourselves to this ever-living Christ and in this way find the path of life.

To special groups

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the students

from Australia, Ireland and the United States of America. May your time in Rome be one of uplifting spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the example of St Anthony Abbot, the distinguished Father of monasticism who worked hard for the Church by supporting martyrs during the persecution, encourage you, dear *young people*, to seek Christ constantly and follow him faithfully; may it comfort you, dear *sick* people, in bearing your suffering patiently and in offering it up so that the Kingdom of God may be spread throughout the world; and may it help you, dear *newly-weds*, to be witnesses of Christ's love in your family life.

APPEAL

The traditional *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* begins the day after tomorrow, Friday, 18 January. It is particularly important this year because 100 years have passed since it was introduced. The theme is St Paul's invitation to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing" (I Thes 5: 17), an invitation that I gladly make my own and address to the whole Church. Yes, it is necessary to pray constantly, asking God insistently for the great gift of unity among all the Lord's disciples. May the inexhaustible power of the Holy Spirit encourage us to a sincere commitment to seeking unity, so that we may profess all together that Jesus is the one Saviour of the world.

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