

AUGUST 28, 2022

Today's Second Reading from chapter 12 of the Epistle to the Hebrews refers us back to Israel's experience at Mount Sinai. The Mountain was visible and tangible, but, once the Glory of the Lord descended upon it, it was also terrifying. There was strange fire that wreathed the mountain and smoke, and there were mysterious and tremendous sounds that were somewhat like, but not quite like, trumpet blasts. Surrounded by all of this, Moses gave the People of Israel the Ten Commandments, and that was all the People could handle. The experience described in Exodus and Deuteronomy was emotionally exhausting to the People. Moses himself, the only man allowed even to touch the mountain, trembled with fear.

The People of Israel could see, and Moses could touch, the mountain of revelation, but it was terrifying. In contrast, writes the sacred Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the People of the Church are called to participate in something that they cannot see or touch, but which is also not terrifying. They are called to participate in the Divine Worship of Heaven, where the Angels and Saints forever remember and celebrate the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. They do not remember these sacred Mysteries as only past events. That isn't how Heavenly Life works. Not the pain of the Lord's Death or the shock of the Lord's Resurrection, but the power and love of His Death and Resurrection are always present in Heaven's Divine Worship, Heaven's Sacred Liturgy.

The sacred Author of Hebrews says that here on earth Christians are able to approach that Heavenly Worship. How? We Christians approach that Heavenly Worship by participating in Holy Church's Liturgy. I do not call Holy Church's Liturgy "earthly", for, although it is certainly celebrated on earth, the Liturgy, especially the Liturgy of the Sacraments, most especially the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist, is not really something of earth. The assembled and praying People are visible, but their assembly and prayer are made holy by the unseen multitude of angels and saints present at every Mass (which is why no Mass ever fails to mention the angels and saints). The presiding Priest is visible, but his sacred words are made real and effective by the unseen Lord Jesus Christ, the True Priest of every Liturgy, and especially every Mass. He is present in power and spirit, though unseen, in all Divine Worship, according to His words "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in their midst". He is in a sense visibly present in the Holy Mass, though only under the unremarkable forms of Bread and Wine. This is a mercy, for He wants to be with us as intimately as possible, according to His words "whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood will live in Me and I in Him"; yet, until we are changed from glory into glory, we cannot endure to see Him as He is, in His true majestic beauty. We are not called to what will frighten us. We are called to "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel" present to us completely, but gently and humbly.

He comes humbly to us. Are we humble enough to show up for His visit?

That is to say, are we humble enough to have Faith?

There is no coming to the Lord without Faith. All of us, even those of us raised to be practicing Catholics, need to have some sort of conversion experience, some kind of turning away from selfishness and wordliness, in order to follow the Lord Jesus truly. There is never conversion without Faith, and there is never Faith without humility. Pride must be humbled.

Pride may be humbled in two ways, gratitude and contrition. Gratitude is a realization that we have been given much more than we could possibly deserve, and the only proper response is to say thank you to someone - or SOMEONE. Contrition is the realization that we have made a mess of things, and need help to get through the mess we've made. We therefore ask someone, or SOMEONE, for help. The gratitude that says to God "Thank you" for life, the universe, and everything, is a laying down of pride, since it places thanksgiving before understanding (understanding is good - but for a wise man thanksgiving comes first). When pride is laid down, Faith can enter in. The contrition that says to God "Help me" with the messes we mortals make in our lives is also a laying down of pride, since it recognizes that help is needed. Again, when pride is laid down, Faith can enter in.

Sunday is always the weekly Feast Day of the Lord Jesus, a celebration of the power of His Death, made present in the Mass, and of His Risen Life, made present in the Mass. If it weren't a Sunday this year, August 28 would be the Feast Day of St. Augustine (or Austin), possibly the greatest Bishop and Teacher in the Church's history. God be thanked, we have had equally great Bishops and equally great Teachers, but I cannot think of anyone who has combined those two roles as perfectly and brilliantly as St. Augustine, the Bishop of the Romano-African city of Hippo (now in Algeria), who died in 430.

St. Augustine was raised to be a practicing Catholic, but he rebelled against that, and needed a strong conversion experience, a strong call to Faith. That could not happen until his pride was humbled. Augustine was never what we would call a wild man. From the time he was 17, he lived with a woman outside of Marriage, but was mostly faithful to her. He always had a sense of basic decency, and a gentleman's code of conduct. What he did not have was the humility to have Faith, and by Faith to receive the Grace to lead the life of holy Love that is far higher and greater than mere basic decency or a gentleman's code of conduct. Church people had him read the Bible, but he was already an artist with the Latin language, and the plain, humble style of the Bible only irritated him. He demanded a solution to the "problem of evil", and seeking such a solution away from the Bible, he fell into the very strange cult of the Manichees. "I sought with pride what only humility could help me find. Fool that I was, I left the nest, imagining myself able to fly, and I fell to the ground"

Little by little, as Augustine pursued his studies and career, and kept thinking. He left the cult of the Manichees, and came to admire people who actually lived the Catholic Faith he had once mostly abandoned. What held him back, however, was his doubt that he could actually force himself to lead a truly Catholic life. One thing that set St. Augustine up to be a great saint was his refusal to be a half Catholic. Until he could actually live the Catholic life, the way of holy love that soars far above basic decency or good manners, he would not be a Catholic. Looking

back, however, he realized that the truth was that he wasn't yet humble enough to let go of the lifestyle he was used to. "I begged chastity . . . but by halves . . . I said 'Give me chastity, but not right now'"

Finally the day came when he totally laid down his pride. After a serious religious conversation one evening with some friends, he dashed out into his garden, torn inside. He felt the call of God to the Catholic way of life, but he still had the pride to cling to memories of his former sins. As his good friend Alipius, worried but not knowing what to do, sat down and started to read the part of the Bible, the Letters of St. Paul, that had been part of the evening's discussion, Augustine threw himself to the ground, and spoke the words that finally released his pride. "How long? How long? Tomorrow? Why not now?" At that moment he heard a child's voice singing "Tolle, Lege, Tolle, Lege, Tolle, Lege - Take and Read, Take and Read, Take and Read" He stood up, and considered if there was any game in which children chanted those words. He couldn't think of one. "Tolle, Lege, Tolle, Lege, Tolle, Lege", the child's voice continued. Augustine looked around, and ran toward the first book he saw, the Letters of St. Paul that Alipius was reading. "Tolle, Lege, Tolle, Lege, Tolle, Lege", the voice continued. Augustine seized the book, and read aloud the first words his eyes found: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in its desires" At that moment, his pride laid down, Augustine knew not only that he WANTED to follow the Christian way of life, but that he COULD follow the Christian way of life, by the power of Divine Grace, far exceeding what he could ever hope to accomplish merely with his own human willpower. (That concept of Divine grace Augustine would extensively explore and develop in his writing.)

Augustine's conversion fits well with today's reading from Hebrews. Augustine had been frightened by the demands of the Christian way of life, but what he really approached was not a law but true Beauty, a Beauty as yet unseen, but no less real for that. This was Beauty for mind and heart, beauty hidden from the proud, but revealed to the humble. In Augustine's famous words "Late have I loved Thee, o Beauty ever ancient and ever new, late have I loved Thee! Thou wast with me, but I was not with Thee. I was outside, chasing after the beautiful things Thou hadst made"

In the midst of the surrounding saints and angels, Augustine, in his 32 year of life had finally met the Lord Jesus Christ, and through Him, the Father. "You called, You cried out, and You pierced my deafness. You sent forth light, You shone out, and my blindness is gone . . . You have touched me, and I am on fire with the desire for Your embrace" In the midst of the surrounding saints and angels, Augustine, in his 32 year of life, finally met the Lord Jesus Christ, and through Him, the Father.

Augustine met the Lord Jesus Christ in the human (but not merely human) words of the Bible. He met the Lord Jesus Christ in the human (but not merely human) worship of the Church. He accepted Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion. He participated often in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. He was ordained a priest, and eventually consecrated a bishop. He knew that we are called not to a visible blazing fire, gloomy darkness, and trumpet blast. He knew that we

are called to the invisible assembly of the Firstborn enrolled in Heaven, and to the Blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel. The invisible assembly of the Firstborn enrolled in Heaven is present in the visible assembly of the Church for Divine Worship. The Blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel is present, and shouting out with saving power, in the Church's Liturgy of the Eucharist

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Of course, much more could be said about great St. Augustine. For purposes of this homily, however, I want to emphasize the holy humility that enabled him to recognize the Assembly of Heaven's firstborn present in the earthly assembly of the Church's people, and recognize the Blood of Jesus calling out our Salvation in the Church's Liturgy. He wanted to live in Jesus Christ, but could not imagine doing that apart from the People and Worship of the Church. As he said to his people in one of his sermons (almost four hundred have been preserved), "What shall I desire? What shall I say? Why am I bishop? Why am I in this world? Only to live in Jesus Christ! But to live in Him with you. That is my passion, my glory, my joy, and my riches".

As a priest, may I also say "Why am I in this world? Only to live in Jesus Christ! But to live in Him with you" As the Lord's people, may you say the same. We have not been called to that which could be touched, a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast. We have been called to the assembly of the Firstborn enrolled in Heaven, and that invisible assembly is made present in our gathering here today. We have been called to the sprinkled Blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel, and that Blood is present and shouting out our Salvation in our Holy Eucharist here today.