

Sermon for the Feast of St. Augustine

Dearly Beloved,

Today, we celebrate the feast of Saint Augustine, the spiritual father and founder of this monastery. His actual feast day fell on this past Wednesday, August 28, the day on which he died and went to heaven in the year 430. But we offer Mass today in his honor that we might be able to celebrate his feast with you since most of you could not join us for his feast, as it fell on a weekday.

St. Augustine is our spiritual father not only because we follow his Rule, written about 100 years before that of St. Benedict, but because he lived as we do. When he became a Catholic at the age of 33, he founded a simple monastery in northern Africa and lived there even when he was ordained a priest. When he became a bishop, he mandated that all of his clergy live with him in the episcopal residence, so that they could pray together, support one another, and contemplate the Holy Trinity and things of heaven.

It is a forgotten fact that religious life, especially priestly religious life, exists principally so that the religious priest has enough leisure, or free time, to consider the things of God and then enrich his people with the insights gained and the union achieved. You support us financially so that we can think about the things you have less time to think about: it is much like a mother bird: we feed you with the richness of the truth and beauty of God, and we do that because you supply our material needs. Religious priests are not the lazy liars that Voltaire and Hitchens say we are, but instead religious priests are the sign of a healthy Church and society, for if God has revealed Himself to man, should not some souls devote themselves wholly to studying all He has said and then handing it on to others?

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the most perfect human activity is contemplation, in the sense of thinking carefully and profoundly about reality. He supports this claim by many reasons: for one, the highest activity of man must be in accord with his highest power, and that is his intellect. Another reason is that whatever makes him most like God would be the most perfect action, and God is thought thinking itself. Lastly, the highest human activity must be something which requires no exterior things to make it possible, and one may consider the truth regardless of whether he has material goods.

What does the contemplative person think about? Since it is an imitation of God, it would have to be the most perfect and lasting things. We could also say that the contemplative thinks about the essence of things, the heart of the matter, and habitually tries to move past appearances to what is most real about a thing or an action. We become exhausted by details, but considering the ‘why’ of a thing actually mysteriously rejuvenates us.

Augustine excelled at this most perfect of human activities. Despite the fact that he had never-ending duties, he was one of the most profound contemplatives that has ever lived. In his homilies and the Confessions, he relates that the most happy time of his life was between his conversion to the Church and his ordination to the priesthood, a period of about five years in which he had leisure to pursue wisdom by reading good authors and discussing truth with his friends. When he became a priest, and especially upon being consecrated a bishop, he no longer had any leisure—like us Canons and like most of you--and yet he found time to contemplate because he made it a priority in his life. In this contemplation, he always looked for center of the matter, the essence, whether it concerned marriage or music, time or the Trinity.

Although his thought is more complicated and varied than a homily allows for, there are three areas of his contemplative life worth looking at more carefully. Of course for Augustine all contemplation was ultimately of God, and secondarily of the things He has made, but he really did enjoy pondering all that was important, true, good and beautiful.

First, the natural world. Augustine loved nature and felt that the most natural human action was fascination with the natural world. He once wrote, “*What words can describe the myriad beauties of land and sea and sky?*”

Just think of the illimitable abundance and the marvelous loveliness of light, the beauty of the sun and moon and stars, of shadowy glades in the woods and of the colors and perfume of flowers, of the songs and plumage of so many varieties of birds, of the innumerable animals of every species that amaze us most when they are smallest in size.” In other words, he loved the details of the world around him, and they never lost their newness for him.

And yet, he also looked for the essence of such things. For him, they all pointed to God. In a famous passage in the Confessions, he asks created things who God is: *“To the sky I put my question, to the sun, the moon, the stars, but they denied me: ‘We are not the God you seek.’ And to all things which stood around the portals of my flesh I said, ‘Tell me of my God. You are not he, but tell me something of him.’ Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried, ‘He made us.’”* For Augustine, nature is most what it is when it functions as a step to God; created things most perfectly achieve their purpose and are therefore most glad, one could say, when they point to the One who made them and help a human being love his or her Creator more.

The second thing Augustine loved to think about was man, both his powers and his actions. Half of book ten of the Confessions, which in an English translation is equivalent to 22 pages, is about the power of memory—how we remember things, what we remember, where we store memories and other considerations. And his epic work on the Trinity, he devotes a fourth of it to discussing man’s intellect and will and how they enable him to know and love and he does such things. But he didn’t concern himself only with thinking about the essence of the soul—he also thought about why man acts as he does, especially why he sins, and he thought a lot about why he sinned. When he was sixteen, the bishop to be famously stole some pears from a nearby orchard, and 25 years later, he was still thinking about why he had done that. He never stopped looking for the essence of his own actions, and seeking the why of them so that he might live better, more virtuously, more peaceably with others.

Both these considerations again led him closer to God: contemplating bad action, he knew what good action must look like and how it would make him closer to his Savior; pondering the human soul made him think of the Trinity, and his use of the memory, intellect and will as analogies for the Father, Son and Spirit remains the foundation of Trinitarian theology to this day.

Finally, Augustine loved to read and ruminate upon the Word of God. In his youth, he thought Scripture was a joke, something below himself that only unintelligent people read. But when he heard Ambrose expound the holy books from his pulpit in Milan, Augustine realized that there was an immense profundity to the writings that he had thought were for children. From that time on, he never ceased to read, and write and preach on Scripture. In fact, one of his first writings after his conversion is a lengthy commentary on the first three chapters of Genesis. Although he knew all of Scripture very well, Augustine had, just as we should have, his favorite books. He especially enjoyed reading and commenting on Genesis 1-3, the Gospel of John and the first letter of John, Paul’s letter to the Romans, and most of all, the Psalms. Again, in the Confessions, he wrote, *“How wonderful are your Scriptures! How profound! We see their surface and it attracts us like children. And yet, O my God, their depth is stupendous. We shudder to peer deep into them, for they inspire in us both the awe of reverence and the thrill of love...they are sweet with the honey of heaven and radiant with your light.”*

Whereas when he was young, he thought the Word of God was the least important of all written works and that worldly authors were much more important, when he came to love God as a young man, he began to gauge all human wisdom by the measure of holy Scripture. It became for him the essence of all good thought, and now Cicero and Plotinus and Virgil had to prove their worth in light of the Bible, rather than vice versa. And those who expounded the holy books were those he trusted most, for he knew that they were closer to the center of truth.

All this talk of Augustine’s contemplation of nature, man, and Scripture is meant, of course, to encourage you to do the same, and imitate him. But to return to Aristotle for a moment, notice that contemplation of true and

lasting things is not the mark of a Christian qua Christian but of a human being. We don't have a choice between contemplating or not contemplating any more than we have a choice between being human or not. If we wish to be good persons, we must make time for ourselves to think and meditate upon profound things. Moreover, it is not only that this will make us holier persons, but also happier persons.

Too many of us spend our lives not acting like human beings but some elevated form of domestic animal because we don't give ourselves time and space to think, and we use our leisure time so badly. We will not be happier by devoting more time to details of life, like social media and sports, but by thinking about the things that last, as St. Paul says, "*Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*" You must trust me that you will be more enlivened and refreshed by contemplation than by any other activity you choose. We are built to think about God and the things that are like Him; when we focus on lesser things, we exhaust ourselves.

"Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!" As we enter more deeply into the holy mysteries of the Mass, let us consider this famous lament of St. Augustine. In a very real way, for each of us, it is late. The day is spent and night is approaching. It is time to re-prioritize our lives, inasmuch as it lies within our power, so that we can be men and women, boys and girls, dedicated to what matters in life. To set aside time for contemplation, prayer, reading, discussion; to use our leisure well. And if, by God's grace, we persevere in this desire, we will be able to pray once more with Augustine: "*You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burn for your peace.*" May we burn as he did until we are filled with the Lord's peace, in the world to come, in the New Jerusalem.