

**Homily for the 140th Anniversary of St. Augustine Parish, Ashland, Illinois
Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C
August 28, 2016**

**St. Augustine Church
Ashland, Illinois**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers [and Deacon],
My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you here at this church, dedicated to the honor of God and to Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, to conclude the celebrations marking the 140th anniversary of this parish and to give thanks to God for so many blessings and graces received these past many years. Pope Francis reminds us that “the history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good.”¹ So it is that today we wish to recall the memories we have of our experiences in this church, both joyful and sorrowful, and to remember those who have touched our lives and nourished our faith in this church.

From humble beginnings as a missionary outpost of St. Peter's Parish in Petersburg, your ancestors strengthened this community and built it up in such a way that it became a parish in its own right, with its own resident pastor. I am happy this situation remains so today and I congratulate and thank you for the witness this community of faith has given for almost a century and a half. Your heavenly patron, Saint Augustine, "encountered God and throughout his life experienced him to the point that this reality – which is primarily his meeting with a Person, Jesus – changed his life, as it changes the lives of everyone, men and women, who in every age have the grace to encounter him."²

Through his encounter with Jesus in the Scriptures, in the Eucharist, and in the confession of his sins, Saint Augustine allowed the totality of his life to be converted to the Lord and become one of the greatest witnesses and teachers of the Christian life. It is, then, "by following in St Augustine's footsteps [that] we will be able to meditate on what this conversion is: it is something definitive, decisive, but the fundamental decision must develop, be brought about throughout our life."³ For Saint Augustine, this conversion spanned many years, more than two decades, before he humbled himself and was exalted by the Lord (cf. Luke 14:11).

We should not, then, be wholly discouraged if some of our family and friends have strayed from the Church, if it seems they are far from the Lord, for there is always hope they will yield to the strength of Christ's love. "It is well known that [Saint Augustine's] conversion took a wholly individual path, because it was not a case of arriving for the first time at the Catholic faith, but of rediscovering it. He had lost it, convinced that in so doing, he was abandoning only the Church, not Christ."⁴

As a young man, Saint Augustine possessed a keen and bright intellect combined with a desire to know the truth. In this, he is not unlike many young men and women today. However, as Pope Saint John Paul II noted,

Despite this love for truth, Augustine fell into serious errors. Scholars who look for the reasons for this indicate three directions: first, a mistaken account of the relationship between reason and faith, so that he would have to choose between them; second, in the supposed contrast between Christ and the Church, with the consequent conviction that it was necessary to abandon the Church in order to belong more fully to Christ; and third, the desire to free himself from the consciousness of sin, not by means of the remission of sin through the working of grace, but by means of the denial of the involvement of human responsibility in the sin itself.⁵

Here, again, Saint Augustine is not unlike many of those we encounter every day.

With Saint Augustine, however, all was not lost. Through the persistent pleading, prayers, and tears of his devout mother, Saint Monica, your patron encountered Jesus and was never the same again. He returned to the faith he received from his mother. In his great spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, he said "For I had heard while still a boy about the eternal life promised to us by the God who in His humility came down to our pride."⁶ "The love for the truth, nourished by divine grace, overcame all errors."⁷ If this happened with Saint Augustine, it can also happen in the lives of our family and friends, through our humble and persistent pleadings, prayers, and tears; our family and friends who may have wandered from the fold can overcome all errors, as well, and take their places at the wedding banquet of the Lamb of God.

We need to keep in mind the example of Saint Augustine and the patient prayers of his mother, Saint Monica, as we seek to bring back to the Church and back to the practice of the Catholic faith those who have strayed from Our Lord's path. In our diocese, we are making a very concerted effort to build a culture of growth, where believers make a very intentional decision to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, out of which flows the personal commitment to live a stewardship

way of life. I am very grateful to your Pastor, Father Chuck Edwards, for his enthusiastic leadership of these efforts as our diocesan Director of the Department for Evangelical and Catechetical Services and of our Office for Stewardship and Discipleship. I also appreciate the willingness of you, the parishioners of Saint Augustine Parish, to share Father Edwards with the rest of the diocese, so that he can have the time needed to assist me properly with these efforts.

Jesus reminds us in the Gospel passage from Saint Luke that we heard today that those who serve with humility will be the honored guests at His Father's Heavenly Banquet. "Humility" comes from the Latin word *humus*, meaning ground, soil or dirt; but that does not mean to think of oneself as dirt. Our phrase, "down to earth," catches the meaning well. Humility is not poor self-esteem. Truly humble people actually have very good self-esteem. C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, wrote, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

Only a few days ago, Pope Francis wrote, "To kneel before the wounds of the human person, to understand them, care for them and heal them, is the duty of a Church that trusts in the light and the strength of the Risen Christ."⁸ These past 140 years, the pastors and parishioners of Saint

Augustine Parish here in Ashland have sought to kneel humbly before the wounds of others, to understand their wounds, to care for their wounds, and to heal their wounds through humble and faithful love. Saint Augustine dedicated himself to this same task; we must dedicated ourselves to it, as well, so that everyone will come to know the One who is “meek and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:29).

Gathered here at the altar of the Lord, we might see a symbolic fulfillment of the words we heard a few moments ago from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

“..you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Yes, here, at the altar, where soon we will offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to God the Father, we approach the foretaste of the heavenly Jerusalem. Here, the angels and the saints, who accompany Jesus wherever he goes, surround us, including the communion of saints who are our family and friends (cf. Matthew 25:31; I Thessalonians 3:1). It is here in the Lord’s sanctuary that we witness and experience the meekness of Jesus

displayed most fully on the Cross; it is here that we receive the fruits of his selfless humility and learn to do good to those who cannot repay us, just as he has done for us (cf. Luke 14:14).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 84.

² Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, January 30, 2008.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, January 30, 2008.

⁴ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Augustinum Hipponensem*, 1.

⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Augustinum Hipponensem*, 1.

⁶ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 1.11.17.

⁷ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Augustinum Hipponensem*, 1.

⁸ Pope Francis, Chirograph of His Holiness Pope Francis to H.E. Msgr. Vincenzo Paglia, August 15, 2016.