

First Sunday of Advent

Before St. Augustine became Saint Augustine, he was just Augustine and not very saintly. Born in fourth-century Africa, he became a catechumen as an infant. As he grew up, his mother, St. Monica, did all she could to have him embrace the teachings of Christ, but Augustine just did not welcome them. He was exceptionally bright, and he knew it. When he reached puberty, he slept around a bit. At age 17 he settled down with one woman, though he never married her. We don't know her name, but they had a son, Adeodatus. Augustine later took a teaching position in Milan and learned more and more about Christianity under the tutelage of the bishop there, St. Ambrose. Even though Augustine had indulged his lusts, he admitted he was not happy. At some point, he even dismissed his mistress.

In his autobiography, Augustine tells of taking a walk in a garden one day with his friend Alypius. They had been discussing Paul's Letter to the Romans, which has a theological depth that would have appealed to an intellectual like Augustine. That day Augustine sensed that without a commitment to Christianity, his life was aimless, and he despaired. He started crying endlessly in the garden and flung himself down under a fig tree. From a neighboring house he heard a child's voice, saying "Take and read, take and read." Something strange stirred within him because from his own enjoyments, he knew that these words did not belong to any child's game. Interpreting this as a divine message, he eyed the book on the table that he and Alypius had been reading. Remembering the example of St. Anthony the hermit, who had taken up the bible, opened it at random to one verse, and completely changed his life, Augustine did the same. He took the book and read the very verses we have today in our second reading: "not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh." Those words changed Augustine's life. Ambrose baptized both Augustine and his son Adeodatus at the cathedral in Milan. Augustine later became a priest and the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He wrote some of the greatest literature of the fifth century and remains a towering figure in Catholic doctrine today - all because of two short verses in Paul's Letter to the Romans.

At this time of year many of us take stock of our lives. If we have lost family or friends since last year's holidays, we grieve and we ponder the meaning of life and death. We crave time with loved ones who are still alive, and we go to extremes to get it. We lavishly spend on gifts to show our affection. As we recall the historic birth of Jesus, we prepare to celebrate it. We ask if we are truly happy with the way we are living, with the time we give our family, the practice of our values, and our struggles with sin.

To begin Advent this year, the church asks us to take and read the words of St. Paul. He wants us to put on the armor of light - a protective shield to preserve us from sin. It's the best way to dress for Christmas. But some of us wear different clothes: We wear jealousy, rivalry, promiscuity, lust, drunkenness, orgies. We wear these activities of darkness. This Advent, let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day. Daylight is short; let us make ourselves bright. Let us take off the clothing of sin and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sunday, December 1, 2019