

Saints Monica and Augustine and Evangelization

This Thursday and Friday, we celebrate the feast days of Saints Monica and Augustine.

Monica was the loving mother of Augustine, who became a great bishop and writer in the early Church, and is still one of the greatest theologians ever produced. But a big reason for this was because of Monica, his mother. Over a long period of time, she would keep praying for him, encouraging him, and sometimes literally following him, moving to where he was, all because she kept hoping he would turn his life around. And of course, eventually he did.

Having a pagan father, Patricus, who eventually converted to Christianity when death neared, Augustine was known for some poor decision making early on in his life. He'd get into trouble with other teenagers. He resisted his mother's attempts to become a Christian. He was worldly. He liked to party and lived with his girlfriend outside of marriage. He got caught up in heretical teaching while in college. While never really a notorious criminal or anything like that, I think you could say he's the kind of person we all have in our families: overall a good person who is caught up in ambition, living for the moment, and believes in a higher power but doesn't seem all that important. Eventually she, along with the Holy Spirit, got him to "re-vert" (he had been baptized). So how can we maybe take a page from her when we are reaching out to others?

1. Kindness and hospitality. One of the true tragedies that has occurred in Christianity, and indeed our world, is the divisions we have. Initially there were sects who broke off from the Church as early heresies; then we had the Western Schism with Protestant congregations forming. We've come a long way with ecumenism, but even within our Catholic Church today, there have been divisions. Some have been between neighboring parishes based on ethnicity or parish culture; others have been between so-called "liberal" and "conservative" Catholics, others have been based on money. Other times we can silently have an attitude of knowing who "belongs" at church and who doesn't. How pathetic. This is also apparent in our society too as we see each other so often in terms of partisanship than as part of our common country. We must remember Christ is in all people. It by no means is part of not standing up for what we believe in or being unique in our own way; for we also need to be who we are and not fear talking about our beliefs. But a starting point can first be trying to get to know the person, to welcome them to Mass or invite them to Mass, or just have a conversation with them to learn more about them. And if we see visitors at Mass, consider saying "hi." As one long time parishioner said to me being at Saint Joe's is a bit like being a part of a "small town" and people seem to connect (great to see these social things finally starting again too!). But I also run across a number of people who are visiting family or on vacation from other parts of the country. Let's make sure all are truly welcome by trying to be welcoming to all. It's so great to see that here, and not too long ago someone who started coming to Mass again remarked how though not a long time parishioner or even registered here felt our parish had that welcoming vibe, and wasn't "cliquey" like some other parishes can be.

2. Watching what we say. Words mean things, and sometimes we can forget that. Especially online. On the one hand we all have to vent, but if we are putting others down, that can encourage others to do that too. We need to be mindful of what we say about the Church. If we are on social media or at dinner, and putting down the Church; either our parish, the bishop, the pope, what kind of reflection does that give to others? We can be critical of people, such as our boss or those in public office, but do we try to respect their dignity too and choose our words carefully? Certainly we might not like everything that happens in the Church, at the universal or local level, and certainly we have disagreements on politics, but we also must remember that what we say can be taken out of context, and if we paint a negative view of the Catholic Church, it's certainly not going to be seen as something another person who is not Catholic or non-practicing would want to be a part of.

3. Invite people to Mass. Rather than use judgmental language that can push them away, from time to time invite them to come with you. Over the years I've been often surprised in a good way at people who come back to Mass because they are made to feel welcome.

4. Pray for others. Augustine took the long road to return to his faith, but because of his mother's example and prayers, he eventually did go on to become one of the greatest theologians of all time. Prayer can do so much, for both the living and the dead.

5. Be patient. One of the challenges can be when a person has a faith life, or perhaps they have "reverted" to their Catholic faith, but then they want others to be right where they are, right now. If they aren't patient, sometimes a zealous or judgmental attitude can push people away. If we are always in someone's face about how they do not go to Mass, or talking about our faith all the time to them, it might not work. Rather, we need to look for the right time to talk about the faith with them, finding the balance between never saying a word or saying too much. They might not come right away, but over time amazing things can happen.

6. Be the Gospel they read. As the saying goes, "sometimes you are the only Bible people read," we need to remember that is quite true. When we are kind, positive, uplifting and generous with our time, people will come to see it as a reflection of an interior love of God.

7. Look for ways to deepen the faith of others through discussion and involvement. Some things should seem obvious to a Catholic, but there is a lot of misconceptions and ignorance about the faith. Many Catholics think the Eucharist is just a symbol; many non-Catholics think we worship Mary as a Goddess. And even for those who attend Mass weekly, there may be misconceptions too. The list goes on and on, but the bottom line is ignorance of the faith, both from people who are Catholic and those who are not is rampant. We need to learn about the faith more deeply ourselves, but look for ways to talk about it; from talking to kids and grandkids about stained glass, statues, or the colors the priest is wearing, to giving someone a rosary and explaining how to use it and what it means. Remember through your baptism and confirmation you are a priest, prophet and a king, sharing in the duty to be a shepherd of souls.

In a little over 14 years as a priest, one of the greatest joys I see is when someone who I had not seen much before all of a sudden starts to come after a wedding, funeral or major feast day. People in the world are so hungry, which is why there can be so much energy on passing things of this world, they just don't always know what they hunger for. We've been hearing much about the Bread of Life in our Gospel readings on these Sundays in July and August - let us strive to help people come to know the Bread that will truly fill them, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Saint Monica and Saint Augustine, pray for us.

God bless!

Fr. Paul