



The Holy See

HOLY MASS FOR THE BEGINNING OF THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF THE ORDER OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

HOMILY OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS

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Video

“You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (*Confessions*, 1, 1, 1). With these famous words St Augustine addresses God in his *Confessions*, and these words sum up his whole life.

“Restlessness”: this word makes an impression on me and sets me thinking. I would like to start with a question: what fundamental restlessness did Augustine live in his life? Or perhaps I should say: what kinds of restlessness does this great and holy man ask us to awaken and to keep alive in our own existence? I am proposing three kinds: the restlessness of spiritual seeking, the restlessness of the encounter with God, the restlessness of love.

1. The first: the restlessness of spiritual seeking. Augustine lived an experience that is fairly common today: common enough among today’s young people. He was raised in the Christian faith by his mother Monica, even though he did not receive Baptism. However, as he grew up he fell away from the faith, failing to find the answer to his questions, to his heart’s desires, and was attracted by other proposals. He then joined a group of Manichaeans, devoted himself diligently to his studies, did not give up carefree pleasures, the spectacles of his time and deep friendships. He experienced intense love and had a brilliant career as a teacher of rhetoric that even took him to the imperial court in Milan. Augustine was a man who had “made it”, he had everything. Nevertheless, his heart still yearned for life’s deep meaning; his heart had not been overcome by sleep. I would say it had not been anaesthetized by success, by things or by power. Augustine did

not withdraw into himself, he did not settle down, he continued his quest for the truth, for the meaning of life. He continued to seek God's face. Of course he made mistakes, he took wrong turns, he sinned, he was a sinner. Yet he retained the restlessness of spiritual seeking. In this way he discovered that God was waiting for him, indeed, that he had never ceased to be the first to seek him. I would like to tell those who feel indifferent to God, to faith, and those who are far from God or who have distanced themselves from him, that we too, with our "distancing" and our "abandonment" of God, that may seem insignificant but are so numerous in our daily life: look into the depths of your heart, look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? Has your heart preserved the restlessness of seeking or have you let it be suffocated by things that end by hardening it? God awaits you, he seeks you; how do you respond to him? Are you aware of the situation of your soul? Or have you nodded off? Do you believe God is waiting for you or does this truth consist only of "words"?

2. In Augustine it was this very restlessness in his heart which brought him to a personal encounter with Christ, brought him to understand that the remote God he was seeking was the God who is close to every human being, the God close to our heart, who was "more inward than my innermost self" (cf. *ibid.* III, 6, 11). However even in the discovery of and encounter with God, Augustine did not stop, he did not give up, he did not withdraw into himself like those who have already arrived, but continued his search. The restlessness of seeking the truth, of seeking God, became the restlessness to know him ever better and of coming out of himself to make others know him. It was precisely the restlessness of love. He would have liked a peaceful life of study and prayer but God called him to be a Pastor in Hippo, in a difficult period, with a split community and war at the gates. And Augustine let God make him restless, he never tired of proclaiming him, of evangelizing with courage and without fear, he sought to be the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep (cf. Jn 10:14). Indeed, as I like to repeat, he "knew the odour of his sheep", and went out to search for those that had strayed. Augustine lived as St Paul had instructed Timothy and each one of us: he proclaimed the word, he insisted in season and out of season, he proclaimed the Gospel with a magnanimous heart, with a great heart (cf. 2 Tim 4:2), that of a Pastor who is anxious about his sheep. Augustine's treasure is this very attitude: always going towards God, always going out towards the flock.... He was a man constantly stretched between these poles; never "privatizing" love... always journeying on! Always be on the way, the Father said. As for you, always be restless!

And this is the peace of restlessness. We may ask ourselves: am I anxious for God, anxious to proclaim him, to make him known? Or do I allow that spiritual worldliness to attract me which impels people to do everything for love of themselves? We consecrated people think of our personal interests, of the functionality of our works, of our careers. Eh! We can think of so many things.... Have I, so to speak, "made myself 'comfy'" in my Christian life, in my priestly life, in my religious life, and also in my community life? Or do I retain the force of restlessness for God, for his Word that makes me "step out" of myself towards others?

3. And let us come to the last kind of restlessness, the anxiety of love. Here I cannot but look at the mother: this Monica! How many tears did that holy woman shed for her son's conversion! And today too how many mothers shed tears so that their children will return to Christ! Do not lose hope in God's grace! In the *Confessions* we read this sentence that a bishop said to St Monica who was asking him to help her son find the road to faith: "it is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish" (III, 12, 21). After his conversion Augustine himself, addressing God, wrote: "my mother, your faithful one, wept before you on my behalf more than mothers are wont to weep the bodily death of their children" (*ibid.*, III, 11, 19). A restless woman, this woman who at the end of her life said these beautiful words: "*cumulatius hoc mihi Deus praestitit!*" [my God has exceeded my expectations abundantly] (*ibid.*, IX, 10, 26). God lavishly rewarded her tearful request! And Augustine was Monica's heir, from her he received the seed of restlessness. This, then, is the restlessness of love: ceaselessly seeking the good of the other, of the beloved, without ever stopping and with the intensity that leads even to tears. Then I think of Jesus weeping at the tomb of his friend Lazarus; of Peter who, after denying Jesus, encounters his gaze full of mercy and love, weeps bitterly, and of the father who waits on the terrace for his son's return and when he spies him still far off runs to meet him; the Virgin Mary comes to mind lovingly following her Son Jesus even to the Cross. Do we feel the restlessness of love? Do we believe in love for God and for others? Or are we unconcerned by this? Not in an abstract manner, not only in words, but as a real brother to those we come across, the brother who is beside us! Are we moved by their needs or do we remain closed in on ourselves, in our communities which are often "handy communities" for us? At times we can live in a building without knowing our next door neighbour; or we can be in a community without really knowing our own confreres: I think sorrowfully of the consecrated people who are infertile "old bachelors". The restlessness of love is always an incentive to go towards the other, without waiting for the other to manifest his need. The restlessness of love gives us the gift of pastoral fecundity, and we must ask ourselves, each one of us: is my spiritual fecundity healthy, is my apostolate fertile?

Let us ask the Lord for you, dear Augustinians who are beginning your General Chapter, and for all of us, that he keep in our hearts the spiritual restlessness that prompts us to seek him always, the restlessness to proclaim him courageously, the restlessness of love for every brother and sister. So be it.