



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



Introduction

Every assignment, every call of God, every direction from Him starts somewhere. God has specific assignments for your life. But how do you discover them? How will you hear His voice? How will you know His will for your life, His plans for you? Whom should you marry? Where should you live? What career should you pursue? What service is calling your name?

The answer can be found in the appeal Paul made to the Romans:

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2)

We urge you to take these next few days to reflect on your life and the choices you have made. Use this time that we have together to make a decision to always choose Christ, to be a living sacrifice, to renew your mind, to be transformed... the choice is yours.

Lecture 1: A Call to be Different

Focus Question: In what ways does the world try to conform us to its way of thinking?

Overview: The world constantly tries to mold us into its image. It tries to shape our values, our morals, and our perspective on life. Those who don't conform to peer pressure are threatened with dishonor, contempt, hostility, loss of relationships and loss of security. From trying to change the way we dress, to the way we act and even the way we deal with one another, we have become a society obsessed with fame and glamour, and some of us will stop at nothing to reach our obsession. So, we must always remember what Jesus said of his disciples, *"They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world"* (John 17:16).

Thoughts for Reflection: Ask yourself this question, have you conformed to this world's standards? In making decisions in being a wife, a husband, a friend or being a servant of the Most High God? In deciding what career to pursue? What university to attend? In choosing your friends? Do you go after the money and respect in your career choice or what will honor God? Do you choose a lifestyle that gives you all the freedom you can get or one that allows you adequate time to serve and care for your future family? Are you trying to get as far away from home as possible? Or are you pursuing the best education? Do you befriend the popular people or the Godly people? What has motivated you to become a part of this world rather than just someone living in it?

Think about this, the number one reason people conform is for acceptance. It is common to think that when you do things that others do, you will be accepted. It's actually quite simple. It's easier to conform than to be different. We know that the spirit of the world is opposed to that of Christ, because Satan is the Prince of this world. Now more than ever is the time to allow the Word of God to become the final authority in our lives.

Have you noticed that values have declined to the point where everything that goes against God's word is accepted, and the principles of the Bible are being rejected?

As Christians, our success is based on whether or not we choose to walk in the Spirit (the Word of God) or to conform to the image of this world's system, which leads to death and destruction. Just because something is accepted by a majority does not make it right. The only proper standard of what is acceptable is the Bible; and it is time to start taking it seriously. Satan is striving feverishly to infiltrate the minds and hearts of people of all ages by suggestively packaging sin—presenting it in such a way as to make it seem okay. Sexual immorality and homosexuality, for example, are being fed to the public through news broadcasts, television sitcoms, and music videos. If you pay attention long enough, these images may begin to seem acceptable and even appealing to you. Sadly, those who speak out against such



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



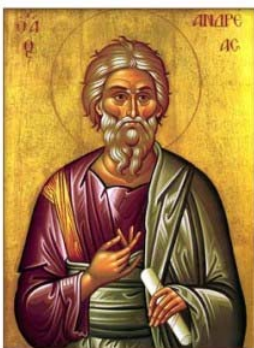
imagery and messages are labeled old fashion. Just because something is accepted does not make it acceptable in God's eyes.

Think of it this way, you can be one of two things: A thermometer or a thermostat. They almost sound the same. They are both concerned with temperature. Yet, there is a big difference between them. A thermometer merely registers the temperature. A thermostat, on the other hand, controls the temperature, either raising or lowering it to the desired level.

Some Christians today, sadly, are thermometers. They merely register or reflect what is going on in the world around them. The world participates in ungodly sex before or after marriage; so do they. The world pursues material things and money; so do they. The world puts self first; so do they. Like all the worldly and godless people around them, these Christian young people pursue a materialistic and hedonistic vision of life. They are but thermometers. Other Christian young people are thermostats. These believers do not blindly follow or reflect what is going on in the godless world around them. Instead, they dare to stand out and be counted. They dare to impact the world around them for Christ. They dare to go against the flow. They dare to be different.

Ask yourself this: Do you dare to be different or have you conformed?

Lecture 1: A Call to be Different - St. Andrew the Apostle



On Kiahk 4th, St. Andrew the Apostle, the brother of St. Peter, was martyred. He was chosen to go to the city of Lydd and to Kurdistan. He entered the city of Lydd, where most of its people had believed at the hands of St. Peter. He was accompanied by his disciple, Philemon, who had a sweet voice and was a good reader. St. Andrew commanded Philemon to go up to the pulpit and read. When the priests of the idols heard of the arrival of Andrew the Apostle, they took their spears and went to the church. They stood outside the church to hear if he was cursing their gods or not. They heard Philemon reading the words of David the Prophet, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak: eyes they have but they do not see: They have ears, but they do not hear: noses they have, but they do not smell: They have hands, but they do not handle: feet they have, but they do not walk: nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them." (Psalm 115:4-8) Their hearts rejoiced because of his sweet voice and their emotions mellowed. They entered the church, and bowed down at the feet of Andrew the Apostle. He preached to them and they believed in the Lord Christ. Then he baptized them with the rest of those who worshipped idols.

He also went with St. Bartholomew to the city of Azrinus. Its people were wicked and knew not God. They went on preaching and teaching them until they lead many of them to the knowledge of God, because of the signs and wonders they performed before them. Those who did not believe plotted against him. They sent for him so that when he arrived, they would attack him and kill him. When their messengers came to St. Andrew and heard his sincere teachings and saw his shining face, they believed in our Lord Christ and did not return to those who had sent them. The unbelievers decided to go to him and burn him. When they gathered around him to do what they had intended, the Apostle prayed to the Lord, and immediately fire came down from heaven and surrounded them. They were terrified and believed.

The report of St. Andrew the Apostle was heard throughout all the land and many believed in the Lord. Nevertheless the priests of the idols did not cease looking for him in order to kill him. Afterwards, they gathered and went to him; they bound him and beat him severely. After they dragged him around the city naked, they cast him into prison, so that they might crucify him the following day. Their custom was to stone those who were to be killed by crucifixion. The Apostle spent his night praying to God. The Lord Christ appeared to him and strengthened him saying, "Do not fear or worry for the time of your departure from this world is near." He gave him peace and disappeared. St. Andrew's soul rejoiced for what he saw. On the next day, they hanged him upon a tree and stoned him until he departed. Certain believers came and took his holy body and laid it with great honor in a private grave. Many signs and wonders were made manifest from his body. May the prayers of St. Andrew the Apostle be with us all, Amen.



Midwest Winter Retreat 2011



Lecture 2: A Call to Change

Focus Questions: Though you may have ways in which you are obeying God, what are examples of your obedience that requires a sacrifice on your part? Why is it so difficult to change our ways?

Overview: The Christian's behavior is different than that of the world. But behavior is not the Christian's primary focus. Repentance starts in the mind, in the realm of ideas. We conform our thinking with the Bible and from it infer applications that affect our behavior. In the end it will be found that those who lived according to the Bible, lived properly. *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ"* (Philippians 3:20).

Thoughts for Reflection: If we Christians want to become like Christ, we must become aware of the "pattern of this world," the "atmosphere" of the age we live in, the cultural influences that hinder us from becoming like Christ, and then make a conscious effort not to conform to them and thus allow the Adversary to steal the blessings of God from us.

More than just telling us not to conform to the pattern of the world, Romans 12:2 commands us to "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind...." The Greek word translated "be transformed" is *metamorphoo*, and is in the imperative mood, so it is a command.

We are commanded to be transformed; it is not an option for Christians. It seems to be part of the "atmosphere" of our age that if a person has a particular personality and does not want to change, he or she says, "That's just the way I am." Well, "just the way" our old nature is, is not good enough for God, who wants us to be like Christ.

Do we know better than God? Is doing things "our way" really going to make us more blessed than if we believed God and worked to be like Christ? God commands us to transform, and the good news is that we can, and our lives will be more blessed for it.

When a person becomes a Christian, he or she makes Christ their Lord. Christ said, *"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"* (Luke 6:46). We Christians do not want to be in the category of those who have called Christ Lord but who do not do what he says. He commands us to be transformed—not outwardly, but inwardly—and, through his spirit within us, he will help us change.

The word *metamorphoo* can mean either to change in a manner that is visible to others, or it can mean to change inwardly, in one's character.

An outward, visible change happened to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration when Peter, James, and John saw him transformed into how he will look in his future glory.

Romans 12:2, on the other hand, is referring to a change on the inside, a change in character, which will then of course, be reflected on the outside, in how we live.

Each of us was born dominated by our sinful nature, the relentless internal proclivity toward self-centeredness. After we are baptized and have the new nature of Christ within us, God commands us to put off the old nature and put on the new.

God commands us to change.

Ask yourself this: What will you change in your life today? What sacrifices can you make for Christ when he has given you the ultimate sacrifice?



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



Lecture 2: A Call to Change - The Life of Saint Moses the Black



Saint Moses the Black, known as the Ethiopian or the strong was an ascetic monk and priest in Egypt in the fourth century. Moses was a slave of a government official in Egypt who dismissed him for theft and suspected murder. He became the leader of a gang of bandits who roamed the Nile Valley spreading terror and violence. He was a large, imposing figure.

On one occasion, a barking dog prevented Moses from carrying out a robbery, so he swore vengeance on the owner. Weapons in his mouth, Moses swam the river toward the owner's hut. The owner, again alerted, hid, and the frustrated Moses took some of his sheep to slaughter.

Attempting to hide from local authorities, he took shelter with some monks in a colony in the desert of Scetes, near Alexandria. The dedication of their lives, as well as their peace and contentment, influenced Moses deeply. He soon gave up his old way of life, became a Christian, was baptized and joined the monastic community at Scetes.

Moses had a rather difficult time adjusting to regular monastic discipline. His flair for adventure remained with him. Attacked by a group of robbers in his desert cell, Moses fought back, overpowered the intruders, and dragged them to the chapel where the other monks were at prayer. He told the brothers that he didn't think it Christian to hurt the robbers and asked what he should do with them. The overwhelmed robbers repented, were converted, and themselves joined the community.

Moses was zealous in all he did, but became discouraged when he concluded he was not perfect enough. Early one morning, Saint Isidore, abbot of the monastery, took Moses to the roof and together they watched the first rays of dawn come over the horizon. Isidore told Moses, "Only slowly do the rays of the sun drive away the night and usher in a new day, and thus, only slowly does one become a perfect contemplative."

Moses proved to be effective as a prophetic spiritual leader. The abbot ordered the brothers to fast during a particular week. Some brothers came to Moses, and he prepared a meal for them. Neighboring monks reported to the abbot that Moses was breaking the fast. When they came to confront Moses, they changed their minds, saying "You did not keep a human commandment, but it was so that you might keep the divine commandment of hospitality." Some see in this account one of the earliest allusions to the Paschal fast, which developed at this time. When a brother committed a fault and Moses was invited to a meeting to discuss an appropriate penance, Moses refused to attend.

When he was again called to the meeting, Moses took a leaking jug filled with water and carried it on his shoulder. Another version of the story has him carrying a basket filled with sand. When he arrived at the meeting place, the others asked why he was carrying the jug. He replied, "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, but today I am coming to judge the errors of another." On hearing this, the assembled brothers forgave the erring monk. Moses became the spiritual leader of a colony of hermits in the west.

Later, he was ordained a priest. At about age 75, about the year 405 AD, word came that a group of Berber planned to attack the monastery. The brothers wanted to defend themselves, but Moses forbade it. He told them to retreat, rather than take up weapons. He and seven others remained behind and greeted the invaders with open arms, but all eight were martyred by the bandits.

His relics and major shrine are found today at the Church of the Virgin's Monastery of Baramous.

May the prayers and supplications of St. Moses the Black be with us all, Amen.



Midwest Winter Retreat 2011



Lecture 3: A Call to Commitment

Focus Questions: What does the road to renewal look like? How can I commit my life to Christ?

Overview: The commitment to become a living sacrifice is a commitment to change. It is a commitment to a radical change, a reversal of our thinking and values, of our motives and methods. It is not a minor repair but a tearing down and complete rebuilding. "This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart...that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (Ephesians 4:17-24).

Thoughts for Reflection: To commit ourselves to God means that we are to yield ourselves to him, surrender to him, abandon ourselves to him, entrust ourselves to him and place ourselves at his disposal. True commitment is not something that you can take back.

All too often we desire God to submit His plan for our life as a proposal to us, and then we determine whether or not to ratify it. Such cannot be the case, for we see in these verses the principle of dedication before direction.

Divine guidance comes as a result of dedication. God does not 'cast His pearls before swine,' nor does He reveal His directive will to the uncommitted. James 1:23 says "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was."

How often do we repent (observe our natural face in the mirror) and then fail to commit to change (go away and forget what kind of man he was)?

God is calling us to commit ourselves to him totally and to live transformed lives. This is the only way to do things if we are going to prosper, live a long life and enjoy the fruits of our labors here on earth. Righteousness is not only doing right; it is the testimony we bear for the gospel and the saving power of the grace of God at work in our hearts.

God, having made us right with himself in Christ, gives us the opportunity and the privilege to show to the world that we are no longer people belonging to Satan. This therefore means that there is a contradiction in our lives if we claim to be converted and to know God through Jesus Christ and yet we are still living wrongly, doing wrong, speaking wrong and almost everything about us at work, at home and in the environment is wrong.

Paul's appeal is that the very best that we can offer is ourselves. If we are serious about following Christ and if we wish our lives to be transformed, our offering must be a total presentation of ourselves. Your friends, the community, the world are watching, waiting to see Christ in you, but they can only interpret what you present.

Think of it this way, when the pilot of a giant airplane is speeding down the runway, there is a certain point where staying on the ground is no longer an option. When he crosses that line, he is committed to the air, he will take off or a disastrous crash is imminent. The pilot can no longer change his mind once he is committed. Unfortunately some of us have never gotten off the ground. We have been sitting there gunning our engines, making noise but getting nowhere. We have been planning on it, meaning to, wanting to, trying to, going to, aiming to, hoping to. But tragedy of tragedies, we have never gotten off the ground.

It is your commitment that will show and prove to the world the will of God.

It is your commitment that will show Christ to this generation; a committed life is a transformed life.

Ask yourself this: What is your commitment?



Midwest Winter Retreat 2011



Lecture 3: A Call to Commitment - The Life of Hegomen Pishoy Kamel

by *The Coptic Encyclopedia*



He was born Samy Kamel in Sirrs-Alliaan, Menoufia, Egypt, in 1931. Raised in Damanhur Egypt, by two God-fearing parents, he received an early education for his age. He attended the school of Sciences, Alexandria University, and graduated with Honors with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1951.

While working as a Science teacher in public schools, he continued to study at the University of Alexandria, received a degree in literature in 1954 and was appointed an instructor at the Education College, Alexandria University. He then continued to quench his thirst for knowledge by studying psychology and education (of which he graduated and ranked first, in 1952), and then earned a B.A in Philosophy. Then, while still studying, and at a young age, he began serving at Sunday School in the Church of the Blessed Virgin - Moharram Bey suburb.

It then happened that on the afternoon of Wednesday, November 18 1959, he took his Sunday School class to receive the blessings of the then new successor to St Mark, Pope Kyrillos VI. Upon arrival, he was told that he was going to be ordained priest. Out of humility he tried to excuse himself by declaring he was still unmarried. In response to this the Pope replied "The Spirit of God who inspired me to this decision, will elect for you the bride who will be most suitable for you in your ministry." And sure enough it came to pass that Samy Kamel was led by God's Spirit to ask for the hand of Angele Bassili - a sister of a very dear friend. The blessed wedding was held on the Tuesday the 24th of November, and he was consecrated a priest on Wednesday the 2nd of December. Angele proved to be the very girl fit for the life-partnership of Father Pishoy (also written as "Father Bishoy") - just as Pope Kyrillos VI had foretold.

Father Bishoy truly loved serving and the people whom he served. He summarized his love for the flock in these words: "They are your children Lord: Some are good, others are evil, other are wasting themselves... they all have one thing in common: They are your children ... I am the servant of your children... I am a servant and have no right to insult or despise any of them, because if I do, I would be insulting you or despising you ...I only can serve them, love them, and assure them of your certain promise that you loved them all because it is you who carries the sins of the whole world" (translated, shortened, and paraphrased from Arabic).

When he became a priest, he kept that promise of full time service to the last breath. He despised material things. An eyewitness saw him one night at the Church looking very distressed because a young woman came asking for financial help and he did not know from where he could help her. She was followed by a student asking for money to pay college registration fees. This little worry did not last long. Our late Father Bishoy asked them both to wait. While waiting, a little girl walked in and handed him an envelope stuffed with money. When he asked her name, she just answered saying: "My mother Mary sends this to you." All the needs were met that night thanks to our merciful God.

Father Bishoy started St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in Sporting, Alexandria (where he is now buried). His input into the purchase of a church for the early Egyptian immigrants to the U.S. in Los Angeles is a wonderful story of faith and commitment to the will of God: The congregation was just starting in the late 60's when Father Bishoy Kamel was sent to Los Angeles to serve them in 1969. They initially used a Syrian Orthodox Church building. Then came the opportunity to purchase a \$100,000 existing church building, which was previously used by a Russian Orthodox Congregation, near Hollywood. At the time, the congregation had \$500 in their treasury, and some of the more prominent people warned Father Bishoy not to put the church in debt. In a short order, he had miraculously raised \$23,000, some of this money also came from small loans from new immigrants who had very little to give.



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



He immediately took a cab and went to the bank to put the down payment and sign the papers for a mortgage loan. In his excitement, he left the unmarked envelope full of cash (\$23,000) on the seat of the cab, and by the time he realized it, the taxi was gone. He went in, told the loan officer that he had misplaced the money, and needed more time to find it or replace it. He went home upset, and feeling he had failed everybody. Abouna had an unpleasant day; the envelope was not marked, and he could not think of a way to prove he had the money.

That night however, after midnight, there was knock on the door. Father Bishoy asked Tassony Angele to open the door. To their surprise, it was the cab driver. The man confessed, "After you left, I looked back and saw that envelope. I picked it up and found it full of cash. Not marked, I thought about keeping it and drove around and around considering this. Then I told myself that this man who owns it must be a minister or a priest or something so I should give it back. But, even if I wanted to give him the money back how could I find him? I then thought if I described you to someone, by the way you are dressed and the way you looked, somebody might be able to lead me to you. That is how I found out that you are Coptic and how I knew the way to your apartment!" (which was then the church address). The taxi driver then gave Abouna the money and refused to accept the customary 10% reward, instead he choose to pay a donation after being told the cause of the large sum of money. Thus through God's grace, the congregation soon had its church built peacefully, with no debts.

Father Bishoy loved the cross dearly; it is no wonder his departure was on the third day of the feast of the Cross. He also gave the titles: *Under the feet of the Cross*, and *With Christ Crucified* to two books which he wrote. His most favorite possession was a picture of Christ crucified and Mary Magdalene kneeling under his feet. This picture he hung on the wall above his bed.

His love for the cross and for God allowed him to see Christ in every person, even the most wayward people. He did not allow people to speak evil about others in his presence and always had something nice to say about others, especially, those who differed with him, following the words of the Apostle: "Love suffers long, and is kind, Love boasts not in itself, thinks not evil" (1 Cor13: 1-13).

The third day of the Feast of the Cross was on 12 Baramhat. On the eve of that day, fraught with memories, Abouna began giving his blessing to all those around him. As the hands of the clock moved towards daybreak, he asked in exultation, "What is this opening above?" A nearby relative inquired where this opening was, to which Father Bishoy replied in a whisper, "It is in the Heavens!" 'And thus the Gates of Paradise were opened, and the Redeemer's voice rang in the ears of that ever-faithful disciple; "'Well done good and faithful servant, enter in the Joy of thy Master" (Matt 25:21,23), (Luke 19:17). That took place at 8am in the morning of Wednesday 12 Baramhat (21 March 1979).

Three hours later, the pure body lay in his open coffin near the curtains of the altar. He was dressed in white vestments embroidered with gold in which he had chanted the Divine Liturgy; his head was covered with a mitre, all in gold, and in his hand he held a white cross covered in gold. In short, he was dressed after the manner of the Celestials as described in the Book of Revelations (7:9). Multitudes came in single file to kiss the Cross in his hand and pay tribute; they continued in an incessant flow until 3 pm the next day.

The Late Father Pishoy Kamel's example is clearly felt and experienced by those who knew him and even in those who have just recently heard of him.

His departure was certainly early, but it was the will of God that he lives in paradise to intercede for us. May the prayers of this great father be with us, Amen.



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



Lecture 4: Be Transformed

Focus Questions: What does it take to be transformed? What are practical steps I can take today?

Overview: Becoming a living sacrifice is the commitment to BEING TRANSFORMED. It is not we who change ourselves. In the final analysis, our thinking will be shaped by something or someone outside ourselves. In our sin and unbelief, we like to think of ourselves as “free thinkers.” In reality, we are only thinking like Satan and like the fallen world system in which we live. Our culture constantly seeks to shape us. Like teenage children, we think we are expressing our individuality and independence when we differ with God. In reality, we are merely following the world, the flesh, and the devil in rebellion and unbelief. When we give our lives to God, we give ourselves over to His influence and control. When we turn to God in obedience, we turn away from the world’s shaping influence on us. Its influence should diminish, and God’s infinite wisdom, contained in Scripture and conveyed by His Spirit, should begin to transform our thinking and our actions. Giving our lives to God as a living sacrifice is the decision to be shaped and influenced by God and not by our fallen world.

Thoughts for Reflection: In His grace and mercy, God not only commands us to be transformed, but also tells us how to go about accomplishing the task. Romans 12:2 commands us to be transformed “by the renewing of your mind.” It is by changing our thoughts that we are transformed. It does not come from wishing, hoping, or commanding, but rather by “renewing.”

“Renewing” is the Greek word, *anakainosis*, which is made up of the prefix *ana* and the noun *kainos*. The prefix *ana* can mean “up” or “again,” and although the specific form of the word found in the New Testament is not found in ancient Greek literature, other forms are used, and mean “renew.” However, it is important to note that the primary meaning of *ana* is “up” or “upon,” and that emphasis certainly comes into play here in Romans 12. It is not just that God asks us to “renew” our minds, but rather to bring our minds “up” to a new level of thinking. Nevertheless, the idea of “renewing” is also very much in view, and the point is that, due to our sin nature and the atmosphere of ungodliness that we live in and breathe every day, we can never rest in any “new” that we attain, but must be in the process of “renewing” every day. The noun *kainos* is also important, because there are two primary Greek words for “new.” One is *neos*, which means “new in time,” and the other is *kainos*, which means “new in quality.” Every thought we have is “new” at that time, so God is not asking us to just have “new” thoughts. Rather, God is commanding us to bring our thinking up to a new quality, His quality. Whereas before we may have had fleshly, worldly, and selfish, thoughts, God is commanding us to bring our thoughts up in quality, so that they are holy, pure, selfless, giving, thankful, etc.

Bishop Mousa Said: transformation consists of four stages in order to become a member of God's Kingdom: the first is baptism in which we receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit; it is the stage in which we become 'regenerated'. The second stage is 'consecration' - the anointing of the holy oil Myron, after baptism. The priest anoints the baptized with the sign of the cross in 36 places: the brain, nostrils, mouth, ears and eyes - 'Lord consecrate my senses'; 2 on the heart - 'Lord consecrate my heart'; 2 on the back - 'Lord consecrate my will'; 6 crosses on both arms, on the three joints, back and front - 'Lord consecrate my deeds'; and 6 crosses on both legs, on the three joints, back and front - 'Lord consecrate my way'. Once this baby has been regenerated through baptism, and consecrated through Myron, he is now Christian and can be 'unified' with Christ through the Holy Communion. This child when he grows up will inevitably sin, so he must return to the Lord through 'repentance'; which is like a second baptism.

As a final thought, it is important to meditate on the idea that a part of being transformed is that your original state is unrecognizable. Take for example a butterfly. Before it is transformed into a butterfly, it was a larva. Once it becomes a butterfly, you can no longer picture it as a larva. It doesn't look that way, act that way, or even get around that way. Part of transformation is being unrecognizable as your old self. It is putting away friends of the past, sins of the past, and actions of the past. You can't be “transformed” and hang on to this old baggage. A butterfly can't say I miss crawling; I'm going to not fly as much and crawl sometimes. Likewise with us, you can't be transformed into this new spiritual being while you still curse, get drunk, date around, and ultimately cling to your old self.

Ask yourself this: What are you doing to transform your life, renew your spirit and walk worthy of the calling with which you were called?



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



Lecture 4: Be Transformed - Saint Augustine and Saint Monica



by *Church Heroes Series*

"And You, O Lord, how long? How long? Is it to be tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour put an end to my shame?" These words of repentance marked the beginning of St. Augustine's new life. A few years after he came in contact with God, he said, "Our hearts, O Lord, were made for you, and they are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you." He departed on August 28, 430 A.D.

His Childhood and Youth

St. Augustine was born on November 13, 354 A.D. at Tagaste, a small town of Numidia in North Africa, not far from Hippo. His father, Patricius, was a pagan and had a violent temper, but because of the good example and patience of his wife, St. Monica, Patricius was baptized a little before his death. When St. Augustine was a child, St. Monica instructed him in the Christian religion and taught him how to pray. Once, St. Augustine became dangerously ill and he desired to be baptized, and his mother got everything ready for it; but he suddenly became better, and the baptism was postponed. St. Augustine's father wanted him to become a man of learning and cared very little about his character and spiritual growth.

Years away from Christ

At Carthage, St. Augustine entered into sexual relations with a woman (to whom he remained faithful until he sent her away from him 15 years later). She bore him a son out of wedlock, Adeodatus, in 372. St. Augustine's father had died in 371, but St. Augustine remained at Carthage and switched to studying philosophy and the search for the truth. He also studied the Scriptures, but from a subjective attitude. He was offended with the simplicity of style, and could not understand their humility or penetrate their spirit. Then he fell into Manichaeism – a combination of pagan religions and philosophy. His understanding was darkened, his judgment was clouded, and his pride was inflated, which made it easier for him to join the Manichaeans. He later wrote about this time in his life: "I sought with pride what only humility could make me find. Fool that I was, I left the nest, imagining myself able to fly, and I fell to the ground." For nine years St. Augustine established his own schools of rhetoric and grammar in Tagaste and Carthage, while his devoted mother, St. Monica, never ceased to pray and use gentle persuasion to try to bring St. Augustine to conversion and reform. She was encouraged to follow St. Augustine and continued to pray for him because a bishop once assured her that, "the son of so many tears could not perish." For this reason, St. Monica is also known as the "mother of tears." In 383, St. Augustine departed to Rome secretly so that his mother could not prevent him from going to the big city. He opened a school of rhetoric, and then was appointed by the government as a teacher in Milan, where his mother and his friend Alipius joined him. St. Monica's only goal in life was to convert her son to Christianity.

His Repentance

In Milan, St. Augustine fell under the influence of Bishop Ambrose. St. Augustine began to go to the bishop's sermons, not really expecting to profit spiritually, but more to satisfy his curiosity and to enjoy the eloquence of the speech. St. Augustine found Bishop Ambrose's teachings to be more scholarly than the heresies of Manichaeism he had adopted, and he began to read the New Testament, especially St. Paul's writings. At the same time, he sent away the mother of Adeodatus his son; she returned to Africa, leaving the child behind.

St. Augustine's spiritual, moral and intellectual struggle continued; he was convinced of the truth of Christianity, but his will was weaker than the worldly temptations, and he delayed his return to Christ for many months. He kept telling himself: "Soon, in a little while, I shall make up my mind, but not right now." In his half desires of conversion, he was accustomed to beg God for the grace of chastity, but at the same time, he was afraid of being heard too soon. He realized that his problem was a moral one: the divine truth he was seeking would never be his unless he first overcame his weakness. Soon after, Pontitian, an African, came to visit St. Augustine and his friend Alipius. He told them about



Midwest Winter Retreat

2011



two men who had suddenly been converted to serve the Lord by hearing a reading about the life of the great St. Anthony. Pontitian's words had a powerful effect on St. Augustine's mind. He was ashamed that his will had been so weak, and he said to his friend Alipius: "What are we doing to let the unlearned seize Heaven by force, while we, even with all our knowledge, remain behind, cowardly and heartless, wallowing in our sins? Because they have done better than us and gone before us, are we ashamed to follow them? Is it not more shameful not even to follow them now?"

St. Augustine rushed to the garden, greatly upset; his eyes filled with tears and he threw himself on the grass under a fig tree and reproached himself bitterly, crying out: "And You, O Lord, how long? How long? Is it to be tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour put an end to my shame?" As he spoke these words, he heard a child's voice singing "Tolle lege! Tolle lege!" (which means "Take and read! Take and read!"). St. Augustine could not remember any childhood game he played that used such words. He remembered that the great St. Anthony was converted from the pleasures of the world by hearing a single verse. So, St. Augustine picked up St. Paul's epistles and read the first verse that he opened up to: "Let us walk properly, as in the day; not in revelry and drunkenness, not in licentiousness and lewdness, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." (Romans 13:13-14) When St. Augustine told Alipius what he had experienced, Alipius took the epistle and read the next words: "Receive one who is weak in the faith." Alipius applied these words to himself and decided to join his friend in his resolution to convert to Christianity. This high point in the conversion of St. Augustine took place in September of 386, when he was 32 years old. The following year, Bishop Ambrose baptized St. Augustine, his son Adeodatus, and Alipius, in the presence of St. Monica. She knew that her prayers were answered and died shortly after.

After his conversion and baptism, St. Augustine prayed: "Too late, have I loved You, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved You! You were with me, and I was not with You; I was abroad, running after those beauties which You have made; those things which could have no existence except for You, and they kept me away from You. You have called, You have cried out, and have pierced my deafness. You have enlightened, You have shown forth, and my blindness has vanished. I have tasted You, and am hungry for You. You have touched me, and I am on fire with the desire of Your embraces." A Priest and then a Bishop from that time, St. Augustine went back to Tagaste, his native city, and lived for three years with his friends and shared a life of prayer, study and poverty. All things were commonly owned and distributed according to everyone's needs. He had no idea of becoming a priest, but in 391, he was ordained as an assistant to Valerius, Bishop of Hippo, and he had to move to that city. He established a sort of monastery in his house, living with Alipius, Evodius, Possidius and others according to the rule of the holy Apostles.

In 395, St. Augustine was ordained as co-bishop with Valerius, and succeeded him in the See of Hippo after his death. St. Augustine established regular and common life in his Episcopal residence, and required all the priests, deacons, and subdeacons to give up their property and live the life of poverty as was followed by the early Church and instituted by the Apostles. He founded a community of religious women, and when his sister, the first "abbess" died, he wrote a letter addressing the general ascetic principles of the religious life. This letter is known as the Rule of Saint Augustine. He used the revenues from his church to assist the needy and rescue captives. Like another Moses or Saint Paul, St. Augustine said to his people: "I do not want to be saved without you. What shall I desire? What shall I say? Why am I a bishop? Why am I in the world? Only to live in Jesus Christ; but to live in Him with you. This is my passion, my honor, my glory, my joy and my riches." Through his 35 years as a bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine had to defend the faith against one heresy or another. He opposed the Donatists, the Pelagians, and the Alarians. In order to finish his valuable writings, and to prevent a troublesome selection of who would be bishop after his death, he proposed to his clergy and people to choose Heraclius, the youngest among his deacons, to be the next bishop. St. Augustine calmly departed to the Lord on August 28, 430 A.D., after having lived 76 years and spent almost 40 of them in the labors of the ministry.

May the prayers and supplications of St. Augustine, and his mother St. Monica, be with us all. Amen.