

St. Augustine's conversion like that of many youths today

VATICAN CITY – As a young man, St. Augustine, like many young Catholics today, left the practice of the faith for a time, but his search for truth and meaning eventually led to his conversion, Pope Benedict XVI said.

Continuing his series of audience talks about early church theologians, the pope Jan. 9 gave the first of what he said would be several talks about St. Augustine, who lived 354-430, and was the subject of his doctoral dissertation when he was Father Joseph Ratzinger.

Briefly presenting St. Augustine's biography, the pope said he was "a man of passion, of faith, of very high intelligence and of untiring pastoral concern."

In addition, he said, St. Augustine is "the father of the church that left us the greatest number of works" and, in fact, "it seems impossible that one man could have written so much in one lifetime."

St. Augustine's most famous work is his autobiography, "The Confessions."

Pope Benedict told the estimated 4,500 people at his general audience that St. Augustine's mother, St. Monica, was a devout Christian and educated him in the faith.

Although "he always was fascinated by the figure of Jesus," St. Augustine increasingly distanced himself from the faith and the life of the church, "just as happens today with many young people," the pope said.

But "even if he had left the practice of the faith he was always in search of the truth," read voraciously and "was convinced that without Jesus the truth could not be found," the pope said.

Disappointed at the lack of philosophical depth in the Bible, St. Augustine went in search of a religion that corresponded to his desire for truth and for Jesus, but one

which also had a highly developed philosophy, the pope said.

He thought he found the answer among the Manichaeans, “who presented themselves as Christians and promised that their religion was completely rational. They affirmed that the world is divided into two principles – good and evil,” which they believed explained all the struggles inherent in human life, Pope Benedict said.

“Their dualistic morality pleased St. Augustine because there was a very strict morality for the elite, but the adherents like him could live in a way more convenient for the situation of a young man of that time,” he said.

“It also had a concrete advantage for his life,” giving him important contacts for his career while “allowing him to pursue the relationship he had begun with a woman,” with whom he had a son, the pope said.

But the Manichaeans could not respond to all his doubts and eventually, after listening repeatedly to the preaching of St. Ambrose in Milan, he was baptized.

“His conversion to Christianity Aug. 15, 386, came as the culmination of a long and tormented interior journey, which we will discuss in another catechesis,” the pope said.