

'The most complete genius in history'

by Father Carlo Cremona

I can only join with enthusiasm in this International Conference on St. Augustine, father and founder of African and European civilization, rejoicing in the initiative which is the first event in the international cultural field on the occasion of the anniversary of the conversion of the great African and of his baptism by St. Ambrose in Milan. It is the 1,600th anniversary, which we will celebrate, for his conversion, in the summer of 1986, and for his baptism, in April of 1987 and beyond.

I am an impassioned devotee of the saint, who for me is also the most complete genius in human history, insofar as he has assimilated all of classical and philosophical culture, enlivening it and enriching it with the light of Christianity, and whose personal experience in the itinerary of reason and of faith, integrated with one another, constitutes the beacon of orientation for every man over the last 16 centuries.

I would like to confide that a few months hence, at the beginning of next year, Rusconi publishing house will publish a biography by me intitled *Agostino*, with an introduction by the archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the successor to Ambrose. I have tried to compile it in documentary fashion by the autobiographical notes which Augustine spreads through his works—not only in the *Confessions*—but also in a discursive, literary manner such that the character does not have the static quality of a monument, but comes to life as a contemporary of modern man.

Since the peculiarity of Augustine, and the reason for his survival in cultural and human interest even today, is not only the depth and universality of his internal searching, but also the astonishing resemblance of his time to ours—the same experiences, the same crisis of survival, and the same solutions—and he is our teacher.

That collapse of the Roman Empire which then embodied the order of the whole world; his suffering over it, even though he was authentically African; that message of faith in the human future which he infused when, during the Sack of Rome in 410 and the panic that followed, he used to preach: "Rome will not perish if the Romans do not perish, because Rome is not in its walls, but is in the soul of its citizens"; the political crisis; the religious crisis with the Donatist, Arian, and Pelagian heresies; his impassioned defense of truth: All this resembles the anguish of the modern man, frightened by a possible universal holocaust, by the conflict of ideologies,

by destabilizing violence, and by the turbulence by which fashions not only pass away, but carry with them fundamental moral values.

One can say that in the passing of one civilization to another, precisely at the time of his death, the reference-point, the epicenter of stability, was his personality and the heritage of his teachings. He reacted with a double force which was really just one: the force of truth and the force of love for man as the creature of God, immensely beloved by Christ.

What he did in those terrible circumstances by intervening also on questions of social justice, of political wisdom (because the rulers themselves turned to him for advice), was inspired by the contemplation of God, by the vision of the City of God into which he sought to transform the earthly city. This indomitable master of life, Providence chose to have born in Africa, proconsular Africa, which had absorbed the civilization of Rome, but also Christian Africa, the Africa of Ciprian which, independently of Roman institutions, had already absorbed Christian civilization.

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He recalled Apuleius of Madaura, the great writer, and other figures who had honored Africa, imposing themselves with their genius.

He was proud to say, "He is African, like us"! (*Nobiscum Afer!*)

There were, in his time, in proconsular Africa more than 1,000 bishops, between Catholics and Donatists. Then the entire glorious African Church was turned upside down.

But Africa is again a center of attention of Christianity and of the Church, because of its indispensable contribution to a renewed and strengthened civilization. Emblematic of this are the trips by Paul VI and John Paul II. Africa responds with its whole incomparable soul, Africa wants to be for Man, it could not but be for Man, and it looks to the greatest of its sons, Augustine.

For he could not be a stranger to this rebirth.

Africans of all national communities can glory in him, the Bishop of Hippo (today Annaba), in the singer of the City of God, in the great human Genius, in Augustine, repeating, "*Nobiscum Afer!*"