



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

22nd Sunday Year C

St Mary & St Monica

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 3: 17-20, 28-29, Ps 67, Hebrews 12: 18-19, 22-24, Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Although tonight is technically Sunday, I wanted to cheat a little and focus on the Saint whose day this properly is in the calendar of the heroes and heroines of our Faith.

Whenever I go to Rome, which I try to do every year, my pilgrimage always begins in the same way. After early Mass at the Briggittine's in the Farnese and a quick restorative coffee and cornetto at Angelo's, just off the Campo di Fiore, we wend our way north across the Piazza Navona and into a little square just top right. Ascending the steps, like the north face of the Eiger, we go straightway to the little dim-lit Cavalletti chapel at the back of the church of St. Augustine to kneel and gaze at Caravaggio's shocking masterpiece, '*Madonna dei Pellegrini*', Our Lady of the Pilgrims.

We come here because it seems to encapsulate what our journey is about. The Madonna is a real woman – beautiful, dark, substantial and earthy. She bears no relation to the anaemic blonde Marys of popular nativity. She is of the poor. Barefoot, she is pictured in a crumbling doorway at the rough end of

town. This is the Mary of the stable. This is the Mary of the refugee road to Egypt.

In her arms she bears, dandled across her hip, a strong beautiful boy, naked but for the cloth that will cover Him at Calvary. In the twilight there is just the hint of a halo but you have to look.

Both are gazing down with strength and compassion on two pilgrims. The Christ child is imparting His blessing.

The Pilgrims, a young bearded man and old woman, are poor and barefoot. They may look very much like Jesus and Mary in thirty years' time. What catches me most is the expression on the face of these kneeling seekers after God. There is a quiet joy, an expectation, a knowledge of fulfilment and a devout but unfussy recognition of the Presence. God has revealed Himself to Man and here, in this quiet and unconsidered place in human history (and in this corner of the Eternal City), we are invited to look up and see Our Lady present Him to us and with joyful hearts receive His blessing.

If you want to know the purpose of your pilgrimage there is no better place to start than at the painting. If you can get into your heart the look on the faces of those pilgrims, the journey will have led you to Christ.

But the treasury of St. Augustine's does not end there.

Our next stop, passing the beautiful Raphael pillar of the prophet Isaiah, is to a little chapel tucked in the western side of the main sanctuary. Here is a small altar and sarcophagus beneath it. It is the resting place of the mortal remains of St. Monica, Augustine's mother – and here we kneel to pray.

It is both ironic and fitting that St. Monica, whose feast it is today, should rest here. Ironic because St. Monica said, *'I do not care where you lay my body...so long as you pray for my soul at the altar'*. And here she is in this beautiful Roman Church.

Fitting because it is the church that is under the patronage of her son for whose conversion she prayed for so long and whose extraordinary and profound ministry to the Catholic Church was watered with her tears. In the world's eyes, Augustine was already hugely successful – teacher, philosophy professor, social whizz, complete with comfortable lifestyle and attractive mistress. He preferred the ranks of Manichean heresy and smartypants neo-Platonism to the truths of the Catholic Faith. To Monica he was a failure and he was lost. How she prayed for his conversion. In the end, as we know, Augustine came to Faith, not by any great intellectual gymnastics but by hearing the voice of a young child reading the Scripture over the garden wall. One of the greatest minds of Christendom was brought home by the witness of a simple heart.

So to this little shrine come the faithful to pray for those of their children who have never truly come to Jesus or who have since walked away. The vast hinterland of lapsed Catholics that turn out for funerals but never come to Mass are prayed for here, one by one, by those bereft parents and grandparents who will never give up on their salvation 'til the day they themselves die.... and even then.

The great church of St. Augustine is held between the pictures of these two great women. The devoted and determined mother who stormed Heaven with her prayers for her lost child and the Mother of all who will live, who holds the secret of the Universe in her arms, who presents the Word made flesh to the world, in whose womb the divine transcendence became immanent among us,

by whose love and innocence and faith and obedience the Portal of eternity was opened.

Both welcome the weary, hopeful, longing pilgrim home. Monica prayed that her beloved son would turn again and serve the Son of Mary as a faithful member of the Universal Church. That is the heart prayer of every Catholic mother (and father) for their own children.

I did not want today to pass without rejoicing in these two great women or without reminding ourselves that Monica and Mary pray for us and we should confidently ally our little tearstained yet joyful efforts with theirs. We never know in the doorway of which twilit battered flop-house Our Lady will present Jesus to the wanderer far from home, or behind which garden wall the voice of innocence will speak to the all too complicated hearts of a lost generation.

Keep storming Heaven with your prayers. No prayer is ever lost.

Mother Mary, mother Monica – pray for our children and pray for us.

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