

2020 0827 Havant (Commemoration of St Monica)

Today we commemorate St Monica, a fourth century African saint and mother of St Augustine, one of the greatest teachers in the history of the Church.

We only know about Monica from her son and in particular from his famous *Confessions* in which he tells about his turbulent journey towards Christian faith and her role in it.

North Africa at the time, like the rest of the Roman Empire was a kind of religious supermarket - just too much choice. Monica was a devout Christian, but her husband, Patricius, was a pagan, and the young Augustine did the rounds of the different religious options - except when he was pursuing his main interests which seem to have been sex and hanging out with his friends.

All this was pain and grief to Monica, who never ceased to pray for her wayward son and for her husband. There must have been times when she was tempted, humanly speaking to give up, but, being told by a wise bishop she consulted that "the child of those tears shall never perish", she stuck at it. Her persistence paid off, and eventually Augustine, by now a successful teacher and scholar in Milan, converted to Christianity, as too, shortly before his death, did Patricius.

With Augustine's conversion, Monica, who had followed him to Milan felt that her life's work was complete. "I don't know why I am still alive, she said to him, there's only one thing I wanted, to see you a Catholic Christian before I died." Shortly afterwards just as they were about to go back home to Africa, she fell terminally ill and told her son to bury her where she died in Italy. Augustine's brother, who was also with them said he hoped she would not die so far from home but in her own country. "What silly talk!" said Monica, "Lay

this body anywhere, and take no trouble over it. One thing only do I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be". Augustine therefore returned to Africa without his mother and was quickly ordained. The rest, as they say, is history.

What can we learn from this moving story of a mother's love and persistent prayer?

Above all, I think, it is the responsibility we all have to pray for all those for whom we have a care that they might come to know the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and put their trust in him.

Everyone has their own unique journey of faith, but the influence of other people has a very important part to play and we all can and should do the best we can to encourage and support them in it.

Intercession, praying for others, is a permanent obligation for every Christian, as St Paul so often insists. As it likely that we shall all continue to spend more time in isolation as the threat of Covid-19 continues, this is a particularly good time to reassess our pattern of intercession. We may not all be mothers, but we can all exercise a mother's prayerful care for each other. What shall we pray for? .Of course, everyone has so many needs which we should hold in our hearts before God, but surely nothing could be more important than that they should come to realise the eternal dignity for which they have been created.

Our own times are every bit as religiously confusing as the fourth century Roman Empire. Just too much choice: with the added complication that so many people now grow up with no sense at that their lives ultimately matter - *ultimately* that is, to the very end and beyond it. This is why persistence in prayer is so important. Don't give up even if nothing seems to be happening. The status of every soul is God's secret, as too is how God will answer our prayers. It is just for us to keep going. Remember the advice given to Monica: "the child of those tears shall never perish."