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One of the greatest recorded conversions in history is the conversion of St. Augustine. St. Augustine, who lived in the 4th century, was not always the great saint, Bishop, and Doctor of the Church, but at one time an ardent sinner and hedonist. He received the gift of a wonderful education and yet was intellectually prideful; his mother was a devout Christian and yet he was a partier and lived a sexually immoral life. And yet what makes his conversion so startling is that he was so versed in heretical gnostic philosophies. This great teacher and orator is converted after reviewing his sinful life, and despairing in his garden, crying over how empty and meaningless his life was, he threw himself down on the ground, and suddenly heard a child *chant tolle lege, tolle lege, pick it up and read it*. He writes *I studied as hard as I could whether children use such a chant in any of their games. But I could not remember ever having heard it. No longer crying, I leaped up, not doubting that it was by divine prompting that I should open the book and read what first I hit on*. He rushed back to where he had left the book of the Apostle Paul and opening it read *Give up indulgence and drunkenness, give up lust and obscenity, give up strife and rivalries, and clothe yourself in Jesus Christ the Lord, leavening no further allowance for fleshly desires*. He writes, *The very instant I finished that sentence, light was flooding my heart with assurance, and all my shadowy reluctance vanished away*.

What adds to the beauty of St. Augustine's conversion is that we cannot separate it from the prayers and tears of his mother, St. Monica. St. Monica was a devout Christian. Her other two sons entered religious life at young ages, but Augustine became lazy and uncouth. At 17 she reluctantly allowed him to go off to school in Carthage. There he fell into an heretical cult. It is said that on Augustine's return from school, his lifestyle and beliefs were so shocking to St. Monica that she drove him from her table. Soon after she reconciled with her wayward son and sought advice from St. Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan who encouraged her by saying, *woman, the son of so many tears can never perish*. St. Monica prayed only for her son Augustine's conversion, and for her humility and faithfulness in prayer she was rewarded by witnessing her son's baptism by St. Ambrose. She died shortly after witnessing her son's baptism.

Augustine would go on to be ordained a priest, and then a Bishop writing numerous Theological books that have shaped western civilization and theology. Nearly a thousand years after his death Augustine was recognized as a saint, and for his many theological works one of the four original doctors of the Church. For

over 20 years St. Monica prayed day and night for her son's conversion, shedding countless tears. We see from the life of St. Augustine St. Monica's prayers and God's mercy and grace did not end with Augustine's conversion and baptism. God richly rewarded St. Monica's prayers, she died at peace knowing her son was finally a Christian. But what a reward her prayers garnered. Her son not just a baptized Christian, but a bishop, theologian and saint celebrated by the Church.

But what might have happened if St. Monica had prayed more like the Pharisee in today's Gospel? What if she put her pride and vanity on display, praying so that others could hear her boast, while tearing down her son and family? Had she been this kind of person she would not have converted her pagan husband and mother-in-law to Christianity. But most importantly, had she been this kind of person she would not have been right with God. This is the problem with the Pharisee, the Pharisee tells God that he does not really need God. He is doing quite well by himself, and he is better than other poor unfortunates. Arrogance is the theme that runs through the Pharisee's prayer, *Oh Lord, I thank you that you have made me better than others and have made me to do quite well by myself*. The Pharisee has missed the point and is far from righteousness.

The publican who is despised for being a tax collector recognizes that righteousness is a gift, not a reward. The way to receive a gift is to be open to it. The way to be open to the gift of righteousness is to show you know you need it. The way you show you know you need it is to be sorry for your sins and ask forgiveness. It requires a total acceptance upon God's mercy and pity, which leads us to pray as the publican and St. Monica did, with faith and humility. We must realize that we cannot go it alone. This is what St. Augustine realized in the garden that day, that his life though full of worldly pleasures was empty and meaningless as long as he kept God at a distance.

We hear in this morning's collect that God declares His power chiefly in showing mercy and pity. God always hears the humble prayer of faith. And we see through the publican and St. Monica that God can use the humble prayer of faith to not just convert a soul but to transform it beyond our greatest hopes. God does this because God always forgives those who earnestly repent. God always wants to wipe out the past and not hold it against us. God always wants to put us back into a proper relationship to him. That is what the cross on which Jesus died guarantees as long as we receive Him into our hearts and souls.

And now we return in humility and faith to the greatest of Christian prayers, the Mass. Here let us lay our prayers before the throne of God, praying, *Lord be merciful to us* and hear us, and fill us with your grace. Amen.