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Academic Text

A Mother's *Last Words:* Simply Remember me at the Altar of the Lord

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine tells us of his amazement that as she lay dying, his mother St. Monica declared that she did not care where she would be buried. Ever since her husband Patricius had died, she had been preoccupied with sharing his grave. But now, all she asked for was prayer. Recalling the moment, Augustine muses that every reader of his work will now have the opportunity to think of Monica and pray for her.

Today, pilgrims to Rome can visit St. Monica's tomb, in a chapel in the Basilica of St. Augustine, not far from Piazza Navona. What would Monica, the widow from Africa who passed away in Ostia Antica while travelling, have made of the idea that her remains would actually be venerated in a Basilica dedicated to her son in Rome?

St. Monica reminds us of the reality of a community – in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth. Its dimensions are everywhere present in Augustine's explanation of his mother's faith in the *Confessions*. Specifically, through Christ's salvific action and his resurrection, all baptized persons are unified. More strongly still, through sharing the same eternal meal of the Eucharist, the faithful on earth are truly present to each other across time and space. As Jesus himself said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." (John 6:54)

Monica reminds us of this timeless reality when she begs her sons: "Put this body



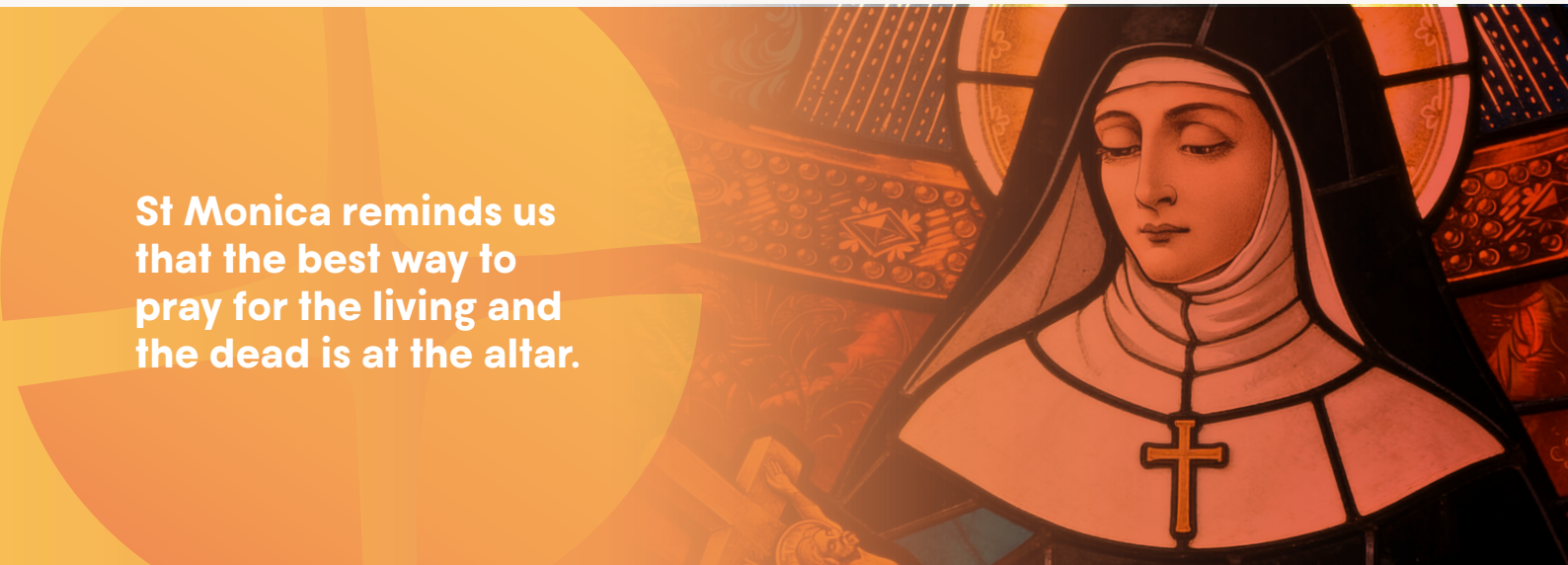
anywhere! Don't trouble yourselves about it! I simply ask you to remember me at the Lord's altar wherever you are!" Sharing in the Eucharist, we become more fully members of the Body of Christ, the Church; and we become more fully present to one another – "wherever we are".

Augustine assures the reader that Monica believed so strongly at this moment in the resurrection of the dead that she was able to put aside the comparatively unimportant details about where she would be buried. "Nothing is far from God," she declared, continuing: "There is no danger that at the end of the world he will not know where to find me and raise me up." (Conf. 9, 28) When Christ comes again, those who rise with him will have resurrection bodies. Christians pray for one another in the hope that they will be wholly present to each other in this embodied, spiritual way, at the end of time.

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Specifically, Monica reminds us that the best way to pray for the living and the dead is at the altar. As the Catechism reminds us, "The Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for the faithful departed who "have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified," so that they may be able to enter into the light and peace of Christ." (1371) Augustine tells us that while on earth she was at that altar daily, finding there the assurance that Christ is ever victorious, over sin and even over death. This can be known at the altar when one understands how Christ's death and resurrection have won for us the hope of eternal life.

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First, Monica's request is a tender admonishment that her sons not focus too much on Monica's absence when she dies. God must come first, and she hopes she is preceding them, to be in the divine presence. While she is with God in heaven, or yearning for him in Purgatory, and they are with God on earth, all three can still be together through the Body and Blood of Christ on the altar. Grief, as Augustine describes in the *Confessions* more than once, can be all-consuming. A more balanced grief remembers this power of the sacrifice on the altar with magnificent joy and hope.

Monica's request also reveals something of her love for Augustine and his brother. Her request that they pray for her at the altar is as much about them, and all others gathered to pray there, as it is about herself. If they are praying at the altar, they are at the most important place on earth. There where the Eucharist is celebrated, they are nourished, feasting on the bread of eternal life. Their regular presence at the altar brings them closer to Christ, who unites all in community, by being the one Body, given for all – that they may be one.

Finally, of course, if her sons carry out her wish and pray for her at the altar of the Lord, then if she is in purgatory, she will more swiftly attain her heavenly goal. The communion of the faithful is tied together by bonds of charity. Those in

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heaven can pray for those in purgatory and on earth; those on earth can pray for those in purgatory and for themselves; but those in purgatory can only pray for others and not for themselves. In other words, the souls in purgatory depend on our prayers – especially the offering of masses – for their release.

Monica knows exactly what she is doing when she makes her request. What she does not know is that Augustine will write a spiritual classic that will essentially urge others to pray for her. Nor does she realise that centuries later, she would be teaching us, through the *Confessions*, about the importance of the Eucharist for forming community.

We see here a powerful example of how parents and children can learn from one another the importance of the Eucharist for forming the richest kind of community. Monica has seen for herself the transformative power of grace in Augustine's life – so much so that he has given up a lucrative but ethically questionable career in teaching rhetoric to follow Christ. He will go on to be much more than this.

As Augustine reflects on Monica's life and death, he recounts his relationships with friends who at different points either brought him closer to Christ or drove him further away. Elsewhere in his letters, he rejoices when a pagan friend, Martianus, converts to Christianity, observing that now, as they both partake of the Eucharist, their friendship can be at a qualitatively different level; their spiritual kinship is complete. (Letter 258) Like Monica, Augustine wants the assurance that the love he has for others will be celebrated wherever he and they are. Christ promises to fulfil this desire for all eternity, through the Eucharist.

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