Our Forefathers

in the Monastic Life

Biographies of Great Monastic Saints

by Pope Benedict XVI

Selections from the Wednesday Audiences
June 20, 2007 – October 6, 2010

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Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Continuing our revisitation of the great Teachers of the ancient Church, let us focus our attention today on St. Athanasius of Alexandria.

Only a few years after his death, this authentic protagonist of the Christian tradition was already hailed as "the pillar of the Church" by Gregory of Nazianzus, the great theologian and Bishop of Constantinople (*Orationes*, 21, 26), and he has always been considered a model of orthodoxy in both East and West.

As a result, it was not by chance that Gian Lorenzo Bernini placed his statue among those of the four holy Doctors of the Eastern and Western Churches — together with the images of Ambrose, John Chrysostom and Augustine — which surround the Chair of St. Peter in the marvellous apse of the Vatican Basilica.

Athanasius was undoubtedly one of the most important and revered early Church Fathers. But this great Saint was above all the impassioned theologian of the Incarnation of the Logos, the Word of God who — as the Prologue of the fourth Gospel says — "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

For this very reason Athanasius was also the most important and tenacious adversary of the Arian heresy, which at that time threatened faith in Christ, reduced to a creature "halfway" between God and man, according to a recurring tendency in history which we also see manifested today in various forms.

In all likelihood Athanasius was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in about the year 300 A.D. He received a good education before becoming a deacon and secretary to the Bishop of Alexandria, the great Egyptian metropolis. As a close collaborator of his Bishop, the young cleric took part with him in the Council of Nicaea, the first Ecumenical Council, convoked by the Emperor Constantine in May 325 A.D. to ensure Church unity. The Nicene Fathers were thus able to address various issues and primarily the serious problem that had arisen a few years earlier from the preaching of the Alexandrian priest, Arius.

With his theory, Arius threatened authentic faith in Christ, declaring that the *Logos* was not a true God but a created God, a creature "halfway" between God and man who hence remained for ever inaccessible to us The Bishops gathered in Nicaea responded by developing and establishing the "Symbol of faith" ["Creed"] which, completed later at the First Council of Constantinople, has endured in the traditions of various Christian denominations and in the liturgy as the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*.

In this fundamental text — which expresses the faith of the undivided Church and which we also recite today, every Sunday, in the Eucharistic celebration — the Greek term *homooúsios* is featured, in Latin *consubstantialis*: it means that the Son, the *Logos*, is "of the same substance" as the Father, he is God of God, he is his substance. Thus, the full divinity of the Son, which was denied by the Arians, was brought into the limelight.

In 328 A.D., when Bishop Alexander died, Athanasius succeeded him as Bishop of Alexandria. He showed

straightaway that he was determined to reject any compromise with regard to the Arian theories condemned by the Council of Nicaea.

Athanasius' treatment of Arians

His intransigence — tenacious and, if necessary, at times harsh — against those who opposed his episcopal appointment and especially against adversaries of the Nicene Creed, provoked the implacable hostility of the Arians and philo-Arians.

Despite the unequivocal outcome of the Council, which clearly affirmed that the Son is of the same substance as the Father, these erroneous ideas shortly thereafter once again began to prevail — in this situation even Arius was rehabilitated —, and they were upheld for political reasons by the Emperor Constantine himself and then by his son Constantius II.

Moreover, Constantine was not so much concerned with theological truth but rather with the unity of the Empire and its political problems; he wished to politicize the faith, making it more accessible — in his opinion — to all his subjects throughout the Empire.

Thus, the Arian crisis, believed to have been resolved at Nicaea, persisted for decades with complicated events and painful divisions in the Church. At least five times — during the 30 years between 336 and 366 A.D. — Athanasius was obliged to abandon his city, spending 17 years in exile and suffering for the faith. But during his forced absences from Alexandria, the Bishop was able to sustain and to spread in the West, first at Trier and then in Rome, the Nicene faith as well as the ideals of monasticism, embraced in Egypt by the great hermit, Anthony,

with a choice of life to which Athanasius was always close.

St. Anthony, with his spiritual strength, was the most important champion of St. Athanasius' faith. Reinstated in his See once and for all, the Bishop of Alexandria was able to devote himself to religious pacification and the reorganization of the Christian communities. He died on 2 May 373, the day when we celebrate his liturgical Memorial.

The most famous doctrinal work of the holy Alexandrian Bishop is his treatise: *De Incarnatione*, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the divine Logos who was made flesh, becoming like one of us for our salvation.

In this work Athanasius says with an affirmation that has rightly become famous that the Word of God "was made man so that we might be made God; and he manifested himself through a body so that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality" (54, 3). With his Resurrection, in fact, the Lord banished death from us like "straw from the fire" (8, 4).

The fundamental idea of Athanasius' entire theological battle was precisely that God is accessible. He is not a secondary God, he is the true God and it is through our communion with Christ that we can truly be united to God. He has really become "God-with-us".

Among the other works of this great Father of the Church — which remain largely associated with the events of the Arian crisis — let us remember the four epistles he addressed to his friend Serapion, Bishop of Thmuis, on the divinity of the Holy Spirit which he clearly affirmed, and

approximately 30 "Festal" Letters addressed at the beginning of each year to the Churches and monasteries of Egypt to inform them of the date of the Easter celebration, but above all to guarantee the links between the faithful, reinforcing their faith and preparing them for this great Solemnity.

Lastly, Athanasius also wrote meditational texts on the Psalms, subsequently circulated widely, and in particular, a work that constitutes the *bestseller* of early Christian literature: *The Life of Anthony*, that is, the biography of St. Anthony Abbot. It was written shortly after this Saint's death precisely while the exiled Bishop of Alexandria was staying with monks in the Egyptian desert.

Athanasius was such a close friend of the great hermit that he received one of the two sheepskins which Anthony left as his legacy, together with the mantle that the Bishop of Alexandria himself had given to him.

The exemplary biography of this figure dear to Christian tradition soon became very popular, almost immediately translated into Latin, in two editions, and then into various Oriental languages; it made an important contribution to the spread of monasticism in the East and in the West.

It was not by chance that the interpretation of this text, in Trier, was at the centre of a moving tale of the conversion of two imperial officials which Augustine incorporated into his *Confessions* (cf. VIII, 6, 15) as the preamble to his own conversion.

Anthony's influence on Christians

Moreover, Athanasius himself showed he was clearly aware of the influence that Anthony's fine example could have on Christian people. Indeed, he wrote at the end of this work:

"The fact that his fame has been blazoned everywhere, that all regard him with wonder, and that those who have never seen him long for him, is clear proof of his virtue and God's love of his soul. For not from writings, nor from worldly wisdom, nor through any art, was Anthony renowned, but solely from his piety towards God. That this was the gift of God no one will deny.

"For from whence into Spain and into Gaul, how into Rome and Africa, was the man heard of who dwelt hidden in a mountain, unless it was God who makes his own known everywhere, who also promised this to Anthony at the beginning? For even if they work secretly, even if they wish to remain in obscurity, yet the Lord shows them as lamps to lighten all, that those who hear may thus know that the precepts of God are able to make men prosper and thus be zealous in the path of virtue" (*Life of Anthony*, 93, 5-6).

Yes, brothers and sisters! We have many causes for which to be grateful to St. Athanasius. His life, like that of Anthony and of countless other saints, shows us that "those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 42).

Wednesday, 20 June 2007

Saint Basil (Part 1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us remember today one of the great Fathers of the Church, St. Basil, described by Byzantine liturgical texts as "a luminary of the Church".

He was an important Bishop in the fourth century to whom the entire Church of the East, and likewise the Church of the West, looks with admiration because of the holiness of his life, the excellence of his teaching and the harmonious synthesis of his speculative and practical gifts.

He was born in about 330 A.D. into a family of saints, "a true domestic Church", immersed in an atmosphere of deep faith. He studied with the best teachers in Athens and Constantinople. Unsatisfied with his worldly success and realizing that he had frivolously wasted much time on vanities, he himself confessed: "One day, like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvellous light of the truth of the Gospel..., and I wept many tears over my miserable life" (cf. *Letter* 223: *PG* 32, 824a).

Attracted by Christ, Basil began to look and listen to him alone (cf. *Moralia*, 80, 1: *PG* 31, 860bc). He devoted himself with determination to the monastic life through prayer, meditation on the Sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and the practice of charity (cf. *Letters* 2, 22), also following the example of his sister, St. Macrina, who was already living the ascetic life of a nun. He was then ordained a priest and finally, in the year 370, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia in present-day Turkey.

Through his preaching and writings, he carried out immensely busy pastoral, theological and literary activities.

With a wise balance, he was able to combine service to souls with dedication to prayer and meditation in solitude. Availing himself of his personal experience, he encouraged the foundation of numerous "fraternities", in other words, communities of Christians consecrated to God, which he visited frequently (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 29, *in laudem Basilii*: *PG* 36, 536b).

He urged them with his words and his writings, many of which have come down to us (cf. *Regulae brevius tractatae*, *Proemio*: *PG* 31, 1080ab), to live and to advance in perfection.

Various legislators of ancient monasticism drew on his works, including St. Benedict, who considered Basil his teacher (cf. *Rule* 73, 5).

Indeed, Basil created a very special monasticism: it was not closed to the community of the local Church but instead was open to it. His monks belonged to the particular Church; they were her life-giving nucleus and, going before the other faithful in the following of Christ and not only in faith, showed a strong attachment to him — love for him — especially through charitable acts. These monks, who ran schools and hospitals, were at the service of the poor and thus demonstrated the integrity of Christian life.

Major contributor to monasticism

In speaking of monasticism, the Servant of God John Paul II wrote: "For this reason many people think that the essential structure of the life of the Church, monasticism,

was established, for all time, mainly by St. Basil; or that, at least, it was not defined in its more specific nature without his decisive contribution" (Apostolic Letter *Patres Ecclesiae*, n. 2, January 1980; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 25 February, p. 6).

As the Bishop and Pastor of his vast Diocese Basil was constantly concerned with the difficult material conditions in which his faithful lived; he firmly denounced the evils; he did all he could on behalf of the poorest and most marginalized people; he also intervened with rulers to alleviate the sufferings of the population, especially in times of disaster; he watched over the Church's freedom, opposing even the powerful in order to defend the right to profess the true faith (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 48-51 *in laudem Basilii*: *PG*36, 557c-561c).

Basil bore an effective witness to God, who is love and charity, by building for the needy various institutions (cf. Basil, *Letter* 94: *PG* 32, 488bc), virtually a "city" of mercy, called "Basiliade" after him (cf. Sozomeno, *Historia Eccl.* 6, 34: *PG* 67, 1397a). This was the origin of the modern hospital structures where the sick are admitted for treatment.

Aware that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed", and "also the fount from which all her power flows" (*Sacrosancturn Concilium*, n. 10), and in spite of his constant concern to do charitable acts which is the hallmark of faith, Basil was also a wise "liturgical reformer" (cf. Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 34 *in laudem Basilii*: *PG* 36, 541c).

Indeed, he has bequeathed to us a great Eucharistic Prayer [or *anaphora*] which takes its name from him and has given a fundamental order to prayer and psalmody:

because of the impulse he gave to the Psalms, the people loved and were familiar with them and even went to pray them during the night (cf. Basil, *In Psalmum* 1, 1-2: PG 29, 212a-213c). And we thus see how liturgy, worship, prayer with the Church and charity go hand in hand and condition one another.

With zeal and courage Basil opposed the heretics who denied that Jesus Christ was God as Father (cf. Basil, *Letter* 9, 3: *PG* 32, 272a; *Letter* 52, 1-3: *PG* 32, 392b-396a; *Adv. Eunomium* 1, 20: *PG* 29, 556c). Likewise, against those who would not accept the divinity of the Holy Spirit, he maintained that the Spirit is also God and "must be equated and glorified with the Father and with the Son (cf. *De Spiritu Sancto*: *SC* 17ff., 348). For this reason Basil was one of the great Fathers who formulated the doctrine on the Trinity: the one God, precisely because he is love, is a God in three Persons who form the most profound unity that exists: divine unity.

In his love for Christ and for his Gospel, the great Cappadocian also strove to mend divisions within the Church (cf. *Letters*, 70, 243), doing his utmost to bring all to convert to Christ and to his word (cf. *De ludicio* 4: *PG* 31, 660b-661a), a unifying force which all believers were bound to obey (cf. *ibid*. 1-3: *PG* 31, 653a-656c).

A project of life for priests

To conclude, Basil spent himself without reserve in faithful service to the Church and in the multiform exercise of the episcopal ministry. In accordance with the programme that he himself drafted, he became an "apostle and minister of Christ, steward of God's mysteries, herald of the Kingdom, a model and rule of piety, an eye of the Body of the Church, a Pastor of Christ's sheep, a

loving doctor, father and nurse, a cooperator of God, a farmer of God, a builder of God's temple" (cf. *Moralia* 80, 11-20: *PG* 31, 864b-868b).

This is the programme which the holy Bishop consigns to preachers of the Word — in the past as in the present —, a programme which he himself was generously committed to putting into practice. In 379 A.D. Basil, who was not yet 50, returned to God "in the hope of eternal life, through Jesus Christ Our Lord" (*De Baptismo*, 1, 2, 9)

He was a man who truly lived with his gaze fixed on Christ. He was a man of love for his neighbor. Full of the hope and joy of faith, Basil shows us how to be true Christians.

Wednesday, 4 July 2007

Saint Basil (Part 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After this three-week break, we are continuing with our Wednesday meetings. Today, I would simply like to resume my last Catechesis, whose subject was the life and writings of St. Basil, a Bishop in present-day Turkey, in Asia Minor, in the fourth century A. D. The life and works of this great Saint are full of ideas for reflection and teachings that arc also relevant for us today.

First of all is *the reference to God's mystery*, which is still the most meaningful and vital reference for human beings. The Father is "the principal of all things and the cause of being of all that exists, the root of the living" (*Hom*. 15, 2 *de fide*: PG 31, 465c); above all, he is "the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Anaphora Sancti Basilii*). Ascending to God through his creatures, we "become aware of his goodness and wisdom" (Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* 1, 14: PG 29, 544b).

The Son is the "image of the Father's goodness and seal in the same form" (cf. *Anaphora Sancti Basilii*). With his obedience and his Passion, the Incarnate Word carried out his mission as Redeemer of man (cf. Basil, *In Psalmum* 48, 8; PG 29, 452aó; cf. also *De Baptismo* 1, 2: SC 357, 158).

Lastly, he spoke fully of the Holy Spirit, to whom he dedicated a whole book. He reveals to us that the Spirit enlivens the Church, fills her with his gifts and sanctifies her.

The resplendent light of the divine mystery is reflected in man, the image of God, and exalts his dignity. Looking at Christ, one fully understands human dignity.

Basil exclaims: "[Man], be mindful of your greatness, remembering the price paid for you: look at the price of your redemption and comprehend your dignity!" (*In Psalmum* 48, 8:*PG* 29, 452b).

Christians in particular, conforming their lives to the Gospel, recognize that all people are brothers and sisters; that life is a stewardship of the goods received from God, which is why each one is responsible for the other, and whoever is rich must be as it were an "executor of the orders of God the Benefactor" (*Hom 6 de avaritia*: *PG* 32, 1181-1196). We must all help one another and cooperate as members of one body (*Ep* 203, 3).

And on this point, he used courageous, strong words in his homilies. Indeed, anyone who desires to love his neighbour as himself, in accordance with God's commandment, "must possess no more than his neighbour" (*Hom. in divites*: *PG* 31, 281b).

In times of famine and disaster, the holy Bishop exhorted the faithful with passionate words "not to be more cruel than beasts... by taking over what people possess in common or by grabbing what belongs to all (*Hom. tempore famis*: *PG* 31, 325a).

Basil's profound thought stands out in this evocative sentence: "All the destitute look to our hands just as we look to those of God when we are in need".

Therefore, Gregory of Nazianzus' praise after Basil's death was well-deserved. He said: "Basil convinces us

that since we are human beings, we must neither despise men nor offend Christ, the common Head of all, with our inhuman behaviour towards people; rather, we ourselves must benefit by learning from the misfortunes of others and must lend God our compassion, for we are in need of mercy" (Gregory Nazianzus, *Orationes* 43, 63; *PG* 36, 580b).

These words are very timely. We see that St. Basil is truly one of the Fathers of the Church's social doctrine.

Need for the Eucharist

Furthermore, Basil reminds us that to keep alive our love for God and for men, *we need the Eucharist*, the appropriate food for the baptized, which can nourish the new energies that derive from Baptism (cf. *De Baptismo* 1, 3: *SC* 357, 192).

It is a cause of immense joy to be able to take part in the Eucharist (cf. *Moralia* 21, 3: *PG*31, 741a), instituted "to preserve unceasingly the memory of the One who died and rose for us" (*Moralia* 80, 22: *PG* 31, 869b).

The Eucharist, an immense gift of God, preserves in each one of us the memory of the baptismal seal and makes it possible to live the grace of Baptism to the full and in fidelity.

For this reason, the holy Bishop recommended frequent, even daily, Communion: "Communicating even daily, receiving the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, is good and useful; for he said clearly: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life' (Jn 6:54). So who would doubt that communicating continuously with life were not living in fullness?" (*Ep*. 93: *PG* 32, 484b).

The Eucharist, in a word, is necessary for us if we are to welcome within us true life, eternal life (cf. *Moralia* 21, 1: *PG* 31, 737c).

Finally, Basil was of course also concerned with that chosen portion of the People of God, *the youth*, society's future. He addressed a *Discourse* to them on how to benefit from the pagan culture of that time.

He recognized with great balance and openness that examples of virtue can be found in classical Greek and Latin literature. Such examples of upright living can be helpful to young Christians in search of the truth and the correct way of living (cf. *Ad Adolescentes* 3).

Therefore, one must take from the texts by classical authors what is suitable and conforms with the truth: thus, with a critical and open approach — it is a question of true and proper "discernment"— young people grow in freedom.

With the famous image of bees that gather from flowers only what they need to make honey, Basil recommends: "Just as bees can take nectar from flowers, unlike other animals which limit themselves to enjoying their scent and colour, so also from these writings... one can draw some benefit for the spirit. We must use these books, following in all things the example of bees. They do not visit every flower without distinction, nor seek to remove all the nectar from the flowers on which they alight, but only draw from them what they need to make honey, and leave the rest. And if we are wise, we will take from those writings what is appropriate for us, and conform to the truth, ignoring the rest" (*Ad Adolescentes* 4).

Basil recommended above all that young people grow in virtue, in the right way of living: "While the other goods... pass from one to the other as in playing dice, virtue alone is an inalienable good and endures throughout life and after death" (*Ad Adolescentes* 5).

Everyone is our neighbour

Dear brothers and sisters, I think one can say that this Father from long ago also speaks to us and tells us important things.

In the first place, attentive, critical and creative participation in today's culture.

Then, social responsibility: this is an age in which, in a globalized world even people who are physically distant are really our neighbours; therefore, friendship with Christ, the God with the human face.

And, lastly, knowledge and recognition of God the Creator, the Father of us all: only if we are open to this God, the common Father, can we build a more just and fraternal world.

Wednesday, 1st August 2007

Saint Gregory Nazianzus (Part 1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday, I talked about St. Basil, a Father of the Church and a great teacher of the faith.

Today, I would like to speak of his friend, Gregory Nazianzus; like Basil, he too was a native of Cappadocia. As a distinguished theologian, orator and champion of the Christian faith in the fourth century, he was famous for his eloquence, and as a poet, he also had a refined and sensitive soul.

Gregory was born into a noble family about 330 A.D. and his mother consecrated him to God at birth. After his education at home, he attended the most famous schools of his time: he first went to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where he made friends with Basil, the future Bishop of that city, and went on to stay in other capitals of the ancient world, such as Alexandria, Egypt and in particular Athens, where once again he met Basil (cf. *Orationes*43:14-24; *SC* 384:146-180).

Remembering this friendship, Gregory was later to write: "Then not only did I feel full of veneration for my great Basil because of the seriousness of his morals and the maturity and wisdom of his speeches, but he induced others who did not yet know him to be like him.... The same eagerness for knowledge motivated us..... This was our competition: not who was first but who allowed the others to be first. It seemed as if we had one soul in two bodies" (*Orationes* 43:16, 20; *SC* 384:154-156, 164).

These words more or less paint the self-portrait of this noble soul. Yet, one can also imagine how this man, who

was powerfully cast beyond earthly values, must have suffered deeply for the things of this world.

On his return home, Gregory received Baptism and developed an inclination for monastic life: solitude as well as philosophical and spiritual meditation fascinated him.

Interior life with God

He himself wrote: "Nothing seems to me greater than this: to silence one's senses, to emerge from the flesh of the world, to withdraw into oneself, no longer to be concerned with human things other than what is strictly necessary; to converse with oneself and with God, to lead a life that transcends the visible; to bear in one's soul divine images, ever pure, not mingled with earthly or erroneous forms; truly to be a perfect mirror of God and of divine things, and to become so more and more, taking light from light...; to enjoy, in the present hope, the future good, and to converse with angels; to have already left the earth even while continuing to dwell on it, borne aloft by the spirit" (*Orationes* 2:7; *SC* 247:96).

As he confides in his autobiography (cf. *Carmina* [*historica*] 2:1, 11 *De Vita Sua* 340-349; *PG* 37:1053), he received priestly ordination with a certain reluctance for he knew that he would later have to be a Bishop, to look after others and their affairs, hence, could no longer be absorbed in pure meditation.

However, he subsequently accepted this vocation and took on the pastoral ministry in full obedience, accepting, as often happened to him in his life, to be carried by Providence where he did not wish to go (cf. Jn 21:18).

In 371, his friend Basil, Bishops of Caesarea, against Gregory's own wishes, desired to ordain him Bishop of Sasima, a strategically important locality in Cappadocia. Because of various problems, however, he never took possession of it and instead stayed on in the city of Nazianzus.

In about 379, Gregory was called to Constantinople, the capital, to head the small Catholic community faithful to the Council of Nicea and to belief in the Trinity. The majority adhered instead to Arianism, which was "politically correct" and viewed by emperors as politically useful.

Thus, he found himself in a condition of minority, surrounded by hostility. He delivered five Theological Orations (*Orationes* 27-31; *SC* 250:70-343) in the little Church of the Anastasis precisely in order to defend the Trinitarian faith and to make it intelligible.

Called 'The Theologian'

These discourses became famous because of the soundness of his doctrine and his ability to reason, which truly made clear that this was the divine logic. And the splendour of their form also makes them fascinating today.

It was because of these orations that Gregory acquired the nickname: "The Theologian".

This is what he is called in the Orthodox Church: the "Theologian". And this is because to his way of thinking theology was not merely human reflection or even less, only a fruit of complicated speculation, but rather sprang from a life of prayer and holiness, from persevering dia-

logue with God. And in this very way he causes the reality of God, the mystery of the Trinity, to appear to our reason.

In the silence of contemplation, interspersed with wonder at the marvels of the mystery revealed, his soul was engrossed in beauty and divine glory.

While Gregory was taking part in the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, he was elected Bishop of Constantinople and presided over the Council; but he was challenged straightaway by strong opposition, to the point that the situation became untenable. These hostilities must have been unbearable to such a sensitive soul.

What Gregory had previously lamented with heartfelt words was repeated: "We have divided Christ, we who so loved God and Christ! We have lied to one another because of the Truth, we have harboured sentiments of hatred because of Love, we are separated from one another" (*Orationes* 6:3; *SC* 405:128).

Thus, in a tense atmosphere, the time came for him to resign.

In the packed cathedral, Gregory delivered a farewell discourse of great effectiveness and dignity (cf. *Orationes* 42; *SC* 384:48-114). He ended his heartrending speech with these words: "Farewell, great city, beloved by Christ.... My children, I beg you, jealously guard the deposit [of faith] that has been entrusted to you (cf. I Tm 6:20), remember my suffering (cf. Col 4:18). May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all" (cf. *Orationes*42:27; *SC* 384:112-114).

Gregory returned to Nazianzus and for about two years devoted himself to the pastoral care of this Christian community. He then withdrew definitively to solitude in nearby Arianzo, his birthplace, and dedicated himself to studies and the ascetic life.

It was in this period that he wrote the majority of his poetic works and especially his autobiography: the *De Vita Sua*, a reinterpretation in verse of his own human and spiritual journey, an exemplary journey of a suffering Christian, of a man of profound interiority in a world full of conflicts.

He is a man who makes us aware of God's primacy, hence, also speaks to us, to this world of ours: without God, man loses his grandeur; without God, there is no true humanism.

Consequently, let us too listen to this voice and seek to know God's Face.

In one of his poems he wrote, addressing himself to God: "May you be benevolent, You, the hereafter of all things" (*Carmina [dogmatica]* 1:1, 29; *PG* 37:508).

And in 390, God welcomed into his arms this faithful servant who had defended him in his writings with keen intelligence and had praised him in his poetry with such great love.

Wednesday, 8 August 2007

Saint Gregory Nazianzus (Part 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the course of portraying the great Fathers and Doctors of the Church whom I seek to present in these Catecheses, I spoke last time of St. Gregory Nazianzus, a fourth-century Bishop, and today I would like to fill out this portrait of a great teacher. Today, we shall try to understand some of his teachings.

Reflecting on the mission God had entrusted to him, St. Gregory Nazianzus concluded: "I was created to ascend even to God with my actions" (*Orationes* 14, 6 *De Pauperum Amore*: *PG* 35, 865).

In fact, he placed his talents as a writer and orator at the service of God and of the Church. He wrote numerous discourses, various homilies and panegyrics, a great many letters and poetic works (almost 18,000 verses!): a truly prodigious output.

He realized that this was the mission that God had entrusted to him: "As a servant of the Word, I adhere to the ministry of the Word; may I never agree to neglect this good. I appreciate this vocation and am thankful for it; I derive more joy from it than from all other things put together" (*Orationes* 6, 5: *SC* 405, 134; cf. also *Orationes* 4, 10).

Nazianzus was a mild man and always sought in his life to bring peace to the Church of his time, torn apart by discord and heresy. He strove with Gospel daring to overcome his own timidity in order to proclaim the truth of the faith.

He felt deeply the yearning to draw close to God, to be united with him. He expressed it in one of his poems in which he writes: "Among the great billows of the sea of life, here and there whipped up by wild winds... one thing alone is dear to me, my only treasure, comfort and oblivion in my struggle, the light of the Blessed Trinity" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 15:*PG* 37, 1250ff.). Thus, Gregory made the light of the Trinity shine forth, defending the faith proclaimed at the Council of Nicea: one God in three persons, equal and distinct — Father, Son and Holy Spirit —, "a triple light gathered into one splendour" (*Hymn for Vespers, Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 32: *PG* 37, 512).

One God through whom all exists

Therefore, Gregory says further, in line with St. Paul (I Cor 8:6): "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom is all; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom is all; and one Holy Spirit, in whom is all (*Orationes* 39, 12: *SC* 358, 172).

Gregory gave great prominence to Christ's full humanity: to redeem man in the totality of his body, soul and spirit, Christ assumed all the elements of human nature, otherwise man would not have been saved.

Disputing the heresy of Apollinaris, who held that Jesus Christ had not assumed a rational mind, Gregory tackled the problem in the light of the mystery of salvation: "What has not been assumed has not been healed" (*Ep.* 101, 32: *SC* 208, 50), and if Christ had not been "endowed with a rational mind, how could he have been a man?" (*Ep.* 101, 34: *SC* 208, 50). It was precisely our mind and our reason that needed and needs the relationship, the encounter with God in Christ.

Having become a man, Christ gave us the possibility of becoming, in turn, like him. Nazianzus exhorted people: "Let us seek to be like Christ, because Christ also became like us: to become gods through him since he himself, through us, became a man. He took the worst upon himself to make us a gift of the best" (*Orationes* 1, 5: *SC* 247, 78).

Mary, who gave Christ his human nature, is the true Mother of God (*Theotokos*: cf. *Ep.*101, 16: *SC* 208, 42), and with a view to her most exalted mission was "purified in advance" (*Orationes* 38, 13: *SC* 358, 132, almost as a distant prelude to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception). Mary is proposed to Christians, and especially to virgins, as a model and their help to call upon in times of need (cf. *Orationes*, 24, 11: *SC* 282, 60-64).

Gregory reminds us that as human persons, we must show solidarity to one another. He writes: "'We are all one in the Lord' (cf. Rom 12:5), rich and poor, slaves and free, healthy and sick alike; and one is the head from which all derive: Jesus Christ. And as with the members of one body, each is concerned with the other, and all with all".

He then concludes, referring to the sick and to people in difficulty: "This is the one salvation for our flesh and our soul: showing them charity" (*Orationes* 14, 8 *De Pauperum Amore*:*PG* 35, 868ab).

Imitate the goodness of the Lord

Gregory emphasizes that man must imitate God's goodness and love. He therefore recommends: "If you are healthy and rich, alleviate the need of whoever is sick and poor; if you have not fallen, go to the aid of whoever

has fallen and lives in suffering; if you are glad, comfort whoever is sad; if you are fortunate, help whoever is smitten with misfortune. Give God proof of your gratitude for you are one who can benefit and not one who needs to be benefited.... Be rich not only in possessions but also in piety; not only in gold but in virtue, or rather, in virtue alone. Outdo your neighbour's reputation by showing yourself to be kinder than all; make yourself God for the unfortunate, imitating God's mercy" (*Orationes*14, 26 *De Pauperum Amore*: *PG* 35, 892bc).

Gregory teaches us first and foremost the importance and necessity of prayer. He says: "It is necessary to remember God more often that one breathes" (*Orationes* 27, 4: *PG* 250, 78), because prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with our thirst. God is thirsting for us to thirst for him (cf. *Orations* 40, 27: *SC* 358, 260).

In prayer, we must turn our hearts to God, to consign ourselves to him as an offering to be purified and transformed. In prayer we see all things in the light of Christ, we let our masks fall and immerse ourselves in the truth and in listening to God, feeding the fire of love.

In a poem which is at the same time a meditation on the purpose of life and an implicit invocation to God, Gregory writes: "You have a task, my soul, a great task if you so desire. Scrutinize yourself seriously, your being, your destiny; where you come from and where you must rest; seek to know whether it is life that you are living or if it is something more. You have a task, my soul, so purify your life: Please consider God and his mysteries, investigate what existed before this universe and what it is for you, where you come from and what your destiny will be. This is your task, my soul; therefore, purify your life" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 78: *PG* 37, 1425-1426).

The holy Bishop continuously asked Christ for help, to be raised and set on his way: "I have been let down, O my Christ, by my excessive presumption: from the heights, I have fallen very low. But lift me now again so that I may see that I have deceived myself; if again I trust too much in myself, I shall fall immediately and the fall will be fatal" (*Carmina [historica]*2, 1, 67: *PG* 37, 1408).

So it was that Gregory felt the need to draw close to God in order to overcome his own weariness. He experienced the impetus of the soul, the vivacity of a sensitive spirit and the instability of transient happiness.

For him, in the drama of a life burdened by the knowledge of his own weakness and wretchedness, the experience of God's love always gained the upper hand.

You have a task, soul, St. Gregory also says to us, the task of finding the true light, or finding the true nobility of your life. And your life is encountering God, who thirsts for our thirst.

Wednesday, 22 August 2007

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (Part 1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the last Catecheses, I spoke of two great fourth-century Doctors of the Church, Basil and Gregory Nazianzus, a Bishop in Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey. Today, we are adding a third, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother, who showed himself to be a man disposed to meditation with a great capacity for reflection and a lively intelligence open to the culture of his time. He has thus proved to be an original and profound thinker in the history of Christianity.

He was born in about 335 A.D. His Christian education was supervised with special care by his brother Basil — whom he called "father and teacher" (*Ep*. 13, 4: *SC* 363, 198) — and by his sister Macrina. He completed his studies, appreciating in particular philosophy and rhetoric.

Initially, he devoted himself to teaching and was married. Later, like his brother and sister, he too dedicated himself entirely to the ascetic life.

He was subsequently elected Bishop of Nyssa and showed himself to be a zealous Pastor, thereby earning the community's esteem.

When he was accused of embezzlement by heretical adversaries, he was obliged for a brief period to abandon his episcopal see but later returned to it triumphant (cf. *Ep*. 6: *SC* 363, 164-170) and continued to be involved in the fight to defend the true faith.

Especially after Basil's death, by more or less gathering his spiritual legacy, Gregory cooperated in the triumph of orthodoxy. He took part in various Synods; he attempted to settle disputes between Churches; he had an active part in the reorganization of the Church and, as a "pillar of orthodoxy", played a leading role at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which defined the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Various difficult official tasks were entrusted to him by the Emperor Theodosius, he delivered important homilies and funeral discourses, and he devoted himself to writing various theological works. In addition, in 394, he took part in another Synod, held in Constantinople. The date of his death is unknown.

Goal: to find true light

Gregory expressed clearly the purpose of his studies, the supreme goal to which all his work as a theologian was directed: not to engage his life in vain things but to find the light that would enable him to discern what is truly worthwhile (cf. *In Ecclesiasten hom.* 1: *SC*416, 106-146).

He found this supreme good in Christianity, thanks to which "the imitation of the divine nature" is possible (*De Professione Christiana: PG* 46, 244c).

With his acute intelligence and vast philosophical and theological knowledge, he defended the Christian faith against heretics who denied the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (such as Eunomius and the Macedonians) or compromised the perfect humanity of Christ (such as Apollinaris).

He commented on Sacred Scripture, reflecting on the creation of man. This was one of his central topics: creation.

He saw in the creature the reflection of the Creator and found here the way that leads to God.

But he also wrote an important book on the life of Moses, whom he presents as a man journeying towards God: this climb to Mount Sinai became for him an image of our ascent in human life towards true life, towards the encounter with God.

He also interpreted the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father", as well as the Beatitudes. In his "Great Catechetical Discourse (*Oratio Catechetica Magna*) he developed theology's fundamental directions, not for an academic theology closed in on itself but in order to offer catechists a reference system to keep before them in their instructions, almost as a framework for a pedagogical interpretation of the faith.

Furthermore, Gregory is distinguished for his spiritual doctrine. None of his theology was academic reflection; rather, it was an expression of the spiritual life, of a life of faith lived. As a great "father of mysticism", he pointed out in various treatises — such as his *De Professione Christiana* and *De Perfectione Christiana* — the path Christians must take if they are to reach true life, perfection.

He exalted consecrated virginity (*De Virginitate*) and proposed the life of his sister Macrina, who was always a guide and example for him (cf. *Vita Macrinae*), as an outstanding model of it.

Gregory gave various discourses and homilies and wrote numerous letters. In commenting on man's creation, he highlighted the fact that God, "the best artist, forges our nature so as to make it suitable for the exercise of royalty. Through the superiority given by the soul and through the very make-up of the body, he arranges things in such a way that man is truly fit for regal power" (*De Hominis Opificio* 4: *PG* 44, 136b).

Man: reflection of God's beauty

Yet, we see that man, caught in the net of sin, often abuses creation and does not exercise true kingship. For this reason, in fact, that is, to act with true responsibility for creatures, he must be penetrated by God and live in his light.

Indeed, man is a reflection of that original beauty which is God: "Everything God created was very good", the holy Bishop wrote. And he added: "The story of creation (cf. Gn 1:31) witnesses to it. Man was also listed among those very good things, adorned with a beauty far superior to all of the good things. What else, in fact, could be good, on par with one who was similar to pure and incorruptible beauty?... The reflection and image of eternal life, he was truly good; no, he was very good, with the radiant sign of life on his face" (*Homilia in Canticum* 12: *PG* 44, 1020c).
Man was honoured by God and placed above every other creature: "The sky was not made in God's image, not the moon, not the sun, not the beauty of the stars, no other things which appear in creation. Only you (human soul) were made to be the image of nature that surpasses every intellect, likeness of incorruptible beauty, mark of true divinity, vessel of blessed life, image of true light, that when you look upon it you become what he is, because

through the reflected ray coming from your purity you imitate he who shines within you. Nothing that exists can measure up to your greatness" (*Homilia in Canticum* 2: *PG* 44, 805d).

Let us meditate on this praise of the human being. Let us also see how man was degraded by sin. And let us try to return to that original greatness: only if God is present, does man attain his true greatness.

Man therefore recognizes in himself the reflection of the divine light: by purifying his heart he is once more, as he was in the beginning, a clear image of God, exemplary Beauty (cf.*Oratio Catechetica* 6: *SC* 453, 174).

Thus, by purifying himself, man can see God, as do the pure of heart (cf. Mt 5:8): "If, with a diligent and attentive standard of living, you wash away the bad things that have deposited upon your heart, the divine beauty will shine in you.... Contemplating yourself, you will see within you he who is the desire of your heart, and you will be blessed" (*De Beatitudinibus*6: 44, 1272ab). We should therefore wash away the ugliness stored within our hearts and rediscover God's light within us.

Man's goal is therefore the contemplation of God. In him alone can he find his fulfilment.

To somehow anticipate this goal in this life, he must work ceaselessly toward a spiritual life, a life in dialogue with God. In other words — and this is the most important lesson that St. Gregory of Nyssa has bequeathed to us — total human fulfilment consists in holiness, in a life lived in the encounter with God, which thus becomes luminous also to others and to the world.

Wednesday, 29 August 2007

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (Part 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I present to you certain aspects of the teaching of St. Gregory of Nyssa, of whom we spoke last Wednesday.

First of all, Gregory of Nyssa had a very lofty concept of human dignity. Man's goal, the holy Bishop said, is to liken himself to God, and he reaches this goal first of all through the love, knowledge and practice of the virtues, "bright beams that shine from the divine nature" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: *PG* 44, 1272c), in a perpetual movement of adherence to the good like a corridor outstretched before oneself.

In this regard, Gregory uses an effective image already present in Paul's *Letter to the Philippians: épekteinómenos* (3:13), that is, "I press on" towards what is greater, towards truth and love. This vivid expression portrays a profound reality: the perfection we desire to attain is not acquired once and for all; perfection means journeying on, it is continuous readiness to move ahead because we never attain a perfect likeness to God; we are always on our way (cf. *Homilia in Canticum* 12: *PG* 44, 1025d).

The history of every soul is that of a love which fills every time and at the same time is open to new horizons, for God continually stretches the soul's possibilities to make it capable of ever greater goods. God himself, who has sown the seeds of good in us and from whom every initiative of holiness stems, "models the block..., and polishing and cleansing our spirit, forms Christ within us" (*In Psalmos* 2, 11: *PG* 44, 544b).

Gregory was anxious to explain: "In fact, this likeness to the Divine is not our work at all; it is not the achievement of any faculty of man; it is the great gift of God bestowed upon our nature at the very moment of our birth" (*De Virginitate* 12, 2: *SC* 119, 408-410).

For the soul, therefore, "it is not a question of knowing something about God but of having God within" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: *PG* 44, 1269c).

Moreover, as Gregory perceptively observes, "Divinity is purity, it is liberation from the passions and the removal of every evil: if all these things are in you, God is truly in you" (*De Beatitudinibus* 6: *PG* 44, 1272c).

Having God means having all

When we have God in us, when man loves God, through that reciprocity which belongs to the law of love he wants what God himself wants (cf. *Homilia in Canticum* 9: *PG* 44, 956ac); hence, he cooperates with God in fashioning the divine image in himself, so that "our spiritual birth is the result of a free choice, and we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we ourselves wish to be, and through our will forming ourselves in accordance with the model that we choose" (*Vita Moysis* 2, 3: *SC* 1ff., 108).

To ascend to God, man must be purified: "The way that leads human nature to Heaven is none other than detachment from the evils of this world.... Becoming like God means becoming righteous, holy and good.... If, therefore, according to Ecclesiastes (5:1), 'God is in Heaven', and if, as the Prophet says, 'You have made God your refuge' (Ps 73[72]:28), it necessarily follows that you

must be where God is found, since you are united with him.

"Since he commanded you to call God 'Father' when you pray, he tells you definitely to be likened to your Heavenly Father and to lead a life worthy of God, as the Lord orders us more clearly elsewhere, saying, 'Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48)" (*De Oratione Dominica* 2: *PG* 44, 1145ac).

In this journey of spiritual ascesis Christ is the Model and Teacher, he shows us the beautiful image of God (cf. *De Perfectione Christiana*: *PG* 46, 272a). Each of us, looking at him, finds ourselves "the painter of our own life", who has the will to compose the work and the virtues as his colours (*ibid*.: *PG* 46, 272b).

So, if man is deemed worthy of Christ's Name how should he behave?

This is Gregory's answer: "[He must] always examine his own thoughts, his own words and his own actions in his innermost depths to see whether they are oriented to Christ or are drifting away from him" (*ibid*.: *PG* 46, 284c). And this point is important because of the value it gives to the word "Christian". A Christian is someone who bears Christ's Name, who must therefore also liken his life to Christ. We Christians assume a great responsibility with Baptism.

But Christ, Gregory says, is also present in the poor, which is why they must never be offended: "Do not despise them, those who lie idle, as if for this reason they were worth nothing. Consider who they are and you will discover wherein lies their dignity: they represent the Person of the Saviour. And this is how it is: for in his

goodness the Lord gives them his own Person so that through it, those who are hard of heart and enemies of the poor may be moved to compassion" (*De Pauperibus Amandis*: *PG* 46, 460bc).

Gregory, as we said, speaks of rising: rising to God in prayer through purity of heart, but also rising to God through love of neighbour. Love is the ladder that leads to God.

Consequently, Gregory of Nyssa strongly recommends to all his listeners: "Be generous with these brothers and sisters, victims of misfortune. Give to the hungry from what you deprive your own stomach" (*ibid*.: *PG* 46, 457c).

Gregory recalls with great clarity that we all depend on God and therefore exclaims: "Do not think that everything belongs to you! There must also be a share for the poor, God's friends. In fact, the truth is that everything comes from God, the universal Father, and that we brothers and sisters and belong to the same lineage" (*ibid*.: *PG*, 465b).

The Christian should then examine himself, Gregory insists further: "But what use is it to fast and abstain from eating meat if with your wickedness all you do is to gnaw at your brother? What do you gain in God's eyes from not eating your own food if later, acting unfairly, you snatch from their hands the food of the poor?".

Let us end our catechesis on the three great Cappadocian Fathers by recalling that important aspect of Gregory of Nyssa's spiritual doctrine which is prayer. To progress on the journey to perfection and to welcome God within

him, to bear the Spirit of God within him, the love of God, man must turn to God trustingly in prayer:

"Through prayer we succeed in being with God. But anyone who is with God is far from the enemy. Prayer is a support and protection of charity, a brake on anger, an appeasement and the control of pride. Prayer is the custody of virginity, the protection of fidelity in marriage, the hope for those who are watching, an abundant harvest for farmers, certainty for sailors" (*De Oratione Dominica* 1: *PG* 44, 1124ab).

The Christian always prays by drawing inspiration from the Lord's Prayer: "So if we want to pray for the Kingdom of God to come, we must ask him for this with the power of the Word: that I may be distanced from corruption, delivered from death, freed from the chains of error; that death may never reign over me, that the tyranny of evil may never have power over us, that the adversary may never dominate me nor make me his prisoner through sin but that your Kingdom may come to me so that the passions by which I am now ruled and governed may be distanced, or better still, blotted out" (*ibid*., 3: *PG* 44, 1156d-1157a).

Having ended his earthly life, the Christian will thus be able to turn to God serenely. In speaking of this, St. Gregory remembered the death of his sister Macrina and wrote that she was praying this prayer to God while she lay dying: "You who on earth have the power to take away sins, `forgive me, so that I may find refreshment' (cf. Ps 38:14), and so that I may be found without blemish in your sight at the time when I am emptied from my body (cf. Col 2:11), so that my spirit, holy and immaculate (cf. Eph 5:27), may be accepted into your hands 'like

incense before you – (Ps 141:[140]:2) (*Vita Macrinae* 24: *SC* 178, 224).

This teaching of St. Gregory is always relevant: not only speaking of God, but carrying God within oneself. Let us do this by commitment to prayer and living in a spirit of love for all our brethren.

Wednesday, 5 September 2007

Saint Eusebius of Vercelli

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This morning I invite you to reflect on St. Eusebius of Vercelli, the first Bishop of Northern Italy of whom we have reliable information. Born in Sardinia at the beginning of the fourth century, he moved to Rome with his family at a tender age.

Later, he was instituted lector: he thus came to belong to the clergy of the city at a time when the Church was seriously troubled by the Arian heresy.

The high esteem that developed around Eusebius explains his election in 345 A.D. to the Episcopal See of Vercelli. The new Bishop immediately began an intense process of evangelization in a region that was still largely pagan, especially in rural areas. Inspired by St. Athanasius — who had written the *Life of St. Anthony*, the father of monasticism in the East — he founded a priestly community in Vercelli that resembled a monastic community. This coenobium impressed upon the clergy of Northern Italy a significant hallmark of apostolic holiness and inspired important episcopal figures such as Limenius and Honoratus, successors of Eusebius in Vercelli, Gaudentius in Novara, Exuperantius in Tortona, Eustasius in Aosta, Eulogius in Ivrea and Maximus in Turin, all venerated by the Church as saints.

Defending the divinity of Christ

With his sound formation in the Nicene faith, Eusebius did his utmost to defend the full divinity of Jesus Christ, defined by the Nicene Creed as "of one being with the Father".

To this end, he allied himself with the great Fathers of the fourth century — especially St. Athanasius, the standard bearer of Nicene orthodoxy — against the philo-Arian policies of the Emperor. For the Emperor, the simpler Arian faith appeared politically more useful as the ideology of the Empire. For him it was not truth that counted but rather political opportunism: he wanted to exploit religion as the bond of unity for the Empire. But these great Fathers resisted him, defending the truth against political expediency.

Eusebius was consequently condemned to exile, as were so many other Bishops of the East and West: such as Athanasius himself, Hilary of Poitiers — of whom we spoke last time — and Hosius of Cordoba. In Scythopolis, Palestine, to which he was exiled between 355 and 360, Eusebius wrote a marvelous account of his life.

Here too, he founded a monastic community with a small group of disciples. It was also from here that he attended to his correspondence with his faithful in Piedmont, as can be seen in the second of the three *Letters* of Eusebius recognized as authentic.

Later, after 360, Eusebius was exiled to Cappadocia and the Thebaid, where he suffered serious physical ill-treatment. After his death in 361, Constantius II was succeeded by the Emperor Julian, known as "the Apostate", who was not interested in making Christianity the religion of the Empire but merely wished to restore paganism. He rescinded the banishment of these Bishops and thereby also enabled Eusebius to reinstated in his See. In 362 he was invited by Anastasius to take part in the Council of Alexandria, which decided to pardon the Arian Bishops as long as they returned to the secular state.

Eusebius was able to exercise his episcopal ministry for another 10 years, until he died, creating an exemplary relationship with his city which did not fail to inspire the pastoral service of other Bishops of Northern Italy, whom we shall reflect upon in future Catecheses, such as St. Ambrose of Milan and St. Maximus of Turin.

For his people and his city

The Bishop of Vercelli's relationship with his city is illustrated in particular by two testimonies in his correspondence. The first is found in the *Letter* cited above, which Eusebius wrote from his exile in Scythopolis "to the beloved brothers and priests missed so much, as well as to the holy people with a firm faith of Vercelli, Novara, Ivrea and Tortona (*Second Letter, CCL* 9, p. 104).

These first words, which demonstrate the deep emotion of the good Pastor when he thought d his flock, are amply confirmed at the end of the Letter his very warm fatherly greetings to each and every one of his children in Vercelli, with expressions overflowing with affection and love.

One should note first of all the explicit relationship that bound the Bishop to the *sanctae plebes*, not only of *Vercelae*/Vercelli — the first and subsequently for some years the only Diocese in the Piedmont — but also of *Novaria*/ Novara, *Eporedia*/Irvea and *Dertona*/ Tortona, that is, of the Christian communities in the same Diocese which had become quite numerous and acquired a certain consistency and autonomy.

Another interesting element is provided by the farewell with which the Letter concludes. Eusebius asked his sons

and daughters to give his greeting "also to those who are outside the Church, yet deign to nourish feelings of love for us: *etiam hos, qui foris sunt et nos dignatur diligere*". This is an obvious proof that the Bishop's relationship with his city was not limited to the Christian population but also extended to those who — outside the Church — recognized in some way his spiritual authority and loved this exemplary man.

The second testimony of the Bishop's special relationship with his city comes from the*Letter* St. Ambrose of Milan wrote to the Vercellians in about 394, more than 20 years after Eusebius' death (*Ep. extra collecitonem* 14: *Maur*. 63). The Church of Vercelli was going through a difficult period: she was divided and lacked a Bishop. Ambrose frankly declared that he hesitated to recognize these Vercellians as descending from "the lineage of the holy fathers who approved of Eusebius as soon as they saw him, without ever having known him previously and even forgetting their own fellow citizens".

In the same *Letter*, the Bishop of Milan attested to his esteem for Eusebius in the dearest possible way: “Such a great man”, he wrote in peremptory tones, "well deserves to be elected by the whole of the Church”. Ambrose's admiration for Eusebius was based above all on the fact that the Bishop of Vercelli governed his Diocese with the witness of his life: "With the austerity of fasting he governed his Church”.

Indeed, Ambrose was also fascinated, as he himself admits, by the monastic ideal of the contemplation of God which, in the footsteps of the Prophet Elijah, Eusebius had pursued.

A simple, holy lifestyle

First of all, Ambrose commented, the Bishop of Vercelli gathered his clergy in *vita communis* and educated its members in "the observance of the monastic rule, although they lived in the midst of the city". The Bishop and his clergy were to share the problems of their fellow citizens and did so credibly, precisely by cultivating at the saint time a different citizenship, that of Heaven (cf. Heb 13:14). And thus, they really built true citizenship and true solidarity among all the citizens of Vercelli.

While Eusebius was adopting the cause of the *sancta plebs* of Vercelli, he lived a monk's life in the heart of the city, opening the city to God. This trait, though, in no way diminished his exemplary pastoral dynamism. It seems among other things that he set up parishes in Vercelli for art orderly and stable ecclesial service and promoted Marian shrines for the conversion of the pagan populations in the countryside. This "monastic feature", however, conferred a special dimension on the Bishop's relationship with his hometown.

Just like the Apostles, for whom Jesus prayed at his Last Supper, the Pastors and faithful of the Church "are of the world" (Jn 17:11), but not "in the world". Therefore, Pastors, Eusebius said, must urge the faithful not to consider the cities of the world as their permanent dwelling place but to seek the future city, the definitive heavenly Jerusalem.

This "eschatological reserve" enables Pastors and faithful to preserve the proper scale of values without ever submitting to the fashions of the moment and the unjust claims of the current political power. The authentic scale of values — Eusebius' whole life seems to say — does

not come from emperors of the past or of today but from Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, equal to the Father in divinity, yet a man like us.

In referring to this scale of values, Eusebius never tired of "warmly recommending" his faithful "to jealously guard the faith, to preserve harmony, to be assiduous in prayer' (*Second Letter, op. cit.*).

Dear friends, I too warmly recommend these perennial values to you as I greet and bless you, using the very words with which the holy Bishop Eusebius concluded his *Second Letter*:

"I address you all, my holy brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, faithful of both sexes and of every age group, so that you may... bring our greeting also to those who are outside the Church, yet deign to nourish sentiments of love for us" (*ibid*.).

Wednesday, 17 October 2007

Saint Jerome (Part 1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we turn our attention to St. Jerome, a Church Father who centred his life on the Bible: he translated it into Latin, commented on it in his works, and above all, strove to live it in practice throughout his long earthly life, despite the well-known difficult, hot-tempered character with which nature had endowed him.

Jerome was born into a Christian family in about 347 A.D. in Stridon. He was given a good education and was even sent to Rome to fine-tune his studies. As a young man he was attracted by the worldly life (cf. *Ep* 22, 7), but his desire for and interest in the Christian religion prevailed.

He received Baptism in about 366 and opted for the ascetic life. He went to Aquileia and joined a group of fervent Christians that had formed around Bishop Valerian and which he described as almost "a choir of blesseds" (*Chron. ad ann.* 374).

He then left for the East and lived as a hermit in the Desert of Chalcis, south of Aleppo (*Ep*14, 10), devoting himself assiduously to study. He perfected his knowledge of Greek, began learning Hebrew (cf. *Ep* 125, 12), and transcribed codices and Patristic writings (cf.*Ep* 5, 2). Meditation, solitude and contact with the Word of God helped his Christian sensibility to mature.

He bitterly regretted the indiscretions of his youth (cf. *Ep*. 22, 7) and was keenly aware of the contrast between the pagan mentality and the Christian life: a contrast made famous by the dramatic and lively "vision" —

of which he has left us an account — in which it seemed to him that he was being scourged before God because he was "Ciccronian rather than Christian" (cf. *Ep*. 22, 30).

In 382 he moved to Rome: here, acquainted with his fame as an ascetic and his ability as a scholar, Pope Damasus engaged him as secretary and counsellor; the Pope encouraged him, for pastoral and cultural reasons, to embark on a new Latin translation of the Biblical texts.

Several members of the Roman aristocracy, especially noblewomen such as Paula, Marcella, Asella, Lea and others, desirous of committing themselves to the way of Christian perfection and of deepening their knowledge of the Word of God, chose him as their spiritual guide and teacher in the methodical approach to the sacred texts. These noblewomen also learned Greek and Hebrew.

The travels of St. Jerome

After the death of Pope Damasus, Jerome left Rome in 385 and went on pilgrimage, first to the Holy Land, a silent witness of Christ's earthly life, and then to Egypt, the favourite country of numerous monks (cf. *Contra Rufinum*, 3, 22; Ep. 108, 6-14).

In 386 he stopped in Bethlehem, where male and female monasteries were built through the generosity of the noblewoman, Paula, as well as a hospice for pilgrims bound for the Holy Land, "remembering Mary and Joseph who had found no room there" (*Ep*. 108, 14).

He stayed in Bethlehem until he died, continuing to do a prodigious amount of work: he commented on the Word

of God; he defended the faith, vigorously opposing various heresies; he urged the monks on to perfection; he taught classical and Christian culture to young students; he welcomed with a pastor's heart pilgrims who were visiting the Holy Land. He died in his cell close to the Grotto of the Nativity on 30 September 419-420.

Jerome's literary studies and vast erudition enabled him to revise and translate many biblical texts: an invaluable undertaking for the Latin Church and for Western culture. On the basis of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and thanks to the comparison with previous versions, he revised the four Gospels in Latin, then the Psalter and a large part of the Old Testament.

Taking into account the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Septuagint, the classical Greek version of the Old Testament that dates back to pre-Christian times, as well as the earlier Latin versions, Jerome was able, with the assistance later of other collaborators, to produce a better translation: this constitutes the so-called "Vulgate", the "official" text of the Latin Church which was recognized as such by the Council of Trent and which, after the recent revision, continues to be the "official" Latin text of the Church.

It is interesting to point out the criteria which the great biblicist abided by in his work as a translator. He himself reveals them when he says that lie respects even the order of the words of the Sacred Scriptures, for in them, he says, "the order of the words is also a mystery" (*Ep*. 57, 5), that is, a revelation.

Furthermore, he reaffirms the need to refer to the original texts: "Should an argument on the New Testament arise

between Latins because of interpretations of the manuscripts that fail to agree, let us turn to the original, that is, to the Greek text in which the New Testament was written.

"Likewise, with regard to the Old Testament, if there are divergences between the Greek and Latin texts we should have recourse to the original Hebrew text; thus, we shall be able to find in the streams all that flows from the source" (*Ep*. 106, 2).

Christians judge for themselves

Jerome also commented on many biblical texts. For him the commentaries had to offer multiple opinions "so that the shrewd reader, after reading the different explanations and hearing many opinions — to be accepted or rejected — may judge which is the most reliable, and, like an expert moneychanger, may reject the false coin" (*Contra Rufinum* 1, 16).

Jerome refuted with energy and liveliness the heretics who contested the tradition and faith of the Church. He also demonstrated the importance and validity of Christian literature, which had by then become a real culture that deserved to be compared with classical literature: he did so by composing his *De Viris Illustribus*, a work in which Jerome presents the biographies of more than a hundred Christian authors.

Further, he wrote biographies of monks, comparing among other things their spiritual itineraries as well as monastic ideal. In addition, he translated various works by Greek authors.

Lastly, in the important Epistulae, a masterpiece of Latin literature, Jerome emerges with the profile of a man of culture, an ascetic and a guide of souls.

What can we learn from St. Jerome? It seems to me, this above all; to love the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. St. Jerome said: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ".

It is therefore important that every Christian live in contact and in personal dialogue with the Word of God given to us in Sacred Scripture.

This dialogue with Scripture must always have two dimensions: on the one hand, it must be a truly personal dialogue because God speaks with each one of us through Sacred Scripture and it has a message for each one.

We must not read Sacred Scripture as a word of the past but as the Word of God that is also addressed to us, and we must try to understand, what it is that the Lord wants to tell us.

However, to avoid falling into individualism, we must bear in mind that the Word of God has been given to us precisely in order to build communion and to join forces in the truth on our journey towards God. Thus, although it is always a personal Word, it is also a Word that builds community, that builds the Church.

We must therefore read it in communion with the living Church. The privileged place for reading and listening to the Word of God is the liturgy, in which, celebrating the

Word and making Christ's Body present in the Sacrament, we actualize the Word in our lives and make it present among us.

We must never forget that the Word of God transcends time. Human opinions come and go. What is very modern today will be very antiquated tomorrow.

On the other hand, the Word of God is the Word of eternal life, it bears within it eternity and is valid for ever. By carrying the Word of God within us, we therefore carry within us eternity, eternal life.

I thus conclude with a word St. Jerome once addressed to St. Paulinus of Nola. In it the great exegete expressed this very reality, that is, in the Word of God we receive eternity, eternal life. St. Jerome said: "Seek to learn on earth those truths which will remain ever valid in Heaven" (*Ep*. 53, 10).

Wednesday, 7 November 2007

Saint Jerome (Part 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we continue the presentation of the figure of St. Jerome. As we said last Wednesday, he dedicated his life to studying the Bible, so much so that he was recognized by my Predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, as "an outstanding doctor in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture".

Jerome emphasized the joy and importance of being familiar with biblical texts: "Does one not seem to dwell, already here on earth, in the Kingdom of Heaven when one lives with these texts, when one meditates on them, when one does not know or seek anything else?" (*Ep*. 53, 10).

In reality, to dialogue with God, with his Word, is in a certain sense a presence of Heaven, a presence of God. To draw near to the biblical texts, above all the New Testament, is essential for the believer, because "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ". This is his famous phrase, cited also by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* (n. 25).

Truly "in love" with the Word of God, he asked himself: "How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, through which one learns to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?" (*Ep*. 30, 7).

The Bible, an instrument "by which God speaks every day to the faithful" (*Ep*. 133, 13), thus becomes a stimulus and source of Christian life for all situations and for each person. To read Scripture is to converse with God: "If you pray", he writes to a young Roman noblewoman,

"you speak with the Spouse; if you read, it is he who speaks to you" (*Ep*. 22, 25).

The study of and meditation on Scripture renders man wise and serene (cf. *In Eph*., Prol.). Certainly, to penetrate the Word of God ever more profoundly, a constant and progressive application is needed. Hence, Jerome recommends to the priest Nepotian: "Read the divine Scriptures frequently; rather, may your hands never set the Holy Book down. Learn here what you must teach" (*Ep*. 52, 7).

To the Roman matron Leta he gave this counsel for the Christian education of her daughter: "Ensure that each day she studies some Scripture passage.... After prayer, reading should follow, and after reading, prayer.... Instead of jewels and silk clothing, may she love the divine Books" (*Ep*. 107, 9, 12).

Through meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures, one "maintains the equilibrium of the soul" (*Ad Eph.*, Prot.). Only a profound spirit of prayer and the Holy Spirit's help can introduce us to understanding the Bible: "In the interpretation of Sacred Scripture we always need the help of the Holy Spirit" (*In Mich*. 1, 1, 10, 15).

Bible + Magisterium = Wisdom

A passionate love for Scripture therefore pervaded Jerome's whole life, a love that he always sought to deepen in the faithful, too. He recommends to one of his spiritual daughters: "Love Sacred Scripture and wisdom will love you; love it tenderly, and it will protect you; honour it and you will receive its caresses. May it he for you as your necklaces and your earrings" (*Ep*. 130, 20). And

again: "Love the science of Scripture, and you will not love the vices of the flesh" (*Ep*. 125, 11).

For Jerome, a fundamental criterion of the method for interpreting the Scriptures was harmony with the Church's Magisterium. We should never read Scripture alone because we meet too many closed doors and could easily slip into error.

The Bible has been written by the People of God and for the People of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Only in this communion with the People of God do we truly enter into the "we", into the nucleus of the truth that God himself wants to tell us.

For him, an authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmonious accord with the faith of the Catholic Church. It does not treat of an exegesis imposed on this Book from without; the Book is really the voice of the pilgrim People of God and only in the faith of this People are we "correctly attuned" to understand Sacred Scripture.

Therefore, Jerome admonishes: "Remain firmly attached to the traditional doctrine that you have been taught, so that you can preach according to right doctrine and refute those who contradict it" (*Ep*. 52, 7).

In particular, given that Jesus Christ founded his Church on Peter, every Christian, he concludes, must be in communion "with St. Peter's See. I know that on this rock the Church is built" (*Ep*. 15, 2). Consequently, without approximations, he declared: "T am with whoever is united to the teaching of St. Peter" (*Ep*. 16).

Obviously, Jerome does not neglect the ethical aspect. Indeed, he often recalls the duty to harmonize one's life with the divine Word, and only by living it does one also find the capacity to understand it.

This consistency is indispensable for every Christian, and particularly for the preacher, so that his actions may never contradict his discourses nor be an embarrassment to him.

Thus, he exhorts the priest Nepotian: "May your actions never be unworthy of your words, may it not happen that, when you preach in church, someone might say to himself: 'Why does he therefore not act like this?'. How could a teacher, on a full stomach, discuss fasting; even a thief can blame avarice; but in the priest of Christ the mind and words must harmonize" (*Ep*. 52, 7).

In another Epistle Jerome repeats: "Even if we possess a splendid doctrine, the person who feels condemned by his own conscience remains disgraced" (*Ep*. 127, 4). Also on the theme of consistency he observes: the Gospel must translate into truly charitable behaviour, because in each human being the Person of Christ himself is present.

For example, addressing the presbyter Paulinus (who then became Bishop of Nola and a Saint), Jerome counsels: "The true temple of Christ is the soul of the faithful: adorn it and beautify this shrine, place your offerings in it and receive Christ. What is the use of decorating the walls with precious stones if Christ dies of hunger in the person of the poor?" (*Ep*. 58, 7). Jerome concretizes the need "to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit him in the suffering, to newish him in the hungry, to house him in the homeless" (*Ep*. 130, 14).

The love of Christ, nourished with study and meditation, makes us rise above every difficulty: "Let us also love Jesus Christ, always seeking union with him: then even what is difficult will seem easy to us" (*Ep*. 22, 40).

God's Word sets us in motion

Prosper of Aquitaine, who defined Jerome as a "model of conduct and teacher of the human race" (*Carmen de ingratis*, 57), also left us a rich and varied teaching on Christian asceticism. He reminds us that a courageous commitment towards perfection requires constant vigilance, frequent mortification, even if with moderation and prudence, and assiduous intellectual and manual labour to avoid idleness (cf. Epp. 125, 11; 130, 15), and above all obedience to God: "Nothing... pleases God as much as obedience..., which is the most excellent and sole virtue" (*Hom. de Oboedientia*: *CCL* 78, 552).

The practice of pilgrimage can also be part of the ascetical journey. In particular, Jerome gave an impulse to it in the Holy Land, where pilgrims were welcomed and housed in the lodgings that were built next to the monastery of Bethlehem, thanks to the generosity of the noblewoman Paula, a spiritual daughter of Jerome (cf. *Ep*. 108, 14).

Lastly, one cannot remain silent about the importance that Jerome gave to the matter of Christian pedagogy (cf. *Epp*. 107; 128). He proposed to form "one soul that must become the temple of the Lord" (*Ep*. 107, 4), a "very precious gem" in the eyes of God (Ep. 107, 13).

With profound intuition he advises to preserve oneself from evil and from the occasions of sin, and to exclude

equivocal or dissipating friendships (cf. *Ep*. 107, 4, 8-9; also *Ep*. 128, 3-4).

Above all, he exhorts parents to create a serene and joyful environment around their children, to stimulate them to study and work also through praise and emulation (cf. *Epp*. 107, 4; 128, 1), encouraging them to overcome difficulties, foster good habits and avoid picking up bad habits, so that, and here he cites a phrase of Publius Siro which he heard at school: "it will be difficult for you to correct those things to which you are quietly habituating yourself" (*Ep*. 107, 8).

Parents are the principal educators of their children, the first teachers of life. With great clarity Jerome, addressing a young girl's mother and then mentioning her father, admonishes, almost expressing a fundamental duty of every human creature who comes into existence: "May she find in you her teacher, and may she look to you with the inexperienced wonder of childhood. Neither in you, nor in her father should she ever see behaviour that could lead to sin, as it could be copied. Remember that... you can educate her more by example than with words" (Ep. 107, 9).

Among Jerome's principal intuitions as a pedagogue, one must emphasize the importance he attributed to a healthy and integral education beginning from early childhood, with the particular responsibility belonging to parents, the urgency for a serious moral and religious formation and the duty to study for a complete human formation.

Moreover, an aspect rather disregarded in ancient times but held vital by our author is the promotion of the woman, to whom he recognizes the right to a complete formation: human, scholastic, religious, professional.

We see precisely today how the education of the personality in its totality, the education to responsibility before God and man, is the true condition of all progress, all peace, all reconciliation and the exclusion of violence. Education before God and man: it is Sacred Scripture that offers us the guide for education and thus of true humanism.

We cannot conclude these quick notes on the great Father of the Church without mentioning his effective contribution to safeguarding the positive and valid elements of the ancient Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures for nascent Christian civilization. Jerome recognized and assimilated the artistic values of the richness of the sentiments and the harmony of the images present in the classics, which educate the heart and fantasy to noble sentiments.

Above all, he put at the centre of his life and activity the Word of God, which indicates the path of life to man and reveals the secrets of holiness to him. We cannot fail to be deeply grateful for all of this, even in our day.

Wednesday, 14 November 2007

Aphraates, "the Sage"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our excursion into the world of the Fathers of the Church, I would like to guide you today to a little-known part of this universe of faith, in the territories where the Semitic-language Churches flourished, still uninfluenced by Greek thought.

These Churches developed throughout the fourth century in the Near East, from the Holy Land to Lebanon and to Mesopotamia. In that century, which was a period of formation on the ecclesial and literary level, these communities contributed to the ascetic-monastic phenomenon with autochthonous characteristics that did not come under Egyptian monastic influence.

The Syriac communities of the fourth century, therefore, represent the Semitic world from which the Bible itself has come, and they are an expression of a Christianity whose theological formulation had not yet entered into contact with different cultural currents, but lived in their own way of thinking.

They are Churches in which asceticism in its various hermitic forms (hermits in the desert, caverns, recluses, stylites) and monasticism in forms of community life, exert a role of vital importance in the development of theological and spiritual thought.

I would like to introduce this world through the great figure of Aphraates, known also by the sobriquet "the Sage". He was one of the most important and at the same time most enigmatic personages of fourth century Syriac Christianity.

A native of the Ninive-Mossul region, today in Iraq, he lived during the first half of the fourth century. We have little information about his life; he maintained, however, close ties with the ascetic-monastic environment of the Syriac-speaking Church, of which he has given us some information in his work and to which he dedicates part of his reflection. Indeed, according to some sources he was the head of a monastery and later consecrated a Bishop.

He wrote 23 homilies, known as *Expositions or Demonstrations*, on various aspects of Christian life, such as faith, love, fasting, humility, prayer, the ascetic life, and also the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, between the Old and New Testaments. He wrote in a simple style with short sentences and sometimes with contrasting parallelisms; nevertheless, he was able to weave consistent discourses with a well-articulated development of the various arguments he treated.

Aphraates was from an Ecclesial Community situated on the frontier between Judaism and Christianity. It was a community strongly-linked to the Mother Church of Jerusalem, and its Bishops were traditionally chosen from among the so-called "family" of James, the "brother of the Lord" (cf. Mk 6:3). They were people linked by blood and by faith to the Church of Jerusalem.

Aphraates' language was Syriac, therefore a Semitic language like the Hebrew of the Old Testament and like the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself.

Aphraates' Ecclesial Community was a community that sought to remain faithful to the Judeo-Christian tradition, of which it felt it was a daughter. It therefore maintained

a close relationship with the Jewish world and its Sacred Books.

Significantly, Aphraates defines himself as a "disciple of the Sacred Scripture" of the Old and New Testaments (*Expositions* 22, 26), which he considers as his only source of inspiration, having recourse to it in such abundance as to make it the centre of his reflection.

Aphraates develops various arguments in his *Expositions*. Faithful to Syriac tradition, he often presents the salvation wrought by Christ as a healing, and thus Christ himself as the physician.

Sin, on the other hand, is seen as a wound that only penance can heal: "A man who has been wounded in battle", Aphraates said, "is not ashamed to place himself in the hands of a wise doctor...; in the same way, the one who has been wounded by Satan must not be ashamed to recognize his fault and distance himself from it, asking for the medicine of penance" (*Expositions* 7, 3).

Another important aspect in Aphraates' work is his teaching on prayer, and in a special way on Christ as the teacher of prayer. The Christian prays following Jesus' teaching and example of oration:

"Our Saviour taught people to pray like this, saying: 'Pray in secret to the One who is hidden, but who sees all'; and again: 'Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Mt 6:6).... Our Saviour wants to show that God knows the desires and thoughts of the heart" (*Expositions* 4, 10).

Humility: beautiful and Christ-like

For Aphraates, the Christian life is centred on the imitation of Christ, in taking up his yoke and following him on the way of the Gospel.

One of the most useful virtues for Christ's disciple is humility. It is not a secondary aspect in the Christian's spiritual life: man's nature is humble and it is God who exalts it to his own glory.

Aphraates observed that humility is not a negative value: "If man's roots are planted in the earth, his fruits ascend before the Lord of majesty" (*Expositions* 9, 14).

By remaining humble, including in the earthly reality in which one lives, the Christian can enter into relationship with the Lord: "The humble man is humble, but his heart rises to lofty heights. The eyes of his face observe the earth and the eyes of his mind the lofty heights" (*Expositions* 9, 2).

Aphraates' vision of man and his physical reality is very, positive: the human body, in the example of the humble Christ, is called to beauty, joy and light: "God draws near to the man who loves, and it is right to love humility and to remain in a humble state. The humble are simple, patient, loving, integral, upright, good, prudent, calm, wise, quiet, peaceful, merciful, ready to convert, benevolent, profound, thoughtful, beautiful and attractive" (*Expositions* 9, 14).

Aphraates often presented the Christian life in a clear ascetic and spiritual dimension: faith is the base, the foundation; it makes of man a temple where Christ himself dwells.

Faith, therefore, makes sincere charity possible, which expresses itself in love for God and neighbour.

Another important aspect in Aphraates' thought is fasting, which he understood in a broad sense. He spoke of fasting from food as a necessary practice to be charitable and pure, of fasting understood as continence with a view to holiness, of fasting from vain or detestable words, of fasting from anger, of fasting from the possession of goods with a view to ministry, of fasting from sleep to be watchful in prayer.

Dear brothers and sisters, to conclude, we return again to Aphraates' teaching on prayer. According to this ancient "Sage", prayer is achieved when Christ dwells in the Christian's heart, and invites him to a coherent commitment to charity towards one's neighbour. In fact, he wrote:

"Give relief to those in distress, visit the ailing, help the poor: this is prayer. Prayer is good, and its works are beautiful. Prayer is accepted when it gives relief to one's neighbour. Prayer is heard when it includes forgiveness of affronts. Prayer is strong when it is full of God's strength" (Expositions 4, 14-16).

With these words Aphraates invites us to a prayer that becomes Christian life, a fulfilled life, a life penetrated by faith, by openness to God and therefore to love of neighbour.

Wednesday, 21 November 2007

Boethius and Cassiodorus

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, I would like to talk about two ecclesiastical writers, Boethius and Cassiodorus, who lived in some of the most turbulent years in the Christian West and in the Italian peninsula in particular.

Odoacer, King of the Rugians, a Germanic race, had rebelled, putting an end to the Western Roman Empire (476 A.D.), but it was not long before he was killed by Theodoric's Ostrogoths who had controlled the Italian Peninsula for some decades.

Boethius, born in Rome in about 480 from the noble Anicius lineage, entered public life when he was still young and by age 25 was already a senator. Faithful to his family's tradition, he devoted himself to politics, convinced that it would be possible to temper the fundamental structure of Roman society with the values of the new peoples. And in this new time of cultural encounter he considered it his role to reconcile and bring together these two cultures, the classical Roman and the nascent Ostrogoth culture.

Thus, he was also politically active under Theodoric, who at the outset held him in high esteem. In spite of this public activity, Boethius did not neglect his studies and dedicated himself in particular to acquiring a deep knowledge of philosophical and religious subjects.

However, he also wrote manuals on arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, all with the intention of passing on the great Greco-Roman culture to the new gener-

ations, to the new times. In this context, in his commitment to fostering the encounter of cultures, he used the categories of Greek philosophy to present the Christian faith, here too seeking a synthesis between the Hellenistic-Roman heritage and the Gospel message. For this very reason Boethius was described as the last representative of ancient Roman culture and the first of the Medieval intellectuals.

His most famous work is undoubtedly *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, which he wrote in prison to help explain his unjust detention. In fact, he had been accused of plotting against King Theodoric for having taken the side of his friend Senator Albinus in a court case. But this was a pretext. Actually, Theodoric, an Arian and a barbarian, suspected that Boethius was sympathizing with the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. Boethius was tried and sentenced to death. He was executed on 23 October 524, when he was only 44 years old.

It is precisely because of his tragic end that he can also speak from the heart of his own experience to contemporary man, and especially to the multitudes who suffer the same fate because of the injustice inherent in so much of "human justices".

Through this work, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, he sought consolation, enlightenment and wisdom in prison. And he said that precisely in this situation he knew how to distinguish between apparent goods, which disappear in prison, and true goods such as genuine friendship, which even in prison do not disappear.

The loftiest good is God: Boethius — and he teaches us this — learned not to sink into a fatalism that extinguishes hope. He teaches us that it is not the event but

Providence that governs and Providence has a face. It is possible to speak to Providence because Providence is God. Thus, even in prison, he was left with the possibility of prayer, of dialogue with the One who saves us.

At the same time, even in this situation he retained his sense of the beauty of culture and remembered the teaching of the great ancient Greek and Roman philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle — he had begun to translate these Greeks into Latin — Cicero, Seneca, and also poets such as Tibullus and Virgil.

Philosophy: the soul's medicine

Boethius held that philosophy, in the sense of the quest for true wisdom, was the true medicine of the soul (Bk I). On the other hand, man can only experience authentic happiness within his own interiority (Bk II). Boethius thus succeeded in finding meaning by thinking of his own personal tragedy in the light of a sapiential text of the Old Testament (Wis 7:30-8:1) which he cites: "Against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Bk III, 12: PL 63, col. 780).

The so-called prosperity of the wicked is therefore proven to be false (Bk IV), and the providential nature of *adversa fortuna* is highlighted. Life's difficulties not only reveal how transient and short-lived life is, but are even shown to serve for identifying and preserving authentic relations among human beings. *Adversa fortuna*, in fact, makes it possible to discern false friends from true and makes one realize that nothing is more precious to the human being than a true friendship.

The fatalistic acceptance of a condition of suffering is nothing short of perilous, the believer Boethius added, because "it eliminates at its roots the very possibility of prayer and of theological hope, which form the basis of man's relationship with God" (Bk V, 3: *PL* 63, col. 842).

The final peroration of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* can be considered a synthesis of the entire teaching that Boethius addressed to himself and all who might find themselves in his same conditions. Thus, in prison he wrote: "So combat vices, dedicate yourselves to a virtuous life oriented by hope, which draws the heart upwards until it reaches Heaven with prayers nourished by humility. Should you refuse to lie, the imposition you have suffered can change into the enormous advantage of always having before your eyes the supreme Judge, who sees and knows how things truly are" (Bk V, 6: *PL*. 63, col. 862).

Every prisoner, regardless of the reason why he ended up in prison, senses how burdensome this particular human condition is, especially when it is brutalized, as it was for Boethius, by recourse to torture.

Then particularly absurd is the condition of those like Boethius — whom the city of Pavia recognizes and celebrates in the liturgy as a martyr of the faith — who are tortured to death for no other reason than their own ideals and political and religious convictions.

Boethius, the symbol of an immense number of people unjustly imprisoned in all ages and on all latitudes, is in fact an objective entrance way that gives access to contemplation of the mysterious Crucified One of Golgotha.

Model of cultural encounter

Marcus Aurelius Cassiodorus was a contemporary of Boethius, a Calabrian born in Scyllacium in about 485 A.D. and who died at a very advanced age in Vivarium in 580. Cassiodorus, a man with a privileged social status, likewise devoted himself to political life and cultural commitment as few others in the Roman West of his time. Perhaps the only men who could stand on an equal footing in this twofold interest were Boethius, whom we have mentioned, and Gregory the Great, the future Pope of Rome (590-604).

Aware of the need to prevent all the human and humanist patrimony accumulated in the golden age of the Roman Empire from vanishing into oblivion, Cassiodorus collaborated generously, and with the highest degree of political responsibility, with the new peoples who had crossed the boundaries of the Empire and settled in Italy.

He too was a model of cultural encounter, of dialogue, of reconciliation. Historical events did not permit him to make his political and cultural dreams come true; he wanted to create a synthesis between the Roman and Christian traditions of Italy and the new culture of the Goths.

These same events, however, convinced him of the providentiality of the monastic movement that was putting down roots in Christian lands. He decided to support it and gave it all his material wealth and spiritual energy.

He conceived the idea of entrusting to the monks the task of recovering, preserving and transmitting to those to come the immense cultural patrimony of the ancients so

that it would not be lost. For this reason he founded *Vivarium*, a coenobitic community in which everything was organized in such a way that the monk's intellectual work was esteemed as precious and indispensable.

He arranged that even those monks who had no academic training must not be involved solely in physical labour and farming but also in transcribing manuscripts and this helping to transmit the great culture to future generations.

And this was by no means at the expense of monastic and Christian spiritual dedication or of charitable activity for the poor. In his teaching, expounded in various works but especially in the Treatise *De Anima* and in the *Institutiones Divinarum Litterarum* (cf.*PL* 69, col. 1108), prayer nourished by Sacred Scripture and particularly by assiduous recourse to the Psalms (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1149) always has a central place as the essential sustenance for all.

Thus, for example, this most learned Calabrian introduced his *Expositio in Psalterium*: "Having rejected and abandoned in Ravenna the demands of a political career marked by the disgusting taste of worldly concerns, having enjoyed the Psalter, a book that came from Heaven, as true honey of the soul, I dived into it avidly, thirsting to examine it without a pause, to steep myself in that salutary sweetness, having had enough of the countless disappointments of active life" (*PL* 70, col. 10).

The search for God, the aspiration to contemplate him, Cassiodorus notes, continues to be the permanent goal of monastic life (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1107). Nonetheless, he adds that with the help of divine grace (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1131, 1142), greater profit can be attained from the revealed

Word with the use of scientific discoveries and the "profane" cultural means that were possessed in the past by the Greeks and Romans (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1140).

Personally, Cassiodorus dedicated himself to philosophical, theological and exegetical studies without any special creativity, but was attentive to the insights he considered valid in others. He read Jerome and Augustine in particular with respect and devotion.

Of the latter he said: "In Augustine there is such a great wealth of writings that it seems to me impossible to find anything that has not already been abundantly treated by him" (cf. *PL*70, col. 10).

Citing Jerome, on the other hand, he urged the monks of Vivarium: "It is not only those who fight to the point of bloodshed or who live in virginity who win the palm of victory but also all who, with God's help, triumph over physical vices and preserve their upright faith. But in order that you may always, with God's help, more easily overcome the world's pressures and enticements while remaining in it as pilgrims constantly journeying forward, seek first to guarantee for yourselves the salutary help suggested by the first Psalm which recommends meditation night and day on the law of the Lord. Indeed, the enemy will not find any gap through which to assault you if all your attention is taken up by Christ" (*De Institutione Divinaruni Scripturarum*, 32: *PL* 69, col. 1147).

This is a recommendation we can also accept as valid. In fact, we live in an intercultural time with its danger of violence that destroys cultures, and of the necessary commitment to pass on important values and to teach the new generations the path of reconciliation and peace.

We find this path by turning to the God with the human Face, the God who revealed himself to us in Christ..

Wednesday, 12 March 2008

Saint Benedict of Norcia

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, I would like to speak about Benedict, the Founder of Western Monasticism and also the Patron of my Pontificate. I begin with words that St Gregory the Great wrote about St Benedict: "The man of God who shone on this earth among so many miracles was just as brilliant in the eloquent exposition of his teaching" (cf. *Dialogues II,* 36). The great Pope wrote these words in 592 A.D. The holy monk, who had died barely 50 years earlier, lived on in people's memories and especially in the flourishing religious Order he had founded. St Benedict of Norcia, with his life and his work, had a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture.

The most important source on Benedict's life is the second book of St Gregory the Great's *Dialogues.* It is not a biography in the classical sense. In accordance with the ideas of his time, by giving the example of a real man — St Benedict, in this case — Gregory wished to illustrate the ascent to the peak of contemplation which can be achieved by those who abandon themselves to God.

He therefore gives us a model for human life in the climb towards the summit of perfection. St Gregory the Great also tells in this book of the *Dialogues* of many miracles worked by the Saint, and here too he does not merely wish to recount something curious but rather to show how God, by admonishing, helping and even punishing, intervenes in the practical situations of man's life. Gregory's aim was to demonstrate that God is not a distant hypothesis placed at the origin of the world but is present in the life of man, of every man.

This perspective of the "biographer" is also explained in light of the general context of his time: straddling the fifth and sixth centuries, "the world was overturned by a tremendous crisis of values and institutions caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire, the invasion of new peoples and the decay of morals". But in this terrible situation, here, in this very city of Rome, Gregory presented St Benedict as a "luminous star" in order to point the way out of the "black night of history" (cf. John Paul II, 18 May 1979; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition *[ORE]*, 28 May, p. 8).

Benedict lived for God alone

In fact, the Saint's work and particularly his *Rule* were to prove heralds of an authentic spiritual leaven which, in the course of the centuries, far beyond the boundaries of his country and time, changed the face of Europe following the fall of the political unity created by the Roman Empire, inspiring a new spiritual and cultural unity, that of the Christian faith shared by the peoples of the Continent. This is how the reality we call "Europe" came into being.

St Benedict was born around the year 480. As St Gregory said, he came "*ex provincia Nursiae*"— from the province of Norcia. His well-to-do parents sent him to study in Rome. However, he did not stay long in the Eternal city.

As a fully plausible explanation, Gregory mentions that the young Benedict was put off by the dissolute lifestyle of many of his fellow students and did not wish to make the same mistakes.

He wanted only to please God: "*soli Deo placere desiderans"* (*II Dialogues,* Prol. 1). Thus, even before he finished his studies, Benedict left Rome and withdrew to the solitude of the mountains east of Rome. After a short stay in the village of Enfide (today, Affile), where for a time he lived with a "religious community" of monks, he became a hermit in the neighbouring locality of Subiaco. He lived there completely alone for three years in a cave which has been the heart of a Benedictine Monastery called the "Sacro Speco" (Holy Grotto) since the early Middle Ages.

The period in Subiaco, a time of solitude with God, was a time of maturation for Benedict.

It was here that he bore and overcame the three fundamental temptations of every human being: the temptation of self-affirmation and the desire to put oneself at the centre, the temptation of sensuality and, lastly, the temptation of anger and revenge.

In fact, Benedict was convinced that only after overcoming these temptations would he be able to say a useful word to others about their own situations of neediness. Thus, having tranquilized his soul, he could be in full control of the drive of his ego and thus create peace around him. Only then did he decide to found his first monasteries in the Valley of the Anio, near Subiaco.

In the year 529, Benedict left Subiaco and settled in Monte Cassino. Some have explained this move as an escape from the intrigues of an envious local cleric. However, this attempt at an explanation hardly proved convincing since the latter's sudden death did not induce Benedict to return (*II Dialogues*, 8).

In fact, this decision was called for because he had entered a new phase of inner maturity and monastic experience. According to Gregory the Great, Benedict's exodus from the remote Valley of the Anio to Monte Cassio — a plateau dominating the vast surrounding plain which can be seen from afar — has a symbolic character: a hidden monastic life has its own *raison d'être* but a monastery also has its public purpose in the life of the Church and of society, and it must give visibility to the faith as a force of life.

Indeed, when Benedict's earthly life ended on 21 March 547, he bequeathed with his *Rule* and the Benedictine family he founded a heritage that bore fruit in the passing centuries and is still bearing fruit throughout the world.

Throughout the second book of his *Dialogues*, Gregory shows us how St Benedict's life was steeped in an atmosphere of prayer, the foundation of his existence. Without prayer there is no experience of God. Yet Benedict's spirituality was not an interiority removed from reality. In the anxiety and confusion of his day, he lived under God's gaze and in this very way never lost sight of the duties of daily life and of man with his practical needs.

Seeing God, he understood the reality of man and his mission. In his *Rule* he describes monastic life as "a school for the service of the Lord" (Prol. 45) and advises his monks, "let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" [that is, the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours] (43, 3).

However, Benedict states that in the first place prayer is an act of listening (Prol. 9-11), which must then be expressed in action. "The Lord is waiting every day for us

to respond to his holy admonitions by our deeds" (Prol. 35).

'Ora et labora'

Thus, the monk's life becomes a fruitful symbiosis between action and contemplation, "so that God may be glorified in all things" (57, 9). In contrast with a facile and egocentric self-fulfilment, today often exalted, the first and indispensable commitment of a disciple of St Benedict is the sincere search for God (58, 7) on the path mapped out by the humble and obedient Christ (5, 13), whose love he must put before all else (4, 21; 72, 11), and in this way, in the service of the other, he becomes a man of service and peace.

In the exercise of obedience practised by faith inspired by love (5, 2), to which the *Rule* dedicates an entire chapter (7). In this way, man conforms ever more to Christ and attains true self-fulfilment as a creature in the image and likeness of God.

The obedience of the disciple must correspond with the wisdom of the Abbot who, in the monastery, "is believed to hold t the place of Christ" (2, 2; 63, 13). The figure of the Abbot, which is described above all in Chapter II of the *Rule* with a profile of spiritual beauty and demanding commitment, can be considered a self-portrait of Benedict, since, as St Gregory the Great wrote, "the holy man could not teach otherwise than as he himself lived" (cf. *Dialogues II*, 36). The Abbot must be at the same time a tender father and a strict teacher (cf. 2, 24), a true educator. Inflexible against vices, he is nevertheless called above all to imitate the tenderness of the Good Sheherd (27, 8), to "serve rather than to rule" (64, 8) in order "to show them all what is good and holy by his

deeds more than by his words" and "illustrate the divine precepts by his example" (2, 12). To be able to decide responsibly, the Abbot must also be a person who listens to "the brethren's views" (3, 2), because "the Lord often reveals to the youngest what is best" (3, 3). This provision makes a *Rule* written almost 15 centuries ago surprisingly modern! A man with public responsibility even in small circles must always be a man who can listen and learn from what he hears.

Benedict describes the *Rule* he wrote as "minimal, just an initial outline" (cf. 73, 8); in fact, however, he offers useful guidelines not only for monks but for all who seek guidance on their journey toward God. For its moderation, humanity and sober discernment between the essential and the secondary in spiritual life, his *Rule* has retained its illuminating power even to today.

By proclaiming St Benedict Patron of Europe on 24 October 1964, Paul VI intended to recognize the marvellous work the Saint achieved with his *Rule* for the formation of the civilization and culture of Europe. Having recently emerged from a century that was deeply wounded by two World Wars and the collapse of the great ideologies, now revealed as tragic utopias, Europe today is in search of its own identity.

Of course, in order to create new and lasting unity, political, economic and juridical instruments are important, but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal which draws on the Christian roots of the Continent, otherwise a new Europe cannot be built.

Without this vital sap, man is exposed to the danger of succumbing to the ancient temptation of seeking to redeem himself by himself — a utopia which in different

ways, in 20th-century Europe, as Pope John Paul II pointed out, has caused "a regression without precedent in the tormented history of humanity" (*Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture*, 12 January 1990, n. 1;*ORE,* 5 February, p. 5).

Today, in seeking true progress, let us also listen to the *Rule* of St Benedict as a guiding light on our journey. The great monk is still a true master at whose school we can learn to become proficient in true humanism.

Wednesday, 9 April 2008

Saint Romanus the Melodist

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the series of Catecheses on the Fathers of the Church, I would like today to talk about a little-known figure: Romanus the Melodist who was born in about 490 in Emesa (today Homs), in Syria. Theologian, poet and composer, he belonged to the great ranks of theologians who transformed theology into poetry.

Let us think of his compatriot, St. Ephrem the Syrian, who lived 200 years before him. However, we can also think of Western theologians, such as St. Ambrose, whose hymns are still part of our liturgy and still move hearts; or of a theologian, a very vigorous thinker such as St. Thomas, who gave us hymns for the Feast of Corpus Christi [to be celebrated] tomorrow; we think of St. John of the Cross and of so many others. Faith is love and therefore creates poetry and music. Faith is joy, therefore it creates beauty.

Thus Romanus the Melodist is one of these, a poet theologian and composer. Having acquired the rudiments of Greek and Syrian culture in his native town, he moved to Berytus (Beirut), perfecting there his classical education and his knowledge of rhetoric.

After being ordained a permanent deacon (c. 515), he was a preacher here for three years. He then moved to Constantinople towards the end of the reign of Anastasius I (c. 518), and settled there in the monastery adjacent to the Church of the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. It was here that the key episode of his life occurred: the *Synaxarion* [*The Lives of the Orthodox Saints*] informs us of the apparition of the Mother of God in a

dream, and of the gift of the poetic charism. In fact, Mary enjoined him to swallow a scroll. On awakening the following morning — it was the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord — Romanus began declaiming from the ambo "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent" (Hymn *"On the Nativity" I. Proemio*). So it was that he became a homilist-cantor until his death (after 555).

Romanus lives on in history as one of the most representative authors of liturgical hymns. At that time the homily was virtually the only opportunity for catechetical instruction afforded to the faithful. Thus, Romanus is an eminent witness of the religious feeling of his epoch, but also of a lively and original catechesis. In his compositions we can appreciate the creativity of this form of catechesis, the creativity of the theological thought and aesthetics and sacred hymnography of that time.

The place in which Romanus preached was a sanctuary on the outskirts of Constantinople: he would mount the ambo that stood in the centre of the church and speak to the community utilizing a somewhat extravagant technique: he referred to the mural depictions or icons arranged on the ambo, and even made use of dialogue.

He sung his homilies in metric verse known as *kontakia*. The term *kontakion*, "little rod", would seem to refer to the staff around which a liturgical or other manuscript was wound. Eighty-nine *kontakia* bearing Romanus' name have come down to us but tradition attributes 1,000 to him.

An acrostic of the author's name

In the works of Romanus every *kontakion* is composed of strophes, the majority of which go from 18 to 24, with

an equal number of syllables, structured on the model of the first strophe, the *irmo*. The rhythmic accents in the verses of all the strophes are modelled on those of the *irmo*. Each strophe ends with a refrain (*efimnio*), which is usually identical in order to create poetic unity. Furthermore, the initial letter of each stanza spell the author's name (*acrostic*), and are often preceded by the adjective "humble". A prayer referring to the events celebrated or evoked concludes the hymn.

After the biblical reading, Romanus sung the *Proemium*, usually in the form of a prayer or supplication. Thus he announced the topic of the sermon and explained the *refrain* to be repeated in chorus at the end of each stanza, which he delivered in rhythmic prose.

An important example is offered to us by the *kontakion* for Good Friday: it is a dramatic dialogue between Mary and her Son that takes place on the Way of the Cross. Mary says:

"Where are you going, my Child?
For whose sake are you finishing this swift race?
I never thought I would see you, my Son, in such necessity nor did I ever believe that the lawless would rage so,
and unjustly stretch out their hands against you";
Jesus answers:
"Why, mother, do you weep?...
Lest I suffer? Lest I die?
How then should I save Adam?".

Mary's Son consoles his Mother, but reminds her of her role in the history of salvation:

"Put aside your grief, mother,
put it aside;
mourning is not right for you
who have been called 'Full of Grace' (*Mary at the foot of the Cross*, 1-2; 4-5).

Then in the hymn on Abraham's sacrifice, Sarah claims for herself the decision on Isaac's life. Abraham says:

"When Sarah hears, my Lord, all your words,
upon knowing your will, she will say to me:
If the one who has given it desires to repossess it
why did he give it?
.... O watchful one, leave me my son,
and when he who called you wants him,
it is to me that he must speak" (cf. *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, 7).

Romanus did not use the solemn Byzantine Greek of the Imperial Court, but the simple Greek that was close to the language of the populous.

I would like to cite here an example of the lively and highly personal manner in which he speaks about the Lord Jesus: he calls him the "source that is never consumed by fire and the light against the darkness", and says:

"I long to hold you in my hand like a lamp;
indeed, anyone who carries an oil lamp among men and women is illuminated without being burned.
Illuminate me, then, You who are the light that never burns out" (*The Presentation or Feast of Encounter*, 8).

The force of conviction in his preaching was based on the close consistency between his words and his life. In one prayer he says:

"Make my language clear, my Saviour, open my mouth and, after filling it, penetrate my heart so that my acts may correspond to my words" (*Mission of the Apostles*, 2).

Let us now examine some of his main themes. A fundamental subject that recurs in his preaching is the unity of God's action in history, the unity between Creation and the history of salvation, the unity between the Old and New Testaments.

Another important theme is pneumatology, the teaching on the Holy Spirit. On the Feast of Pentecost Romanus stressed the continuity that exists between Christ, ascended into heaven, and the Apostles, that is, the Church, and he exalts missionary action in the world:

"With divine virtue they conquered all men;
they took up the Cross of Christ as a pen,
they used words like 'fishing nets'
and set them to 'catch' the world, they used the Word of God as a sharp hook
and as bait they used
the flesh of the Sovereign One of the universe" (*Pentecost* 2:18).

Christology for the people

Another central theme is, of course, Christology. Romanus did not involve himself in the difficult theological concepts, hotly debated at that time which lacerated not

only the unity of theologians but also the unity of Christians in the Church. He preached a simple but fundamental Christology, the Christology of the great Councils.

Above all, however, Romanus was close to popular piety — moreover the ideas of the Councils were inspired by popular piety and knowledge of the human heart — and in this way Romanus emphasized that Christ is true man and true God, and in being the true man-God, he is only one Person. the synthesis between Creation and the Creator, in whose human words we hear the voice of the Word of God himself. He said:

"Christ was a man, but he was also God,
yet he was not divided in two:
He is One, the Son of a Father who is
One alone" (*The Passion*, 19).

With regard to Mariology, grateful to the Virgin for his gift of a poetic talent, Romanus mentions her at the end of almost all his hymns and dedicated to her some of his most beautiful *kontakia*: *The Nativity of Christ, The Annunciation, The Divine Motherhood, The New Eve*.

Lastly, his moral teachings refer to the Last Judgement (The Ten Virgins, [II]). He takes us towards this moment of truth in our lives, the appearance before the just Judge, and therefore exhorts us to conversion with penance and fasting. The positive aspect is that the Christian must practice charity and almsgiving.

Romanus accentuated the primacy of charity over continence in two hymns — The Wedding at Cana and The Ten Virgins. Charity is the greatest of the virtues:

"Ten virgins possessed the virtue of virginity intact but for five of them the difficult practice proved unfruitful.
The others shone with their lamps of love for humanity and for this reason the bridegroom invited them in" (*The Ten Virgins*, 1).

Vibrant humanity, the ardour of faith and profound humility pervade the hymns of Romanus the Melodist. This great poet and composer reminds us of the whole treasure of Christian culture, born of faith, born of the heart that has encountered Christ, the Son of God. Culture, the whole of our great Christian culture, is born from this contact of the heart with the Truth who is Love.

Nor, if faith stays alive, will this cultural inheritance die; rather, it will remain alive and present. To this day, images still speak to the hearts of believers, they are not relics of the past. Cathedrals are not mediaeval monuments but rather houses of life in which we feel "at home" and where we meet God and one another. Nor is great music — Gregorian chant, Bach or Mozart — something of the past; rather, it lives on in the vitality of the liturgy and in our faith.

If faith is alive, Christian culture can never become "obsolete" but on the contrary will remain alive and present. And if faith is alive, today too we can respond to the imperative that is ceaselessly repeated in the Psalms: "O Sing to the Lord a new song" (Ps 98[97]:1). Creativity, innovation, a new song, a new culture and the presence of the entire cultural heritage are not mutually exclusive but form one reality: they arc the presence of God's beauty and the joy of being his children.

Wednesday, 21 May 2008

Saint Gregory the Great (Part 1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday I spoke of a Father of the Church little known in the West, Romanus the Melodist. Today I would like to present the figure of one of the greatest Fathers in the history of the Church, one of four Doctors of the West, Pope St. Gregory, who was Bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, and who earned the traditional title of *Magnus*/the Great. Gregory was truly a great Pope and a great Doctor of the Church!

He was born in Rome about 540 into a rich patrician family of the *gens Anicia*, who were distinguished not only for their noble blood but also for their adherence to the Christian faith and for their service to the Apostolic See. Two Popes came from this family: Felix III (483-492), the great-great grandfather of Gregory, and Agapetus (535-536). The house in which Gregory grew up stood on the Clivus Scauri, surrounded by majestic buildings that attested to the greatness of ancient Rome and the spiritual strength of Christianity.

The example of his parents Gordian and Sylvia, both venerated as Saints, and those of his father's sisters, Aetnaiana and Tharsilla, who lived in their own home as consecrated virgins following a path of prayer and self-denial, inspired lofty Christian sentiments in him.

In the footsteps of his father, Gregory entered early into an administrative career which reached its climax in 572 when he became Prefect of the city. This office, complicated by the sorry times, allowed him to apply himself on a vast range to every type of administrative problem, drawing light for future duties from them.

In particular, he retained a deep sense of order and discipline: having become Pope, he advised Bishops to take as a model for the management of ecclesial affairs the diligence and respect for the law like civil functionaries. Yet this life could not have satisfied him since shortly after, he decided to leave every civil assignment in order to withdraw to his home to begin the monastic life, transforming his family home into the monastery of St. Andrew on the Coelian Hill.

This period of monastic life, the life of permanent dialogue with the Lord in listening to his word, constituted a perennial nostalgia which he referred to ever anew and ever more in his homilies. In the midst of the pressure of pastoral worries, he often recalled it in his writings as a happy time of recollection in God, dedication to prayer and peaceful immersion in study. Thus, he could acquire that deep understanding of Sacred Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church that later served him in his work.

But the cloistered withdrawal of Gregory did not last long. The precious experience that he gained in civil administration during a period marked by serious problems, the relationships he had had in this post with the Byzantines and the universal respect that he acquired induced Pope Pelagius to appoint him deacon and to send him to Constantinople as his "apocrisarius" — today one would say "Apostolic Nuncio" in order to help overcome the last traces of the Monophysite controversy and above all to obtain the Emperor's support in the effort to check the Lombard invaders.

Fortified in prayer

The stay at Constantinople, where he resumed monastic life with a group of monks, was very important for Gregory, since it permitted him to acquire direct experience of the Byzantine world, as well as to approach the problem of the Lombards, who would later put his ability and energy to the test during the years of his Pontificate.

After some years he was recalled to Rome by the Pope, who appointed him his secretary. They were difficult years: the continual rain, flooding due to overflowing rivers, the famine that afflicted many regions of Italy as well as Rome. Finally, even the plague broke out, which claimed numerous victims, among whom was also Pope Pelagius II. The clergy, people and senate were unanimous in choosing Gregory as his successor to the See of Peter. He tried to resist, even attempting to flee, but to no avail: finally, he had to yield. The year was 590.

Recognising the will of God in what had happened, the new Pontiff immediately and enthusiastically set to work. From the beginning he showed a singularly enlightened vision of realty with which he had to deal, an extraordinary capacity for work confronting both ecclesial and civil affairs, a constant and even balance in making decisions, at times with courage, imposed on him by his office.

Abundant documentation has been preserved from his governance thanks to the Register of his Letters (approximately 800), reflecting the complex questions that arrived on his desk on a daily basis. They were questions that came from Bishops, Abbots, clergy and even from civil authorities of every order and rank.

Among the problems that afflicted Italy and Rome at that time was one of special importance both in the civil and ecclesial spheres: the Lombard question. The Pope dedicated every possible energy to it in view of a truly peaceful solution. Contrary to the Byzantine Emperor who assumed that the Lombards were only uncouth individuals and predators to be defeated or exterminated, St. Gregory saw this people with the eyes of a good pastor, and was concerned with proclaiming the word of salvation to them, establishing fraternal relationships with them in view of a future peace founded on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence between Italians, Imperials and Lombards. He was concerned with the conversion of the young people and the new civil structure of Europe: the Visigoths of Spain, the Franks, the Saxons, the immigrants in Britain and the Lombards, were the privileged recipients of his evangelising mission.

Yesterday we celebrated the liturgical memorial of St. Augustine of Canterbury, the leader of a group of monks. Gregory assigned to go to Britain to evangelise England.

The Pope — who was a true peacemaker — deeply committed himself to establish an effective peace in Rome and in Italy by undertaking intense negotiations with Agiluif, the Lombard King. This negotiation led to a period of truce that lasted for about three years (598-601); after which, in 603, it was possible to stipulate a more stable armistice. This positive result was obtained also thanks to the parallel contacts that, meanwhile, the Pope undertook with Queen Theodolinda, a Bavarian princess who, unlike the leaders of other Germanic peoples, was Catholic — deeply Catholic.

Paving the way to peace, charity

A series of Letters of Pope Gregory to this Queen has been preserved in which he reveals his respect and friendship for her. Theodolinda, little by little was able to guide the King to Catholicism, thus preparing the way to peace. The Pope also was careful to send her relics for the Basilica of St. John the Baptist which she had had built in Monza, and did not fail to send his congratulations and precious gills for the same Cathedral of Monza on the occasion of the birth and baptism of her son, Adaloald.

The series of events concerning this Queen constitutes a beautiful testimony to the importance of women in the history of the Church. Gregory constantly focused on three basic objectives: to limit the Lombard expansion in Italy; to preserve Queen Theodolinda from the influence of schismatics and to strengthen the Catholic faith; and to mediate between the Lombards and the Byzantines in view of an accord that guaranteed peace in the peninsula and at the same time permitted the evangelisation of the Lombards themselves.

Therefore, in the complex situation his scope was constantly twofold: to promote understanding on the diplomatic-political level and to spread the proclamation of the true faith among the peoples.

Along with his purely spiritual and pastoral action, Pope Gregory also became an active protagonist in multifaceted social activities. With the revenues from the Roman See's substantial patrimony in Italy, especially in Sicily, he bought and distributed grain, assisted those in need, helped priests, monks and nuns who lived in poverty,

paid the ransom for citizens held captive by the Lombards and purchased armistices and truces.

Moreover, whether in Rome or other parts of Italy, he carefully carried out the administrative reorganization, giving precise instructions so that the goods of the Church, useful for her sustenance and evangelising work in the world, were managed with absolute rectitude and according to the rules of justice and mercy.

He demanded that the tenants on Church territory be protected from dishonest agents and, in cases of fraud, were to be quickly compensated, so that the face of the Bride of Christ was not soiled with dishonest profits.

Gregory carried out this intense activity notwithstanding his poor health, which often forced him to remain in bed for days on end. The fasts practised during the years of monastic life had caused him serious digestive problems. Furthermore, his voice was so feeble that he was often obliged to entrust the reading of his homilies to the deacon, so that the faithful present in the Roman Basilicas could hear him.

On feast days he did his best to celebrate the *Missarum sollemnia*, that is the solemn Mass, and then he met personally with the people of God, who were very fond of him, because they saw in him the authoritative reference from whom to draw security: not by chance was the title *consul Dei* quickly attributed to him.

Notwithstanding the very difficult conditions in which he had to work, he gained the faithful's trust, thanks to his holiness of life and rich humanity, achieving truly magnificent results for his time and for the future.

He was a man immersed in God: his desire for God was always alive in the depths of his soul and precisely because of this he was always close to his neighbour, to the needy people of his time. Indeed, during a desperate period of havoc, he was able to create peace and give hope. This man of God shows us the true sources of peace, from which true hope comes. Thus, he becomes a guide also for us today.

Wednesday, 28 May 2008

Saint Gregory the Great (Part 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, at our Wednesday appointment, I return to the extraordinary figure of Pope Gregory the Great to receive some additional light from his rich teaching.

Notwithstanding the many duties connected to his office as the Bishop of Rome, he left to us numerous works, from which the Church in successive centuries has drawn with both hands. Besides the important correspondence — in last week's catechesis I cited the Register that contains over 800 letters — first of all he left us writings of an exegetical character, among which his *Morals*, a commentary on Job (known under the Latin title*Moralia in Iob*), the *Homilies on Ezekiel* and the *Homilies on the Gospel* stand out.

Then there is an important work of a hagiographical character, the *Dialogues*, written by Gregory for the edification of the Lombard Queen Theodolinda. The primary and best known work is undoubtedly the *Regula pastoralis* (Pastoral Rule), which the Pope published at the beginning of his Pontificate with clearly programmatic goals.

Wanting to review these works quickly, we must first of all note that, in his writings, Gregory never sought to delineate "his own" doctrine, his own originality. Rather, he intended to echo the traditional teaching of the Church, he simply wanted to be the mouthpiece of Christ and of the Church on the way that must be taken to reach God. His exegetical commentaries are models of this approach.

He was a passionate reader of the Bible, which he approached not simply with a speculative purpose: from Sacred Scripture, he thought, the Christian must draw not theoretical understanding so much as the daily nourishment for his soul, for his life as man in this world.

For example, in the *Homilies on Ezekiel*, he emphasized this function of the sacred text: to approach the Scripture simply to satisfy one's own desire for knowledge means to succumb to the temptation of pride and thus to expose oneself to the risk of sliding into heresy. Intellectual humility is the primary rule for one who searches to penetrate the supernatural realities beginning from the sacred Book.

Obviously, humility dues not exclude serious study; but to ensure that the results are spiritually beneficial, facilitating true entry into the depth of the text, humility remains indispensable.

Only with this interior attitude can one really listen to and eventually perceive the voice of God. On the other hand, when it is a question of the Word of God understanding it means nothing if it does not lead to action.

In these *Homilies on Ezekiel* is also found that beautiful expression according which "the preacher must dip his pen into the blood of his heart; then he can also reach the ear of his neighbour".

Reading his homilies, one sees that Gregory truly wrote with his life-blood and, therefore, he still speaks to us today.

Gregory also developed this discourse in the *Book of Morals*, a Commentary on Job. Following the Patristic

tradition, he examined the sacred text in the three dimensions of its meaning: the literal dimension, the allegorical dimension and the moral dimension, which are dimensions of the unique sense of Sacred Scripture.

Nevertheless, Gregory gave a clear prevalence to the moral sense. In this perspective, he proposed his thought by way of some dual meanings — *to know-to do, to speak-to live, to know-to act* — in which he evokes the two aspects of human life that should be complementary, but which often end by being antithetical.

The moral ideal, he comments, always Consists in realizing a harmonious integration between word and action, thought and deed, prayer and dedication to the duties of one's state: this is the way to realize that synthesis thanks to which the divine descends to man and man is lifted up until he becomes one with God.

Thus the great Pope marks out a complete plan of life for the authentic believer; for this reason the *Book of Morals*, a commentary on Job, would constitute in the course of the Middle Ages a kind of *summa* of Christian morality.

Of notable importance and beauty are also the *Homilies on the Gospel*. The first of these was given in St. Peter's Basilica in 590 during the Advent Season, hence only a few months after Gregory's election to the Papacy; the last was delivered in St. Lawrence's Basilica on the Second Sunday after Pentecost in 593.

The Pope preached to the people in the churches where the "stations" were celebrated — special prayer ceremonies during the important seasons of the liturgical year — or the feasts of titular martyrs.

The guiding principle, which links the different homilies, is captured in the word "*preacher*": not only the minister of God, but also every Christian, has the duty "to preach" of what he has experienced in his innermost being, following the example of Christ who was made man to bring to all the good news of salvation.

The horizon of this commitment is eschatological: the expectation of the fulfilment of all things in Christ was a constant thought of the great Pontiff and ended by becoming the guiding reason of his every thought and activity. From here sprang his incessant reminders to be vigilant and to perform good works.

Probably the must systematic text of Gregory the Great is the Pastoral Rule, written in the first years of his Pontificate. In it Gregory proposed to treat the figure of the ideal Bishop, the teacher and guide of his flock. To this end he illustrated the seriousness of the office of Pastor of the Church and its inherent duties.

Therefore, those who were not called to this office may not seek it with superficiality, instead those who assumed it without due reflection necessarily feel trepidation rise within their soul. Taking up again a favourite theme, he affirmed that the Bishop is above all the "preacher" par excellence; for this reason he must be above all an example for others, so that his behaviour may be a point of reference for all.

Efficacious pastoral action requires that he know his audience and adapt his words to the situation of each person: here Gregory paused to illustrate the various categories of the faithful with acute and precise annotations, which can justify the evaluation of those who have also seen in this work a treatise on psychology. From this one

understands that he really knew his flock and spoke of all things with the people of his time and his city.

Nevertheless, the great Pontiff insisted on the Pastor's duty to recognize daily his own unworthiness in the eyes of the Supreme Judge, so that pride did not negate the good accomplished. For this the final chapter of the Rule is dedicated to humility: "When one is pleased to have achieved many virtues, it is well to reflect on one's own inadequacies and to humble oneself: instead of considering the good accomplished, it is necessary to consider what was neglected".

All these precious indications demonstrate the lofty concept that St. Gregory had for the care of souls, which he defined as the "*ars artium*", the art of arts. The Rule had such great, and the rather rare, good fortune to have been quickly translated into Greek and Anglo-Saxon.

Another significant work is the *Dialogues*. In this work addressed to his friend Peter, the deacon, who was convinced that customs were so corrupt as to impede the rise of saints as in times past, Gregory demonstrated just the opposite: holiness is always possible, even in difficult times.

He proved it by narrating the life of contemporaries or those who had died recently, who could well be considered saints, even if not canonised. The narration was accompanied by theological and mystical reflections that make the book a singular hagiographical text, capable of enchanting entire generations of readers.

The material was drawn from the living traditions of the people and intended to edify and form, attracting the attention of the reader to a series of questions regarding the

meaning of miracles, the interpretation of Scripture, the immortality of the soul, the existence of Hell, the representation of the next world — all themes that require fitting clarification. Book II is wholly dedicated to the figure of Benedict of Nursia and is the only ancient witness to the life of the holy monk, whose spiritual beauty the text highlights fully.

In the theological plan that Gregory develops regarding his works, the past, present and future are compared. What counted for him more than anything was the entire arch of salvation history, that continues to unfold in the obscure meanderings of time. In this perspective it is significant that he inserted the news of the conversion of the Angles in the middle of his *Book of Morals*, a commentary on Job: to his eyes the event constituted a furthering of the Kingdom of God which the Scripture treats. Therefore, it could rightly be mentioned in the commentary on a holy book.

According to him the leader's of Christian communities must commit themselves to reread events in the light of the Word of God: in this sense the great Pontiff felt he had the duty to orient pastors and the faithful on the spiritual itinerary of an enlightened and correct *lectio divina*, placed in the context of one's own life.

Before concluding it is necessary to say a word on the relationship that Pope Gregory nurtured with the Patriarchs of Antioch, of Alexandria and of Constantinople itself. He always concerned himself with recognizing and respecting rights, protecting them from every interference that would limit legitimate autonomy.

Still, if St. Gregory, in the context of the historical situation, was opposed to the title "ecumenical" on the part of

the Patriarch of Constantinople, it was not to limit or negate this legitimate authority but rather because he was concerned about the fraternal unity of the universal Church.

Above all he was profoundly convinced that humility should be the fundamental virtue for every Bishop, even more so for the Patriarch. Gregory remained a simple monk in his heart and therefore was decisively contrary to great titles. He wanted to be — and this is his expression — *servus servorum Dei*.

Coined by him, this phrase was not just a pious formula on his lips but a true manifestation of his way of living and acting. He was intimately struck by the humility of God, who in Christ made himself our servant. He washed and washes our dirty feet. Therefore, he was convinced that a Bishop, above all, should imitate this humility of God and follow Christ in this way. His desire was to live truly as a monk, in permanent contact with the Word of God, but for love of God he knew how to make himself the servant of all in a time full of tribulation and suffering.

He knew how to make himself the "servant of the servants". Precisely because he was this, he is great and also shows us the measure of true greatness.

Wednesday, 4 June 2008

Saint Columban

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak about the holy Abbot Columban, the best known Irishman of the early Middle Ages. Since he worked as a monk, missionary and writer in various countries of Western-Europe with good reason he can he called a "European" Saint.

With the Irish of his time, he had a sense of Europe's cultural unity. The expression "*totius Europae* — of all Europe", with reference to the Church's presence, on the Continent, is found for he first time in one of his letters, written around the year 600, addressed to Pope Gregory the Great (cf. *Epistula* I, 1).

Columban was born c. 543 in the Province of Leinster in southeast Ireland. He was educated at home by excellent tutors who introduced him to the study of liberal arts. He was then entrusted to the guidance of Abbot Sinell of the community of Cleenish Northern Ireland, where he was able to deepen his study of Sacred Scripture.

At the age of about 20 he entered the monastery of Bangor, in the northeast of the island, whose abbot, Comgall, was a monk well known for his virtue and ascetic rigour.

In full agreement with his abbot, Columban zealously practiced the severe discipline of the monastery, leading a life of prayer, ascesis and study. While there, he was also ordained a priest. His life at Bangor and the Abbot's example influenced the conception of monasticism that developed in Columban over time and that he subsequently spread in the course of his life.

When he was approximately 50 years old, following the characteristically Irish ascetic ideal of the "*peregrinatio pro Christo*", namely, making oneself a pilgrim for the sake of Christ, Columban left his island with 12 companions to engage in missionary work on the European Continent.

We should in fact bear in mind that the migration of people from the North and the East had caused whole areas, previously Christianized, to revert to paganism. Around the year 590, the small group of, missionaries landed on the Breton coast. Welcomed kindly by the King of the Franks of Austrasia (present-day France), they asked only for a small piece of uncultivated land.

They were given the ancient Roman fortress of Annegray, totally ruined and abandoned and covered by forest.

Accustomed to a life of extreme hardship, in the span of a few months the monks managed to build the first hermitage on the ruins. Thus their re-evangelization began, in the first place, through the witness of their lives.

With the new cultivation of the land, they also began a new cultivation of souls. The fame of those foreign religious who, living on prayer and in great austerity, built houses and worked the land spread rapidly, attracting pilgrims and penitents. In particular, many young men asked to be accepted by the monastic community in order to live, like them, this exemplary life which was renewing the cultivation of the land and of souls.

It was not long before the foundation of a second monastery was required. It was built a few kilometres away on the ruins of an ancient spa, Luxeuil. This monastery

was to become the centre of the traditional Irish monastic and missionary outreach on the European Continent. A third monastery was erected at Fontaine, an hour's walk further north.

Columban lived at Luxeuil for almost 20 years. Here the Saint wrote for his followers the*Regula monachorum* — for a while more widespread in Europe than Benedict's Rule — which portrayed the ideal image of the monk. It is the only ancient Irish monastic rule in our possession today.

Columban integrated it with the *Regula coenobialis*, a sort of penal code for the offences committed by monks, with punishments that are somewhat surprising to our modern sensibility and can only be explained by the mentality and environment of that time.

With another famous work entitled: *De poenitentiarum misura taxanda*, also written at Luxeuil, Columban introduced Confession and private and frequent penance on the Continent. It was known as "tariffed" penance because of the proportion established between the gravity of the sin and the type of penance imposed by the confessor.

These innovations roused the suspicion of local Bishops, a suspicion that became hostile when Columban had the courage to rebuke them openly for the practices of some of them.

The controversy over the date of Easter was an opportunity to demonstrate their opposition: Ireland, in fact, followed the Eastern rather than the Roman tradition. The Irish monk was convoked in 603 to account to a Synod at Chalon-sur-Saône for his practices regarding

penance and Easter. Instead of presenting himself before the Synod, he sent a letter in which he minimized the issue, inviting the Synod Fathers not only to discuss the problem of the date of Easter, in his opinion a negligible problem, "but also all the necessary canonical norms that — something more serious — are disregarded by many" (cf. *Epistula*II, 1).

At the same time he wrote to Pope Boniface IV — just as several years earlier he had turned to Pope Gregory the Great (cf. *Epistula* I) — asking him to defend the Irish tradition (cf. *Epistula* III).

Intransigent as he was in every moral matter, Columban then came into conflict with the royal house for having harshly reprimanded King Theuderic for his adulterous relations.

This created a whole network of personal, religious and political intrigues and manoeuvres which, in 610, culminated in a Decree of expulsion banishing Columban and all the monks of Irish origin from Luxeuil and condemning them to definitive exile.

They were escorted to the sea and, at the expense of the court, boarded a ship bound for Ireland. However, not far from shore the ship ran aground and the captain, who saw this as a sign from Heaven, abandoned the voyage and, for fear of being cursed by God, brought the monks back to dry land.

Instead of returning to Luxeuil, they decided to begin a new work of evangelization. Thus, they embarked on a Rhine boat and travelled up the river. After a first stop in Tuggen near Lake Zurich they went to the region of Bregenz, near Lake Constance, to evangelize the Alemanni.

However, soon afterwards, because of political events unfavourable to his work, Columban decided to cross the Alps with the majority of his disciples. Only one monk whose name was Gallus stayed behind; it was from his hermitage that the famous Abbey of St. Gall in Switzerland subsequently developed.

Having arrived in Italy, Columban met with a warm welcome at the Lombard Royal Court but was immediately faced with considerable difficulties: the life of the Church was torn apart by the Arian heresy, still prevalent among the Lombards, and by a schism which had detached most of the Church in Northern Italy from communion with the Bishop of Rome.

Columban entered authoritatively into this context, writing a satirical pamphlet against Arianism and a letter to Boniface IV to convince him to take some decisive steps with a view to re-establishing unity (cf. *Epistula* V).

When, in 612 or 613, the King of the Lombards allocated to him a plot of land in Bobbio, in the Trebbia Valley,

Columban founded a new monastery there which was later to become a cultural centre on a par with the famous monastery of Monte Cassino. Here he came to the end of his days: he died on 23 November 615 and to this day is commemorated on this date in the Roman rite.

St. Columban's message is concentrated in a firm appeal to conversion and detachment from earthly goods, with a view to the eternal inheritance. With his ascetic life and conduct free from compromises when he faced the corruption of the powerful, he is reminiscent of the severe figure of St. John the Baptist.

His austerity, however, was never an end in itself but merely the means with which to open himself freely to God's love and to correspond with his whole being to the gifts received from him, thereby restoring in himself the image of God, while at the same time cultivating the earth and renewing human society.

I quote from his *Instructiones*: "If man makes a correct use of those faculties that God has conceded to his soul, he will be likened to God. Let us remember that we must restore to him all those gifts which he deposited in us when we were in our original condition.

"He has taught us the way with his Commandments. The first of them tells us to love the Lord with all our heart, because he loved us first, from the beginning of time, even before we came into the light of this world" (cf. *Instructiones* XI).

The Irish Saint truly incarnated these words in his own life. A man of great culture — he also wrote poetry in Latin and a grammar book — he proved rich in gifts of grace. He was a tireless builder of monasteries as well as an intransigent penitential preacher who spent every ounce of his energy on nurturing the Christian roots of Europe which was coming into existence.

With his spiritual energy, with his faith, with his love for God and neighbour, he truly became one of the Fathers of Europe. He shows us even today the roots from which our Europe can be reborn.

Wednesday, 11 June 2008

St Maximus the Confessor

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to present the figure of one of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church in later times. He is a monk, St Maximus, whose fearless courage in witnessing to - "confessing" - even while suffering, the integrity of his faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, Saviour of the world, earned him Christian Tradition's title of *Confessor*.

Maximus was born in Palestine, the land of the Lord, in about 580. As a boy he was initiated to the monastic life and the study of the Scriptures through the works of Origen, the great teacher who by the third century had already "established" the exegetic tradition of Alexandria.

Maximus moved from Jerusalem to Constantinople and from there, because of the barbarian invasions, sought refuge in Africa. Here he was distinguished by his extreme courage in the defence of orthodoxy.

Maximus refused to accept any reduction of Christ's humanity. A theory had come into being which held that there was only one will in Christ, the divine will. To defend the oneness of Christ's Person, people denied that he had his own true and proper human will. And, at first sight, it might seem to be a good thing that Christ had only one will. But St Maximus immediately realized that this would destroy the mystery of salvation, for humanity without a will, a man without a will, is not a real man but an amputated man.

Had this been so, the man Jesus Christ would not have been a true man, he would not have experienced the

drama of being human which consists, precisely, of conforming our will with the great truth of being.

Thus St Maximus declared with great determination: Sacred Scripture does not portray to us an amputated man with no will but rather true and complete man: God, in Jesus Christ, really assumed the totality of being human - obviously with the exception of sin - hence also a human will.

And said like this, his point is clear: Christ either is or is not a man. If he is a man, he also has a will. But here the problem arises: do we not end up with a sort of dualism? Do we not reach the point of affirming two complete personalities: reason, will, sentiment? How is it possible to overcome dualism, to keep the completeness of the human being and yet succeed in preserving the unity of the Person of Christ who was not schizophrenic?

Unity found by coming out of self

St Maximus demonstrates that man does not find his unity, the integration of himself or his totality within himself but by surpassing himself, by coming out of himself.

Thus, also in Christ, by coming out of himself, man finds himself in God, in the Son of God. It is not necessary to amputate man to explain the Incarnation; all that is required is to understand the dynamism of the human being who is fulfilled only by coming out of himself; it is in God alone that we find ourselves, our totality and our completeness.

Hence, we see that the person who withdraws into himself is not a complete person but the person who is open,

who comes out of himself, becomes complete and finds himself, finds his true humanity, precisely in the Son of God.

For St Maximus, this vision did not remain a philosophical speculation; he saw it realized in Jesus' actual life, especially in the drama of Gethsemane. In this drama of Jesus' agony, of the anguish of death, of the opposition between the human will not to die and the divine will which offers itself to death, in this drama of Gethsemane the whole human drama is played out, the drama of our redemption.

St Maximus tells us that, and we know that this is true, Adam (and we ourselves are Adam) thought that the "no" was the peak of freedom. He thought that only a person who can say "no" is truly free; that if he is truly to achieve his freedom, man must say "no" to God; only in this way he believed he could at last be himself, that he had reached the heights of freedom.

This tendency also carried within it the human nature of Christ, but went beyond it, for Jesus saw that it was not the "no" that was the height of freedom. The height of freedom is the "yes", in conformity with God's will. It is only in the "yes" that man truly becomes himself; only in the great openness of the "yes", in the unification of his will with the divine, that man becomes immensely open, becomes "divine".

What Adam wanted was to be like God, that is, to be completely free. But the person who withdraws into himself is not divine, is not completely free; he is freed by emerging from himself, it is in the "yes" that he becomes free; and this is the drama of Gethsemane: not my will but yours.

It is by transferring the human will to the divine will that the real person is born, it is in this way that we are redeemed.

This, in a few brief words, is the fundamental point of what St Maximus wanted to say and here we see that the whole human being is truly at issue; the entire question of our life lies here.

In Africa St Maximus was already having problems defending this vision of man and of God. He was then summoned to Rome. In 649 he took an active part in the Lateran Council, convoked by Pope Martin I to defend the two wills of Christ against the Imperial Edict which - *pro bono pacis* - forbade discussion of this matter. Pope Martin was made to pay dearly for his courage. Although he was in a precarious state of health, he was arrested and taken to Constantinople. Tried and condemned to death, the Pope obtained the commutation of his sentence into permanent exile in the Crimea, where he died on 16 September 655, after two long years of humiliation and torment.

It was Maximus' turn shortly afterwards, in 662, as he too opposed the Emperor, repeating: "It cannot be said that Christ has a single will!" (cf. *PG* 91, cc. 268-269). Thus, together with his two disciples, both called Anastasius, Maximus was subjected to an exhausting trial although he was then over 80 years of age.

The Emperor's tribunal condemned him with the accusation of heresy, sentencing him to the cruel mutilation of his tongue and his right hand - the two organs through which, by words and writing, Maximus had fought the erroneous doctrine of the single will of Christ.

In the end, thus mutilated, the holy monk was finally exiled to the region of Colchis on the Black Sea where he died, worn out by the suffering he had endured, at the age of 82, on 13 August that same year, 662.

In speaking of Maximus' life, we mentioned his literary opus in defence of orthodoxy. We referred in particular to the *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, formerly Patriarch of Constantinople: in this debate he succeeded in persuading his adversary of his errors. With great honesty, in fact, Pyrrhus concluded the *Disputation* with these words: "I ask forgiveness for myself and for those who have preceded me: by ignorance we arrived at these absurd ideas and arguments; and I ask that a way may be found to cancel these absurdities, saving the memory of those who erred" (*PG* 91, c. 352).

Also several dozen important works have been handed down to us, among which the *Mystagogia* is outstanding. This is one of St Maximus' most important writings, which gathers his theological thought in a well-structured synthesis.

St. Maximus' focus: salvation

St Maximus' thought was never merely theological, speculative or introverted because its target was always the practical reality of the world and its salvation. In this context in which he had to suffer, he could not escape into purely theoretical and philosophical affirmations. He had to seek the meaning of life, asking himself: who am I? What is the world?

God entrusted to man, created in his image and likeness, the mission of unifying the cosmos. And just as Christ unified the human being in himself, the Creator unified

the cosmos in man. He showed us how to unify the cosmos in the communion of Christ and thus truly arrived at a redeemed world.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, referred to this powerful saving vision when, "relaunching" Maximus - he defined his thought with the vivid expression *Kosmische Liturgie*, "cosmic liturgies".

Jesus, the one Saviour of the world, is always at the centre of this solemn "liturgy". The efficacy of his saving action which definitively unified the cosmos is guaranteed by the fact that in spite of being God in all things, he is also integrally a man and has the "energy" and will of a man.

The life and thought of Maximus were powerfully illumined by his immense courage in witnessing to the integral reality of Christ, without any reduction or compromise. And thus who man really is and how we should live in order to respond to our vocation appears.

We must live united to God in order to be united to ourselves and to the cosmos, giving the cosmos itself and humanity their proper form.

Christ's universal "yes" also shows us clearly how to put all the other values in the right place. We think of values that are justly defended today such as tolerance, freedom and dialogue. But a tolerance that no longer distinguishes between good and evil would become chaotic and self-destructive, just as a freedom that did not respect the freedom of others or find the common measure of our respective liberties would become anarchy and destroy

authority. Dialogue that no longer knows what to discuss becomes empty chatter.

All these values are important and fundamental but can only remain true values if they have the point of reference that unites them and gives them true authenticity. This reference point is the synthesis between God and the cosmos, the figure of Christ in which we learn the truth about ourselves and thus where to rank all other values, because we discover their authentic meaning.

Jesus Christ is the reference point that gives light to all other values. This was the conclusion of the great Confessor's witness. And it is in this way, ultimately, that Christ indicates that the cosmos must become a liturgy, the glory of God, and that worship is the beginning of true transformation, of the true renewal of the world.

I would therefore like to conclude with a fundamental passage from one of St Maximus' works: "We adore one Son together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning before all time, is now and ever shall be, for all time and for the time after time. Amen!" (*PG* 91, c. 269).

Wednesday, 25 June 2008

John Climacus

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After 20 Catecheses dedicated to the Apostle Paul, today I would like to return to presenting the great writers of the Church of the East and of the West in the Middle Ages. And I am proposing the figure of John known as Climacus, a Latin transliteration of the Greek term *klimakos,* which means *of the ladder (klimax).* This is the title of his most important work in which he describes the ladder of human life ascending towards God.

He was born in about 575 A.D. He lived, therefore, during the years in which Byzantium, the capital of the Roman Empire of the East, experienced the greatest crisis in its history. The geographical situation of the Empire suddenly changed and the torrent of barbarian invasions swept away all its structures.

Only the structure of the Church withstood them, continuing in these difficult times to carry out her missionary, human, social and cultural action, especially through the network of monasteries in which great religious figures such as, precisely, John Climacus were active.

John lived and told of his spiritual experiences in the Mountains of Sinai, where Moses encountered God and Elijah heard his voice. Information on him has been preserved in a brief *Life (PG* 88, 596-608), written by a monk, Daniel of Raithu. At the age of 16, John, who had become a monk on Mount Sinai, made himself a disciple of Abba Martyr, an "elder", that is, a "wise man".

At about 20 years of age, he chose to live as a hermit in a grotto at the foot of the mountain in the locality of Tola,

eight kilometres from the present-day St Catherine's Monastery. Solitude, however, did not prevent him from meeting people eager for spiritual direction, or from paying visits to several monasteries near Alexandria.

In fact, far from being an escape from the world and human reality, his eremitical retreat led to ardent love for others *(Life*, 5) and for God *(ibid.*, 7).

After 40 years of life as a hermit, lived in love for God and for neighbour — years in which he wept, prayed and fought with demons — he was appointed hegumen of the large monastery on Mount Sinai and thus returned to cenobitic life in a monastery. However, several years before his death, nostalgic for the eremitical life, he handed over the government of the community to his brother, a monk in the same monastery.

John died after the year 650. He lived his life between two mountains, Sinai and Tabor and one can truly say that he radiated the light which Moses saw on Sinai and which was contemplated by the three Apostles on Mount Tabor!

He became famous, as I have already said, through his work, entitled *The Climax*, in the West known as the *Ladder of Divine Ascent (PG* 88, 632-1164). Composed at the insistent request of the hegumen of the neighbouring Monastery of Raithu in Sinai, the *Ladder* is a complete treatise of spiritual life in which John describes the monk's journey from renunciation of the world to the perfection of love. This journey — according to his book — covers 30 steps, each one of which is linked to the next. The journey may be summarized in

three consecutive stages: the first is expressed in renunciation of the world in order to return to a state of evangelical childhood.

Thus, the essential is not the renunciation but rather the connection with what Jesus said, that is, the return to true childhood in the spiritual sense, becoming like children.

John comments: "A good foundation of three layers and three pillars is: innocence, fasting and temperance. Let all babes in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:1) begin with these virtues, taking as their model the natural babes" (1, 20; 636).

Voluntary detachment from beloved people and places permits the soul to enter into deeper communion with God. This renunciation leads to obedience which is the way to humility through humiliations — which will never be absent — on the part of the brethren.

John comments: "Blessed is he who has mortified his will to the very end and has entrusted the care of himself to his teacher in the Lord: indeed he will be placed on the right hand of the Crucified One!" (4, 37; 704).

The second stage of the journey consists in spiritual combat against the passions. Every step of the ladder is linked to a principal passion that is defined and diagnosed, with an indication of the treatment and a proposal of the corresponding virtue.

All together, these steps of the ladder undoubtedly constitute the most important treatise of spiritual strategy that we possess. The struggle against the passions, however, is steeped in the positive — it does not remain as something negative — thanks to the image of the "fire"

of the Holy Spirit: that "all those who enter upon the good fight (cf. 1 Tm 6:12), which is hard and narrow,... may realize that they must leap into the fire, if they really expect the celestial fire to dwell in them" (1,18; 636). The fire of the Holy Spirit is the fire of love and truth.

The power of the Holy Spirit alone guarantees victory. However, according to John Climacus it is important to be aware that the passions are not evil in themselves; they become so through human freedom's wrong use of them. If they are purified, the passions reveal to man the path towards God with energy unified by ascesis and grace and, "if they have received from the Creator an order and a beginning..., the limit of virtue is boundless" (26/2, 37; 1068).

The last stage of the journey is Christian perfection that is developed in the last seven steps of the*Ladder*. These are the highest stages of spiritual life, which can be experienced by the "Hesychasts": the solitaries, those who have attained quiet and inner peace; but these stages are also accessible to the more fervent cenobites.

Of the first three — simplicity, humility and discernment — John, in line with the Desert Fathers, considered the ability to discern, the most important. Every type of behaviour must be subject to discernment; everything, in fact, depends on one's deepest motivations, which need to be closely examined. Here one enters into the soul of the person and it is a question of reawakening in the hermit, in the Christian, spiritual sensitivity and a "feeling heart", which are gifts from God: "After God, we ought to follow our conscience as a rule and guide in everything," (26/1,5; 1013). In this way one reaches tranquillity of soul, *hesychia*, by means of which the soul may gaze upon the abyss of the divine mysteries.

The state of quiet, of inner peace, prepares the Hesychast for prayer which in John is twofold: "corporeal prayer" and "prayer of the heart". The former is proper to those who need the help of bodily movement: stretching out the hands, uttering groans, beating the breast, etc. (15, 26; 900). The latter is spontaneous, because it is an effect of the reawakening of spiritual sensitivity, a gift of God to those who devote themselves to corporeal prayer. In John this takes the name "Jesus prayer" *(Iesou euche),* and is constituted in the invocation of solely Jesus' name, an invocation that is continuous like breathing: "May your remembrance of Jesus become one with your breathing, and you will then know the usefulness of *hesychia",* inner peace (27/2, 26; 1112). At the end the prayer becomes very simple: the word "Jesus" simply becomes one with the breath.

The last step of the ladder (30), suffused with "the sober inebriation of the spirit", is dedicated to the supreme "trinity of virtues": faith, hope and above all charity.

John also speaks of charity as *eros* (human love), a symbol of the matrimonial union of the soul with God, and once again chooses the image of fire to express the fervour, light and purification of love for God. The power of human love can be reoriented to God, just as a cultivated olive may be grafted on to a wild olive tree (cf. Rm 11:24) (cf. 15, 66; 893).

John is convinced that an intense experience of this *eros* will help the soul to advance far more than the harsh struggle against the passions, because of its great power. Thus, in our journey, the positive aspect prevails.

Yet charity is also seen in close relation to hope: "Hope is the power that drives love. Thanks to hope, we can

look forward to the reward of charity.... Hope is the doorway of love.... The absence of hope destroys charity: our efforts are bound to it, our labours are sustained by it, and through it we are enveloped by the mercy of God" (30, 16; 1157).

The conclusion of the *Ladder* contains the synthesis of the work in words that the author has God himself utter: "May this ladder teach you the spiritual disposition of the virtues. I am at the summit of the ladder, and as my great initiate (St Paul) said: *'So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13:13)!"* (30, 18; 1160).

At this point, a last question must be asked: can the *Ladder,* a work written by a hermit monk who lived 1,400 years ago, say something to us today? Can the existential journey of a man who lived his entire life on Mount Sinai in such a distant time be relevant to us? At first glance it would seem that the answer must be "no", because John Climacus is too remote from us.

But if we look a little closer, we see that the monastic life is only a great symbol of baptismal life, of Christian life. It shows, so to speak, in capital letters what we write day after day in small letters. It is a prophetic symbol that reveals what the life of the baptized person is, in communion with Christ, with his death and Resurrection.

The fact that the top of the "ladder", the final steps, are at the same time the fundamental, initial and most simple virtues is particularly important to me: faith, hope and charity. These are not virtues accessible only to moral heroes; rather they are gifts of God to all the baptized: in them our life develops too.

The beginning is also the end, the starting point is also the point of arrival: the whole journey towards an ever more radical realization of faith, hope and charity. The whole ascent is present in these virtues.

Faith is fundamental, because this virtue implies that I renounce my arrogance, my thought, and the claim to judge by myself without entrusting myself to others. This journey towards humility, towards spiritual childhood is essential. It is necessary to overcome the attitude of arrogance that makes one say: I know better, in this my time of the 21st century, than what people could have known then.

Instead, it is necessary to entrust oneself to Sacred Scripture alone, to the word of the Lord, to look out on the horizon of faith with humility, in order to enter into the enormous immensity of the universal world, of the world of God. In this way our soul grows, the sensitivity of the heart grows toward God.

Rightly, John Climacus says that hope alone renders us capable of living charity; hope in which we transcend the things of every day, we do not expect success in our earthly days but we look forward to the revelation of God himself at last.

It is only in this extension of our soul, in this self-transcendence, that our life becomes great and that we are able to bear the effort and disappointments of every day, that we can be kind to others without expecting any reward.

Only if there is God, this great hope to which I aspire, can I take the small steps of my life and thus learn charity. The mystery of prayer, of the personal knowledge of

Jesus, is concealed in charity: simple prayer that strives only to move the divine Teacher's heart.

So it is that one's own heart opens, one learns from him his own kindness, his love. Let us therefore use this "ascent" of faith, hope and charity. In this way we will arrive at true life.

Wednesday, 11 February 2009

Bede, the Venerable

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Saint we are approaching today is called Bede and was born in the northeast of England, to be exact, Northumbria, in the year 672 or 673. He himself recounts that when he was seven years old his parents entrusted him to the Abbot of the neighbouring Benedictine monastery to be educated: "spending all the remaining time of my life a dweller in that monastery". He recalls, "I wholly applied myself to the study of Scripture; and amidst the observance of the monastic Rule and the daily charge of singing in church, I always took delight in learning, or teaching, or writing" (*Historia eccl. Anglorum*, V, 24).

In fact, Bede became one of the most outstanding erudite figures of the early Middle Ages since he was able to avail himself of many precious manuscripts which his Abbots would bring him on their return from frequent journeys to the continent and to Rome.

His teaching and the fame of his writings occasioned his friendships with many of the most important figures of his time who encouraged him to persevere in his work from which so many were to benefit.

When Bede fell ill, he did not stop working, always preserving an inner joy that he expressed in prayer and song. He ended his most important work, the *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, with this invocation: "I beseech you, O good Jesus, that to the one to whom you have graciously granted sweetly to drink in the words of your knowledge, you will also vouchsafe in your loving kindness that he may one day come to you, the Fountain of

all wisdom, and appear for ever before your face". Death took him on 26 May 737: it was the Ascension.

Sacred Scripture was the constant source of Bede's theological reflection. After a critical study of the text (a copy of the monumental *Codex Amiatinus* of the Vulgate on which Bede worked has come down to us), he comments on the Bible, interpreting it in a Christological key, that is, combining two things: on the one hand he listens to exactly what the text says, he really seeks to hear and understand the text itself; on the other, he is convinced that the key to understanding Sacred Scripture as the one word of God is Christ, and with Christ, in his light, one understands the Old and New Testaments as "one" Sacred Scripture.

The events of the Old and New Testaments go together, they are the way to Christ, although expressed in different signs and institutions (this is what he calls the *concordia sacramentorum*). For example, the tent of the covenant that Moses pitched in the desert and the first and second temple of Jerusalem are images of the Church, the new temple built on Christ and on the Apostles with living stones, held together by the love of the Spirit.

And just as pagan peoples also contributed to building the ancient temple by making available valuable materials and the technical experience of their master builders, so too contributing to the construction of the Church there were apostles and teachers, not only from ancient Jewish, Greek and Latin lineage, but also from the new peoples, among whom Bede was pleased to list the Irish Celts and Anglo-Saxons. St. Bede saw the growth of the universal dimension of the Church which is not restricted to one specific culture but is comprised of all the cultures

of the world that must be open to Christ and find in him their goal.

Another of Bede's favourite topics is the history of the Church. After studying the period described in the Acts of the Apostles, he reviews the history of the Fathers and the Councils, convinced that the work of the Holy Spirit continues in history. In the *Chronica Maiora*, Bede outlines a chronology that was to become the basis of the universal Calendar "*ab incarnatione Domini*".

In his day, time was calculated from the foundation of the City of Rome. Realizing that the true reference point, the centre of history, is the Birth of Christ, Bede gave us this calendar that interprets history starting from the Incarnation of the Lord.

Bede records the first six Ecumenical Councils and their developments, faithfully presenting Christian doctrine, both Mariological and soteriological, and denouncing the Monophysite and Monothelite, Iconoclastic and Neo-Pelagian heresies.

Lastly he compiled with documentary rigour and literary expertise the Ecclesiastical History of the English Peoples mentioned above, which earned him recognition as "the father of English historiography".

The characteristic features of the Church that Bede sought to emphasize are: a) *catholicity*, seen as faithfulness to tradition while remaining open to historical developments, and as the quest for unity in multiplicity, in historical and cultural diversity according to the directives Pope Gregory the Great had given to Augustine of Canterbury, the Apostle of England; b) *apostolicity and Roman traditions*: in this regard he deemed it of prime

importance to convince all the Irish, Celtic and Pict Churches to have one celebration for Easter in accordance with the Roman calendar. The *Computo*, which he worked out scientifically to establish the exact date of the Easter celebration, hence the entire cycle of the liturgical year, became the reference text for the whole Catholic Church.

Bede was also an eminent teacher of liturgical theology. In his Homilies on the Gospels for Sundays and feast days he achieves a true mystagogy, teaching the faithful to celebrate the mysteries of the faith joyfully and to reproduce them coherently in life, while awaiting their full manifestation with the return of Christ, when, with our glorified bodies, we shall be admitted to the offertory-procession in the eternal liturgy of God in Heaven.

Following the "realism" of the catecheses of Cyril, Ambrose and Augustine, Bede teaches that the sacraments of Christian initiation make every faithful person "not only a Christian but Christ". Indeed, every time that a faithful soul lovingly accepts and preserves the Word of God, in imitation of Mary, he conceives and generates Christ anew. And every time that a group of neophytes receives the Easter sacraments the Church "reproduces herself" or, to use a more daring term, the Church becomes "Mother of God", participating in the generation of her children through the action of the Holy Spirit.

By his way of creating theology, interweaving the Bible, liturgy and history, Bede has a timely message for the different "states of life":

a) for scholars (*doctores ac doctrices*) he recalls two essential tasks: to examine the marvels the word of God in

order to preserve them in an attractive form to the faithful; to explain the dogmatic truth: avoiding heretical complications and keeping to "Catholic simplicity", with the attitude of the lowly and humble to whom God is pleased to reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom;

b) pastors, for their part, must give priority to preaching, not only through verbal or hagiographic language but also by giving importance to icons, processions and pilgrimages. Bede recommends that they use the vulgate as he himself does, explaining the "Our Father" and the "Creed" in Northumbrian and continuing, until the last day of his life, his commentary on the Gospel of John in the vulgate;

c) Bede recommends to consecrate people who devote themselves to the Divine Office, living in the joy of fraternal communion and progressing in the spiritual life by means of ascesis and contemplation that they attend to the apostolate — no one possesses the Gospel for himself alone but must perceive it as a gift for others too — both by collaborating with Bishops in pastoral activities of various kinds for the young Christian communities and by offering themselves for the evangelizing mission among the pagans, outside their own country, as "*peregrini pro amore Dei* ".

Making this viewpoint his own, in his commentary on the Song of Songs Bede presents the Synagogue and the Church as collaborators in the dissemination of God's word. Christ the Bridegroom wants a hard-working Church, "weathered by the efforts of evangelization" — there is a clear reference to the word in the Song of Songs (1:5), where the bride says "*Nigra sum sed formosa*" ("I am very dark, but comely") — intent on tilling other fields or vineyards and in establishing among the

new peoples "not a temporary but but a permanent dwelling place", in other words, intent on integrating the Gospel into their social fabric and cultural institutions.

In this perspective the holy Doctor urges lay faithful to be diligent in religious instruction, imitating those "insatiable crowds of the Gospel who did not even allow the Apostles time to take a mouthful".

He teaches them how to pray ceaselessly, "reproducing in life what they celebrate in the liturgy", offering all their actions as a spiritual sacrifice in union with Christ. He explains to parents that in their small domestic circle too they can exercise "the priestly office as pastors and guides", giving their children a Christian upbringing. He also affirms that he knows many of the faithful (men and women, married and single) "capable of irreproachable conduct who, if appropriately guided, will be able every day to receive Eucharistic communion" (*Epist. ad Ecgberctum*, ed. Plummer, p. 419).

The fame of holiness and wisdom that. Bede already enjoyed in his lifetime, earned him the title of "Venerable". Pope Sergius I called him this when he wrote to his Abbot in 701 asking him to allow him to come to Rome temporarily to give advice on matters of universal interest. After his death, Bede's writings were widely disseminated in his homeland and on the European continent.

Boniface, the missionary of Germany, (d. 754), asked the Archbishop of York and the Abbot of Wearmouth several times to have some of his works transcribed and sent to him so that he and his companions might also enjoy the spiritual light that shone from them.

A century later, Notker Balbulus, Abbot of Sankt Gallen (d. 912), noting the extraordinary influence of Bede, compared him to a new sun that God had caused to rise, not in the East but in the West, to illuminate the world.

Apart from the rhetorical emphasis, it is a fact that with his works Bede made an effective contribution to building a Christian Europe in which the various peoples and cultures amalgamated with one another, thereby giving them a single physiognomy, inspired by the Christian faith.

Let us pray that today too there may be figures of Bede's stature, to keep the whole continent united; let us pray that we may all be willing to rediscover our common roots, in order to be builders of a profoundly human and authentically Christian Europe.

Wednesday, 18 February 2009

Saint Boniface, the Apostle of the Germans

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we shall reflect on a great eighth-century missionary who spread Christianity in Central Europe, indeed also in my own country: St. Boniface, who has gone down in history as "the Apostle of the Germans".

We have a fair amount of information on his life, thanks to the diligence of his biographers. He was born into an Anglo-Saxon family in Wessex in about 675 and was baptized with the name of Winfrid. He entered the monastery at a very early age, attracted by the monastic ideal. Since he possessed considerable intellectual ability, he seemed destined for a peaceful and brilliant academic career. He became a teacher of Latin grammar, wrote several treatises and even composed various poems in Latin.

He was ordained a priest at the age of about 30 and felt called to an apostolate among the pagans on the continent.

His country, Great Britain — which had been evangelized barely 100 years earlier by Benedictines led by St. Augustine — at the time showed such sound faith and ardent charity that it could send missionaries to Central Europe to proclaim the Gospel there.

In 716, Winfrid went to Frisia (today Holland) with a few companions, hut he encountered the opposition of the local chieftain and his attempt at evangelization failed.

Having returned home, he did not lose heart and two years later travelled to Rome to speak to Pope Gregory it and receive his instructions. One biographer recounts

that the Pope welcomed him "with a smile and a look full of kindliness", and had "important conversations" with him in the following days (Willibaldo, [Willibald of Mainz], *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, pp. 13-14), and lastly, after conferring upon him the new name of Boniface, assigned to him, in official letters, the mission of preaching the Gospel among the German peoples.

Comforted and sustained by the Pope's support, Boniface embarked on the preaching of the Gospel in those regions, fighting against pagan worship and reinforcing the foundations of' human and Christian morality. With a deep sense of duty he wrote in one of his letters: "We are united in the fight on the Lord's Day, because days of affliction and wretchedness have come.... We are not mute dogs or taciturn observers or mercenaries fleeing from wolves! On the contrary, we are diligent Pastors who watch over Christ's flock, who proclaim God's will to the leaders and ordinary folk, to the rich and the poor... in season and out of season..." (cf. *Epistulae*, 3,352.354: MGH).

With his tireless activity and his gift for organization, Boniface — adaptable and friendly yet firm —obtained great results. The Pope then "declared that he wished to confer upon him the episcopal dignity so that he might thus with greater determination correct and lead back to the path of truth those who had strayed, feeling supported by the greater authority of the apostolic dignity and being much more readily accepted by all in the office of preacher, the clearer it was that this was why he had been ordained by the Apostolic Bishop" (Othlo, *Vita. S. Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, lib. I, p. 127).

The Supreme Pontiff himself consecrated Boniface "Regional Bishop", that is, for the whole of Germany. Boniface then resumed his apostolic labours in the territories assigned to him. and extended his action also to the Church of the Gauls: with great caution he restored discipline in the Church, convoked various Synods to guarantee the authority of the sacred canons and strengthened the necessary communion with the Roman Pontiff, a point that he had very much at heart.

The Successors of Pope Gregory II also held him in the highest esteem. Gregory III appointed him Archbishop of all the Germanic tribes, sent him the pallium and granted him the faculties to organize the ecclesiastical hierarchy in those regions (cf. *Epist*. 28: *S. Bonifatti Epistulae*, ed. Tangl, Berolini 1916). Point Zacchary confirmed him in his office and praised his dedication (cf. *Epist*. 51, 57, 58, 60, 68, 77, 80, 86, 87, 89: *op. cit.*); Pope Stephen III, newly elected, received a letter from him in which he expressed his filial respect (cf. *Epist*. 108: *op. cit.*).

In addition to this work of evangelization and organization of the Church through the founding of dioceses and the celebration of Synods, this great Bishop did not omit to encourage the foundation of various male and female monasteries so that they would become like beacons, so as to radiate human and Christian culture and the faith in the territory.

He summoned monks and nuns from the Benedictine monastic communities in his homeland who gave him a most effective and invaluable help in proclaiming the Gospel and in disseminating the humanities and the arts among the population.

Indeed, he rightly considered that work for the Gospel must also be work for a true human culture. Above all the Monastery of Fulda founded in about 743 — was the heart and centre of outreach of religious spirituality and culture: there the monks, in prayer, work and penance, strove to achieve holiness; there they trained in the study of the sacred and profane disciplines and prepared themselves for the proclamation of the Gospel in order to be missionaries.

Thus it was to the credit of Boniface, of his monks and nuns — for women too had a very important role in this work of evangelization — that human culture, which is inseparable from faith and reveals its beauty, flourished.

Boniface himself has left us an important intellectual corpus. First of all is his copious correspondence, in which pastoral letters alternate with official letters and others private in nature; which record social events but above all reveal his richly human temperament and profound faith.

In addition he composed a treatise on the *Ars grammatica* in which he explained the declinations, verbs and syntax of the Latin language, but which also became for him a means of spreading culture and the faith. An *Ars metrica* — that is, an introduction on how to write poetry — as well as various poetic compositions and, lastly, a collection of 15 sermons are also attributed to him.

Although he was getting on in years (he was almost 80), he prepared himself for a new evangelizing mission: with about 50 monks he returned to Frisia where he had begun his work.

Almost as a prediction of his imminent death, in alluding to the journey of life, he wrote to Bishop Lull, his disciple and successor in the see of Mainz: "I wish to bring to a conclusion the purpose of this journey; in no way can I renounce my desire to set out. The day of my end is near and the time of my death is approaching; having shed my mortal body, I shall rise to the eternal reward. May you, my dear son, ceaselessly call the people from the maze of error, complete the building of the Basilica of Fulda that has already been begun, and in it lay my body, worn out by the long years of life" (Willibald, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, *ed. cit.*, p. 46).

While he was beginning the celebration of Mass at Dokkum (in what today is northern Holland) on 5 June 754, he was assaulted by a band of pagans. Advancing with a serene expression he "forbade his followers from fighting saying, 'cease, my sons, from fighting, give up warfare, for the witness of Scripture recommends that we do not give an eye for an eye but rather good for evil. Here is the long awaited day, the time of our end has now come; courage in the Lord!'", (*ibid*., pp. 49-50).

These were his last words before he fell under the blows of his aggressors. The mortal remains of the Martyr Bishop were then taken to the Monastery of Fulda where they received a fitting burial.

One of his first biographers had already made this judgement of him: "The holy Bishop Boniface can call himself father of all the inhabitants of Germany, for it was he who first brought them forth in Christ with the words of his holy preaching, he strengthened them with his example and lastly, he gave his life for them; no greater love than this can be shown" (Othlo, *Vita S. Bonifatii, ed. cit.*, lib. I, p. 158).

Centuries later, what message can we gather today from the teaching and marvellous activity of this great missionary and martyr? For those who approach Boniface, an initial fact stands out: *the centrality of the word of God*, lived and interpreted in the faith of the Church, a word that he lived, preached and witnessed to until he gave the supreme gift of himself in martyrdom.

He was so passionate about the word of God that he felt the urgent need and duty to communicate it to others, even at his own personal risk.

This word was the pillar of the faith which he had committed himself to spreading at the moment of his episcopal ordination: "I profess integrally the purity of the holy Catholic faith and with the help of God I desire to remain in the unity of this faith, in which there is no doubt that the salvation of Christians lies" (*Epist.* 12, in *S. Bonifatii Epistolae, ed. cit.*, p. 29).

The second most important proof that emerges from the life of Boniface is his *faithful communion with the Apostolic See*, which was a firm and central reference point of his missionary work; he always preserved this communion as a rule of his mission and left it, as it were, as his will.

In a letter to Pope Zachary, he said: "I never cease to invite and to submit to obedience to the Apostolic See those who desire to remain in the Catholic faith and in the unity of the Roman Church and all those whom God grants to me as listeners and disciples in my mission" (*Epist.* 50: in *ibid.*, p. 81).

One result of this commitment was the steadfast spirit of cohesion around the Successor of Peter which Boniface

transmitted to the Church in his mission territory, uniting England, Germany and France with Rome and thereby effectively contributing to planting those Christian roots of Europe which were to produce abundant fruit in the centuries to come.

Boniface also deserves our attention for a third characteristic: he encouraged *the encounter between the Christian-Roman culture and the German culture.* Indeed, he knew that humanizing and evangelizing culture was an integral part of his mission as Bishop.

In passing on the ancient patrimony of Christian values, he grafted on to the Germanic populations a new, more human lifestyle, thanks to which the inalienable rights of the person were more widely respected. As a true son of St. Benedict, he was able to combine prayer and labour (manual and intellectual), pen and plough.

Boniface's courageous witness is an invitation to us all to welcome God's word into our lives as an essential reference point, to love the Church passionately, to feel coresponsible for her future, to seek her unity around the Successor of Peter.

At the same time, he reminds us that Christianity, by encouraging the dissemination of culture, furthers human progress. It is now up to us to be equal to such a prestigious patrimony and to make it fructify for the benefit of the generations to come.

His ardent zeal for the Gospel never fails to impress me. At the age of 41 he left a beautiful and fruitful monastic life, the life of a monk and teacher, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the simple, to barbarians; once again, at the

age of 80, he went to a region in which he foresaw his martyrdom.

By comparing his ardent faith, this zeal for the Gospel, with our own often lukewarm and bureaucratized faith, we see what we must do and how to renew our faith, in order to give the precious pearl of the Gospel as a gift to our time.

Appeal

It was with deep sorrow that I learned of the murders of two young British soldiers and a policeman in Northern Ireland. As I assure the families of the victims and the injured of my spiritual closeness, I condemn in the strongest terms these abominable acts of terrorism which, apart from desecrating human life, seriously endanger the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland and risk destroying the great hopes generated by this process in the region and throughout the world. I ask the Lord that no one will again give in to the horrendous temptation of violence and that all will increase their efforts to continue building — through the patient effort of dialogue — a peaceful, just and reconciled society.

Wednesday, 11 March 2009

Ambrose Autpert

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Church lives in people and those who want to know the Church better, to understand her mystery, must consider the people who have seen and lived her message, her mystery.

In the Wednesday Catechesis I have therefore been speaking for some time of people from whom we can learn what the Church is. We began with the Apostles and Fathers of the Church and we have gradually reached the eighth century, Charlemagne's period.

Today I want to talk about Ambrose Autpert, a lesser known author; in fact, the majority of his works were attributed to other, better known people, from St Ambrose of Milan to St Ildefonsus, not to mention those that the monks of Monte Cassino claimed came from the pen of an abbot of theirs of the same name who lived almost a century later.

Apart from a few brief autobiographical notes in his important commentary on the *Apocalypse,* we have little information about his life. Yet, an attentive reading of the works whose authorship the critic recognizes makes it possible, little by little, to discover in his teaching a precious theological and spiritual treasure for our time too.

Born into a noble family in Provence — according to his late biographer, Giovanni — Ambrose Autpert was at the court of the Frankish King Pepin the Short where, in addition to his function as official, he somehow also played the role of tutor to the future Emperor Charlemagne. Autpert, probably in the retinue of Pope Stephen II, who in

753-54 went to the Frankish court, came to Italy and had the opportunity of visiting the famous Benedictine Abbey of St Vincent, located near the sources of the River Volturno in the Duchy of Benevento. Founded at the beginning of the century by three brothers from Benevento — Pal-done, Tatone and Tasone — the abbey was known as an oasis of classical and Christian culture.

Shortly after his visit, Ambrose Autpert decided to embrace the religious life and entered that monastery where he acquired an appropriate education, especially in the fields of theology and spirituality, in accordance with the tradition of the Fathers.

In about the year 761, he was ordained a priest and on 4 October 777 he was elected abbot with the support of the Frankish monks despite the opposition of the Lombards, who favoured Potone the Lombard. The nationalistic tension in the background did not diminish in the subsequent months. As a result, in the following year, 778, Autpert decided to resign and to seek shelter, together with several Frankish monks, in Spoleto where he could count on Charlemagne's protection.

This, however, did not solve the dissension at St Vincent's Monastery. A few years later, when on the death of the abbot who had succeeded Autpert, Potone himself was elected as his successor (a. 782), the dispute flared up again and even led to the denunciation of the new abbot to Charlemagne. The latter sent the contenders to the tribunal of the Pontiff who summoned them to Rome. Autpert was also called as a witness. However, he died suddenly on the journey, perhaps murdered, on 30 January 784.

Ambrose Autpert was a monk and abbot in an epoch marked by strong political tensions which also had repercussions on life within the monasteries. We have frequent and disturbing echoes of them in his writings. He reports, for example, the contradiction between the splendid external appearance of monasteries and the tepidity of the monks: this criticism was also certainly directed at his own abbey. He wrote for his monastery the *Life* of the three founders with the clear intention of offering the new generation of monks a term of reference to measure up to.

He also pursued a similar aim in a small ascetic treatise *Conflictus vitiorum atque virtutum*("Combat between the vices and the virtues"), which met with great acclaim in the Middle Ages and was published in 1473 in Utrecht, under Gregory the Great's name and, a year later, in Strasbourg under that of St Augustine.

In it Ambrose Autpert intends to give the monks a practical training in how to face spiritual combat day after day. Significantly he applies the affirmation in 2 Tim 3:12: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted", no longer by external forces but by the assault that the Christian must face within him on the part of the forces of evil. Twenty-four pairs of fighters are presented in a sort of disputation: every vice seeks to lure the soul by subtle reasoning, whereas the respective virtue rebuffs these insinuations, preferably by using words of Scripture.

In this treatise on the combat between the vices and the virtues, Autpert sets *contemptus mundi* (contempt for the world) against *cupiditas* (greed) which becomes an important figure in the spirituality of monks. This contempt for the world is not a contempt for Creation, for the

beauty and goodness of Creation and of the Creator, but a contempt for the false vision of the world that is presented to us and suggested to us precisely by covetousness. It insinuates that "having" is the supreme value of our being, of our life in the world, and seems important. And thus it falsifies the creation of the world and destroys the world.

Autpert then remarks that the acquisitive greed of the rich and powerful in the society of his time also exists within the souls of monks and thus he writes a treatise entitled *De cupiditate,* in which, together with the Apostle Paul, he denounces greed from the outset as the root of all evil.

He writes: "In the earth's soil various sharp thorns spring from different roots; in the human heart, on the other hand, the stings of all the vices sprout from a single root, greed" *(De cupiditate* I: CCCM 27B, p. 963).
In the light of the present global financial crisis, this report reveals its full timeliness. We see that it was precisely from this root of covetousness that the crisis sprang. Ambrose imagines the objection that the rich and powerful might raise, saying: but we are not monks, certain ascetic requirements do not apply to us.

And he answers: "What you say is true, but for you, in the manner of your class and in accordance with your strength, the straight and narrow way applies because the Lord has proposed only two doors and two ways (that is, the narrow door and the wide door, the steep road and the easy one); he has not pointed to a third door or a third way" (loc. cit., p. 978).

He sees clearly that life-styles differ widely. Nonetheless the duty to combat greed, to fight the desire to possess,

to appear, and the false concept of freedom as the faculty to dispose of all things as one pleases applies to the man in this world too and also to the rich. The rich person must also find the authentic road of truth, of love, and thus of an upright life.

As a prudent pastor of souls, Autpert was thus able to speak a word of comfort at the end of his penitential homily: "I have not spoken against the greedy, but against greed, not against nature but against vice" (loc. cit., p. 981).

Ambrose Autpert's most important work is without a doubt his commentary on the *Apocalypse [Expositio in Apocalypsim]* in 10 volumes: this constitutes, centuries later, the first broad commentary in the Latin world on the last book of Sacred Scripture. This work was the fruit of many years' work, carried out in two phases between 758 and 767, hence prior to his election as abbot.

In the premise he is careful to indicate his sources, something that was not usual in the Middle Ages. Through what was perhaps his most significant source, the commentary of Bishop Primasius of Hadrumetum, written in about the middle of the sixth century, Autpert came into contact with the interpretation of the *Apocalypse* bequeathed to us by Ticonius, an African who lived a generation before St Augustine. He was not a Catholic; he belonged to the schismatic Donatist Church, yet he was a great theologian. In his commentary he sees the *Apocalypse* above all as a reflection of the mystery of the Church.

Ticonius had reached the conviction that the Church was a bipartite body: on the one hand, he says, she belongs to

Christ, but there is another part of the Church that belongs to the devil. Augustine read this commentary and profited from it but strongly emphasized that the Church is in Christ's hands, that she remains his Body, forming one with him, sharing in the mediation of grace.

He therefore stresses that the Church can never be separated from Jesus Christ. In his interpretation of the *Apocalypse,* similar to that of Ticonius, Autpert is not so much concerned with the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time as rather with the consequences that derive for the Church of the present from his First Coming, his Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

And he speaks very important words to us: in reality Christ "must be born, die and be raised daily in us, who are his Body" *(In Apoc.*, III: CCCM, 27, p. 205).

In the context of the mystic dimension that invests every Christian he looks to Mary as a model of the Church, a model for all of us because Christ must also be born in and among us.

Under the guidance of the Fathers, who saw the "woman clothed with the sun" of Rv 12:1 as an image of the Church, Autpert argues: "the Blessed and devout Virgin... daily gives birth to new peoples from which the general Body of the Mediator is formed. It is therefore not surprising if she, in whose blessed womb the Church herself deserved to be united with her Head, represents the type of the Church".

In this sense Autpert considers the Virgin Mary's role decisive in the work of the Redemption (cf. also his homilies *In purification S. Mariae* and *In adsumptione S. Mariae).* His great veneration and profound love for the

Mother of God sometimes inspired in him formulations that in a certain way anticipated those of St Bernard and of Franciscan mysticism, yet without ever deviating to disputable forms of sentimentalism because he never separates Mary from the mystery of the Church.

Therefore, with good reason, Ambrose Autpert is considered the first great Mariologist in the West. He considers that the profound study of the sacred sciences, especially meditation on the Sacred Scriptures, which he describes as "the ineffable sky, the unfathomable abyss" should be combined with the devotion that he believed must free the soul from attachment to earthly and transient pleasures *(In Apoc.* Ix).

In the beautiful prayer with which his commentary on the *Apocalypse* ends, underlining the priority that must be given to love in all theological research, he addresses God with these words: "When you are intellectually examined by us, you are not revealed as you truly are: when you are loved, you are attained".

Today we can see in Ambrose Autpert a personality who lived in a time of powerful political exploitation of the Church, in which nationalism and tribalism had disfigured the face of the Church. But he, in the midst of all these difficulties with which we too are familiar, was able to discover the true face of the Church in Mary, in the Saints, and he was thus able to understand what it means to be a Catholic, to be a Christian, to live on the word of God, to enter into this abyss and thus to live the mystery of the Mother of God: to give new life to the Word of God, to offer to the Word of God one's own flesh in the present time.

And with all his theological knowledge, the depth of his knowledge, Autpert was able to understand that with merely theological research God cannot truly be known as he is. Love alone reaches him. Let us hear this message and pray the Lord to help us to live the mystery of the Church today in our time.

Wednesday, 22 April 2009

John Damascene

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I should like to speak about John Damascene, a personage of prime importance in the history of Byzantine Theology, a great Doctor in the history of the Universal Church. Above all he was an eyewitness of the passage from the Greek and Syrian Christian cultures shared by the Eastern part of the Byzantine Empire, to the Islamic culture, which spread through its military conquests in the territory commonly known as the Middle or Near East. John, born into a wealthy Christian family, at an early age assumed the role, perhaps already held by his father, of Treasurer of the Caliphate. Very soon, however, dissatisfied with life at court, he decided on a monastic life, and entered the monastery of Mar Saba, near Jerusalem. This was around the year 700. He never again left the monastery, but dedicated all his energy to ascesis and literary work, not disdaining a certain amount of pastoral activity, as is shown by his numerous homilies. His liturgical commemoration is on the 4 December. Pope Leo XIII proclaimed him Doctor of the Universal Church in 1890.

In the East, his best remembered works are the three *Discourses against those who calumniate the Holy Images*, which were condemned after his death by the iconoclastic Council of Hieria (754). These discourses, however, were also the fundamental grounds for his rehabilitation and canonization on the part of the Orthodox Fathers summoned to the Council of Nicaea (787), the Seventh Ecumenical Council. In these texts it is possible to trace the first important theological attempts to legitimise the veneration of sacred images, relating them to

the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

John Damascene was also among the first to distinguish, in the cult, both public and private, of the Christians, between worship *(latreia),* and veneration *(proskynesis)*: the first can only be offered to God, spiritual above all else, the second, on the other hand, can make use of an image to address the one whom the image represents. Obviously the Saint can in no way be identified with the material of which the icon is composed. This distinction was immediately seen to be very important in finding an answer in Christian terms to those who considered universal and eternal the strict Old Testament prohibition against the use of cult images. This was also a matter of great debate in the Islamic world, which accepts the Jewish tradition of the total exclusion of cult images. Christians, on the other hand, in this context, have discussed the problem and found a justification for the veneration of images. John Damascene writes, "In other ages God had not been represented in images, being incorporate and faceless. But since God has now been seen in the flesh, and lived among men, I represent that part of God which is visible. I do not venerate matter, but the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to live in matter and bring about my salvation through matter. I will not cease therefore to venerate that matter through which my salvation was achieved. But I do not venerate it in absolute terms as God! How could that which, from non-existence, has been given existence, be God?... But I also venerate and respect all the rest of matter which has brought me salvation, since it is full of energy and Holy graces. Is not the wood of the Cross, three times blessed, matter?... And the ink, and the most Holy Book of the Gospels, are they not matter? The redeeming altar which dispenses the Bread of life, is it not matter?...

And, before all else, are not the flesh and blood of Our Lord matter? Either we must suppress the sacred nature of all these things, or we must concede to the tradition of the Church the veneration of the images of God and that of the friends of God who are sanctified by the name they bear, and for this reason are possessed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Do not, therefore, offend matter: it is not contemptible, because nothing that God has made is contemptible" (cf.*Contra imaginum calumniatores,* 1, 16, ed. Kotter, pp. 89-90). We see that as a result of the Incarnation, matter is seen to have become divine, is seen as the habitation of God. It is a new vision of the world and of material reality. God became flesh and flesh became truly the habitation of God, whose glory shines in the human Face of Christ. Thus the arguments of the Doctor of the East are still extremely relevant today, considering the very great dignity that matter has acquired through the Incarnation, capable of becoming, through faith, a sign and a sacrament, efficacious in the meeting of man with God. John Damascene remains, therefore, a privileged witness of the cult of icons, which would come to be one of the most distinctive aspects of Eastern spirituality up to the present day. It is, however, a form of cult which belongs simply to the Christian faith, to the faith in that God who became flesh and was made visible. The teaching of Saint John Damascene thus finds its place in the tradition of the universal Church, whose sacramental doctrine foresees that material elements taken from nature can become vehicles of grace by virtue of the invocation (*epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by the confession of the true faith.

John Damascene extends these fundamental ideas to the veneration of the relics of Saints, on the basis of the conviction that the Christian Saints, having become partakers of the Resurrection of Christ, cannot be considered

simply "dead". Numbering, for example, those whose relics or images are worthy of veneration, John states in his third discourse in defence of images: "First of all (let us venerate) those among whom God reposed, he alone Holy, who reposes among the Saints (cf. Is 57:15), such as the Mother of God and all the Saints. These are those who, as far as possible, have made themselves similar to God by their own will; and by God's presence in them, and his help, they are really called gods (cf. Ps 82[81]:6), not by their nature, but by contingency, just as the red-hot iron is called fire, not by its nature, but by contingency and its participation in the fire. He says in fact : you shall be holy, because I am Holy (cf. Lv 19:2)" (III, 33, col. 1352 A). After a series of references of this kind, John Damascene was able serenely to deduce: "God, who is good, and greater than any goodness, was not content with the contemplation of himself, but desired that there should be beings benefited by him, who might share in his goodness: therefore he created from nothing all things, visible and invisible, including man, a reality visible and invisible. And he created him envisaging him and creating him as a being capable of thought (*ennoema ergon*), enriched with the word (*logo[i] sympleroumenon*), and orientated towards the spirit (*pneumati teleioumenon*)" (II, 2, *PG* 94, col. 865A).

And to clarify this thought further, he adds: "We must allow ourselves to be filled with wonder (*thaumazein*) at all the works of Providence (*tes pronoias erga*), to accept and praise them all, overcoming any temptation to identify in them aspects which to many may seem unjust or iniquitous, (*adika*), and admitting instead that the project of God (*pronoia*) goes beyond man's capacity to know or to understand (*agnoston kai akatalepton*), while on the contrary only he may know our thoughts, our actions, and even our future" (II, 29, *PG* 94, col. 964c). Plato had

in fact already said that all philosophy begins with wonder. Our faith, too, begins with wonder at the very fact of the Creation, and at the beauty of God who makes himself visible.

The optimism of the contemplation of nature (*physike theoria*), of seeing in the visible creation the good, the beautiful, the true, this Christian optimism, is not ingenuous: it takes account of the wound inflicted on human nature by the freedom of choice desired by God and misused by man, with all the consequences of widespread discord which have derived from it. From this derives the need, clearly perceived by John Damascene, that nature, in which the goodness and beauty of God are reflected, wounded by our fault, "should be strengthened and renewed" by the descent of the Son of God in the flesh, after God had tried in many ways and on many occasions, to show that he had created man so that he might exist not only in "being", but also in "well-being" (cf. *The Orthodox Faith*, II, 1, PG 94, col. 981). With passionate eagerness John explains: "It was necessary for nature to be strengthened and renewed, and for the path of virtue to be indicated and effectively taught (*didachthenai aretes hodòn*), the path that leads away from corruption and towards eternal life.... So there appeared on the horizon of history the great sea of love that God bears towards man (*philanthropias pelagos*)".... It is a fine expression. We see on one side the beauty of Creation, and on the other the destruction wrought by the fault of man. But we see in the Son of God, who descends to renew nature, the sea of love that God has for man. John Damascene continues: "he himself, the Creator and the Lord, fought for his Creation, transmitting to it his teaching by example.... And so the Son of God, while still remaining in the form of God, lowered the skies and descended... to his servants... achieving the newest thing of

all, the only thing really new under the sun, through which he manifested the infinite power of God" (III, I, *PG* 94, col. 981c-984B).

We may imagine the comfort and joy which these words, so rich in fascinating images, poured into the hearts of the faithful. We listen to them today, sharing the same feelings with the Christians of those far-off days: God desires to repose in us, he wishes to renew nature through our conversion, he wants to allow us to share in his divinity. May the Lord help us to make these words the substance of our lives.

Wednesday, 6 May 2009

Saint Theodore the Studite

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Saint we meet today, St Theodore the Studite, brings us to the middle of the medieval Byzantine period, in a somewhat turbulent period from the religious and political perspectives. St Theodore was born in 759 into a devout noble family: his mother Theoctista and an uncle, Plato, Abbot of the Monastery of Saccudium in Bithynia, are venerated as saints. Indeed it was his uncle who guided him towards monastic life, which he embraced at the age of 22.

He was ordained a priest by Patriarch Tarasius, but soon ended his relationship with him because of the toleration the Patriarch showed in the case of the adulterous marriage of the Emperor Constantine This led to Theodore's exile in 796 to Thessalonica.

He was reconciled with the imperial authority the following year under the Empress Irene, whose benevolence induced Theodore and Plato to transfer to the urban monastery of Studios, together with a large portion of the community of the monks of Saccudium, in order to avoid the Saracen incursions. So it was that the important "Studite Reform" began.

Theodore's personal life, however, continued to be eventful. With his usual energy, he became the leader of the resistance against the iconoclasm of Leo V, the Armenian who once again opposed the existence of images and icons in the Church. The procession of icons organized by the monks of Studios evoked a reaction from the police. Between 815 and 821, Theodore was

scourged, imprisoned and exiled to various places in Asia Minor.

In the end he was able to return to Constantinople but not to his own monastery. He therefore settled with his monks on the other side of the Bosporus. He is believed to have died in Prinkipo on 11 November 826, the day on which he is commemorated in the Byzantine Calendar.

Theodore distinguished himself within Church history as one of the great reformers of monastic life and as a defender of the veneration of sacred images, beside St Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, in the second phase of the iconoclasm.

Theodore had realized that the issue of the veneration of icons was calling into question the truth of the Incarnation itself. In his three books, the *Antirretikoi (Confutation)*, Theodore makes a comparison between eternal intra-Trinitarian relations, in which the existence of each of the divine Persons does not destroy their unity, and the relations between Christ's two natures, which do not jeopardize in him the one Person of the *Logos.*

He also argues: abolishing veneration of the icon of Christ would mean repudiating his redeeming work, given that, in assuming human nature, the invisible eternal *Word* appeared in visible human flesh and in so doing sanctified the entire visible cosmos. Theodore and his monks, courageous witnesses in the period of the iconoclastic persecutions, were inseparably bound to the reform of coenobitic life in the Byzantine world. Their importance was notable if only for an external circumstance: their number. Whereas the number of monks in monasteries of that time did not exceed 30 or 40, we

know from the *Life of Theodore* of the existence of more than 1,000 Studite monks overall. Theodore himself tells us of the presence in his monastery of about 300 monks; thus we see the enthusiasm of faith that was born within the context of this man's being truly informed and formed by faith itself.

However, more influential than these numbers was the new spirit the Founder impressed on coenobitic life. In his writings, he insists on the urgent need for a conscious return to the teaching of the Fathers, especially to St Basil, the first legislator of monastic life, and to St Dorotheus of Gaza, a famous spiritual Father of the Palestinian desert.

Theodore's characteristic contribution consists in insistence on the need for order and submission on the monks' part. During the persecutions they had scattered and each one had grown accustomed to living according to his own judgement. Then, as it was possible to re-establish community life, it was necessary to do the utmost to make the monastery once again an organic community, a true family, or, as St Theodore said, a true "Body of Christ". In such a community the reality of the Church as a whole is realized concretely.

Another of St Theodore's basic convictions was this: monks, differently from lay people, take on the commitment to observe the Christian duties with greater strictness and intensity. For this reason they make a special profession which belongs to the *hagiasmata* (*consecrations*), and it is, as it were, a "new Baptism", symbolized by their taking the habit.

Characteristic of monks in comparison with lay people, then, is the commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience. In addressing his monks, Theodore spoke in a practical, at times picturesque manner about poverty, but poverty in the following of Christ is from the start an essential element of monasticism and also points out a way for all of us.

The renunciation of private property, this freedom from material things, as well as moderation and simplicity apply in a radical form only to monks, but the spirit of this renouncement is equal for all. Indeed, we must not depend on material possessions but instead must learn renunciation, simplicity, austerity and moderation. Only in this way can a supportive society develop and the great problem of poverty in this world be overcome.

Therefore, in this regard the monks' radical poverty is essentially also a path for us all. Then when he explains the temptations against chastity, Theodore does not conceal his own experience and indicates the way of inner combat to find self-control and hence respect for one's own body and for the body of the other as a temple of God.

However, the most important renunciations in his opinion are those required by obedience, because each one of the monks has his own way of living, and fitting into the large community of 300 monks truly involves a new way of life which he describes as the "martyrdom of submission".

Here too the monks' example serves to show us how necessary this is for us, because, after the original sin, man has tended to do what he likes. The first principle is for the life of the world, all the rest must be subjected to it.

However, in this way, if each person is self-centred, the social structure cannot function.

Only by learning to fit into the common freedom, to share and to submit to it, learning legality, that is, submission and obedience to the rules of the common good and life in common, can society be healed, as well as the *self*, of the pride of being the centre of the world.

Thus St Theodore, with fine introspection, helped his monks and ultimately also helps us to understand true life, to resist the temptation to set up our own will as the supreme rule of life and to preserve our true personal identity — which is always an identity shared with others — and peace of heart.

For Theodore the Studite an important virtue on a par with obedience and humility is *philergia*, that is, the love of work, in which he sees a criterion by which to judge the quality of personal devotion: the person who is fervent and works hard in material concerns, he argues, will be the same in those of the spirit. Therefore he does not permit the monk to dispense with work, including manual work, under the pretext of prayer and contemplation; for work — to his mind and in the whole monastic tradition — is actually a means of finding God.

Theodore is not afraid to speak of work as the "sacrifice of the monk", as his "liturgy", even as a sort of Mass through which monastic life becomes angelic life. And it is precisely in this way that the world of work must be humanized and man, through work, becomes more himself and closer to God.

One consequence of this unusual vision is worth remembering: precisely because it is the fruit of a form of "liturgy", the riches obtained from common work must not serve for the monks' comfort but must be ear-marked for assistance to the poor. Here we can all understand the need for the proceeds of work to be a good for all.

Obviously the "Studites'" work was not only manual: they had great importance in the religious and cultural development of the Byzantine civilization as calligraphers, painters, poets, educators of youth, school teachers and librarians.

Although he exercised external activities on a truly vast scale, Theodore did not let himself be distracted from what he considered closely relevant to his role as superior: being the spiritual father of his monks. He knew what a crucial influence both his good mother and his holy uncle Plato —whom he described with the significant title "father" — had had on his life.

Thus he himself provided spiritual direction for the monks. Every day, his biographer says, after evening prayer he would place himself in front of the iconostasis to listen to the confidences of all. He also gave spiritual advice to many people outside the monastery.

The *Spiritual Testament* and the *Letters* highlight his open and affectionate character, and show that true spiritual friendships were born from his fatherhood both in the monastic context and outside it.

The *Rule*, known by the name of *Hypotyposis*, codified shortly after Theodore's death, was adopted, with a few modifications, on Mount Athos when in 962 St Athanasius Anthonite founded the Great Laura there, and in the

Kievan Rus', when at the beginning of the second millennium St Theodosius introduced it into the Laura of the Grottos.

Understood in its genuine meaning, the *Rule* has proven to be unusually up to date. Numerous trends today threaten the unity of the common faith and impel people towards a sort of dangerous spiritual individualism and spiritual pride. It is necessary to strive to defend and to increase the perfect unity of the Body of Christ, in which the peace of order and sincere personal relations in the Spirit can be harmoniously composed.

It may be useful to return at the end to some of the main elements of Theodore's spiritual doctrine: love for the Lord incarnate and for his visibility in the Liturgy and in icons; fidelity to Baptism and the commitment to live in communion with the Body of Christ, also understood as the communion of Christians with each other; a spirit of poverty, moderation and renunciation; chastity, self-control, humility and obedience against the primacy of one's own will that destroys the social fabric and the peace of souls; love for physical and spiritual work; spiritual love born from the purification of one's own conscience, one's own soul, one's own life.

Let us seek to comply with these teachings that really do show us the path of true life.

Wednesday, 27 May 2009

Rabanus Maurus

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak of a truly extraordinary figure of the Latin West: Rabanus Maurus, a monk. Together with men such as Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede and Ambrose Autpert of whom I have already spoken in previous Catecheses, during the centuries of the so-called "High Middle Ages" he was able to preserve the contact with the great culture of the ancient scholars and of the Christian Fathers.

Often remembered as the *"praeceptor Germaniae"*, Rabanus Maurus was extraordinarily prolific. With his absolutely exceptional capacity for work, he perhaps made a greater contribution than anyone else to keeping alive that theological, exegetic and spiritual culture on which successive centuries were to draw.

He was referred to by great figures belonging to the monastic world such as Peter Damian, Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as by an ever increasing number of *"clerics"* of the secular clergy who gave life to one of the most beautiful periods of the fruitful flourishing of human thought in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Born in Mainz in about 780, Rabanus entered the monastery at a very early age. He was nicknamed "Maurus" after the young St Maur who, according to *Book II of the Dialogues* of St Gregory the Great, was entrusted by his parents, Roman nobles, to the Abbot Benedict of Norcia. Alone this precocious insertion of Rabanus as *"puer oblatus"* in the Benedictine monastic world and the benefits he drew from it for his own human, cultural and spiritual

growth, were to provide an interesting glimpse not only of the life of monks and of the Church, but also of the whole of society of his time, usually described as "Carolingian".

About them or perhaps about himself, Rabanus Maurus wrote: "There are some who have had the good fortune to be introduced to the knowledge of Scripture from a tender age (*"a cunabulis suis"*) and who were so well-nourished with the food offered to them by Holy Church as to be fit for promotion, with the appropriate training, to the highest of sacred Orders" (*PL* 107, col. 419 BC).

The extraordinary culture for which Rabanus Maurus was distinguished soon brought him to the attention of the great of his time. He became the advisor of princes. He strove to guarantee the unity of the Empire and, at a broader cultural level, never refused to give those who questioned him a carefully considered reply, which he found preferably in the Bible or in the texts of the Holy Fathers.

First elected Abbot of the famous Monastery of Fulda and then appointed Archbishop of Mainz, his native city, this did not stop him from pursuing his studies, showing by the example of his life that it is possible to be at the same time available to others without depriving oneself of the appropriate time for reflection, study and meditation. Thus Rabanus Maurus was exegete, philosopher, poet, pastor and man of God. The Dioceses of Fulda, Mainz, Limburg and Breslau (Wroclaw) venerate him as a saint or blessed. His works fill at least six volumes of Migne's*Patrologia Latina.* It is likely that we are indebted to him for one of the most beautiful hymns known to the Latin Church, the *"Veni Creator Spiritus"*, an extraordinary synthesis of Christian pneumatology.

In fact, Rabanus' first theological work is expressed in the form of poetry and had as its subject the mystery of the Holy Cross in a book entitled: *"De laudibus Sanctae Crucis"*, conceived in such a way as to suggest not only a conceptual content but also more exquisitely artistic stimuli, by the use of both poetic and pictorial forms within the same manuscript codex.

Suggesting the image of the Crucified Christ between the lines of his writing, he says, for example: "This is the image of the Saviour who, with the position of his limbs, makes sacred for us the most salubrious, gentle and loving form of the Cross, so that by believing in his Name and obeying his commandments we may obtain eternal life thanks to his Passion. However, every time we raise our eyes to the Cross, let us remember the one who died for us to save us from the powers of darkness, accepting death to make us heirs to eternal life" (*Lib. I*, fig. 1, *PL* 107 col. 151 C).

This method of combining all the arts, the intellect, the heart and the senses, which came from the East, was to experience a great development in the West, reaching unparalleled heights in the miniature codices of the Bible and in other works of faith and art that flourished in Europe until the invention of printing and beyond.

In Rabanus Maurus, in any case, is shown an extraordinary awareness of the need to involve, in the experience of faith, not only the mind and the heart, but also the senses through those other aspects of aesthetic taste and human sensitivity that lead man to benefit from the truth with his whole self, "mind, soul and body". This is important: faith is not only thought but also touches the whole of our being.

Since God became Man in flesh and blood, since he entered the tangible world, we must seek and encounter God in all the dimensions of our being. Thus the reality of God, through faith, penetrates our being and transforms it. This is why Rabanus Maurus focused his attention above all on the Liturgy as a synthesis of all the dimensions of our perception of reality. This intuition of Rabanus Maurus makes it extraordinarily up to date.

Also famous among his opus are the *"Hymns"*, suggested for use especially in liturgical celebrations. In fact, since Rabanus was primarily a monk, his interest in the liturgical celebration was taken for granted. However, he did not devote himself to the art of poetry as an end in itself but, rather, used art and every other form of erudition as a means for deepening knowledge of the word of God. He therefore sought with great application and rigour to introduce his contemporaries, especially ministers (Bishops, priests and deacons), to an understanding of the profoundly theological and spiritual meaning of all the elements of the liturgical celebration.

He thus sought to understand and to present to others the theological meanings concealed in the rites, drawing from the Bible and from the tradition of the Fathers. For the sake of honesty and to give greater weight to his explanations, he did not hesitate to indicate the Patristic sources to which he owed his knowledge. Nevertheless he used them with freedom and with careful discernment, continuing the development of patristic thought.
At the end of the *"Epistola prima"*, addressed to a "chorbishop" of the Diocese of Mainz, for example, after answering the requests for clarification concerning the behaviour to adopt in the exercise of pastoral responsibility, he continues, "We have written all these things for you as we deduced them from the Sacred Scriptures and

the canons of the Fathers. Yet, most holy man, may you take your decisions as you think best, case by case, seeking to temper your evaluation in such a way as to guarantee discretion in all things because it is the mother of all the virtues" (*Epistulae,PL* 112, col. 1510 C).

Thus the continuity of the Christian faith which originates in the word of God becomes visible; yet it is always alive, develops and is expressed in new ways, ever consistent with the whole construction, with the whole edifice of faith.

Since an integral part of liturgical celebration is the word of God Rabanus Maurus dedicated himself to it with the greatest commitment throughout his life. He produced appropriate exegetic explanations for almost all the biblical books of the Old and New Testament, with clearly pastoral intentions that he justified with words such as these: "I have written these things... summing up the explanations and suggestions of many others, not only in order to offer a service to the poor reader, who may not have many books at his disposal, but also to make it easier for those who in many things do not succeed in entering in depth into an understanding of the meanings discovered by the Fathers" (*Commentariorum in Matthaeum praefatio, PL* 107, col. 727 D).

In fact, in commenting on the biblical texts he drew amply from the ancient Fathers, with special preference for Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

His outstanding pastoral sensitivity later led him to occupy himself above all with one of the problems most acutely felt by the faithful and sacred ministers of his time: that of Penance. Indeed, he compiled the *"Penitenziari"* — this is what he called them — in which, accord-

ing to the sensibility of his day, sins and the corresponding punishments were listed, using as far as possible reasons found in the Bible, in the decisions of the Councils and in Papal Decretals. The "Carolingians" also used these texts in their attempt to reform the Church and society.

Corresponding with the same pastoral intentions, were works such as *"De disciplina ecclesiastica"* and *"De institution clericorum"*, in which, drawing above all from Augustine, Rabanus explained to the simple and to the clergy of his diocese the basic elements of the Christian faith: they were like little catechisms.

I would like to end the presentation of this great "churchman" by quoting some of his words in which his basic conviction is clearly reflected: "Those who are negligent in contemplation (*"qui vacare Deo negligit"*), deprive themselves of the vision of God's light; then those who let themselves be indiscreetly invaded by worries and allow their thoughts to be overwhelmed by the tumult of worldly things condemn themselves to the absolute impossibility of penetrating the secrets of the invisible God" (*Lib* I, *PL* 112, col. 1263 A).

I think that Rabanus Maurus is also addressing these words to us today: in periods of work, with its frenetic pace, and in holiday periods we must reserve moments for God. We must open our lives to him, addressing to him a thought, a reflection, a brief prayer, and above all we must not forget Sunday as the Lord's Day, the day of the Liturgy, in order to perceive God's beauty itself in the beauty of our churches, in our sacred music and in the word of God, letting him enter our being. Only in this way does our life become great, become true life.

Wednesday, 3 June 2009

Saints Cyril and Methodius

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to talk about Sts Cyril and Methodius, brothers by blood and in the faith, the so-called "Apostles to the Slays".

Cyril was born in Thessalonica to Leo, an imperial magistrate, in 826 or 827. He was the youngest of seven. As a child he learned the Slavonic language. When he was 14 years old he was sent to Constantinople to be educated and was companion to the young Emperor, Michael III.

In those years Cyril was introduced to the various university disciplines, including dialectics, and his teacher was Photius. After refusing a brilliant marriage he decided to receive holy Orders and became "librarian" at the Patriarchate. Shortly afterwards, wishing to retire in solitude, he went into hiding at a monastery but was soon discovered and entrusted with teaching the sacred and profane sciences. He carried out this office so well that he earned the nickname of "Philosopher".

In the meantime, his brother Michael (born in about 815), left the world after an administrative career in Macedonia, and withdrew to a monastic life on Mount Olympus in Bithynia, where he was given the name "Methodius" (a monk's monastic name had to begin with the same letter as his baptismal name) and became hegumen of the Monastery of Polychron.

Attracted by his brother's example, Cyril too decided to give up teaching and go to Mount Olympus to meditate and pray. A few years later (in about 861), the imperial government sent him on a mission to the Khazars on the

Sea of Azov who had asked for a scholar to be sent to them who could converse with both Jews and Saracens.

Cyril, accompanied by his brother Methodius, stayed for a long time in Crimea where he learned Hebrew and sought the body of Pope Clement I who had been exiled there. Cyril found Pope Clement's tomb and, when he made the return journey with his brother, he took Clement's precious relics with him.

Having arrived in Constantinople the two brothers were sent to Moravia by the Emperor Michael III, who had received a specific request from Prince Ratislav of Moravia: "Since our people rejected paganism", Ratislav wrote to Michael, "they have embraced the Christian law; but we do not have a teacher who can explain the true faith to us in our own language". The mission was soon unusually successful. By translating the liturgy into the Slavonic language the two brothers earned immense popularity.

However, this gave rise to hostility among the Frankish clergy who had arrived in Moravia before the Brothers and considered the territory to be under their ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In order to justify themselves, in 867 the two brothers travelled to Rome. On the way they stopped in Venice, where they had a heated discussion with the champions of the so-called "trilingual heresy" who claimed that there were only three languages in which it was lawful to praise God: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The two brothers obviously forcefully opposed this claim.

In Rome Cyril and Methodius were received by Pope Adrian II who led a procession to meet them in order to give a dignified welcome to St Clement's relics. The

Pope had also realized the great importance of their exceptional mission.

Since the middle of the first millennium, in fact, thousands of Slays had settled in those territories located between the two parts of the Roman Empire, the East and the West, whose relations were fraught with tension.

The Pope perceived that the Slav peoples would be able to serve as a bridge and thereby help to preserve the union between the Christians of both parts of the Empire. Thus he did not hesitate to approve the mission of the two brothers in Great Moravia, accepting and approving the use of the Slavonic language in the liturgy. The Slavonic Books were laid on the altar of St Mary of Phatmé (St Mary Major) and the liturgy in the Slavonic tongue was celebrated in the Basilicas of St Peter, St Andrew and St Paul.

Unfortunately, Cyril fell seriously ill in Rome. Feeling that his death was at hand, he wanted to consecrate himself totally to God as a monk in one of the Greek monasteries of the City (probably Santa Prassede) and took the monastic name of Cyril (his baptismal name was Constantine).

He then insistently begged his brother Methodius, who in the meantime had been ordained a Bishop, not to abandon their mission in Moravia and to return to the peoples there. He addressed this prayer to God: "Lord, my God... hear my prayers and keep the flock you have entrusted to me faithful .... Free them from the heresy of the three languages, gather them all in unity and make the people you have chosen agree in the true faith and confession". He died on 14 February 869.

Faithful to the pledge he had made with his brother, Methodius returned to Moravia and Pannonia (today, Hungary) the following year, 870, where once again he encountered the violent aversion of the Frankish missionaries who took him prisoner. He did not lose heart and when he was released in 873, he worked hard to organize the Church and train a group of disciples.

It was to the merit of these disciples that it was possible to survive the crisis unleashed after the death of Methodius on 6 April 885: persecuted and imprisoned, some of them were sold as slaves and taken to Venice where they were redeemed by a Constantinopolitan official who allowed them to return to the countries of the Slavonic Balkans.

Welcomed in Bulgaria, they were able to continue the mission that Methodius had begun and to disseminate the Gospel in the "Land of the Rus'".

God with his mysterious Providence thus availed himself of their persecution to save the work of the holy Brothers. Literary documentation of their work is extant. It suffices to think of texts such as the *Evangeliarium* (liturgical passages of the New Testament), the *Psalter,* various *liturgical texts* in Slavonic, on which both the Brothers had worked. Indeed, after Cyril's death, it is to Methodius and to his disciples that we owe the translation of the entire *Sacred Scriptures,* the *Nomocanone* and the *Book of the Fathers.*

Wishing now to sum up concisely the profile of the two Brothers, we should first recall the enthusiasm with which Cyril approached the writings of St Gregory of Nazianzus, learning from him the value of language in the transmission of the Revelation.

St Gregory had expressed the wish that Christ would speak through him: "I am a servant of the Word, so I put myself at the service of the Word".

Desirous of imitating Gregory in this service, Cyril asked Christ to deign to speak in Slavonic through him. He introduced his work of translation with the solemn invocation: "Listen, O all of you Slav Peoples, listen to the word that comes from God, the word that nourishes souls, the word that leads to the knowledge of God".

In fact, a few years before the Prince of Moravia had asked the Emperor Michael III to send missionaries to his country, it seems that Cyril and his brother Methodius, surrounded by a group of disciples, were already working on the project of collecting the Christian dogmas in books written in Slavonic.

The need for new graphic characters closer to the language spoken was therefore clearly apparent: so it was that the Glagolitic alphabet came into being. Subsequently modified, it was later designated by the name "Cyrillic", in honour of the man who inspired it.

It was a crucial event for the development *o*f the Slav civilization in general. Cyril and Methodius were convinced that the individual peoples could not claim to have received the Revelation fully unless they had heard it in their own language and read it in the characters proper to their own alphabet.

Methodius had the merit of ensuring that the work begun by his brother was not suddenly interrupted. While Cyril, the "Philosopher", was more inclined to contemplation, Methodius on the other hand had a leaning for the active life. Thanks to this he was able to lay the foundations of

the successive affirmation of what we might call the "Cyrillian-Methodian idea": it accompanied the Slav peoples in the different periods of their history, encouraging their cultural, national and religious development.

This was already recognized by Pope Pius XI in his Apostolic Letter *Quod Sanctum Cyrillum*, in which he described the two Brothers: "Sons of the East, with a Byzantine homeland, of Greek origin, for the Roman missions to reap Slav apostolic fruit" (*AAS* 19 [1927] 93-96).

The historic role they played was later officially proclaimed by Pope John Paul II who, with his Apostolic Letter *Egregiae Virtutis*, declared them Co-Patrons of Europe, together with St Benedict (31 December 1980; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 19 January 1981, p. 3).

Cyril and Methodius are in fact a classic example of what today is meant by the term "inculturation": every people must integrate the message revealed into its own culture and express its saving truth in its own language.

This implies a very demanding effort of "translation" because it requires the identification of the appropriate words to present anew, without distortion, the riches of the revealed word.

The two holy Brothers have left us a most important testimony of this, to which the Church also looks today in order to draw from it inspiration and guidelines.

Wednesday, 17 June 2009

Saint Odo of Cluny

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After a long pause, I would like to resume the presentation of important writers of the Eastern and Western Church in the Middle Ages because in their life and writings we see as in a mirror what it means to be Christian. Today I present to you the luminous figure of St Odo, Abbot of Cluny. He fits into that period of medieval monasticism which saw the surprising success in Europe of the life and spirituality inspired by the *Rule of St Benedict.*

In those centuries there was a wonderful increase in the number of cloisters that sprang up and branched out over the continent, spreading the Christian spirit and sensibility far and wide. St Odo takes us back in particular to Cluny, one of the most illustrious and famous monasteries in the Middle Ages that still today reveals to us, through its majestic ruins, the signs of a past rendered glorious by intense dedication to ascesis, study and, in a special way, to divine worship, endowed with decorum and beauty.

Odo was the second Abbot of Cluny. He was born in about 880, on the boundary between the Maine and the Touraine regions of France.

Odo's father consecrated him to the holy Bishop Martin of Tours, in whose beneficent shadow and memory he was to spend his entire life, which he ended close to St Martin's tomb.

His choice of religious consecration was preceded by the inner experience of a special moment of grace, of which

he himself spoke to another monk, John the Italian, who later became his biographer.

Odo was still an adolescent, about 16 years old, when one Christmas Eve he felt this prayer to the Virgin rise spontaneously to his lips: "My Lady, Mother of Mercy, who on this night gave birth to the Saviour, pray for me. May your glorious and unique experience of childbirth, O Most Devout Mother, be my refuge" (*Vita sancti Odonis,* I, 9: *PL* 133, 747).

The name "Mother of Mercy", with which young Odo then invoked the Virgin, was to be the title by which he always subsequently liked to address Mary. He also called her "the one Hope of the world ... thanks to whom the gates of Heaven were opened to us" (*In veneratione S. Mariae Magdalenae: PL* 133, 721).

At that time Odo chanced to come across the *Rule of St Benedict* and to comment on it, "bearing, while not yet a monk, the light yoke of monks" (*ibid.*, I, 14, *PL* 133, 50).

In one of his sermons Odo was to celebrate Benedict as the "lamp that shines in the dark period of life" *(De sancto Benedicto abbate: PL* 133, 725), and to describe him as "a teacher of spiritual discipline" *(ibid., PL* 133, 727). He was to point out with affection that Christian piety, "with the liveliest gentleness commemorates him" in the knowledge that God raised him "among the supreme and elect Fathers of Holy Church" *(ibid., PL* 133, 722).

Fascinated by the Benedictine ideal, Odo left Tours and entered the Benedictine Abbey of Baume as a monk; he later moved to Cluny, of which in 927 he became abbot.

From that centre of spiritual life he was able to exercise a vast influence over the monasteries on the continent.

Various monasteries or coenobiums were able to benefit from his guidance and reform, including that of St Paul Outside-the-Walls. More than once Odo visited Rome and he even went as far as Subiaco, Monte Cassino and Salerno.

He actually fell ill in Rome in the summer of 942. Feeling that he was nearing his end, he was determined, and made every effort, to return to St Martin in Tours, where he died, in the Octave of the Saint's feast, on 18 November 942.

His biographer, stressing the "virtue of patience" that Odo possessed, gives a long list of his other virtues that include contempt of the world, zeal for souls and the commitment to peace in the Churches.

Abbot Odo's great aspirations were: concord between kings and princes, the observance of the commandments, attention to the poor, the correction of youth and respect for the elderly (cf. *Vita sancti Odonis*, I, 17: *PL* 133, 49).

He loved the cell in which he dwelled, "removed from the eyes of all, eager to please God alone" (*ibid.*, I, 14: *PL* 133, 49). However, he did not fail also to exercise, as a "superabundant source", the ministry of the word and to set an example, "regretting the immense wretchedness of this world" (*ibid.*, I, 17: *PL* 133, 51).

In a single monk, his biographer comments, were combined the different virtues that exist, which are found to be few and far between in other monasteries: "Jesus, in his goodness, drawing on the various gardens of monks,

in a small space created a paradise, in order to water the hearts of the faithful from its fountains" (*ibid.*, I, 14: *PL* 133,49).

In a passage from a sermon in honour of Mary of Magdala the Abbot of Cluny reveals to us how he conceived of monastic life: "Mary, who, seated at the Lord's feet, listened attentively to his words, is the symbol of the sweetness of contemplative life; the more its savour is tasted, the more it induces the mind to be detached from visible things and the tumult of the world's preoccupations" (*In ven. S. Mariae Magd., PL* 133, 717).

Odo strengthened and developed this conception in his other writings. From them transpire his love for interiority, a vision of the world as a brittle, precarious reality from which to uproot oneself, a constant inclination to detachment from things felt to be sources of anxiety, an acute sensitivity to the presence of evil in the various types of people and a deep eschatological aspiration.

This vision of the world may appear rather distant from our own; yet Odo's conception of it, his perception of the fragility of the world, values an inner life that is open to the other, to the love of one's neighbour, and in this very way transforms life and opens the world to God's light.

The "devotion" to the Body and Blood of Christ which Odo — in the face of a widespread neglect of them which he himself deeply deplored — always cultivated with conviction deserves special mention. Odo was in fact firmly convinced of the Real Presence, under the Eucharistic species, of the Body and Blood of the Lord, by virtue of the conversion of the "substance" of the bread and the wine.

He wrote: "God, Creator of all things, took the bread saying that this was his Body and that he would offer it for the world, and he distributed the wine, calling it his Blood"; now, "it is a law of nature that the change should come about in accordance with the Creator's command", and thus "nature immediately changes its usual condition: the bread instantly becomes flesh, and the wine becomes blood"; at the Lord's order, "the substance changes" (*Odonis Abb. Cluniac. occupatio*,ed. A. Swoboda, Leipzig 1900, p. 121).

Unfortunately, our abbot notes, this "sacrosanct mystery of the Lord's Body, in whom the whole salvation of the world consists", (*Collationes*, XXVIII: *PL* 133, 572), is celebrated carelessly.

"Priests", he warns, "who approach the altar unworthily, stain the bread, that is, the Body of Christ" (*ibid.*, *PL* 133, 572-573). Only those who are spiritually united to Christ may worthily participate in his Eucharistic Body: should the contrary be the case, to eat his Flesh and to drink his Blood would not be beneficial but rather a condemnation (cf. *ibid.*, xxx, *PL* 133, 575).

All this invites us to believe the truth of the Lord's presence with new force and depth. The presence in our midst of the Creator, who gives himself into our hands and transforms us as he transforms the bread and the wine, thus transforms the world.

St Odo was a true spiritual guide both for the monks and for the faithful of his time. In the face of the "immensity of the vices widespread in society, the remedy he strongly advised was that of a radical change of life, based on humility, austerity, detachment from ephemeral

things and adherence to those that are eternal (cf. *Collationes, xxx, PL* 133, 613).

In spite of the realism of his diagnosis on the situation of his time, Odo does not indulge in pessimism: "We do not say this", he explains, "in order to plunge those who wish to convert into despair. Divine mercy is always available; it awaits the hour of our conversion" (*ibid., PL* 133, 563). And he exclaims: "O ineffable bowels of divine piety! God pursues wrongs and yet protects sinners" (*ibid., PL* 133, 592).

Sustained by this conviction, the Abbot of Cluny used to like to pause to contemplate the mercy of Christ, the Saviour whom he describes evocatively as "a lover of men": *"amator hominum Christus"* (*ibid.,* LIII: *PL* 133, 637). He observes "Jesus took upon himself the scourging that would have been our due in order to save the creature he formed and loves (cf. *ibid., PL* 133, 638).

Here, a trait of the holy abbot appears that at first sight is almost hidden beneath the rigour of his austerity as a reformer: his deep, heartfelt kindness. He was austere, but above all he was good, a man of great goodness, a goodness that comes from contact with the divine goodness.

Thus Odo, his peers tell us, spread around him his overflowing joy. His biographer testifies that he never heard "such mellifluous words" on human lips (*ibid.,* I, 17: *PL* 133, 31).

His biographer also records that he was in the habit of asking the children he met along the way to sing, and that he would then give them some small token, and he adds: "Abbot Odo's words were full of joy ... his merriment instilled in our hearts deep joy" (*ibid.*, II, 5: *PL* 133, 63).

In this way the energetic yet at the same time lovable medieval abbot, enthusiastic about reform, with incisive action nourished in his monks, as well as in the lay faithful of his time, the resolution to progress swiftly on the path of Christian perfection.

Let us hope that his goodness, the joy that comes from faith, together with austerity and opposition to the world's vices, may also move our hearts, so that we too may find the source of the joy that flows from God's goodness.

Wednesday, 2 September 2009

Saint Peter Damian

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During the Catecheses of these Wednesdays I am commenting on several important people in the life of the Church from her origins. Today I would like to reflect on one of the most significant figures of the 11th century, St Peter Damian, a monk, a lover of solitude and at the same time a fearless man of the Church, committed personally to the task of reform, initiated by the Popes of the time.

He was born in Ravenna in 1007, into a noble family but in straitened circumstances. He was left an orphan and his childhood was not exempt from hardships and suffering, although his sister Roselinda tried to be a mother to him and his elder brother, Damian, adopted him as his son. For this very reason he was to be called Piero di Damiano, Pier Damiani [Peter of Damian, Peter Damian].

He was educated first at Faenza and then at Parma where, already at the age of 25, we find him involved in teaching. As well as a good grounding in the field of law, he acquired a refined expertise in the art of writing — the *ars scribendi* — and, thanks to his knowledge of the great Latin classics, became "one of the most accomplished Latinists of his time, one of the greatest writers of medieval Latin" (J. Leclercq, *Pierre Damien, ermite et homme d'Église*, Rome, 1960, p. 172).

He distinguished himself in the widest range of literary forms: from letters to sermons, from hagiographies to prayers, from poems to epigrams. His sensitivity to beauty led him to poetic contemplation of the world. Peter Damian conceived of the universe as a never-ending

"parable" and a sequence of symbols on which to base the interpretation of inner life and divine and supra-natural reality.

In this perspective, in about the year 1034, contemplation of the absolute of God impelled him gradually to detach himself from the world and from its transient realties and to withdraw to the Monastery of Fonte Avellana. It had been founded only a few decades earlier but was already celebrated for its austerity. For the monks' edification he wrote the *Life* of the Founder, St Romuald of Ravenna, and at the same time strove to deepen their spirituality, expounding on his ideal of eremitic monasticism.

One detail should be immediately emphasized: the Hermitage at Fonte Avellana was dedicated to the Holy Cross and the Cross was the Christian mystery that was to fascinate Peter Damian more than all the others.

"Those who do not love the Cross of Christ do not love Christ", he said. (*Sermo XVIII, 11,* p.117); and he described himself as "*Petrus crucis Christi servorum famulus* — Peter, servant of the servants of the Cross of Christ" (*Ep,* 9, 1).

Peter Damian addressed the most beautiful prayers to the Cross in which he reveals a vision of this mystery which has cosmic dimensions for it embraces the entire history of salvation: "O Blessed Cross", he exclaimed, "You are venerated, preached and honoured by the faith of the Patriarchs, the predictions of the Prophets, the senate that judges the Apostles, the victorious army of Martyrs and the throngs of all the Saints" (*Sermo XLVII,* 14, p. 304).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the example of St Peter Damian spur us too always to look to the Cross as to the

supreme act God's love for humankind, of God who has given us salvation.

This great monk compiled a Rule for eremitical life in which he heavily stressed the "rigour of the hermit": in the silence of the cloister the monk is called to spend a life of prayer, by day and by night, with prolonged and strict fasting; he must put into practice generous brotherly charity in ever prompt and willing obedience to the prior.

In study and in the daily meditation of Sacred Scripture, Peter Damian discovered the mystical meaning of the word of God, finding in it nourishment for his spiritual life. In this regard he described the hermit's cell as the "parlour in which God converses with men". For him, living as a hermit was the peak of Christian existence, "the loftiest of the states of life" because the monk, now free from the bonds of worldly life and of his own self, receives "a dowry from the Holy Spirit and his happy soul is united with its heavenly Spouse" (*Ep* 18, 17; cf. *Ep* 28, 43 ff.).

This is important for us today too, even though we are not monks: to know how to make silence within us to listen to God's voice, to seek, as it were, a "parlour" in which God speaks with us: learning the word of God in prayer and in meditation is the path to life.

St Peter Damian, who was essentially a man of prayer, meditation and contemplation, was also a fine theologian: his reflection on various doctrinal themes led him to important conclusions for life. Thus, for example, he expresses with clarity and liveliness the Trinitarian doctrine, already using, under the guidance of biblical and patristic texts, the three fundamental terms which were

subsequently to become crucial also for the philosophy of the West: *processio, relatio* and*persona* (cf. *Opusc. XXXVIII: PL CXLV,* 633-642; and *Opusc. II* and *III*: *ibid.*, 41 ff. and 58 ff).

However, because theological analysis of the mystery led him to contemplate the intimate life of God and the dialogue of ineffable love between the three divine Persons, he drew ascetic conclusions from them for community life and even for relations between Latin and Greek Christians, divided on this topic.

His meditation on the figure of Christ is significantly reflected in practical life, since the whole of Scripture is centred on him. The "Jews", St Peter Damian notes, "through the pages of Sacred Scripture, bore Christ on their shoulders as it were" (*Sermo XLVI,* 15). Therefore Christ, he adds, must be the centre of the monk's life: "May Christ be heard in our language, may Christ be seen in our life, may he be perceived in our hearts" (*Sermo viii,* 5). Intimate union with Christ engages not only monks but all the baptized. Here we find a strong appeal for us too not to let ourselves be totally absorbed by the activities, problems and preoccupations of every day, forgetting that Jesus must truly be the centre of our life.

Communion with Christ creates among Christians a unity of love. In Letter 28, which is a brilliant ecclesiological treatise, Peter Damian develops a profound theology of the Church as communion.

"Christ's Church", he writes, is united by the bond of charity to the point that just as she has many members so is she, mystically, entirely contained in a single member; in such a way that the whole universal Church is rightly

called the one Bride of Christ in the singular, and each chosen soul, through the sacramental mystery, is considered fully Church". This is important: not only that the whole universal Church should be united, but that the Church should be present in her totality in each one of us. Thus the service of the individual becomes "an expression of universality" (*Ep* 28, 9-23).

However, the ideal image of "Holy Church" illustrated by Peter Damian does not correspond — as he knew well — to the reality of his time. For this reason he did not fear to denounce the state of corruption that existed in the monasteries and among the clergy, because, above all, of the practice of the conferral by the lay authorities of ecclesiastical offices; various Bishops and Abbots were behaving as the rulers of their subjects rather than as pastors of souls.

Their moral life frequently left much to be desired. For this reason, in 1057 Peter Damian left his monastery with great reluctance and sorrow and accepted, if unwillingly, his appointment as Cardinal Bishop of Ostia. So it was that he entered fully into collaboration with the Popes in the difficult task of Church reform.

He saw that to make his own contribution of helping in the work of the Church's renewal contemplation did not suffice. He thus relinquished the beauty of the hermitage and courageously undertook numerous journeys and missions.

Because of his love for monastic life, 10 years later, in 1067, he obtained permission to return to Fonte Avellana and resigned from the Diocese of Ostia. However, the tranquillity he had longed for did not last long: two years later, he was sent to Frankfurt in an endeavour to prevent

the divorce of Henry IV from his wife Bertha. And again, two years later, in 1071, he went to Monte Cassino for the consecration of the abbey church and at the beginning of 1072, to Ravenna, to re-establish peace with the local Archbishop who had supported the antipope bringing interdiction upon the city.

On the journey home to his hermitage, an unexpected illness obliged him to stop at the Benedictine Monastery of Santa Maria Vecchia Fuori Porta in Faenza, where he died in the night between 22 and 23 February 1072.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is a great grace that the Lord should have raised up in the life of the Church a figure as exuberant, rich and complex as St Peter Damian. Moreover, it is rare to find theological works and spirituality as keen and vibrant as those of the Hermitage at Fonte Avellana.

St Peter Damian was a monk through and through, with forms of austerity which to us today might even seem excessive. Yet, in that way he made monastic life an eloquent testimony of God's primacy and an appeal to all to walk towards holiness, free from any compromise with evil. He spent himself, with lucid consistency and great severity, for the reform of the Church of his time. He gave all his spiritual and physical energies to Christ and to the Church, but always remained, as he liked to describe himself, *Petrus ultimus monachorum servus*, Peter, the lowliest servant of the monks.

Wednesday, 9 September 2009

Symeon the New Theologian

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today we pause to reflect on an Eastern monk, Symeon the New Theologian, whose writings have had a notable influence on the theology and spirituality of the East, in particular with regard to the experience of mystical union with God. Symeon the New Theologian was born in 949 in Galatai, Paphlagonia, in Asia Minor, into a provincial noble family.

While he was still young he moved to Constantinople to complete his education and enter the Emperor's service. However, he did not feel attracted by the civil career that awaited him. Under the influence of the inner illumination he was experiencing, he set out in search of someone who would guide him in the period of doubt and perplexity he was living through and help him advance on the path of union with God.

He found this spiritual guide in Symeon the Pious *(Eulabes),* a simple monk of the *Studios* in Constantinople who advised him to read Mark the Monk's treatise, *The Spiritual Law*. Symeon the New Theologian found in this text a teaching that made a deep impression on him:

"If you seek spiritual healing, be attentive to your conscience," he read in it. "Do all that it tells you and you will find what serves you". From that very moment, he himself says, he never went to sleep without first asking himself whether his conscience had anything with which to reproach him. Symeon entered the Studite monastery where, however, his mystical experiences and extraordinary devotion to his spiritual father caused him some difficulty.

He moved to the small convent of St Mamas, also in Constantinople, of which three years later he became abbot, *hegumen.* There he embarked on an intense quest for spiritual union with Christ which gave him great authority. It is interesting to note that he was given the title of the "New Theologian", in spite of the tradition that reserved this title for two figures, John the Evangelist and Gregory of Nazianzus.

Symeon suffered misunderstandings and exile but was rehabilitated by Patriarch Sergius II of Constantinople.

Symeon the New Theologian spent the last stage of his life at the Monastery of St Marina where he wrote a large part of his opus, becoming ever more famous for his teaching and his miracles. He died on 12 March 1022.

The best known of his disciples, Niceta Stethatos, who collected and copied Symeon's writings, compiled a posthumous edition of them and subsequently wrote his biography.

Symeon's opus consists of nine volumes that are divided into *theological, gnostic* and *practical chapters,* three books of *catecheses* addressed to monks, two books of *theological and ethical treatises* and one of *hymns.* Moreover, his numerous *Letters* should not be forgotten. All these works have had an important place in the Eastern monastic tradition to our day.

Symeon focused his reflection on the Holy Spirit's presence in the baptized and on the awareness they must have of this spiritual reality. "Christian life", he emphasized, "is intimate, personal communion with God, divine grace illumines the believer's heart and leads him to a mystical vision of the Lord".

Along these lines, Symeon the New Theologian insisted that true knowledge of God does not come from books but rather from spiritual experience, from spiritual life. Knowledge of God is born from a process of inner purification that begins with conversion of heart through the power of faith and love. It passes through profound repentance and sincere sorrow for one's sins to attain union with Christ, the source of joy and peace, suffused with the light of his presence within us. For Symeon this experience of divine grace did not constitute an exceptional gift for a few mystics but rather was the fruit of Baptism in the life of every seriously committed believer.

A point on which to reflect, dear brothers and sisters! This holy Eastern monk calls us all to pay attention to our spiritual life, to the hidden presence of God within us, to the sincerity of the conscience and to purification, to conversion of heart, so that the Holy Spirit may really become present in us and guide us.

Indeed, if rightly we are concerned to care for our physical, human and intellectual development, it is even more important not to neglect our inner growth. This consists in the knowledge of God, in true knowledge, not only learned from books but from within and in communion with God, to experience his help at every moment and in every circumstance. Basically it is this that Symeon describes when he recounts his own mystical experience.

Already as a young man, before entering the monastery, while at home one night immersed in prayer and invoking God's help to fight temptations, he saw the room fill with light. Later, when he entered the monastery, he was given spiritual books for instruction but reading them did not procure for him the peace that he sought.

He felt, he himself says, as if he were a poor little bird without wings. He humbly accepted this situation without rebelling and it was then that his visions of light began once again to increase.

Wishing to assure himself of their authenticity, Symeon asked Christ directly: "Lord, is it truly you who are here?". He heard the affirmative answer resonating in his heart and was supremely comforted.

"That, Lord", he was to write later, "was the first time that you considered me, a prodigal son, worthy of hearing your voice".

However, not even this revelation left him entirely at peace. He wondered, rather, whether he ought to consider that experience an illusion. At last, one day an event occurred that was crucial to his mystical experience.

He began to feel like "a poor man who loves his brethren" *(ptochós philádelphos).* Around him he saw hordes of enemies bent on ensnaring him and doing him harm, yet he felt within an intense surge of love for them.

How can this be explained? Obviously, such great love could not come from within him but must well up from another source. Symeon realized that it was coming from Christ present within him and everything became clear: he had a sure proof that the source of love in him was Christ's presence. He was certain that having in ourselves a love that exceeds our personal intentions suggests that the source of love is in us.

Thus we can say on the one hand that if we are without a certain openness to love Christ does not enter us, and on

the other, that Christ becomes a source of love and transforms us.

Dear friends, this experience remains particularly important for us today if we are to find the criteria that tell us whether we are truly close to God, whether God exists and dwells in us. God's love develops in us if we stay united to him with prayer and with listening to his word, with an open heart. Divine love alone prompts us to open our hearts to others and makes us sensitive to their needs, bringing us to consider everyone as brothers and sisters and inviting us to respond to hatred with love and to offence with forgiveness.

In thinking about this figure of Symeon the New Theologian, we may note a further element of his spirituality. On the path of ascetic life which he proposed and took, the monk's intense attention and concentration on the inner experience conferred an essential importance on the spiritual father of the monastery. The same young Symeon, as has been said, had found a spiritual director who gave him substantial help and whom he continued to hold in the greatest esteem such as to profess veneration for him, even in public, after his death.

And I would like to say that the invitation to have recourse to a good spiritual father who can guide every individual to profound knowledge of himself and lead him to union with the Lord so that his life may be in ever closer conformity with the Gospel still applies for all — priests, consecrated and lay people, and especially youth. To go towards the Lord we always need a guide, a dialogue. We cannot do it with our thoughts alone. And this is also the meaning of the ecclesiality of our faith, of finding this guide.

To conclude, we may sum up the teaching and mystical experience of Symeon the New Theologian in these words: in his ceaseless quest for God, even amidst the difficulties he encountered and the criticism of which he was the object, in the end he let himself be guided by love. He himself was able to live and teach his monks that for every disciple of Jesus the essential is to grow in love; thus we grow in the knowledge of Christ himself, to be able to say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Wednesday, 16 September 2009

Saint Anselm

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Benedictine Abbey of Sant'Anselmo [St Anselm] is located on the Aventine Hill in Rome. As the headquarters of an academic institute of higher studies and of the Abbot Primate of the Confederated Benedictines it is a place that unites within it prayer, study and governance, the same three activities that were a feature of the life of the Saint to whom it is dedicated: Anselm of Aosta, the ninth anniversary of whose death occurs this year.

The many initiatives promoted for this happy event, especially by the Diocese of Aosta, have highlighted the interest that this medieval thinker continues to rouse.

He is also known as Anselm of Bec and Anselm of Canterbury because of the cities with which he was associated. Who is this figure to whom three places, distant from one another and located in three different nations Italy, France, England feel particularly bound?

A monk with an intense spiritual life, an excellent teacher of the young, a theologian with an extraordinary capacity for speculation, a wise man of governance and an intransigent defender of *libertas Ecclesiae,* of the Church's freedom, Anselm is one of the eminent figures of the Middle Ages who was able to harmonize all these qualities, thanks to the profound mystical experience that always guided his thought and his action.

St Anselm was born in 1033 (or at the beginning of 1034) in Aosta, the first child of a noble family. His father was a coarse man dedicated to the pleasures of life who squandered his possessions. On the other hand, Anselm's

mother was a profoundly religious woman of high moral standing (cf. Eadmer, *Vita Sancti Anselmi, PL* 159, col. 49).

It was she, his mother, who saw to the first human and religious formation of her son whom she subsequently entrusted to the Benedictines at a priory in Aosta.

Anselm, who since childhood as his biographer recounts imagined that the good Lord dwelled among the towering, snow-capped peaks of the Alps, dreamed one night that he had been invited to this splendid kingdom by God himself, who had a long and affable conversation with him and then gave him to eat "a very white bread roll" (*ibid.*, col. 51).

This dream left him with the conviction that he was called to carry out a lofty mission. At the age of 15, he asked to be admitted to the Benedictine Order but his father brought the full force of his authority to bear against him and did not even give way when his son, seriously ill and feeling close to death, begged for the religious habit as a supreme comfort.

After his recovery and the premature death of his mother, Anselm went through a period of moral dissipation. He neglected his studies and, consumed by earthly passions, grew deaf to God's call. He left home and began to wander through France in search of new experiences. Three years later, having arrived in Normandy, he went to the Benedictine Abbey of Bec, attracted by the fame of Lanfranc of Pavia, the Prior.

For him this was a providential meeting, crucial to the rest of his life. Under Lanfranc's guidance Anselm energetically resumed his studies and it was not long before

he became not only the favourite pupil but also the teacher's confidante.

His monastic vocation was rekindled and, after an attentive evaluation, at the age of 27 he entered the monastic order and was ordained a priest. Ascesis and study unfolded new horizons before him, enabling him to rediscover at a far higher level the same familiarity with God which he had had as a child.

When Lanfranc became Abbot of Caen in 1063, Anselm, after barely three years of monastic life, was named Prior of the Monastery of Bec and teacher of the cloister school, showing his gifts as a refined educator. He was not keen on authoritarian methods; he compared young people to small plants that develop better if they are not enclosed in greenhouses and granted them a "healthy" freedom.

He was very demanding with himself and with others in monastic observance, but rather than imposing his discipline he strove to have it followed by persuasion. Upon the death of Abbot Herluin, the founder of the Abbey of Bec, Anselm was unanimously elected to succeed him; it was February 1079.

In the meantime numerous monks had been summoned to Canterbury to bring to their brethren on the other side of the Channel the renewal that was being brought about on the continent. Their work was so well received that Lanfranc of Pavia, Abbot of Caen, became the new Archbishop of Canterbury. He asked Anselm to spend a certain period with him in order to instruct the monks and to help him in the difficult plight in which his ecclesiastical community had been left after the Norman conquest.

Anselm's stay turned out to be very fruitful; he won such popularity and esteem that when Lanfranc died he was chosen to succeed him in the archiepiscopal See of Canterbury. He received his solemn episcopal consecration in December 1093.

Anselm immediately became involved in a strenuous struggle for the Church's freedom, valiantly supporting the independence of the spiritual power from the temporal. Anselm defended the Church from undue interference by political authorities, especially King William Rufus and Henry I, finding encouragement and support in the Roman Pontiff to whom he always showed courageous and cordial adherence.

In 1103, this fidelity even cost him the bitterness of exile from his See of Canterbury. Moreover, it was only in 1106, when King Henry I renounced his right to the conferral of ecclesiastical offices, as well as to the collection of taxes and the confiscation of Church properties, that Anselm could return to England, where he was festively welcomed by the clergy and the people.

Thus the long battle he had fought with the weapons of perseverance, pride and goodness ended happily. This holy Archbishop, who roused such deep admiration around him wherever he went, dedicated the last years of his life to the moral formation of the clergy and to intellectual research into theological topics.

He died on 21 April 1109, accompanied by the words of the Gospel proclaimed in Holy Mass on that day: "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom..." (Lk 22: 28-30).

So it was that the dream of the mysterious banquet he had had as a small boy, at the very beginning of his spiritual journey, found fulfilment. Jesus, who had invited him to sit at his table, welcomed Anselm upon his death into the eternal Kingdom of the Father.

"I pray, O God, to know you, to love you, that I may rejoice in you. And if I cannot attain to full joy in this life may I at least advance from day to day, until that joy shall come to the full" (*Proslogion,* chapter 14). This prayer enables us to understand the mystical soul of this great Saint of the Middle Ages, the founder of scholastic theology, to whom Christian tradition has given the title: "Magnificent Doctor", because he fostered an intense desire to deepen his knowledge of the divine Mysteries but in the full awareness that the quest for God is never ending, at least on this earth.

The clarity and logical rigour of his thought always aimed at "raising the mind to contemplation of God" (*ibid., Proemium*). He states clearly that whoever intends to study theology cannot rely on his intelligence alone but must cultivate at the same time a profound experience of faith.

The theologian's activity, according to St Anselm, thus develops in three stages: *faith,* a gift God freely offers, to be received with humility; *experience,* which consists in incarnating God's word in one's own daily life; and therefore true *knowledge,* which is never the fruit of ascetic reasoning but rather of contemplative intuition.

In this regard his famous words remain more useful than ever, even today, for healthy theological research and for anyone who wishes to deepen his knowledge of the truths of faith: "I do not endeavour, O Lord, to penetrate

your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believed, I should not understand" (*ibid*., 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, may the love of the truth and the constant thirst for God that marked St Anselm's entire existence be an incentive to every Christian to seek tirelessly an ever more intimate union with Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. In addition, may the zeal full of courage that distinguished his pastoral action and occasionally brought him misunderstanding, sorrow and even exile be an encouragement for Pastors, for consecrated people and for all the faithful to love Christ's Church, to pray, to work and to suffer for her, without ever abandoning or betraying her.

May the Virgin Mother of God, for whom St Anselm had a tender, filial devotion, obtain this grace for us. "Mary, it is you whom my heart yearns to love", St Anselm wrote, "it is you whom my tongue ardently desires to praise".

Wednesday, 23 September 2009

Peter the Venerable

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peter the Venerable who I would like to present at today's Catechesis takes us back to the famous Abbey of Cluny, to its *decor* (decorum) and *nitor* (clarity) — to use terms that recur in the Cluny texts — a decorum and splendour that were admired especially in the beauty of the liturgy, a privileged way for reaching God.

Even more than these aspects, however, Peter's personality recalls the holiness of the great abbots of Cluny: in Cluny "there was not a single abbot who was not a saint", Pope Gregory VII said in 1080. These holy men include Peter the Venerable who possessed more or less all the virtues of his predecessors although, under him, in comparison with the new Orders such as *Cîteaux*, Cluny began to feel some symptoms of crisis.

Peter is a wonderful example of an ascetic strict with himself and understanding of others. He was born in about 1094 in the French region of Auvergne, he entered the Monastery of Sauxillanges as a child and became a monk there and then prior. In 1122 he was elected Abbot of Cluny and remained in this office until he died, on Christmas day 1156, as he had wished.

"A lover of peace", his biographer Rudolph wrote, "he obtained peace in the glory of God on the day of peace" (*Vita, 1, 17; PL* 189, 28).

All who knew him praised his refined meekness, his serene equilibrium, rectitude, loyalty, reasonableness and his special approach to mediation.

"It is in my nature" he wrote, "to be particularly inclined to indulgence; I am urged to this by my habit of forgiveness. I am accustomed to toleration and forgiveness" (*Ep.* 192, in: *The Letters of Peter the Venerable,* Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 446).

He said further: "With those who hate peace let us always seek to be peacemakers" (*Ep.* 100, *loc. cit.*, p. 261).

And he wrote of himself: "I am not the type who is discontented with his lot... whose mind is always tormented by anxiety or doubt and who complains that everyone else is resting while they are the only ones working" (*Ep.* 182, p. 425).

With a sensitive and affectionate nature, he could combine love for the Lord with tenderness to his family members, especially his mother, and to his friends. He cultivated friendship, especially with his monks who used to confide in him, certain that they would be heard and understood.

According to his biographer's testimony: "he did not look down on anyone and never turned anyone away" (*Vita*, 3: *PL* 189, 19); "he appeared friendly to all; in his innate goodness he was open to all" (*ibid.*, 1,1: *PL.* 189, 17).

We could say that this holy Abbot also sets an example to the monks and Christians of our day, marked by a frenetic pace, when episodes of intolerance, incommunicability, division and conflict are common. His testimony invites us to be able to combine love of God with love of neighbour and not to tire of building relations of brotherhood and reconciliation.

Effectively Peter the Venerable acted in this way. He found himself in charge of the Monastery of Cluny in years that were far from tranquil for various reasons, both within the Abbey and outside it, and managed to be at the same time both strict and profoundly human.

He used to say: "One may obtain more from a man by tolerating him than by irritating him with reproach" (*Ep.* 172, *loc. cit.*, p. 409).

By virtue of his office he had to undertake frequent journeys to Italy, England, Germany and Spain. He found it hard to be wrenched from the quiet of contemplation. He confessed: "I go from one place to the next, I hurry, I am anxious, I am tormented, dragged here and there: my mind now on my own affairs and now on those of others, not without great mental agitation" (*Ep.* 91, *loc. cit.*, p. 233).

Although he was obliged to navigate between the powers and nobles who surrounded Cluny, he succeeded in preserving his habitual calm, thanks to his sense of measure, magnanimity and realism.

Among the important figures with whom he came into contact was Bernard of Clairvaux with whom he maintained a relationship of increasing friendship, despite the differences of their temperaments and approaches. Bernard described him as: "an important man, occupied with important affairs" and held him in high esteem (*Ep.* 147, ed. *Scriptorium Claravallense*, Milan 1986, VI/1, pp. 658-660), while Peter the Venerable described Bernard as a "lamp of the Church" (*Ep* 164, p. 396), and a "strong and splendid pillar of the monastic order and of the whole Church" (*Ep.* 175, p. 418).

With a lively sense of Church, Peter the Venerable affirmed that the vicissitudes of the Christian people must be felt in the "depths of the heart" by those who will be numbered "among the members of Christ's Body" (*Ep.* 164, *ibid.*, p. 397). And he added: "those who do not smart from the wounds of Christ's body are not nourished by the Spirit of Christ", wherever they may be produced (*ibid.*).

In addition, he also showed care and concern for people outside the Church, in particular Jews and Muslims: to increase knowledge of the latter he provided for the translation of the Qur'an.

A historian recently remarked on this subject: "In the midst of the intransigence of medieval people, even the greatest among them, we admire here a sublime example of the sensitivity to which Christian charity leads" (J. Leclercq, *Pietro il Venerabile*, Jaca Book, 1991, p. 189).

Other aspects of Christian life dear to him were love for the Eucharist and devotion to the Virgin Mary. On the Blessed Sacrament he has left passages that constitute "one of the masterpieces of Eucharistic literature of all time" (*ibid.*, p. 267) and on the Mother of God he wrote illuminating reflections, contemplating her ever closely related to Jesus the Redeemer and his work of salvation.

It suffices to present his inspired prayer: "Hail, Blessed Virgin, who put execration to flight. Hail, Mother of the Most High, Bride of the meekest Lamb. You have defeated the serpent, you crushed its head, when the God you bore destroyed it.... Shining Star of the East who dispelled the shadows of the west. Dawn who precedes the sun, day that knows no night.... Pray God who was born of you to dissolve our sin and, after pardoning it, to grant

us his grace and his glory" (*Carmina*, *PL* 189, 1018-1019).

Peter the Venerable also had a predilection for literary activity and a gift for it. He noted his reflections, persuaded of the importance of using the pen as if it were a plough, "to scatter the seed of the Word on paper" (*Ep.* 20, p. 38).

Although he was not a systematic theologian, he was a great investigator of God's mystery. His theology is rooted in prayer, especially in liturgical prayer, and among the mysteries of Christ he preferred the Transfiguration which prefigures the Resurrection. It was Peter himself who introduced this feast at Cluny, composing a special office for it that mirrors the characteristic theological devotion of Peter and of the Cluniac Order, which was focused entirely on contemplation of the glorious Face (*gloriosa facies*) of Christ, finding in it the reasons for that ardent joy which marked his spirit and shone out in the monastery's liturgy.

Dear brothers and sisters, this holy monk is certainly a great example of monastic holiness, nourished from the sources of the Benedictine tradition. For him, the ideal of the monk consists in "adhering tenaciously to Christ" (*Ep.* 53, *loc. cit.*, p. 161), in a cloistered life distinguished by "monastic humility" (*ibid.*) and hard work (*Ep.* 77, *loc. cit.*, p. 211) as well as an atmosphere of silent contemplation and constant praise of God. The first and most important occupation of the monk, according to Peter of Cluny, is the solemn celebration of the Divine Office — "a heavenly action and the most useful of all" (*Statutes*, I, 1026) — to be accompanied by reading, meditation, personal prayer and penance observed with discretion (cf. *Ep.* 20, *loc. cit.*, p. 40).

In this way the whole of life is pervaded by profound love of God and love of others, a love that is expressed in sincere openness to neighbour, in forgiveness and in the quest for peace.

We might say, to conclude, that if this lifestyle, combined with daily work, was the monk's ideal for St Benedict, it also concerns all of us and can be to a large extent the lifestyle of the Christian who wants to become an authentic disciple of Christ, characterized precisely by tenacious adherence to him and by humility, diligence and the capacity for forgiveness and peace.

Wednesday, 14 October 2009

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to talk about St Bernard of Clairvaux, called "the last of the Fathers" of the Church because — once again in the 12th century — he renewed and brought to the fore the important theology of the Fathers. We do not know in any detail about the years of his childhood; however, we know that he was born in 1090 in Fontaines, France, into a large and fairly well-to-do family.

As a very young man he devoted himself to the study of the so-called liberal arts — especially grammar, rhetoric and dialectics — at the school of the canons of the Church of Saint-Vorles at Châtillon-sur-Seine; and the decision to enter religious life slowly matured within him.

At the age of about 20, he entered Cîteaux, a new monastic foundation that was more flexible in comparison with the ancient and venerable monasteries of the period while at the same time stricter in the practice of the evangelical counsels.

A few years later, in 1115, Bernard was sent by Stephen Harding, the third Abbot of Cîteaux, to found the monastery of Clairvaux. Here the young Abbot — he was only 25 years old — was able to define his conception of monastic life and set about putting it into practice.

In looking at the discipline of other monasteries, Bernard firmly recalled the need for a sober and measured life, at table as in clothing and monastic buildings, and recommended the support and care of the poor.

In the meantime the community of Clairvaux became ever more numerous and its foundations multiplied.

In those same years before 1130 Bernard started a prolific correspondence with many people of both important and modest social status. To the many *Epistolae* of this period must be added numerous *Sermones,* as well as *Sententiae* and *Tractatus.*

Bernard's great friendship with William, Abbot of Saint-Thierry, and with William of Champeaux, among the most important figures of the 12th century, also date to this period.

As from 1130, Bernard began to concern himself with many serious matters of the Holy See and of the Church.

For this reason he was obliged to leave his monastery ever more frequently and he sometimes also travelled outside France. He founded several women's monasteries and was the protagonist of a lively correspondence with Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, of whom I spoke last Wednesday.

In his polemical writings he targeted in particular Abelard, a great thinker who had conceived of a new approach to theology, introducing above all the dialectic and philosophical method in the construction of theological thought.

On another front Bernard combated the heresy of the Cathars, who despised matter and the human body and consequently despised the Creator.

On the other hand, he felt it was his duty to defend the Jews, and condemned the ever more widespread outbursts of anti-Semitism.

With regard to this aspect of his apostolic action, several decades later Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn addressed a vibrant tribute to Bernard.

In the same period the holy Abbot wrote his most famous works such as the celebrated *Sermons on the Song of Songs [In Canticum Sermones]*. In the last years of his life — he died in 1153— Bernard was obliged to curtail his journeys but did not entirely stop travelling.

He made the most of this time to review definitively the whole collection of his *Letters*, *Sermons*and *Treatises.* Worthy of mention is a quite unusual book that he completed in this same period, in 1145, when Bernardo Pignatelli, a pupil of his, was elected Pope with the name of Eugene III.

On this occasion, Bernard as his spiritual father, dedicated to his spiritual son the text *De Consideratione* [Five Books on Consideration] which contains teachings on how to be a good Pope. In this book, which is still appropriate reading for the Popes of all times, Bernard did not only suggest how to be a good Pope, but also expressed a profound vision of the Mystery of the Church and of the Mystery of Christ which is ultimately resolved in contemplation of the mystery of the Triune God.

"The search for this God who is not yet sufficiently sought must be continued", the holy Abbot wrote, "yet it may be easier to search for him and find him in prayer rather than in discussion. So let us end the book here, but

not the search" (XIV, 32: *PL* 182, 808) and in journeying on towards God.

I would now like to reflect on only two of the main aspects of Bernard's rich doctrine: they concern Jesus Christ and Mary Most Holy, his Mother.

His concern for the Christian's intimate and vital participation in God's love in Jesus Christ brings no new guidelines to the scientific status of theology. However, in a more decisive manner than ever, the Abbot of Clairvaux embodies the theologian, the contemplative and the mystic.

Jesus alone — Bernard insists in the face of the complex dialectical reasoning of his time — Jesus alone is "honey in the mouth, song to the ear, jubilation in the heart (*mel in ore, in aure melos, in corde iubilum*)".

The title *Doctor Mellifluus*, attributed to Bernard by tradition, stems precisely from this; indeed, his praise of Jesus Christ "flowed like honey".

In the extenuating battles between Nominalists and Realists — two philosophical currents of the time — the Abbot of Clairvaux never tired of repeating that only one name counts, that of Jesus of Nazareth.

"All food of the soul is dry", he professed, "unless it is moistened with this oil; insipid, unless it is seasoned with this salt. What you write has no savour for me unless I have read *Jesus* in it" (*In Canticum Sermones* XV, 6: *PL* 183, 847).

For Bernard, in fact, true knowledge of God consisted in a personal, profound experience of Jesus Christ and of

his love. And, dear brothers and sisters, this is true for every Christian: faith is first and foremost a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, it is having an experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love. It is in this way that we learn to know him ever better, to love him and to follow him more and more. May this happen to each one of us!

In another famous *Sermon on the Sunday in the Octave of the Assumption* the Holy Abbot described with passionate words Mary's intimate participation in the redeeming sacrifice of her Son.

"O Blessed Mother", he exclaimed, "a sword has truly pierced your soul!... So deeply has the violence of pain pierced your soul, that we may rightly call you more than a martyr for in you participation in the passion of the Son by far surpasses in intensity the physical sufferings of martyrdom" (14: *PL* 183, 437-438).

Bernard had no doubts: *"per Mariam ad Iesum"*, through Mary we are led to Jesus. He testifies clearly to Mary's subordination to Jesus, in accordance with the foundation of traditional Mariology. Yet the text of the *Sermon* also documents the Virgin's privileged place in the economy of salvation, subsequent to the Mother's most particular participation (*compassio*) in the sacrifice of the Son.

It is not for nothing that a century and a half after Bernard's death, Dante Alighieri, in the last canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, was to put on the lips of the *Doctor Mellifluus* the sublime prayer to Mary: "Virgin Mother, daughter of your own Son, / humble and exalted more than any creature, / fixed term of the eternal counsel" (*Paradise* XXXIII, VV. 1 ff.).

These reflections, characteristic of a person in love with Jesus and Mary as was Bernard, are still a salutary stimulus not only to theologians but to all believers.

Some claim to have solved the fundamental questions on God, on man and on the world with the power of reason alone.

St Bernard, on the other hand, solidly founded on the Bible and on the Fathers of the Church, reminds us that without a profound faith in God, nourished by prayer and contemplation, by an intimate relationship with the Lord, our reflections on the divine mysteries risk becoming an empty intellectual exercise and losing their credibility.

Theology refers us back to the "knowledge of the Saints", to their intuition of the mysteries of the living God and to their wisdom, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which become a reference point for theological thought.

Together with Bernard of Clairvaux, we too must recognize that man seeks God better and finds him more easily "in prayer than in discussion". In the end, the truest figure of a theologian and of every evangelizer remains the Apostle John who laid his head on the Teacher's breast.

I would like to conclude these reflections on St Bernard with the invocations to Mary that we read in one of his beautiful homilies.

"In danger, in distress, in uncertainty", he says, "think of Mary, call upon Mary. She never leaves your lips, she never departs from your heart; and so that you may obtain the help of her prayers, never forget the example of her life. If you follow her, you cannot falter; if you pray to her, you cannot despair; if you think of her, you cannot

err. If she sustains you, you will not stumble; if she protects you, you have nothing to fear; if she guides you, you will never flag; if she is favourable to you, you will attain your goal..." (*Hom. II super Missus est*, 17: *PL* 183, 70-71).

Wednesday, 21 October 2009

Monastic Theology and Scholastic Theology

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I am reflecting on an interesting page of history that concerns the flourishing of Latin theology in the 12th century which occurred through a series of providential coincidences. A relative peace prevailed in the countries of Western Europe at that time which guaranteed economic development and the consolidation of political structures in society, encouraging lively cultural activity also through its contacts with the East. The benefits of the vast action known as the "Gregorian reform" were already being felt within the Church. Vigorously promoted in the previous century, they had brought greater evangelical purity to the life of the ecclesial community, especially to the clergy, and had restored to the Church and to the Papacy authentic freedom of action.

Furthermore, a wide-scale spiritual renewal supported by the vigorous development of consecrated life was spreading; new religious orders were coming into being and expanding, while those already in existence were experiencing a promising spiritual revival.

Theology also flourished anew, acquiring a greater awareness of its own nature: it refined its method; it tackled the new problems; advanced in the contemplation of God's mysteries; produced fundamental works; inspired important initiatives of culture, from art to literature; and prepared the masterpieces of the century to come, the century of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.

This intense theological activity took place in two milieus: the monasteries and the urban Schools, the *scholae*, some of which were the forerunners of universities, one of the characteristic "inventions" of the Christian Middle Ages.

It is on the basis of these two milieus, monasteries and *scholae*, that it is possible to speak of the two different theological models: "monastic theology" and "scholastic theology". The representatives of monastic theology were monks, usually abbots, endowed with wisdom and evangelical zeal, dedicated essentially to inspiring and nourishing God's loving design. The representatives of Scholastic theology were cultured men, passionate about research; they were *magistri* anxious to show the reasonableness and soundness of the Mysteries of God and of man, believed with faith, of course, but also understood by reason. Their different finalities explain the differences in their method and in their way of doing theology.

In 12th-century monasteries the theological method mainly entailed the explanation of Sacred Scripture, the *sacra pagina* to borrow the words of the authors of that period; biblical theology in particular was practised. The monks, in other words, were devout listeners to and readers of the Sacred Scriptures and one of their chief occupations consisted in *lectio divina*, that is, the prayed reading of the Bible. For them the mere reading of the Sacred Text did not suffice to perceive its profound meaning, its inner unity and transcendent message. It was therefore necessary to practise a biblical theology, in docility to the Holy Spirit. Thus, at the school of the Fathers, the Bible was interpreted allegorically in order

to discover on every page of both the Old and New Testaments what it says about Christ and his work of salvation.

Last year, The Synod of Bishops on the "Word of God in the life and mission of the Church" reminded us of the importance of the spiritual approach to the Sacred Scriptures. It is useful for this purpose to take into account monastic theology, an uninterrupted biblical exegesis, as well as the works written by its exponents, precious ascetic commentaries on the Books of the Bible.

Thus monastic theology incorporated the spiritual aspect into literary formation. It was aware, in other words that a purely theoretical and unversed interpretation is not enough: to enter into the heart of Sacred Scripture it must be read in the spirit in which it was written and created. Literary knowledge was necessary in order to understand the exact meaning of the words and to grasp the meaning of the text, refining the grammatical and philological sensibility. Thus Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine scholar in the past century, entitled the essay in which he presents the characteristics of monastic theology: *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Love of words and the desire for God). In fact, the desire to know and to love God which comes to meet us through his words to be received, meditated upon and put into practice, leads us to seek to deepen our knowledge of the biblical texts in all their dimensions. Then there is another attitude on which those who practise monastic theology insist: namely an intimate, prayerful disposition that must precede, accompany and complete the study of Sacred Scripture. Since, ultimately, monastic theology is listening to God's word, it is impossible not to purify the heart in order to receive it and, especially, it is impossible not to enkindle in it a longing to encounter the Lord.

Theology thus becomes meditation, prayer, a song of praise and impels us to sincere conversion. On this path, many exponents of monastic theology attained the highest goals of mystic experience and extend an invitation to us too to nourish our lives with the word of God, for example, through listening more attentively to the Readings and the Gospel, especially during Sunday Mass. It is also important to set aside a certain period each day for meditation on the Bible, so that the word of God may be a light that illumines our daily pilgrimage on earth.

Scholastic theology, on the other hand — as I was saying — was practised at the *scholae* which came into being beside the great cathedrals of that time for the formation of the clergy, or around a teacher of theology and his disciples, to train professionals of culture in a period in which the appreciation of knowledge was constantly growing.

Central to the method of the Scholastics was the *quaestio*, that is, the problem the reader faces in approaching the words of Scripture and of Tradition. In the face of the problem that these authoritative texts pose, questions arise and the debate between teacher and student comes into being. In this discussion, on the one hand the arguments of the authority appear and on the other those of reason, and the ensuing discussion seeks to come to a synthesis between authority and reason in order to reach a deeper understanding of the word of God. In this regard St Bonaventure said that theology is "*per additionem*" (cf. *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum*, I,*proem.*, q. 1, *concl.*), that is, theology adds the dimension of reason to the word of God and thus creates a faith that is deeper, more personal, hence also more concrete in the person's life. In this regard various solutions were

found and conclusions reached which began to build a system of theology.

The organization of the *quaestiones* led to the compilation of ever more extensive syntheses, that is, the different *quaestiones* were composed with the answers elicited, thereby creating a synthesis, the *summae* that were in reality extensive theological and dogmatic treatises born from the confrontation of human reason with the word of God. Scholastic theology aimed to present the unity and harmony of the Christian Revelation with a method, called, precisely "Scholastic" — of the school — which places trust in human reason. Grammar and philology are at the service of theological knowledge, but logic even more so, namely the discipline that studies the "functioning" of human reasoning, in such a way that the truth of a proposal appears obvious. Still today, in reading the Scholastic *summae* one is struck by the order, clarity and logical continuity of the arguments and by the depth of certain insights. With technical language a precise meaning is attributed to every word and, between believing and understanding, a reciprocal movement of clarification is established.

Dear brothers and sisters, in echoing the invitation of the First Letter of Peter, Scholastic theology stimulates us to be ever ready to account for the hope that is in us (cf. 3:15), hearing the questions as our own and thus also being capable of giving an answer. It reminds us that a natural friendship exists between faith and reason, founded in the order of Creation itself. In the *incipit* of the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the Servant of God John Paul II wrote: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth". Faith is open to the effort of understanding by reason; reason, in

turn, recognizes that faith does not mortify her but on the contrary impels her towards vaster and loftier horizons.

The eternal lesson of monastic theology fits in here. Faith and reason, in reciprocal dialogue, are vibrant with joy when they are both inspired by the search for intimate union with God. When love enlivens the prayerful dimension of theology, knowledge, acquired by reason, is broadened. Truth is sought with humility, received with wonder and gratitude: in a word, knowledge only grows if one loves truth. Love becomes intelligence and authentic theology wisdom of the heart, which directs and sustains the faith and life of believers. Let us therefore pray that the journey of knowledge and of the deepening of God's Mysteries may always be illumined by divine love.

Wednesday, 28 October 2009

St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In my last Catechesis I presented the main features of 12th-century monastic theology and scholastic theology which, in a certain sense, we might call respectively "theology of the heart" and "theology of reason". Among the exponents of both these theological currents a broad and at times heated discussion developed, symbolically represented by the controversy between St Bernard of Clairvaux and Abelard.

In order to understand this confrontation between the two great teachers it helps to remember that theology is the search for a rational understanding, as far as this is possible, of the mysteries of Christian Revelation, believed through faith: *fides quaerens intellectum* — faith seeks understanding — to borrow a traditional, concise and effective definition. Now, whereas St Bernard, a staunch representative of monastic theology, puts the accent on the first part of the definition, namely on *fides* — faith, Abelard, who was a scholastic, insists on the second part, that is, on the *intellectus,* on understanding through reason. For Bernard faith itself is endowed with a deep certitude based on the testimony of Scripture and on the teaching of the Church Fathers. Faith, moreover, is reinforced by the witness of the Saints and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer's soul. In cases of doubt and ambiguity, faith is protected and illumined by the exercise of the Magisterium of the Church.

So it was that Bernard had difficulty in reaching agreement with Abelard and, more in general, with those who submitted the truths of faith to the critical examination

of the intellect; an examination which in his opinion entailed a serious danger, that is, intellectualism, the relativization of truth, the questioning of the actual truths of faith. In this approach Bernard saw audacity taken to the point of unscrupulousness, a product of the pride of human intelligence that claims to "grasp" the mystery of God. In a letter he writes with regret: "Human ingenuity takes possession of everything, leaving nothing to faith. It confronts what is above and beyond it, scrutinizes what is superior to it, bursts into the world of God, alters rather than illumines the mysteries of faith; it does not open what is closed and sealed but rather uproots it, and what it does not find viable in itself it considers as nothing and refuses to believe in it" (*Epistola* CLXXXVIII, 1: *PL* 182, 1, 353).

Theology for Bernard had a single purpose: to encourage the intense and profound experience of God. Theology is therefore an aid to loving the Lord ever more and ever better, as the title of his Treatise on the Duty to love God says (*Liber de diligendo Deo*). On this journey there are various stages that Bernard describes in detail, which lead to the crowning experience when the believer's soul becomes inebriated in ineffable love. Already on earth the human soul can attain this mystical union with the divine Word, a union that the *Doctor Mellifluus* describes as "spiritual nuptials". The divine Word visits the soul, eliminates the last traces of resistance, illuminates, inflames and transforms it.

In this mystical union the soul enjoys great serenity and sweetness and sings a hymn of joy to its Bridegroom. As I mentioned in the Catechesis on the life and doctrine of St Bernard, theology for him could not but be nourished by contemplative prayer, in other words by the affective union of the heart and the mind with God.

On the other hand Abelard, who among other things was the very person who introduced the term "theology" in the sense in which we understand it today, puts himself in a different perspective.

Born in Brittany, France, this famous teacher of the 12th century was endowed with a keen intelligence and his vocation was to study. He first concerned himself with philosophy and then applied the results he achieved in this discipline to theology which he taught in Paris, the most cultured city of the time, and later in the monasteries in which he lived. He was a brilliant orator: literally crowds of students attended his lectures. He had a religious spirit but a restless personality and his life was full of dramatic events: he contested his teachers and he had a son by Héloïse, a cultured and intelligent woman. He often argued with his theological colleagues and also underwent ecclesiastical condemnations although he died in full communion with the Church, submitting to her authority with a spirit of faith.

Actually St Bernard contributed to condemning certain teachings of Abelard at the Provincial Synod of Sens in 1140 and went so far as to request Pope Innocent II's intervention. The Abbot of Clairvaux contested, as we have seen, the excessively intellectualistic method of Abelard who in his eyes reduced faith to mere opinion, detached from the revealed truth. Bernard's fears were not unfounded and were, moreover, shared by other great thinkers of his time. Indeed, an excessive use of philosophy dangerously weakened Abelard's Trinitarian teaching, hence also his idea of God. In the moral field his teaching was not devoid of ambiguity: he insisted on considering the intention of the subject as the sole source for defining the goodness or evil of moral acts, thereby

neglecting the objective significance and moral value of the actions: a dangerous subjectivism.

This — as we know — is a very timely aspect for our epoch in which all too often culture seems to be marked by a growing tendency to ethical relativism; the self alone decides what is good for it, for oneself, at this moment. However, the great merits of Abelard, who had many disciples and made a crucial contribution to the development of scholastic theology — destined to be expressed in a more mature and fruitful manner in the following century — should not be forgotten. Nor should some of his insights be underestimated, such as, for example, his affirmation that non-Christian religious traditions already contain a preparation for the acceptance of Christ, the divine Word.

What can we learn today from the confrontation, frequently in very heated tones, between Bernard and Abelard and, in general, between monastic theology and scholastic theology?

First of all I believe that it demonstrates the usefulness and need for healthy theological discussion within the Church, especially when the questions under discussion are not defined by the Magisterium, which nevertheless remains an ineluctable reference point.

St Bernard, but also Abelard himself, always recognized her authority unhesitatingly. Furthermore, Abelard's condemnation on various occasions reminds us that in the theological field there must be a balance between what we may call the architectural principles given to us by Revelation, which therefore always retain their priority importance, and the principles for interpretation suggested by philosophy, that is, by reason, which have an

important but exclusively practical role. When this balance between the architecture and the instruments for interpretation is lacking, theological reflection risks being distorted by errors and it is then the task of the Magisterium to exercise that necessary service to the truth which belongs to it.

It must be emphasized in addition that among the reasons that induced Bernard to "take sides" against Abelard and to call for the intervention of the Magisterium, was also his concern to safeguard simple and humble believers, who must be defended when they risk becoming confused or misled by excessively personal opinions or by anti-conformist theological argumentation that might endanger their faith.

Lastly, I would like to recall that the theological confrontation between Bernard and Abelard ended with their complete reconciliation, thanks to the mediation of a common friend, Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny of whom I have spoken in one of my previous Catecheses.

Abelard showed humility in recognizing his errors, Bernard used great benevolence. They both upheld the most important value in a theological controversy: to preserve the Church's faith and to make the truth in charity triumph.

Today too may this be the attitude with which we confront one another in the Church, having as our goal the constant quest for truth.

Wednesday, 4 November 2009

The Cluniac Reform

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This morning I would like to speak to you about a monastic movement that was very important in the Middle Ages and which I have already mentioned in previous Catecheses. It is the Order of Cluny which at the beginning of the 12th century, at the height of its expansion, had almost 1,200 monasteries: a truly impressive figure! A monastery was founded at Cluny in 910, precisely 1,100 years ago, and subsequent to the donation of William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine, was placed under the guidance of Abbot Berno.

At that time Western monasticism, which had flourished several centuries earlier with St Benedict, was experiencing a severe decline for various reasons: unstable political and social conditions due to the continuous invasions and sacking by peoples who were not integrated into the fabric of Europe, widespread poverty and, especially, the dependence of abbeys on the local nobles who controlled all that belonged to the territories under their jurisdiction. In this context, Cluny was the heart and soul of a profound renewal of monastic life that led it back to its original inspiration.

At Cluny the Rule of St Benedict was restored with several adaptations which had already been introduced by other reformers. The main objective was to guarantee the central role that the Liturgy must have in Christian life. The Cluniac monks devoted themselves with love and great care to the celebration of the Liturgical Hours, to the singing of the Psalms, to processions as devout as they were solemn, and above all, to the celebration of Holy Mass.

They promoted sacred music, they wanted architecture and art to contribute to the beauty and solemnity of the rites; they enriched the liturgical calendar with special celebrations such as, for example, at the beginning of November, the Commemoration of All Souls, which we too have just celebrated; and they intensified the devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Great importance was given to the Liturgy because the monks of Cluny were convinced that it was participation in the liturgy of Heaven. And the monks felt responsible for interceding at the altar of God for the living and the dead, given large numbers of the faithful were insistently asking them to be remembered in prayer.

Moreover, it was with this same aim that William the Pious had desired the foundation of the Abbey of Cluny.

In the ancient document that testifies to the foundation we read: "With this gift I establish that a monastery of regulars be built at Cluny in honour of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, where monks who live according to the Rule of St Benedict shall gather... so that a venerable sanctuary of prayer with vows and supplications may be visited there, and the heavenly life be sought after and yearned for with every desire and with deep ardour, and that assiduous prayers, invocations and supplications be addressed to the Lord".

To preserve and foster this atmosphere of prayer, the Cluniac Rule emphasized the importance of silence, to which discipline the monks willingly submitted, convinced that the purity of the virtues to which they aspired demanded deep and constant recollection.

It is not surprising that before long the Monastery of Cluny gained a reputation for holiness and that many other monastic communities decided to follow its discipline. Numerous princes and Popes asked the abbots of Cluny to extend their reform so that in a short time a dense network of monasteries developed that were linked to Cluny, either by true and proper juridical bonds or by a sort of charismatic affiliation. Thus a spiritual Europe gradually took shape in the various regions of France and in Italy, Spain, Germany and Hungary.

Cluny's success was assured primarily not only by the lofty spirituality cultivated there but also by several other conditions that ensured its development.

In comparison with what had happened until then, the Monastery of Cluny and the communities dependent upon it were recognized as exempt from the jurisdiction of the local Bishops and were directly subject to that of the Roman Pontiff. This meant that Cluny had a special bond with the See of Peter and, precisely because of the protection and encouragement of the Pontiffs the ideals of purity and fidelity proposed by the Cluniac Reform spread rapidly.

Furthermore, the abbots were elected without any interference from the civil authorities, unlike what happened in other places. Truly worthy people succeeded one another at the helm of Cluny and of the numerous monastic communities dependent upon it: Abbot Odo of Cluny, of whom I spoke in a Catechesis two months ago, and other great figures such as Eymard, Majolus, Odilo and especially Hugh the Great, who served for long periods, thereby assuring stability and the spread of the reform embarked upon. As well as Odo, Majolus, Odilo and Hugh are venerated as Saints.

Not only did the Cluniac Reform have positive effects in the purification and reawakening of monastic life but also in the life of the universal Church. In fact, the aspiration to evangelical perfection was an incentive to fight two great abuses that afflicted the Church in that period: simony, that is the acquisition of pastoral offices for money, and immorality among the secular clergy.

The abbots of Cluny with their spiritual authority, the Cluniac monks who became Bishops and some of them even Popes, took the lead in this impressive action of spiritual renewal. And it yielded abundant fruit: celibacy was once again esteemed and practised by priests and more transparent procedures were introduced in the designation of ecclesiastical offices.

Also significant were the benefits that monasteries inspired by the Cluniac Reform contributed to society. At a time when Church institutions alone provided for the poor, charity was practised with dedication. In all the houses, the almoner was bound to offer hospitality to needy wayfarers and pilgrims, travelling priests and religious and especially the poor, who came asking for food and a roof over their heads for a few days.

Equally important were two other institutions promoted by Cluny that were characteristic of medieval civilization: the "Truce of God" and the "Peace of God". In an epoch heavily marked by violence and the spirit of revenge, with the "Truces of God" long periods of non-belligerence were guaranteed, especially on the occasion of specific religious feasts and certain days of the week.

With "the Peace of God", on pain of a canonical reprimand, respect was requested for defenceless people and for sacred places.

In this way, in the conscience of the peoples of Europe — during that long process of gestation, which was to lead to their ever clearer recognition — two fundamental elements for the construction of society matured, namely, the value of the human person and the primary good of peace.

Furthermore, as happened for other monastic foundations, the Cluniac monasteries had likewise at their disposal extensive properties which, diligently put to good use, helped to develop the economy. Alongside the manual work there was no lack of the typical cultural activities of medieval monasticism such as schools for children, the foundation of libraries and *scriptoria* for the transcription of books.

In this way, 1,000 years ago when the development of the European identity had gathered momentum, the experience of Cluny, which had spread across vast regions of the European continent, made its important and precious contribution.

It recalled the primacy of spiritual benefits; it kept alive the aspiration to the things of God; it inspired and encouraged initiatives and institutions for the promotion of human values; it taught a spirit of peace.

Dear brothers and sisters let us pray that all those who have at heart an authentic humanism and the future of Europe may be able to rediscover, appreciate and defend the rich cultural and religious heritage of these centuries.

Wednesday, 11 November 2009

Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At these Wednesday Audiences I am presenting several exemplary figures of believers who were dedicated to showing the harmony between reason and faith and to witnessing with their lives to the proclamation of the Gospel. I intend to speak today about Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor.

Both were among those philosophers and theologians known as "Victorines" because they lived and taught at the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, founded at the beginning of the 12th century by William of Champeaux. William himself was a well-known teacher who succeeded in giving his abbey a solid cultural identity. Indeed, a school for the formation of the monks, also open to external students, was founded at Saint-Victor, where a felicitous synthesis was achieved between the two theological models of which I have spoken in previous Catecheses. These are monastic theology, primarily oriented to contemplation of the mysteries of the faith in Scripture; and scholastic theology, which aimed to use reason to scrutinize these mysteries with innovative methods in order to create a theological system.

We have little information about the life of Hugh of Saint-Victor. The date and place of his birth are uncertain; he may have been born in Saxony or in Flanders. It is known that having arrived in Paris— the European cultural capital at that time — he spent the rest of his days at the Abbey of Saint-Victor, where he was first a disciple and subsequently a teacher. Even before his death in 1141, he earned great fame and esteem, to the point that he was called a "second St Augustine". Like

Augustine, in fact, he meditated deeply on the relationship between faith and reason, between the secular sciences and theology. According to Hugh of Saint-Victor, in addition to being useful for understanding the Scriptures, all the branches of knowledge have intrinsic value and must be cultivated in order to broaden human knowledge, as well as to answer the human longing to know the truth.

This healthy intellectual curiosity led him to counsel students always to give free reign to their desire to learn. In his treatise on the methodology of knowledge and pedagogy, entitled significantly*Didascalicon* (*On Teaching*) his recommendation was: "Learn willingly what you do not know from everyone. The person who has sought to learn something from everyone will be wiser than them all. The person who receives something from everyone ends by becoming the richest of all" (*Eruditiones Didascalicae*, 3, 14; *PL* 176, 774).

The knowledge with which the philosophers and theologians known as *Victorines* were concerned in particular was theology, which requires first and foremost the loving study of Sacred Scripture. In fact, in order to know God one cannot but begin with what God himself has chosen to reveal of himself in the Scriptures.

In this regard Hugh of Saint-Victor is a typical representative of monastic theology, based entirely on biblical exegesis. To interpret Scripture he suggests the traditional patristic and medieval structure, namely, the literal and historical sense first of all, then the allegorical and anagogical and, lastly, the moral.

These are four dimensions of the meaning of Scripture that are being rediscovered even today. For this reason

one sees that in the text and in the proposed narrative a more profound meaning is concealed: the thread of faith that leads us heavenwards and guides us on this earth, teaching us how to live.

Yet, while respecting these four dimensions of the meaning of Scripture, in an original way in comparison with his contemporaries, Hugh of Saint-Victor insists — and this is something new —on the importance of the historical and literal meaning.

In other words before discovering the symbolic value, the deeper dimensions of the biblical text, it is necessary to know and to examine the meaning of the event as it is told in Scripture. Otherwise, he warns, using an effective comparison, one risks being like grammarians who do not know the elementary rules.

To those who know the meaning of history as described in the Bible, human events appear marked by divine Providence, in accordance with a clearly ordained plan.

Thus, for Hugh of Saint-Victor, history is neither the outcome of a blind destiny nor as meaningless as it might seem. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit is at work in human history and inspires the marvellous dialogue of human beings with God, their friend. This theological view of history highlights the astonishing and salvific intervention of God who truly enters and acts in history. It is almost as if he takes part in our history, while ever preserving and respecting the human being's freedom and responsibility.

Our author considered that the study of Sacred Scripture and its historical and literal meaning makes possible true and proper theology, that is, the systematic illustration of

truths, knowledge of their structure, the illustration of the dogmas of the faith. He presents these in a solid synthesis in his Treatise *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei* (The Sacraments of the Christian Faith). Among other things, he provides a definition of "sacrament" which, further perfected by other theologians, contains ideas that are still very interesting today.

"The sacrament is a corporeal or material element proposed in an external and tangible way", he writes, "which by its likeness *makes present* an invisible and spiritual grace; it *signifies* it, because it was instituted to this end, and *contains* it, because it is capable of sanctifying" (9,2: *PL* 176, 317).

On the one hand is the visibility in the symbol, the "corporeity" of the gift of God. On the other hand, however, in him [it?] is concealed the divine grace that comes from the history of Jesus Christ, who himself created the fundamental symbols.

Therefore, there are three elements that contribute to the definition of a sacrament, according to Hugh of Saint-Victor: the institution by Christ; the communication of grace; and the analogy between the visible — or material — element and the invisible element: the divine gifts.

This vision is very close to our contemporary understanding, because the sacraments are presented with a language interwoven with symbols and images capable of speaking directly to the human heart. Today too it is important that liturgical animators, and priests in particular, with pastoral wisdom, give due weight to the signs proper to sacramental rites — to this visibility and tangibility of Grace. They should pay special attention to catechesis, to ensure that all the faithful experience every

celebration of the sacraments with devotion, intensity and spiritual joy.

Richard, who came from Scotland, was Hugh of Saint-Victor's worthy disciple. He was prior of the Abbey of Saint-Victor from 1162 to 1173, the year of his death. Richard too, of course, assigned a fundamental role to the study of the Bible but, unlike his master, gave priority to the allegorical sense, the symbolic meaning of Scripture. This is what he uses, for example, in his interpretation of the Old Testament figure of Benjamin, the son of Jacob, as a model of contemplation and the epitome of the spiritual life.

Richard addresses this topic in two texts, *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Maior*. In these he proposes to the faithful a spiritual journey which is primarily an invitation to exercise the various virtues, learning to discipline and to control with reason the sentiments and the inner affective and emotional impulses. Only when the human being has attained balance and human maturity in this area is he or she ready to approach contemplation, which Richard defines as "a profound and pure gaze of the soul, fixed on the marvels of wisdom, combined with an ecstatic sense of wonder and admiration" (*Benjamin Maior* 1,4: *PL* 196, 67).

Contemplation is therefore the destination, the result of an arduous journey that involves dialogue between faith and reason, that is — once again — a theological discourse. Theology stems from truths that are the subject of faith but seeks to deepen knowledge of them by the use of reason, taking into account the gift of faith.

This application of reason to the comprehension of faith is presented convincingly in Richard's masterpiece, one

of the great books of history, the *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*). In the six volumes of which it is composed he reflects perspicaciously on the Mystery of the Triune God.

According to our author, since God is love the one divine substance includes communication, oblation and love between the two Persons, the Father and the Son, who are placed in a reciprocal, eternal exchange of love. However the perfection of happiness and goodness admits of no exclusivism or closure. On the contrary, it requires the eternal presence of a third Person, the Holy Spirit.

Trinitarian love is participatory, harmonious and includes a superabundance of delight, enjoyment and ceaseless joy. Richard, in other words, supposes that God is love, analyzes the essence of love— of what the reality love entails — and thereby arrives at the Trinity of the Persons, which really is the logical expression of the fact that God is love.

Yet Richard is aware that love, although it reveals to us the essence of God, although it makes us "understand" the Mystery of the Trinity, is nevertheless always an analogy that serves to speak of a Mystery that surpasses the human mind. Being the poet and mystic that he is, Richard also has recourse to other images. For example, he compares divinity to a river, to a loving wave which originates in the Father and ebbs and flows in the Son, to be subsequently spread with joy through the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, authors such as Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor raise our minds to contemplation of the divine realities. At the same time, the immense joy we feel at the thought, admiration and praise of the Blessed Trinity

supports and sustains the practical commitment to be inspired by this perfect model of communion in love in order to build our daily human relationships. The Trinity is truly perfect communion! How the world would change if relations were always lived in families, in parishes and in every other community by following the example of the three divine Persons in whom each lives not only *with* the other, but *for* the other and *in* the other! A few months ago at the Angelus I recalled: "Love alone makes us happy because we live in a relationship, and we live to love and to be loved" (*Angelus,* Trinity Sunday, 7 June 2009; *L'Osservatore Romano,* English edition, to June 2009, p. 1).

It is love that works this ceaseless miracle. As in the life of the Blessed Trinity, plurality is recomposed in unity, where all is kindness and joy. With St Augustine, held in great honour by the *Victorines,* we too may exclaim: *"Vides Trinitatem, si caritatem vides* — you contemplate the Trinity, if you see charity" (*De Trinitate* VIII, 8, 12).

Wednesday, 25 November 2009

William of Saint-Thierry

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In a previous Catechesis I presented Bernard of Clairvaux, the "Doctor Mellifluus", a great protagonist of the 12th century. His biographer — a friend who esteemed him — was William of Saint-Thierry on whom I am reflecting in this morning's Catechesis.

William was born in Liege between 1075 and 1080. He came from a noble family, was endowed with a keen intelligence and an innate love of study. He attended famous schools of the time, such as those in his native city and in Rheims, France.

He also came into personal contact with Abelard, the teacher who applied philosophy to theology in such an original way as to give rise to great perplexity and opposition. William also expressed his own reservations, pressing his friend Bernard to take a stance concerning Abelard.

Responding to God's mysterious and irresistible call which is the vocation to the consecrated life, William entered the Benedictine Monastery of Saint-Nicasius in Rheims in 1113. A few years later he became abbot of the Monastery of Saint-Thierry in the Diocese of Rheims.

In that period there was a widespread need for the purification and renewal of monastic life to make it authentically evangelical. William worked on doing this in his own monastery and in general in the Benedictine Order. However, he met with great resistance to his attempts at reform and thus, although his friend Bernard advised him

against it, in 1135 he left the Benedictine abbey and exchanged his black habit for a white one in order to join the Cistercians of Signy. From that time, until his death in 1148, he devoted himself to prayerful contemplation of God's mysteries, ever the subject of his deepest desires, and to the composition of spiritual literature, important writings in the history of monastic theology.

One of his first works is entitled *De Natura et dignitate amoris* (*The nature and dignity of love*). In it William expressed one of his basic ideas that is also valid for us.

The principal energy that moves the human soul, he said, is love. Human nature, in its deepest essence, consists in loving. Ultimately, a single task is entrusted to every human being: to learn to like and to love, sincerely, authentically and freely.

However, it is only from God's teaching that this task is learned and that the human being may reach the end for which he was created.

Indeed, William wrote: "The art of arts is the art of love.... Love is inspired by the Creator of nature. Love is a force of the soul that leads it as by a natural weight to its own place and end" (*De Natura et dignitate amoris PL* 184, 379).

Learning to love is a long and demanding process that is structured by William in four stages, corresponding to the ages of the human being: childhood, youth, maturity and old-age. On this journey the person must impose upon himself an effective ascesis, firm self-control to eliminate every irregular affection, every capitulation to selfishness, and to unify his own life in God, the source,

goal and force of love, until he reaches the summit of spiritual life which William calls "wisdom".

At the end of this ascetic process, the person feels deep serenity and sweetness. All the human being's faculties — intelligence, will, affection — rest in God, known and loved in Christ.

In other works too, William speaks of this radical vocation to love for God which is the secret of a successful and happy life and which he describes as a ceaseless, growing desire, inspired by God himself in the human heart.

In a meditation he says "that the object of this love is Love" with a capital "L", namely God. It is he who pours himself out into the hearts of those who love him and prepares them to receive him.

"God gives himself until the person is sated and in such a way that the desire is never lacking. This impetus of love is the fulfilment of the human being" (*De Contemplando Deo* 6, *passim*, SC 61 bis, pp. 79-83).

The considerable importance that William gives to the emotional dimension is striking. Basically, dear friends, our hearts are made of flesh and blood, and when we love God, who is Love itself, how can we fail to express in this relationship with the Lord our most human feelings, such as tenderness, sensitivity and delicacy? In becoming Man, the Lord himself wanted to love us with a heart of flesh!

Moreover, according to William, love has another important quality: it illuminates the mind and enables one to know God better and more profoundly and, in God,

people and events. The knowledge that proceeds from the senses and the intelligence reduces but does not eliminate the distance between the subject and the object, between the "I" and the "you".

Love, on the other hand, gives rise to attraction and communion, to the point that transformation and assimilation take place between the subject who loves and the beloved object. This reciprocity of affection and liking subsequently permits a far deeper knowledge than that which is brought by reason alone. A famous saying of William expresses it: "*Amor ipse intellectus est* — love in itself is already the beginning of knowledge".

Dear friends, let us ask ourselves: is not our life just like this? Is it not perhaps true that we only truly know *who* and *what* we love? Without a certain fondness one knows no one and nothing! And this applies first of all to the knowledge of God and his mysteries that exceed our mental capacity to understand: God is known if he is loved!

A synthesis of William of Saint Thierry's thought is contained in a long letter addressed to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu, whom he visited and wished to encourage and console. Already in 1690, the learned Benedictine Jean Mabillon, gave this letter a meaningful title: *Epistola Aurea* (*Golden Epistle*).

In fact, the teachings on spiritual life that it contains are invaluable for all those who wish to increase in communion with God and in holiness. In this treatise, William proposes an itinerary in three stages. It is necessary, he says, to move on from the "animal" being to the "rational" one, in order to attain to the "spiritual".

What does our author mean by these three terms? To start with, a person accepts the vision of life inspired by faith with an act of obedience and trust. Then, with a process of interiorization, in which the reason and the will play an important role, faith in Christ is received with profound conviction and one feels a harmonious correspondence between what is believed and what is hoped, and the most secret aspirations of the soul, our reason, our affections.

One therefore arrives at the perfection of spiritual life when the realities of faith are a source of deep joy and real and satisfying communion with God.

One lives only in love and for love. William based this process on a solid vision of the human being inspired by the ancient Greek Fathers, especially Origen who, with bold language, taught that the human being's vocation was to become like God who created him in his image and likeness.

The image of God present in man impels him toward likeness, that is, toward an ever fuller identity between his own will and the divine will.

One does not attain this perfection, which William calls "unity of spirit", by one's own efforts, even if they are sincere and generous, because something else is necessary.

This perfection is reached through the action of the Holy Spirit who takes up his abode in the soul and purifies, absorbs and transforms into charity every impulse and desire of love that is present in the human being.

"Then there is a further likeness to God", we read in the *Epistola Aurea*, "which is no longer called 'likeness' but 'unity of spirit', when the person becomes one with God, one in spirit, not only because of the unity of an identical desire but through being unable to desire anything else. In this way the human being deserves to become not God but what God is: man becomes through grace what God is by nature" (*Epistola Aurea* 262-263, *SC* 223, pp. 353-355).

Dear brothers and sisters, this author, whom we might describe as the "Singer of Charity, of Love", teaches us to make the basic decision in our lives which gives meaning and value to all our other decisions: to love God and, through love of him, to love our neighbour; only in this manner shall we be able to find true joy, an anticipation of eternal beatitude.

Let us therefore learn from the Saints in order to learn to love authentically and totally, to set our being on this journey.

Together with a young Saint, a Doctor of the Church, Thérèse of the Child Jesus, let us tell the Lord that we too want to live of love.

And I conclude with a prayer precisely by this Saint: "You know I love you, Jesus Christ, my Own! Your Spirit's fire of love enkindles me. By loving you, I draw the Father here, down to my heart, to stay with me always. Blessed Trinity! You are my prisoner dear, of love, today.... To live of love, 'tis without stint to give. And never count the cost, nor ask reward.... O Heart Divine, o'er-flowing with tenderness, How swift I run, who all to You has given! Naught but your love I need, my life to bless" [To live of love].

Wednesday, 2 December 2009

Rupert of Deutz

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today we become acquainted with another 12th-century Benedictine monk. His name is Rupert of Deutz, a city near Cologne, home to a famous monastery.

Rupert himself speaks of his own life in one of his most important works entitled *The Glory and Honour of the Son of Man* [*De gloria et honore filii hominis super Matthaeum*], which is a commentary on part of the Gospel according to Matthew.

While still a boy he was received at the Benedictine Monastery of St Laurence at Lieges as an "oblate", in accordance with the custom at that time of entrusting one of the sons to the monks for his education, intending to make him a gift to God.

Rupert always loved monastic life. He quickly learned Latin in order to study the Bible and to enjoy the liturgical celebrations. He distinguished himself for his moral rectitude, straight as a die, and his strong attachment to the See of St Peter.

Rupert's time was marked by disputes between the Papacy and the Empire, because of the so-called "Investiture Controversy" with which — as I have mentioned in other Catecheses — the Papacy wished to prevent the appointment of Bishops and the exercise of their jurisdiction from depending on the civil authorities who were certainly not guided by pastoral reasons but for the most part by political and financial considerations.

Bishop Otbert of Lièges resisted the Pope's directives and exiled Berengarius, Abbot of the Monastery of St Laurence, because of his fidelity to the Pontiff. It was in this monastery that Rupert lived. He did not hesitate to follow his Abbot into exile and only when Bishop Otbert returned to communion with the Pope did he return to Liège and agree to become a priest.

Until that moment, in fact, he had avoided receiving ordination from a Bishop in dissent with the Pope. Rupert teaches us that when controversies arise in the Church the reference to the Petrine ministry guarantees fidelity to sound doctrine and is a source of serenity and inner freedom.

After the dispute with Otbert Rupert was obliged to leave his monastery again twice.

In 1116 his adversaries even wanted to take him to court. Although he was acquitted of every accusation, Rupert preferred to go for a while to Siegburg; but since on his return to the monastery in Liege the disputes had not yet ceased, he decided to settle definitively in Germany. In 1120 he was appointed Abbot of Deutz where, except for making a pilgrimage to Rome in 1124, he lived until 1129, the year of his death.

A fertile writer, Rupert left numerous works, still today of great interest because he played an active part in various important theological discussions of his time. For example, he intervened with determination in the Eucharistic controversy, which in 1077 led to his condemnation by Berengarius of Tours.

Berengarius had given a reductive interpretation of Christ's presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, describing it as merely symbolic. In the language of the Church the term "transubstantiation" was as yet unknown but Rupert, at times with daring words, made himself a staunch supporter of the Eucharistic reality and, especially in a work entitled *De divinis officiis* (On divine offices), purposefully asserted the continuity between the Body of the Incarnate Word of Christ and that present in the Eucharistic species of the bread and the wine.

Dear brothers and sisters, it seems to me that at this point we must also think of our time; today too we are in danger of reappraising the Eucharistic reality, that is, of considering the Eucharist almost as a rite of communion, of socialization alone, forgetting all too easily that the Risen Christ is really present in the Eucharist — with his Risen Body — which is placed in our hands *to draw us out* of ourselves, *to incorporate us* into his immortal body and thereby *lead us* to new life.

This great mystery that the Lord is present in his full reality in the Eucharistic species is a mystery to be adored and loved ever anew!

I would like here to quote the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which bear the fruit of 2,000 years of meditation on the faith and theological reflection:

"The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique and incomparable.... In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the Body and Blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ... is truly, really, and substantially contained'.... It is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man,

makes himself wholly and entirely present... by the Eucharistic species of the bread the wine" (cf. n. 1374). Rupert too contributed with his reflections to this precise formulation.

Another controversy in which the Abbot of Deutz was involved concerns the problem of the reconciliation of God's goodness and omnipotence with the existence of evil. If God is omnipotent and good, how is it possible to explain the reality of evil?

Rupert, in fact, reacted to the position assumed by the teachers of the theological school of Laon, who, with a series of philosophical arguments, distinguished in God's will the "to approve" and the "to permit", concluding that God permits evil without approving it and hence without desiring it.

Rupert, on the other hand, renounces the use of philosophy, which he deems inadequate for addressing such a great problem, and remains simply faithful to the biblical narration.

He starts with the goodness of God, with the truth that God is supremely good and cannot desire anything but good. Thus he identifies the origin of evil in the human being himself and in the erroneous use of human freedom. When Rupert addresses this topic he writes pages filled with religious inspiration to praise the Father's infinite mercy, God's patience with the sinful human being and his kindness to him.

Like other medieval theologians, Rupert too wondered why the Word of God, the Son of God, was made man. Some, many, answered by explaining the Incarnation of

the Word by the urgent need to atone for human sin. Rupert, on the other hand, with a Christocentric vision of salvation history, broadens the perspective, and in a work entitled *The Glorification of the Trinity*, sustains the position that the Incarnation, the central event of the whole of history was planned from eternity, even independently of human sin, so that the whole creation might praise God the Father and love him as one family gathered round Christ, the Son of God.

Then he saw in the pregnant woman of the Apocalypse the entire history of humanity which is oriented to Christ, just as conception is oriented to birth, a perspective that was to be developed by other thinkers and enhanced by contemporary theology, which says that the whole history of the world and of humanity is a conception oriented to the birth of Christ.

Christ is always the centre of the exegetic explanations provided by Rupert in his commentaries on the Books of the Bible, to which he dedicated himself with great diligence and passion.

Thus, he rediscovers a wonderful unity in all the events of the history of salvation, from the creation until the final consummation of time: "All Scripture", he says, "is one book, which aspires to the same end (the divine Word); which comes from one God and was written by one Spirit" *(De glorificatione Trinitatis et procesione Sancti spiritus* I, V, *PL* 169, 18).

In the interpretation of the Bible, Rupert did not limit himself to repeating the teaching of the Fathers, but shows an originality of his own. For example, he is the first writer to have identified the bride in the Song of Songs with Mary Most Holy.

His commentary on this book of Scripture has thus turned out to be a sort of Mariological *summa,*in which he presents Mary's privileges and excellent virtues.

In one of the most inspired passages of his commentary Rupert writes: "O most beloved among the beloved, Virgin of virgins, what does your beloved Son so praise in you that the whole choir of angels exalts? What they praise is your simplicity, purity, innocence, doctrine, modesty, humility, integrity of mind and body, that is, your incorrupt virginity" (*In Canticum Canticorum* 4, 1-6,*CCL* 26, pp. 69-70).

The Marian interpretation of Rupert's *Canticum* is a felicitous example of harmony between liturgy and theology. In fact, various passages of this Book of the Bible were already used in liturgical celebrations on Marian feasts.

Rupert, furthermore, was careful to insert his Mariological doctrine into that ecclesiological doctrine. That is to say, he saw in Mary Most Holy the holiest part of the whole Church. For this reason my venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul in his Discourse for the closure of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, in solemnly pronouncing Mary Mother of the Church, even cited a proposal taken from Rupert's works, which describes Mary as *portio maxima, portio optima* —the most sublime part, the very best part of the Church (cf. *In Apocalypsem* I, 7, *PL* 169, 1043).

Dear friends, from these rapid allusions we realize that Rupert was a fervent theologian endowed with great depth. Like all the representatives of monastic theology, he was able to combine rational study of the mysteries of

faith with prayer and contemplation, which he considered the summit of all knowledge of God.

He himself sometimes speaks of his mystical experiences, such as when he confides his ineffable joy at having perceived the Lord's presence: "in that brief moment", he says, "I experienced how true what he himself says is. *Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart"* (*De gloria et honore Filii hominis. Super Matthaeum* 12, *PL* 1601) .

We too, each one of us in our own way, can encounter the Lord Jesus who ceaselessly accompanies us on our way, makes himself present in the Eucharistic Bread and in his Word for our salvation.

Wednesday, 9 December 2009

Saint Hildegard of Bingen (Part 1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In 1988, on the occasion of the Marian Year, Venerable John Paul wrote an Apostolic Letter entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the precious role that women have played and play in the life of the Church.

"The Church", one reads in it, "gives thanks for all the manifestations of the *feminine* 'genius' which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms that the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness" (n. 31).

Various female figures stand out for the holiness of their lives and the wealth of their teaching even in those centuries of history that we usually call the Middle Ages. Today I would like to begin to present one of them to you: St Hildegard of Bingen, who lived in Germany in the 12th century.

She was born in 1098, probably at Bermersheim, Rhineland, not far from Alzey, and died in 1179 at the age of 81, in spite of having always been in poor health.

Hildegard belonged to a large noble family and her parents dedicated her to God from birth for his service.

At the age of eight she was offered for the religious state (in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict, chapter 59), and, to ensure that she received an appropriate human and Christian formation, she was entrusted to the care of

the consecrated widow Uda of Gölklheim and then to Jutta of Spanheim who had taken the veil at the Benedictine Monastery of St Disibodenberg. A small cloistered women's monastery was developing there that followed the Rule of St Benedict. Hildegard was clothed by Bishop Otto of Bamberg and in 1136, upon the death of Mother Jutta who had become the community *magistra* (Prioress), the sisters chose Hildegard to succeed her.

She fulfilled this office making the most of her gifts as a woman of culture and of lofty spirituality, capable of dealing competently with the organizational aspects of cloistered life. A few years later, partly because of the increasing number of young women who were knocking at the monastery door, Hildegard broke away from the dominating male monastery of St Disibodenburg with her community, taking it to Bingen, calling it after St Rupert and here she spent the rest of her days. Her manner of exercising the ministry of authority is an example for every religious community: she inspired holy emulation in the practice of good to such an extent that, as time was to tell, both the mother and her daughters competed in mutual esteem and in serving each other.

During the years when she was superior of the Monastery of St Disibodenberg, Hildegard began to dictate the mystical visions that she had been receiving for some time to the monk Volmar, her spiritual director, and to Richardis di Strade, her secretary, a sister of whom she was very fond.
As always happens in the life of true mystics, Hildegard too wanted to put herself under the authority of wise people to discern the origin of her visions, fearing that they were the product of illusions and did not come from God.

She thus turned to a person who was most highly esteemed in the Church in those times: St Bernard of Clairvaux, of whom I have already spoken in several Catecheses. He calmed and encouraged Hildegard.

However, in 1147 she received a further, very important approval. Pope Eugene III, who was presiding at a Synod in Trier, read a text dictated by Hildegard presented to him by Archbishop Henry of Mainz. The Pope authorized the mystic to write down her visions and to speak in public.

From that moment Hildegard's spiritual prestige continued to grow so that her contemporaries called her the "Teutonic prophetess".

This, dear friends, is the seal of an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit, the source of every charism: the person endowed with supernatural gifts never boasts of them, never flaunts them and, above all, shows complete obedience to the ecclesial authority. Every gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, is in fact intended for the edification of the Church and the Church, through her Pastors, recognizes its authenticity.

I shall speak again next Wednesday about this great woman, this "prophetess" who also speaks with great timeliness to us today, with her courageous ability to discern the signs of the times, her love for creation, her medicine, her poetry, her music, which today has been reconstructed, her love for Christ and for his Church which was suffering in that period too, wounded also in that time by the sins of both priests and lay people, and far better loved as the Body of Christ. Thus St Hildegard speaks to us; we shall speak of her again next Wednesday. Thank you for your attention.

Wednesday, 1st September 2010

Saint Hildegard of Bingen (Part 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to take up and continue my Reflection on St Hildegard of Bingen, an important female figure of the Middle Ages who was distinguished for her spiritual wisdom and the holiness of her life.

Hildegard's mystical visions resemble those of the Old Testament prophets: expressing herself in the cultural and religious categories of her time, she interpreted the Sacred Scriptures in the light of God, applying them to the various circumstances of life. Thus all those who heard her felt the need to live a consistent and committed Christian lifestyle.

In a letter to St Bernard the mystic from the Rhineland confesses: "The vision fascinates my whole being: I do not see with the eyes of the body but it appears to me in the spirit of the mysteries.... I recognize the deep meaning of what is expounded on in the Psalter, in the Gospels and in other books, which have been shown to me in the vision. This vision burns like a flame in my breast and in my soul and teaches me to understand the text profoundly" (*Epistolarium pars prima I-XC*: cccm 91).

Hildegard's mystical visions have a rich theological content. They refer to the principal events of salvation history, and use a language for the most part poetic and symbolic. For example, in her best known work entitled *Scivias*, that is, "You know the ways" she sums up in 35 visions the events of the history of salvation from the creation of the world to the end of time.

With the characteristic traits of feminine sensitivity, Hildegard develops at the very heart of her work the theme of the mysterious marriage between God and humanity that is brought about in the Incarnation. On the tree of the Cross take place the nuptials of the Son of God with the Church, his Bride, filled with grace and the ability to give new children to God, in the love of the Holy Spirit (cf.*Visio tertia: PL* 197, 453c).

From these brief references we already see that theology too can receive a special contribution from women because they are able to talk about God and the mysteries of faith using their own particular intelligence and sensitivity. I therefore encourage all those who carry out this service to do it with a profound ecclesial spirit, nourishing their own reflection with prayer and looking to the great riches, not yet fully explored, of the medieval mystic tradition, especially that represented by luminous models such as Hildegard of Bingen.

The Rhenish mystic is also the author of other writings, two of which are particularly important since, like *Scivias*, they record her mystical visions: they are the *Liber vitae meritorum* (Book of the merits of life) and the *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of the divine works), also called *De operatione Dei*.

In the former she describes a unique and powerful vision of God who gives life to the cosmos with his power and his light. Hildegard stresses the deep relationship that exists between man and God and reminds us that the whole creation, of which man is the summit, receives life from the Trinity. The work is centred on the relationship between virtue and vice, which is why human beings must face the daily challenge of vice that distances them on their way towards God and of virtue that benefits them.

The invitation is to distance themselves from evil in order to glorify God and, after a virtuous existence, enter the life that consists "wholly of joy".

In her second work that many consider her masterpiece she once again describes creation in its relationship with God and the centrality of the human being, expressing a strong Christo-centrism with a biblical-Patristic flavour.

The Saint, who presents five visions inspired by the Prologue of the Gospel according to St John, cites the words of the Son to the Father: "The whole task that you wanted and entrusted to me I have carried out successfully, and so here I am in you and you in me and we are one" (*Pars III, Visio X: PL* 197, 1025a).

Finally, in other writings Hildegard manifests the versatility of interests and cultural vivacity of the female monasteries of the Middle Ages, in a manner contrary to the prejudices which still weighed on that period.

Hildegard took an interest in medicine and in the natural sciences as well as in music, since she was endowed with artistic talent.

Thus she composed hymns, antiphons and songs, gathered under the title: *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of Heavenly Revelations), that were performed joyously in her monasteries, spreading an atmosphere of tranquillity and that have also come down to us. For her, the entire creation is a symphony of the Holy Spirit who is in himself joy and jubilation.

The popularity that surrounded Hildegard impelled many people to seek her advice. It is for this reason that we have so many of her letters at our disposal.

Many male and female monastic communities turned to her, as well as Bishops and Abbots. And many of her answers still apply for us.

For instance, Hildegard wrote these words to a community of women religious: "The spiritual life must be tended with great dedication. At first the effort is burdensome because it demands the renunciation of caprices of the pleasures of the flesh and of other such things. But if she lets herself be enthralled by holiness a holy soul will find even contempt for the world sweet and lovable. All that is needed is to take care that the soul does not shrivel" (E. Gronau, Hildegard. *Vita di una donna profetica alle origini dell'età moderna*, Milan 1996, p. 402).

And when the Emperor Frederic Barbarossa caused a schism in the Church by supporting at least three antipopes against Alexander III, the legitimate Pope, Hildegard did not hesitate, inspired by her visions, to remind him that even he, the Emperor, was subject to God's judgement. With fearlessness, a feature of every prophet, she wrote to the Emperor these words as spoken by God: "You will be sorry for this wicked conduct of the godless who despise me! Listen, O King, if you wish to live! Otherwise my sword will pierce you!" (*ibid.*, p. 412).

With the spiritual authority with which she was endowed, in the last years of her life Hildegard set out on journeys, despite her advanced age and the uncomfortable conditions of travel, in order to speak to the people of God. They all listened willingly, even when she spoke severely: they considered her a messenger sent by God.

She called above all the monastic communities and the clergy to a life in conformity with their vocation. In a special way Hildegard countered the movement of German *cátari* (Cathars). They — *cátari* means literally "pure" advocated a radical reform of the Church, especially to combat the abuses of the clergy. She harshly reprimanded them for seeking to subvert the very nature of the Church, reminding them that a true renewal of the ecclesial community is obtained with a sincere spirit of repentance and a demanding process of conversion, rather than with a change of structures.

This is a message that we should never forget. Let us always invoke the Holy Spirit, so that he may inspire in the Church holy and courageous women, like St Hildegard of Bingen, who, developing the gifts they have received from God, make their own special and valuable contribution to the spiritual development of our communities and of the Church in our time.

Wednesday, 8 September 2010

APOSTOLIC LETTER

Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI
FOR PERPETUAL REMEMBRANCE

1. A "light for her people and her time": in these words Blessed John Paul II, my Venerable Predecessor, described Saint Hildegard of Bingen in 1979, on the occasion of the eight-hundredth anniversary of the death of this German mystic. This great woman truly stands out crystal clear against the horizon of history for her holiness of life and the originality of her teaching. And, as with every authentic human and theological experience, her authority reaches far beyond the confines of a single epoch or society; despite the distance of time and culture, her thought has proven to be of lasting relevance.

In Saint Hildegard of Bingen there is a wonderful harmony between teaching and daily life. In her, the search for God's will in the imitation of Christ was expressed in the constant practice of virtue, which she exercised with supreme generosity and which she nourished from biblical, liturgical and patristic roots in the light of the Rule of Saint Benedict. Her persevering practice of obedience, simplicity, charity and hospitality was especially visible. In her desire to belong completely to the Lord, this Benedictine Abbess was able to bring together rare human gifts, keen intelligence and an ability to penetrate heavenly realities.

2. Hildegard was born in 1098 at Bermersheim, Alzey, to parents of noble lineage who were wealthy landowners. At the age of eight she was received as an oblate at the Benedictine Abbey of Disibodenberg, where in 1115 she made her religious profession. Upon the death of Jutta of Sponheim, around the year 1136, Hildegard was called to succeed her as *magistra*. Infirm in physical health but vigorous in spirit, she committed herself totally to the renewal of religious life. At the basis of her spirituality was the Benedictine Rule which views spiritual balance and ascetical moderation as paths to holiness. Following the increase in vocations to the religious life, due above all to the high esteem in which Hildegard was held, around 1150 she founded a monastery on the hill of Rupertsberg, near Bingen, where she moved with twenty sisters. In 1165, she established another monastery on the opposite bank of the Rhine. She was the Abbess of both.

Within the walls of the cloister, she cared for the spiritual and material well-being of her sisters, fostering in a special way community life, culture and the liturgy. In the outside world she devoted herself actively to strengthening the Christian faith and reinforcing religious practice, opposing the heretical trends of the Cathars, promoting Church reform through her writings and preaching and contributing to the improvement of the discipline and life of clerics. At the invitation first of Hadrian IV and later of Alexander III, Hildegard practised a fruitful apostolate, something unusual for a woman at that time, making several journeys, not without hardship and difficulty, to preach even in public squares and in various cathedral churches, such as at Cologne, Trier, Liège, Mainz, Metz, Bamberg and Würzburg. The profound spirituality of her writings had a significant influence both on the faithful and on important figures of her time and brought about

an incisive renewal of theology, liturgy, natural sciences and music. Stricken by illness in the summer of 1179, Hildegard died in the odour of sanctity, surrounded by her sisters at the monastery of Rupertsberg, Bingen, on 17 September 1179.

3. In her many writings Hildegard dedicated herself exclusively to explaining divine revelation and making God known in the clarity of his love. Hildegard's teaching is considered eminent both for its depth, the correctness of its interpretation, and the originality of its views. The texts she produced are refreshing in their authentic "intellectual charity" and emphasize the power of penetration and comprehensiveness of her contemplation of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, humanity and nature as God's creation, to be appreciated and respected.

These works were born from a deep mystical experience and propose a perceptive reflection on the mystery of God. The Lord endowed her with a series of visions from childhood, whose content she dictated to the Benedictine monk Volmar, her secretary and spiritual advisor, and to Richardis von Stade, one of her women religious. But particularly illuminating are the judgments expressed by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who encouraged her, and especially by Pope Eugene III, who in 1147 authorized her to write and to speak in public. Theological reflection enabled Hildegard to organize and understand, at least in part, the content of her visions. In addition to books on theology and mysticism, she also authored works on medicine and natural sciences. Her letters are also numerous — about four hundred are extant; these were addressed to simple people, to religious communities, popes, bishops and the civil authorities of her time. She was also a composer of sacred music. The corpus of her

writings, for their quantity, quality and variety of interests, is unmatched by any other female author of the Middle Ages.

Her main writings are the *Scivias*, the *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and the *Liber Divinorum Operum*. They relate her visions and the task she received from the Lord to transcribe them. In the author's view her *Letters* were no less important; they bear witness to the attention Hildegard paid to the events of her time, which she interpreted in the light of the mystery of God. In addition there are 58 sermons, addressed directly to her sisters. They are her *Expositiones Evangeliorum*, containing a literary and moral commentary on Gospel passages related to the main celebrations of the liturgical year. Her artistic and scientific works focus mainly on music, in the *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum*; on medicine, in the *Liber Subtilitatum Diversarum Naturarum Creaturarum* and in the *Causae et Curae*, and on natural sciences in the *Physica*. Finally her linguistic writings are also noteworthy, such as the *Lingua Ignota* and the *Litterae Ignotae*, in which the words appear in an unknown language of her own invention, but are composed mainly of phonemes present in German.

Hildegard's language, characterized by an original and effective style, makes ample use of poetic expressions and is rich in symbols, dazzling intuitions, incisive comparisons and evocative metaphors.

4. With acute wisdom-filled and prophetic sensitivity, Hildegard focused her attention on the event of revelation. Her investigation develops from the biblical page in which, in successive phases, it remains firmly anchored. The range of vision of the mystic of Bingen was not limited to treating individual matters but sought to offer a

global synthesis of the Christian faith. Hence in her visions and her subsequent reflections she presents a compendium of the history of salvation from the beginning of the universe until its eschatological consummation. God's decision to bring about the work of creation is the first stage on this immensely long journey which, in the light of sacred Scripture, unfolds from the constitution of the heavenly hierarchy until it reaches the fall of the rebellious angels and the sin of our first parents.

This initial picture is followed by the redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God, the activity of the Church that extends in time the mystery of the Incarnation and the struggle against Satan. The definitive Coming of the Kingdom of God and the Last Judgement crown this work.

Hildegard asks herself and us the fundamental question, whether it is possible to know God: This is theology's principal task. Her answer is completely positive: through faith, as through a door, the human person is able to approach this knowledge. God, however, always retains his veil of mystery and incomprehensibility. He makes himself understandable in creation but, creation itself is not fully understood when detached from God. Indeed, nature considered in itself provides only pieces of information which often become an occasion for error and abuse. Faith, therefore, is also necessary in the natural cognitive process, for otherwise knowledge would remain limited, unsatisfactory and misleading.

Creation is an act of love by which the world can emerge from nothingness. Hence, through the whole range of creatures, divine love flows as a river. Of all creatures God loves man in a special way and confers upon him an extraordinary dignity, giving him that glory which the

rebellious angels lost. The human race may thus be counted as the tenth choir of the angelic hierarchy. Indeed human beings are able to know God in himself, that is, his one nature in the Trinity of Persons. Hildegard approached the mystery of the Blessed Trinity along the lines proposed by Saint Augustine. By analogy with his own structure as a rational being, man is able to have an image at least of the inner life of God. Nevertheless, it is solely in the economy of the Incarnation and human life of the Son of God that this mystery becomes accessible to human faith and knowledge. The holy and ineffable Trinity in supreme Unity was hidden from those in the service of the ancient law. But in the new law of grace it was revealed to all who had been freed from slavery. The Trinity was revealed in a special way in the Cross of the Son.

A second "space" in which God becomes known is his word, contained in the Books of the Old and New Testament. Precisely because God "speaks", man is called to listen. This concept affords Hildegard the opportunity to expound her doctrine on song, especially liturgical song. The sound of the word of God creates life and is expressed in his creatures. Thanks to the creative word, beings without rationality are also involved in the dynamism of creation. But man of course is the creature who can answer the voice of the Creator with his own voice. And this can happen in two ways: *in voce oris*, that is, in the celebration of the liturgy, and *in voce cordis*, that is, through a virtuous and holy life. The whole of human life may therefore be interpreted as harmonic and symphonic.

5. Hildegard's anthropology begins from the biblical narrative of the creation of man (Gen 1:26), made in the

image and likeness of God. Man, according to Hildegard's biblically inspired cosmology, contains all the elements of the world because the entire universe is recapitulated in him; he is formed from the very matter of creation. The human person can therefore consciously enter into a relationship with God. This does not happen through a direct vision, but, in the words of Saint Paul, as "in a mirror" (1 Cor 13:12). The divine image in man consists in his rationality, structured as intellect and will. Thanks to his intellect, man can distinguish between good and evil; thanks to his will, he is spurred to action.

Human beings are seen as a unity of body and soul. The German mystic shows a positive appreciation of corporeity and providential value is given even to the body's weaknesses. The body is not a weight from which to be delivered. Although human beings are weak and frail, this "teaches" them a sense of creatureliness and humility, protecting them from pride and arrogance. Hildegard contemplated in a vision the souls of the blessed in paradise waiting to be rejoined to their bodies. Our bodies, like the body of Christ, are oriented to the glorious resurrection, to the supreme transformation for eternal life. The very vision of God, in which eternal life consists, cannot be definitively achieved without the body.

The human being exists in both the male and female form. Hildegard recognized that a relationship of reciprocity and a substantial equality between man and woman is rooted in this ontological structure of the human condition. Nevertheless the mystery of sin also dwells in humanity, and was manifested in history for the first time precisely in the relationship between Adam and Eve. Unlike other medieval authors who saw Eve's weakness as the cause of the Fall, Hildegard places it above all in Adam's immoderate passion for her.

Even in their condition as sinners, men and women continue to be the recipients of God's love, because God's love is unconditional and, after the Fall, acquires the face of mercy. Even the punishment that God inflicts on the man and woman brings out the merciful love of the Creator. In this regard, the most precise description of the human creature is that of someone on a journey,*homo viator*. On this pilgrimage towards the homeland, the human person is called to a struggle in order constantly to choose what is good and avoid evil.

The constant choice of good produces a virtuous life. The Son of God made man is the subject of all virtues, therefore the imitation of Christ consists precisely in living a virtuous life in communion with Christ. The power of virtue derives from the Holy Spirit, poured into the hearts of believers, who brings about upright behaviour. This is the purpose of human existence. In this way man experiences his Christ-like perfection.

6. So as to achieve this goal, the Lord has given his Church the sacraments. Salvation and the perfection of the human being are not achieved through the effort of the will alone, but rather through the gifts of grace that God grants in the Church.

The Church herself is the first sacrament that God places in the world so that she may communicate salvation to mankind. The Church, built up from "living souls", may rightly be considered virgin, bride and mother, and thus resembles closely the historical and mystical figure of the Mother of God. The Church communicates salvation first of all by keeping and proclaiming the two great mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which are like the two "primary sacraments"; and then through admin-

istration of the other sacraments. The summit of the sacramental nature of the Church is the Eucharist. The sacraments produce the sanctification of believers, salvation and purification from sin, redemption and charity and all the other virtues. However, to repeat, the Church lives because God within her has manifested his intraTrinitarian love, which was revealed in Christ. The Lord Jesus is the mediator par excellence. From the Trinitarian womb he comes to encounter man and from Mary's womb he encounters God. As the Son of God, he is love incarnate; as the Son of Mary, he is humanity's representative before the throne of God.

The human person can have an experience of God. Relationship with him, in fact, is not lived solely in the sphere of rationality, but involves the person totally. All the external and internal senses of the human being are involved in the experience of God. "But man was created in the image and likeness of God, so that he might act through the five bodily senses; he is not divided by them, rather through them he is wise, knowledgeable and intelligent in doing his work (...). For this very reason, because man is wise, knowledgeable and intelligent, he knows creation; he knows God — whom he cannot see except by faith — through creation and his great works, even if with his five senses he barely comprehends them" (*Explanatio Symboli Sancti Athanasii* in *PL* 197, 1073). This experiential process finds once again, its fullness in participation in the sacraments.

Hildegard also saw contradictions in the lives of individual members of the faithful and reported the most deplorable situations. She emphasized in particular that individualism in doctrine and in practice on the part of both lay people and ordained ministers is an expression of

pride and constitutes the main obstacle to the Church's evangelizing mission to non-Christians.

One of the salient points of Hildegard's magisterium was her heartfelt exhortation to a virtuous life addressed to consecrated men and women. Her understanding of the consecrated life is a true "theological metaphysics", because it is firmly rooted in the theological virtue of faith, which is the source and constant impulse to full commitment in obedience, poverty and chastity. In living out the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person shares in the experience of Christ, poor, chaste and obedient, and follows in his footsteps in daily life. This is fundamental in the consecrated life.

7. Hildegard's eminent doctrine echoes the teaching of the Apostles, the Fathers and writings of her own day, while it finds a constant point of reference in the Rule of Saint Benedict. The monastic liturgy and the interiorization of sacred Scripture are central to her thought which, focusing on the mystery of the Incarnation, is expressed in a profound unity of style and inner content that runs through all her writings.

The teaching of the holy Benedictine nun stands as a beacon for *homo viator*. Her message appears extraordinarily timely in today's world, which is especially sensitive to the values that she proposed and lived. For example, we think of Hildegard's charismatic and speculative capacity, which offers a lively incentive to theological research; her reflection on the mystery of Christ, considered in its beauty; the dialogue of the Church and theology with culture, science and contemporary art; the ideal of the consecrated life as a possibility for human fulfilment; her appreciation of the liturgy as a celebration of life; her understanding of the reform of the Church, not

as an empty change of structure but as conversion of heart; her sensitivity to nature, whose laws are to be safeguarded and not violated.

For these reasons the attribution of the title of Doctor of the Universal Church to Hildegard of Bingen has great significance for today's world and an extraordinary importance for women. In Hildegard are expressed the most noble values of womanhood: hence the presence of women in the Church and in society is also illumined by her presence, both from the perspective of scientific research and that of pastoral activity. Her ability to speak to those who were far from the faith and from the Church make Hildegard a credible witness of the new evangelization.

By virtue of her reputation for holiness and her eminent teaching, on 6 March 1979 Cardinal Joseph Höffner, Archbishop of Cologne and President of the German Bishops' Conference, together with the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops of the same Conference, including myself as Cardinal Archbishop of Munich and Freising, submitted to Blessed John Paul II the request that Hildegard of Bingen be declared a Doctor of the Universal Church. In that petition, the Cardinal emphasized the soundness of Hildegard's doctrine, recognized in the twelfth century by Pope Eugene III, her holiness, widely known and celebrated by the people, and the authority of her writings. As time passed, other petitions were added to that of the German Bishops' Conference, first and foremost the petition from the nuns of Eibingen Monastery, which bears her name. Thus, to the common wish of the People of God that Hildegard be officially canonized, was added the request that she be declared a "Doctor of the Universal Church".

With my consent, therefore, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints diligently prepared a *Positio super Canonizatione et Concessione tituli Doctoris Ecclesiae Universalis* for the Mystic of Bingen. Since this concerned a famous teacher of theology who had been the subject of many authoritative studies, I granted the dispensation from the measures prescribed by article 73 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*. The cause was therefore examined and approved by the Cardinals and Bishops, who met in Plenary Session on 20 March 2012. The proponent (*ponens*) of the cause was His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Amato, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. At the audience of 10 May 2012, Cardinal Amato informed us in detail about the *status quaestionis* and the unanimous vote of the Fathers at the above-mentioned Plenary Session of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. On 27 May 2012, Pentecost Sunday, I had the joy of announcing to the crowd of pilgrims from all over the world gathered in Saint Peter's Square the news of the conferral of the title of Doctor of the Universal Church upon Saint Hildegard of Bingen and Saint John of Avila at the beginning of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and on the eve of the Year of Faith.

Today, with the help of God and the approval of the whole Church, this act has taken place. In Saint Peter's Square, in the presence of many Cardinals and Prelates of the Roman Curia and of the Catholic Church, in confirming the acts of the process and willingly granting the desires of the petitioners, I spoke the following words in the course of the Eucharistic sacrifice: "Fulfilling the wishes of numerous brethren in the episcopate, and of many of the faithful throughout the world, after due consultation with the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, with certain knowledge and after mature deliberation,

with the fullness of my apostolic authority I declare Saint John of Avila, diocesan priest, and Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, to be Doctors of the Universal Church. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

I hereby decree the present Letter to be perpetually valid and fully effective, and I establish that from this moment anything to the contrary proposed by any person, of whatever authority, knowingly or unknowingly, is invalid and without force.

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, under the ring of the Fisherman, on 7 October 2012, in the eighth year of my Pontificate.

Saint Matilda of Hackeborn

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I want to talk to you about St Matilda of Hackeborn, one of the great figures of the convent of Helfta, who lived in the 13th century. Her sister, St Gertrude the Great, tells of the special graces that God granted to St Matilda in the sixth book of *Liber Specialis Gratiae* (Book of Special Grace), which states: "What we have written is very little in comparison with what we have omitted. We are publishing these things solely for the glory of God and the usefulness of our neighbour, for it would seem wrong to us to keep quiet about the many graces that Matilda received from God, not so much for herself, in our opinion, but for us and for those who will come after us" (Mechthild von Hackeborn, *Liber specialis gratiae*, VI, I).

This work was written by St Gertrude and by another sister of Helfta and has a unique story. At the age of 50, Matilda went through a grave spiritual crisis, as well as physical suffering. In this condition she confided to two of her sisters who were friends the special graces with which God had guided her since childhood. However, she did not know that they were writing it all down. When she found out she was deeply upset and distressed.

However, the Lord reassured her, making her realize that all that had been written was for the glory of God and for the benefit of her neighbour (cf. *ibid*., II, 25; V, 20). This work, therefore, is the principal source to refer to for information on the life and spirituality of our Saint.

With her we are introduced into the family of Baron von Hackeborn, one of the noblest, richest and most powerful

barons of Thuringia, related to the Emperor Frederick II, and we enter the convent of Helfta in the most glorious period of its history.

The Baron had already given one daughter to the convent, Gertrude of Hackeborn (1231/1232 - 1291/1292). She was gifted with an outstanding personality. She was Abbess for 40 years, capable of giving the spirituality of the convent a particular hallmark and of bringing it to an extraordinary flourishing as the centre of mysticism and culture, a school for scientific and theological training.

Gertrude offered the nuns an intellectual training of a high standard that enabled them to cultivate a spirituality founded on Sacred Scripture, on the Liturgy, on the Patristic tradition, on the Cistercian Rule and spirituality, with a particular love for St Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry.

She was a real teacher, exemplary in all things, in evangelical radicalism and in apostolic zeal. Matilda, from childhood, accepted and enjoyed the spiritual and cultural atmosphere created by her sister, later giving it her own personal hallmark.

Matilda was born in 1241 or 1242 in the Castle of Helfta. She was the Baron's third daughter. When she was seven she went with her mother to visither sister Gertrude in the convent of Rodersdorf. She was so enchanted by this environment that she ardently desired to belong to it. She entered as a schoolgirl and in 1258 became a nun at the convent, which in the meantime had moved to Helfta, to the property of the Hackeborns.

She was distinguished by her humility, her fervour, her friendliness, the clarity and the innocence of her life and

by the familiarity and intensity with which she lived her relationship with God, the Virgin and the Saints. She was endowed with lofty natural and spiritual qualities such as knowledge, intelligence, familiarity with the humanities and a marvellously sweet voice: everything suited her to being a true treasure for the convent from every point of view (*ibid*, *Proem*.).

Thus when "God's nightingale", as she was called, was still very young she became the principal of the convent's school, choir mistress and novice mistress, offices that she fulfilled with talent and unflagging zeal, not only for the benefit of the nuns but for anyone who wanted to draw on her wisdom and goodness.

Illumined by the divine gift of mystic contemplation, Matilda wrote many prayers. She was a teacher of faithful doctrine and deep humility, a counsellor, comforter and guide in discernment.

We read: "she distributed doctrine in an abundance never previously seen at the convent, and alas, we are rather afraid that nothing like it will ever be seen again. The sisters would cluster round her to hear the word of God, as if she were a preacher.

"She was the refuge and consoler of all and, by a unique gift of God, was endowed with the grace of being able to reveal freely the secrets of the heart of each one. Many people, not only in the convent but also outsiders, religious and lay people, who came from afar, testified that this holy virgin had freed them from their afflictions and that they had never known such comfort as they found near her.

"Furthermore, she composed and taught so many prayers that if they were gathered together they would make a book larger than a Psalter" (*ibid*., VI, 1).

In 1261 a five year old girl came to the convent. Her name was Gertrude: She was entrusted to the care of Matilda, just 20 years of age, who taught her and guided her in the spiritual life until she not only made her into an excellent disciple but also her confidant.

In 1271 or 1272, Matilda of Magdeburg also entered the convent. So it was that this place took in four great women — two Gertrudes and two Matildas — the glory of German monasticism.

During her long life which she spent in the convent, Matilda was afflicted with continuous and intense bouts of suffering, to which she added the very harsh penances chosen for the conversion of sinners.

In this manner she participated in the Lord's Passion until the end of her life (cf. *ibid*., VI, 2). Prayer and contemplation were the life-giving *humus* of her existence: her revelations, her teachings, her service to her neighbour, her journey in faith and in love have their root and their context here.

In the first book of the work, *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, the nuns wrote down Matilda's confidences pronounced on the Feasts of the Lord, the Saints and, especially, of the Blessed Virgin.

This Saint had a striking capacity for living the various elements of the Liturgy, even the simplest, and bringing it into the daily life of the convent.

Some of her images, expressions and applications are at times distant from our sensibility today, but, if we were to consider monastic life and her task as mistress and choir mistress, we should grasp her rare ability as a teacher and educator who, starting from the Liturgy, helped her sisters to live intensely every moment of monastic life.

Matilda gave an emphasis in liturgical prayer to the canonical hours, to the celebrations of Holy Mass and, especially, to Holy Communion. Here she was often rapt in ecstasy in profound intimacy with the Lord in his most ardent and sweetest Heart, carrying on a marvellous conversation in which she asked for inner illumination, while interceding in a special way for her community and her sisters.

At the centre are the mysteries of Christ which the Virgin Mary constantly recommends to people so that they may walk on the path of holiness: "If you want true holiness, be close to my Son; he is holiness itself that sanctifies all things" (*ibid*., I, 40).

The whole world, the Church, benefactors and sinners were present in her intimacy with God. For her, Heaven and earth were united.

Her visions, her teachings, the events of her life are described in words reminiscent of liturgical and biblical language. In this way it is possible to comprehend her deep knowledge of Sacred Scripture, which was her daily bread. She had constant recourse to the Scriptures, making the most of the biblical texts read in the Liturgy, and drawing from them symbols, terms, countryside, images and famous figures.

She had a special love for the Gospel: "The words of the Gospel were a marvellous nourishment for her and in her heart stirred feelings of such sweetness that, because of her enthusiasm, she was often unable to finish reading it.... The way in which she read those words was so fervent that it inspired devotion in everyone.

"Thus when she was singing in the choir, she was completely absorbed in God, uplifted by such ardour that she sometimes expressed her feelings in gestures....

"On other occasions, since she was rapt in ecstasy, she did not hear those who were calling or touching her and came back with difficulty to the reality of the things around her" (*ibid*., 1).

In one of her visions, Jesus himself recommended the Gospel to her; opening the wound in his most gentle Heart, he said to her: "consider the immensity of my love: if you want to know it well, nowhere will you find it more clearly expressed than in the Gospel. No one has ever heard expressed stronger or more tender sentiments than these: '*As my father has loved me, so I have loved you* (Jn 15:9)'" (*ibid*., I, 22).

Dear friends, personal and liturgical prayer, especially the Liturgy of the Hours and Holy Mass are at the root of St Matilda of Hackeborn's spiritual experience. In letting herself be guided by Sacred Scripture and nourished by the Bread of the Eucharist, she followed a path of close union with the Lord, ever in full fidelity to the Church.

This is also a strong invitation to us to intensify our friendship with the Lord, especially through daily prayer

and attentive, faithful and active participation in Holy Mass. The Liturgy is a great school of spirituality.

Her disciple Gertrude gives a vivid pictures of St Matilda of Hackeborn's last moments. They were very difficult but illumined by the presence of the Blessed Trinity, of the Lord, of the Virgin Mary and of all the Saints, even Gertrude's sister by blood.

When the time came in which the Lord chose to gather her to him, she asked him let her live longer in suffering for the salvation of souls, and Jesus was pleased with this further sign of her love.

Matilda was 58 years old. The last leg of her journey was marked by eight years of serious illness. Her work and the fame of her holiness spread far and wide. When her time came, "the God of majesty... the one delight of the soul that loves him... sang to her: *Venite vos, benedicti Patris mei.... Venite, o voi che siete i benedetti dal Padre mio, venite a ricevere il regno*... and he united her with his glory" (*ibid*., VI, 8).

May St Matilda of Hackeborn commend us to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the Virgin Mary. She invites us to praise the Son with the Heart of the Mother, and to praise Mary with the Heart of the Son: "I greet you, O most deeply venerated Virgin, in that sweetest of dews which from the Heart of the Blessed Trinity spread within you; I greet you in the glory and joy in which you now rejoice for ever, you who were chosen in preference to all the creatures of the earth and of Heaven even before the world's creation! Amen" (*ibid*., I, 45).

Wednesday, 29 September 2010

Saint Gertrude the Great

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

St Gertrude the Great, of whom I would like to talk to you today, brings us once again this week to the Monastery of Helfta, where several of the Latin-German masterpieces of religious literature were written by women. Gertrude belonged to this world. She is one of the most famous mystics, the only German woman to be called "Great", because of her cultural and evangelical stature: her life and her thought had a unique impact on Christian spirituality. She was an exceptional woman, endowed with special natural talents and extraordinary gifts of grace, the most profound humility and ardent zeal for her neighbour's salvation. She was in close communion with God both in contemplation and in her readiness to go to the help of those in need.

At Helfta, she measured herself systematically, so to speak, with her teacher, Matilda of Hackeborn, of whom I spoke at last Wednesday's Audience. Gertrude came into contact with Matilda of Magdeburg, another medieval mystic and grew up under the wing of Abbess Gertrude, motherly, gentle and demanding. From these three sisters she drew precious experience and wisdom; she worked them into a synthesis of her own, continuing on her religious journey with boundless trust in the Lord. Gertrude expressed the riches of her spirituality not only in her monastic world, but also and above all in the biblical, liturgical, Patristic and Benedictine contexts, with a highly personal hallmark and great skill in communicating.

Gertrude was born on 6 January 1256, on the Feast of the Epiphany, but nothing is known of her parents nor of the

place of her birth. Gertrude wrote that the Lord himself revealed to her the meaning of this first uprooting: "I have chosen you for my abode because I am pleased that all that is lovable in you is my work.... For this very reason I have distanced you from all your relatives, so that no one may love you for reasons of kinship and that I may be the sole cause of the affection you receive" (*The Revelations*, 16, Siena 1994, pp. 76-77).

When she was five years old, in 1261, she entered the monastery for formation and education, a common practice in that period.

Here she spent her whole life, the most important stages of which she herself points out. In her memoirs she recalls that the Lord equipped her in advance with forbearing patience and infinite mercy, forgetting the years of her childhood, adolescence and youth, which she spent, she wrote, "in such mental blindness that I would have been capable... of thinking, saying or doing without remorse everything I liked and wherever I could, had you not armed me in advance, with an inherent horror of evil and a natural inclination for good and with the external vigilance of others.

"I would have behaved like a pagan... in spite of desiring you since childhood, that is since my fifth year of age, when I went to live in the Benedictine shrine of religion to be educated among your most devout friends" (ibid., II 23, p.

Gertrude was an extraordinary student, she learned everything that can be learned of the sciences of the trivium and quadrivium, the education of that time; she was fascinated by knowledge and threw herself into profane

studies with zeal and tenacity, achieving scholastic successes beyond every expectation.

If we know nothing of her origins, she herself tells us about her youthful passions: literature, music and song and the art of miniature painting captivated her. She had a strong, determined, ready and impulsive temperament. She often says that she was negligent; she recognizes her shortcomings and humbly asks forgiveness for them.

She also humbly asks for advice and prayers for her conversion. Some features of her temperament and faults were to accompany her to the end of her life, so as to amaze certain people who wondered why the Lord had favoured her with such a special love.

From being a student she moved on to dedicate herself totally to God in monastic life, and for 20 years nothing exceptional occurred: study and prayer were her main activities. Because of her gifts she shone out among the sisters; she was tenacious in consolidating her culture in various fields.

Nevertheless during Advent of 1280 she began to feel disgusted with all this and realized the vanity of it all. On 27 January 1281, a few days before the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, towards the hour of Compline in the evening, the Lord with his illumination dispelled her deep anxiety.

With gentle sweetness he calmed the distress that anguished her, a torment that Gertrude saw even as a gift of God, "to pull down that tower of vanity and curiosity which, although I had both the name and habit of a nun — alas — I had continued to build with my pride, so that

at least in this manner I might find the way for you to show me your salvation" (*ibid*., p. 87).

She had a vision of a young man who, in order to guide her through the tangle of thorns that surrounded her soul, took her by the hand. In that hand Gertrude recognized "the precious traces of the wounds that abrogated all the acts of accusation of our enemies" (*ibid*., II, p. 89), and thus recognized the One who saved us with his Blood on the Cross: Jesus.

From that moment her life of intimate communion with the Lord was intensified, especially in the most important liturgical seasons — Advent-Christmas, Lent-Easter, the feasts of Our Lady — even when illness prevented her from going to the choir. This was the same liturgical *humus* as that of Matilda, her teacher; but Gertrude describes it with simpler, more linear images, symbols and terms that are more realistic and her references to the Bible, to the Fathers and to the Benedictine world are more direct.

Her biographer points out two directions of what we might describe as her own particular "conversion": *in study*, with the radical passage from profane, humanistic studies to the study of theology, and in *monastic observance*, with the passage from a life that she describes as *negligent*, to the life of intense, mystical prayer, with exceptional missionary zeal.

The Lord who had chosen her from her mother's womb and who since her childhood had made her partake of the banquet of monastic life, called her again with his grace "from external things to inner life and from earthly occupations to love for spiritual things". Gertrude under-

stood that she was remote from him, *in the region of unlikeness*, as she said with Augustine; that she had dedicated herself with excessive greed to liberal studies, to human wisdom, overlooking spiritual knowledge, depriving herself of the taste for true wisdom; she was then led to the mountain of contemplation where she cast off her former self to be reclothed in the new.

"From a grammarian she became a theologian, with the unflagging and attentive reading of all the sacred books that she could lay her hands on or contrive to obtain. She filled her heart with the most useful and sweet sayings of Sacred Scripture.

Thus she was always ready with some inspired and edifying word to satisfy those who came to consult her while having at her fingertips the most suitable scriptural texts to refute any erroneous opinion and silence her opponents" (*ibid*., I, 1, p. 25).

Gertrude transformed all this into an apostolate: she devoted herself to writing and popularizing the truth of faith with clarity and simplicity, with grace and persuasion, serving the Church faithfully and lovingly so as to be helpful to and appreciated by theologians and devout people.

Little of her intense activity has come down to us, partly because of the events that led to the destruction of the Monastery of Helfta. In addition to *The Herald of Divine Love* and *The Revelations*, we still have her *Spiritual Exercises*, a rare jewel of mystical spiritual literature.

In religious observance our Saint was "a firm pillar... a very powerful champion of justice and truth" (*ibid*., I, 1, p. 26), her biographer says. By her words and example

she kindled great fervour in other people. She added to the prayers and penances of the monastic rule others with such devotion and such trusting abandonment in God that she inspired in those who met her an awareness of being in the Lord's presence. In fact, God made her understand that he had called her to be an instrument of his grace. Gertrude herself felt unworthy of this immense divine treasure, and confesses that she had not safeguarded it or made enough of it. She exclaimed: "Alas! If you had given me to remember you, unworthy as I am, by even only a straw, I would have viewed it with greater respect and reverence that I have had for all your gifts!" (*ibid*., II, 5, p. too).

Yet, in recognizing her poverty and worthlessness she adhered to God's will, "because", she said, "I have so little profited from your graces that I cannot resolve to believe that they were lavished upon me solely for my own use, since no one can thwart your eternal wisdom. Therefore, 0 Giver of every good thing who has freely lavished upon me gifts so undeserved, in order that, in reading this, the heart of at least one of your friends may be moved at the thought that zeal for souls has induced you to leave such a priceless gem for so long in the abominable mud of my heart" (*ibid*., II, 5, p. 100f.)

Two favours in particular were dearer to her than any other, as Gertrude herself writes: "The stigmata of your salvation-bearing wounds which you impressed upon me, as it were, like a valuable necklaces, in my heart, and the profound and salutary wound of love with which you marked it.

"You flooded me with your gifts, of such beatitude that even were I to live for 1,000 years with no consolation — neither interior nor exterior — the memory of them

would suffice to comfort me, to enlighten me, to fill me with gratitude. Further, you wished to introduce me into the inestimable intimacy of your friendship by opening to me in various ways that most noble sacrarium of your Divine Being which is your Divine Heart.... To this accumulation of benefits you added that of giving me as Advocate the Most Holy Virgin Mary, your Mother, and often recommended me to her affection, just as the most faithful of bridegrooms would recommend his beloved bride to his own mother" (*ibid*., II, 23, p. 145).

Looking forward to never-ending communion, she ended her earthly life on 17 November 1301 or 1302, at the age of about 46. In the seventh Exercise, that of preparation for death, St Gertrude wrote: "O Jesus, you who are immensely dear to me, be with me always, so that my heart may stay with you and that your love may endure with me with no possibility of division; and bless my passing, so that my spirit, freed from the bonds of the flesh, may immediately find rest in you. Amen" (*Spiritual Exercises*, Milan 2006, p. 148).

It seems obvious to me that these are not only things of the past, of history; rather St Gertrude's life lives on as a lesson of Christian life, of an upright path, and shows us that the heart of a happy life, of a true life, is friendship with the Lord Jesus.

And this friendship is learned in love for Sacred Scripture, in love for the Liturgy, in profound faith, in love for Mary, so as to be ever more truly acquainted with God himself and hence with true happiness, which is the goal of our life. Many thanks.

Wednesday, 6 October 2010