



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 4 June 2008

Saint Gregory the Great (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 does 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 most 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 leaders 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.

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I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, including the groups from England, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Canada and the United States. I extend special greetings to the group of Episcopalian pilgrims from Jerusalem, and to the many student groups present at this audience. May God bless you all!

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