



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 10 March 2010*

[Video]

*Vatican Basilica*

***To participants in the Pilgrimage of the Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to receive you in this Basilica and to address my cordial welcome to each one of you. I greet the pilgrimage promoted by the *Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation* after the recent beatification of this luminous figure of the Milanese clergy. Dear friends, I am well aware of the extraordinary activity you carry out in the vast area of health-care assistance for children in difficulty, for the disabled, for the elderly and for the terminally ill. Through your projects of solidarity you strive to perpetuate the praiseworthy work begun by Bl. Carlo Gnocchi, an apostle of modern times and a genius of Christian charity, who, in taking up the challenges of his time, devoted himself with every possible care to little ones who were mutilated, victims of war in whom he discerned the Face of God. A dynamic and enthusiastic priest and a perceptive teacher, he lived the Gospel integrally in the different milieus in which he worked with unflinching zeal and indefatigable apostolic fervour. In this Year for Priests the Church once again looks to him as a model to imitate. May his shining example sustain the work of all who are dedicated to the service of the weakest.

May it also inspire in priests the keen desire to rediscover and reinvigorate awareness of the extraordinary gift of Grace that the ordained ministry represents for those who have received it, for the whole Church and for the world.

Let us conclude this short Meeting by singing the prayer of the *Pater Noster*.

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### ***Saint Bonaventure (2)***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last week I spoke of the life and personality of St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. This morning I would like to continue my presentation, reflecting on part of his literary opus and on his doctrine.

As I have already said, among St Bonaventure's various merits was the ability to interpret authentically and faithfully St Francis of Assisi, whom he venerated and studied with deep love. In a special way, in St Bonaventure's day a trend among the Friars Minor known as the "Spirituals" held that St Francis had ushered in a totally new phase in history and that the "eternal Gospel", of which Revelation speaks, had come to replace the New Testament. This group declared that the Church had now fulfilled her role in history. They said that she had been replaced by a charismatic community of free men guided from within by the Spirit, namely the "Spiritual Franciscans". This group's ideas were based on the writings of a Cistercian Abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who died in 1202. In his works he affirmed a Trinitarian rhythm in history. He considered the Old Testament as the age of the Fathers, followed by the time of the Son, the time of the Church. The third age was to be awaited, that of the Holy Spirit. The whole of history was thus interpreted as a history of progress: from the severity of the Old Testament to the relative freedom of the time of the Son, in the Church, to the full freedom of the Sons of God in the period of the Holy Spirit. This, finally, was also to be the period of peace among mankind, of the reconciliation of peoples and of religions. Joachim of Fiore had awakened the hope that the new age would stem from a new form of monasticism. Thus it is understandable that a group of Franciscans might have thought it recognized St Francis of Assisi as the initiator of the new epoch and his Order as the community of the new period the community of the Age of the Holy Spirit that left behind the hierarchical Church in order to begin the new Church of the Spirit, no longer linked to the old structures.

Hence they ran the risk of very seriously misunderstanding St Francis' message, of his humble fidelity to the Gospel and to the Church. This error entailed an erroneous vision of Christianity as a whole.

St Bonaventure, who became Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1257, had to confront grave tension in his Order precisely because of those who supported the above-mentioned trend of the "Franciscan Spirituals" who followed Joachim of Fiore. To respond to this group and to

restore unity to the Order, St Bonaventure painstakingly studied the authentic writings of Joachim of Fiore, as well as those attributed to him and, bearing in mind the need to present the figure and message of his beloved St Francis correctly, he wanted to set down a correct view of the theology of history. St Bonaventure actually tackled the problem in his last work, a collection of conferences for the monks of the studium in Paris. He did not complete it and it has come down to us through the transcriptions of those who heard him. It is entitled *Hexaëmeron*, in other words an allegorical explanation of the six days of the Creation. The Fathers of the Church considered the six or seven days of the Creation narrative as a prophecy of the history of the world, of humanity. For them, the seven days represented seven periods of history, later also interpreted as seven millennia. With Christ we should have entered the last, that is, the sixth period of history that was to be followed by the great sabbath of God. St Bonaventure hypothesizes this historical interpretation of the account of the days of the Creation, but in a very free and innovative way. To his mind two phenomena of his time required a new interpretation of the course of history.

The first: the figure of St Francis, the man totally united with Christ even to communion with the stigmata, almost an *alter Christus*, and, with St Francis, the new community he created, different from the monasticism known until then. This phenomenon called for a new interpretation, as an innovation of God which appeared at that moment.

The second: the position of Joachim of Fiore who announced a new monasticism and a totally new period of history, going beyond the revelation of the New Testament, demanded a response. As Minister General of the Franciscan Order, St Bonaventure had immediately realized that with the spiritualistic conception inspired by Joachim of Fiore, the Order would become ungovernable and logically move towards anarchy. In his opinion this had two consequences:

The first, the practical need for structures and for insertion into the reality of the hierarchical Church, of the real Church, required a theological foundation. This was partly because the others, those who followed the spiritualist concept, upheld what seemed to have a theological foundation.

The second, while taking into account the necessary realism, made it essential not to lose the newness of the figure of St Francis.

How did St Bonaventure respond to the practical and theoretical needs? Here I can only provide a very basic summary of his answer and it is in certain aspects incomplete:

1. St Bonaventure rejected the idea of the Trinitarian rhythm of history. God is one for all history and is not tritheistic. Hence history is one, even if it is a journey and, according to St Bonaventure, a journey of progress.

2. Jesus Christ is God's last word in him God said all, giving and expressing himself. More than himself, God cannot express or give. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son.

Christ himself says of the Holy Spirit: "He will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn 14: 26), and "he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16: 15). Thus there is no loftier Gospel, there is no other Church to await. Therefore the Order of St Francis too must fit into this Church, into her faith and into her hierarchical order.

3. This does not mean that the Church is stationary, fixed in the past, or that there can be no newness within her. "*Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*": Christ's works do not go backwards, they do not fail but progress, the Saint said in his letter *De Tribus Quaestionibus*. Thus St Bonaventure explicitly formulates the idea of progress and this is an innovation in comparison with the Fathers of the Church and the majority of his contemporaries. For St Bonaventure Christ was no longer the end of history, as he was for the Fathers of the Church, but rather its centre; history does not end with Christ but begins a new period. The following is another consequence: until that moment the idea that the Fathers of the Church were the absolute summit of theology predominated, all successive generations could only be their disciples. St Bonaventure also recognized the Fathers as teachers for ever, but the phenomenon of St Francis assured him that the riches of Christ's word are inexhaustible and that new light could also appear to the new generations. The oneness of Christ also guarantees newness and renewal in all the periods of history.

The Franciscan Order of course as he emphasized belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ, to the apostolic Church, and cannot be built on utopian spiritualism. Yet, at the same time, the newness of this Order in comparison with classical monasticism was valid and St Bonaventure as I said in my previous Catechesis defended this newness against the attacks of the secular clergy of Paris: the Franciscans have no fixed monastery, they may go everywhere to proclaim the Gospel. It was precisely the break with stability, the characteristic of monasticism, for the sake of a new flexibility that restored to the Church her missionary dynamism.

At this point it might be useful to say that today too there are views that see the entire history of the Church in the second millennium as a gradual decline. Some see this decline as having already begun immediately after the New Testament. In fact, "*Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*": Christ's works do not go backwards but forwards. What would the Church be without the new spirituality of the Cistercians, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the spirituality of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross and so forth? This affirmation applies today too: "*Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*", they move forward. St Bonaventure teaches us the need for overall, even strict discernment, sober realism and openness to the newness, which Christ gives his Church through the Holy Spirit. And while this idea of decline is repeated, another idea, this "spiritualistic utopianism" is also reiterated. Indeed, we know that after the Second Vatican Council some were convinced that everything was new, that there was a different Church, that the pre-Conciliar Church was finished and that we had another, totally "other" Church an anarchic utopianism! And thanks be to God the wise helmsmen of the Barque of St Peter, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, on the one hand defended the newness of the Council, and on the other,

defended the oneness and continuity of the Church, which is always a Church of sinners and always a place of grace.

4. In this regard, St Bonaventure, as Minister General of the Franciscans, took a line of government which showed clearly that the new Order could not, as a community, live at the same "eschatological height" as St Francis, in whom he saw the future world anticipated, but guided at the same time by healthy realism and by spiritual courage he had to come as close as possible to the maximum realization of the Sermon on the Mount, which for St Francis was *the* rule, but nevertheless bearing in mind the limitations of the human being who is marked by original sin.

Thus we see that for St Bonaventure governing was not merely action but above all was thinking and praying. At the root of his government we always find prayer and thought; all his decisions are the result of reflection, of thought illumined by prayer. His intimate contact with Christ always accompanied his work as Minister General and therefore he composed a series of theological and mystical writings that express the soul of his government. They also manifest his intention of guiding the Order inwardly, that is, of governing not only by means of commands and structures, but by guiding and illuminating souls, orienting them to Christ.

I would like to mention only one of these writings, which are the soul of his government and point out the way to follow, both for the individual and for the community: the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, [*The Mind's Road to God*], which is a "manual" for mystical contemplation. This book was conceived in a deeply spiritual place: Mount La Verna, where St Francis had received the stigmata. In the introduction the author describes the circumstances that gave rise to this writing: "While I meditated on the possible ascent of the mind to God, amongst other things there occurred that miracle which happened in the same place to the blessed Francis himself, namely the vision of the winged Seraph in the form of a Crucifix. While meditating upon this vision, I immediately saw that it offered me the ecstatic contemplation of Fr Francis himself as well as the way that leads to it" (cf. *The Mind's Road to God*, Prologue, 2, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Opuscoli Teologici* / 1, Rome 1993, p. 499).

The six wings of the Seraph thus became the symbol of the six stages that lead man progressively from the knowledge of God, through the observation of the world and creatures and through the exploration of the soul itself with its faculties, to the satisfying union with the Trinity through Christ, in imitation of St Francis of Assisi. The last words of St Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, which respond to the question of how it is possible to reach this mystical communion with God, should be made to sink to the depths of the heart: "If you should wish to know how these things come about, (the mystical communion with God) question grace, not instruction; desire, not intellect; the cry of prayer, not pursuit of study; the spouse, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that inflames all and transports to God with fullest unction and burning affection.... Let us then... pass over into darkness; let us impose silence on cares, concupiscence, and phantasms; let us pass over *with the Crucified Christ from this world to the Father*, so that when

the Father is shown to us we may say with Philip, "*It is enough for me*" (cf. *ibid.*, VII 6).

Dear friends, let us accept the invitation addressed to us by St Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor, and learn at the school of the divine Teacher: let us listen to his word of life and truth that resonates in the depths of our soul. Let us purify our thoughts and actions so that he may dwell within us and that we may understand his divine voice which draws us towards true happiness.

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### **To special groups**

I offer a warm welcome to the many school groups present, including the Bruderhof group from England and the students of St Michael's Holy Cross Secondary School in Dublin, Ireland. The developments taking place in Northern Ireland in these days are a promising sign of hope, and I pray that they will help to consolidate the future of peace desired by all. Upon the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, may the Lenten journey we are taking be an opportunity for authentic conversion that leads you to a mature faith in Christ. Dear *sick people*, in taking part lovingly in the suffering of the incarnate Son of God, may you share from this moment in the glory and joy of his Resurrection. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, find in the covenant which, at the price of his Blood, Christ made with this Church, the support and model of your marriage contract and your mission at the service of the Gospel.

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### **Appeal for aid to Turkey and peace in Nigeria**

I am profoundly close to the people hit by the recent earthquake in Turkey and to their families. I assure each one of my prayers, while I ask the international community to contribute promptly and generously to the aid operations.

My heartfelt sympathy also goes to the victims of the atrocious violence that is staining Nigeria with blood and has not even spared defenceless children. Once again, I repeat with anguish that violence does not solve conflicts but only serves to increase their tragic consequences. I appeal to everyone in the country who has civil and religious responsibilities to do their utmost to bring security and peaceful coexistence to the entire population. Lastly, I express my closeness to the Nigerian Pastors and faithful and I pray that with strong, firm hope, they may be authentic witnesses of reconciliation.

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