



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

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Origen of Alexandria: life and work (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our meditations on the great figures of the early Church, today we become acquainted with one of the most remarkable. Origen of Alexandria truly was a figure crucial to the whole development of Christian thought. He gathered up the legacy of Clement of Alexandria, on whom we meditated last Wednesday, and launched it for the future in a way so innovative that he impressed an irreversible turning point on the development of Christian thought.

He was a true "maestro", and so it was that his pupils remembered him with nostalgia and emotion: he was not only a brilliant theologian but also an exemplary witness of the doctrine he passed on. Eusebius of Caesarea, his enthusiastic biographer, said "his manner of life was as his doctrine, and his doctrine as his life. Therefore, by the divine power working with him he aroused a great many to his own zeal" (cf. *Church History*, 6, 3, 7).

His whole life was pervaded by a ceaseless longing for martyrdom. He was 17 years old when, in the 10th year of the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus, the persecution against Christians was unleashed in Alexandria. Clement, his teacher, fled the city, and Origen's father, Leonides, was thrown into prison. His son longed ardently for martyrdom but was unable to realize his desire. So he wrote to his father, urging him not to shrink from the supreme witness of faith. And when Leonides was beheaded, the young Origen felt bound to welcome the example of his father's life.

Forty years later, while preaching in Caesarea, he confessed: "It is of no use to me to have a martyr father if I do not behave well and honour the nobility of my ancestors, that is, the martyrdom of my father and the witness that made him illustrious in Christ" (*Hom. Ez* 4, 8). In a later homily—when, thanks to the extreme tolerance of the Emperor, Philip the Arab, the possibility of bearing witness by shedding one's blood seemed no longer to exist—Origen exclaims: "If God were to grant me to be washed in my blood so as to receive the second Baptism after accepting death for Christ, I would depart this world with assurance.... But those who deserve such things are blessed" (*Hom. Iud.* 7, 12). These words reveal the full force of Origen's longing for Baptism with blood.

And finally, this irresistible yearning was granted to him, at least in part. In the year 250, during Decius' persecution, Origen was arrested and cruelly tortured. Weakened by the suffering to which he had been subjected, he died a few years later. He was not yet 70.

We have mentioned the "irreversible turning point" that Origen impressed upon the history of theology and Christian thought. But of what did this turning point, this innovation so pregnant with consequences, consist? It corresponds in substance to theology's foundation in the explanation of the Scriptures.

Theology to him was essentially explaining, understanding Scripture; or we might also say that his theology was a perfect symbiosis between theology and exegesis. In fact, the proper hallmark of Origen's doctrine seems to lie precisely in the constant invitation to move from the letter to the spirit of the Scriptures, to progress in knowledge of God. Furthermore, this so-called "allegorism", as von Balthasar wrote, coincides exactly "with the development of Christian dogma, effected by the teaching of the Church Doctors", who in one way or another accepted Origen's "lessons".

Thus, Tradition and the Magisterium, the foundation and guarantee of theological research, come to take the form of "scripture in action" (cf. *Origene: Il mondo, Cristo e la Chiesa*, Milan, 1972, p. 43). We can therefore say that the central nucleus of Origen's immense literary opus consists in his "threefold interpretation" of the Bible.

But before describing this "interpretation" it would be right to take an overall look at the Alexandrian's literary production.

St Jerome, in his *Epistle* 33, lists the titles of 320 books and 310 homilies by Origen. Unfortunately, most of these works have been lost, but even the few that remain make him the most prolific author of Christianity's first three centuries. His field of interest extended from exegesis to dogma, to philosophy, apologetics, ascetical theology and mystical theology. It was a fundamental and global vision of Christian life.

The inspiring nucleus of this work, as we have said, was the "threefold interpretation" of the

Scriptures that Origen developed in his lifetime. By this phrase, we wish to allude to the three most important ways in which Origen devoted himself to studying the Scriptures: they are not in sequence; on the contrary, more often than not they overlap.

First of all, he read the Bible, determined to do his utmost to ascertain the biblical text and offer the most reliable version of it. This, for example, was the first step: to know truly what is written and what a specific scriptural passage intentionally and principally meant.

He studied extensively for this purpose and drafted an edition of the Bible with six parallel columns, from left to right, with the Hebrew text in Hebrew characters - he was even in touch with rabbis to make sure he properly understood the Bible's original Hebrew text -, then the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek characters, and then four different translations in Greek that enabled him to compare the different possibilities for its translation. Hence comes the title of "*Hexapla*" ("six columns"), attributed to this enormous synopsis.

This is the first point: to know exactly what was written, the text as such.

Secondly, Origen read the Bible systematically with his famous *Commentaries*. They reproduced faithfully the explanations that the teacher offered during his lessons at Alexandria and Caesarea.

Origen proceeded verse by verse with a detailed, broad and analytical approach, with philological and doctrinal notes. He worked with great precision in order to know completely what the sacred authors meant.

Lastly, even before his ordination to the priesthood, Origen was deeply dedicated to preaching the Bible and adapted himself to a varied public. In any case, the teacher can also be perceived in his *Homilies*, wholly dedicated as he was to the systematic interpretation of the passage under examination, which he analyzed step by step in the sequence of the verses.

Also in his *Homilies*, Origen took every opportunity to recall the different dimensions of the sense of Sacred Scripture that encourage or express a process of growth in the faith: there is the "literal" sense, but this conceals depths that are not immediately apparent.

The second dimension is the "moral" sense: what we must do in living the word; and finally, the "spiritual" sense, the unity of Scripture which throughout its development speaks of Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand the Christological content, hence, the unity in diversity of Scripture. It would be interesting to demonstrate this. I have made a humble attempt in my book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, to show in today's context these multiple dimensions of the Word, of Sacred Scripture, whose historical meaning must in the first place be respected.

But this sense transcends us, moving us towards God in the light of the Holy Spirit, and shows us the way, shows us how to live. Mention of it is found, for example, in the ninth *Homily on Numbers*, where Origen likens Scripture to [fresh] walnuts: "The doctrine of the Law and the Prophets at the school of Christ is like this", the homilist says; "the letter is bitter, like the [green-covered] skin; secondly, you will come to the shell, which is the moral doctrine; thirdly, you will discover the meaning of the mysteries, with which the souls of the saints are nourished in the present life and the future" (*Hom. Num. 9, 7*).

It was especially on this route that Origen succeeded in effectively promoting the "Christian interpretation" of the Old Testament, brilliantly countering the challenge of the heretics, especially the Gnostics and Marcionites, who made the two Testaments disagree to the extent that they rejected the Old Testament.

In this regard, in the same *Homily on Numbers*, the Alexandrian says, "I do not call the Law an 'Old Testament' if I understand it in the Spirit. The Law becomes an 'Old Testament' only for those who wish to understand it carnally", that is, for those who stop at the literal meaning of the text.

But "for us, who understand it and apply it in the Spirit and in the Gospel sense, the Law is ever new and the two Testaments are a new Testament for us, not because of their date in time but because of the newness of the meaning.... Instead, for the sinner and those who do not respect the covenant of love, even the Gospels age" (cf. *ibid.*, 9, 4).

I invite you - and so I conclude - to welcome into your hearts the teaching of this great master of faith. He reminds us with deep delight that in the prayerful reading of Scripture and in consistent commitment to life, the Church is ever renewed and rejuvenated. The Word of God, which never ages and is never exhausted, is a privileged means to this end. Indeed, it is the Word of God, through the action of the Holy Spirit, which always guides us to the whole truth (cf. Benedict XVI, [*Address at the International Congress for the 50th Anniversary of Dei Verbum*](#), *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 September 2005, p. 7).

And let us pray to the Lord that he will give us thinkers, theologians and exegetes who discover this multifaceted dimension, this ongoing timeliness of Sacred Scripture, its newness for today. Let us pray that the Lord will help us to read Sacred Scripture in a prayerful way, to be truly nourished with the true Bread of Life, with his Word.

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I extend a cordial welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims. I am pleased to greet those attending the Thirteenth World Seminar for Catholic Civil Aviation Chaplains and Chaplaincy Members, as well as pilgrims from the following countries: England, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Indonesia, Japan, and the United States of America. May God bless you all!

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