



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*  
*Wednesday, 22 April 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 Paldone, 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* 1: 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 purificationem S. Mariae* and *In assumptionem 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.

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, including groups from Britain and Ireland, Scandinavia, Australia, Canada and the United States of America. I extend a special greeting to the young people from India. Upon all of you, and upon your families and loved ones, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

I now greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. May the Risen Lord fill with his love the heart of each one of you, dear *young people*, so that you may be ready to follow him with your youthful enthusiasm and freshness; may he sustain you dear *sick people*, in accepting with serenity the burden of suffering; may he guide you, dear *newly weds*, in founding with faithful

reciprocal giving families imbued with the fragrance of evangelical holiness.

Lastly, I would like to say a special word to the young people of the *San Lorenzo International Youth Centre*, who today are commemorating the 25th anniversary of the consignment of the Holy Year Cross to the world's young people.

In fact it was on 22 April 1984, at the end of the Holy Year of the Redemption, that beloved John Paul II entrusted to the young people of the world the great wooden cross which, complying with his wishes, had been kept beside the main altar in St Peter's Basilica during that special Jubilee Year. The Cross was then welcomed at the San Lorenzo International Youth Centre and from there began to travel over the continents, opening the hearts of very many young men and women to Christ's redeeming love. Its pilgrimage still continues, especially in preparation for the World Youth Days, so that it has become known as the "World Youth Day Cross".

Dear friends, once again I entrust this Cross to you! Continue to carry it to every corner of the earth, so that the generations to come may discover the Mercy of God and revive in their hearts hope in the Crucified and Risen Christ!

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