



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 10 June 2009*

John Scotus Erigena

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak of a noteworthy thinker of the Christian West: John Scotus Erigena, whose origins are nonetheless obscure. He certainly came from Ireland, where he was born at the beginning of the ninth century, but we do not know when he left his Island to cross the Channel and thus fully enter that cultural world which was coming into being around the Carolingians, and in particular around Charles the Bald, in ninth-century France. Just as we are not certain of the date of his birth, likewise we do not know the year of his death but, according to the experts, it must have been in about the year 870.

John Scotus Erigena had a patristic culture, both Greek and Latin, at first hand. Indeed, he had direct knowledge of the writings of both the Latin and the Greek Fathers. He was well acquainted, among others, with the works of Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great and the important Fathers of the Christian West, but he was just as familiar with the thought of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom and other Christian Fathers of the East who were equally important. He was an exceptional man who in that period had also mastered the Greek language. He devoted very special attention to St Maximus Confessor and above all to Dionysius the Areopagite. This pseudonym conceals a fifth-century ecclesiastical writer, but throughout the Middle Ages people, including John Scotus Erigena, were convinced that this author could be identified with a direct disciple of St Paul who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (17: 34). Scotus Erigena, convinced of the apostolicity of Dionysius' writings, described him as a "divine author" par excellence; Dionysius' writings were therefore an eminent source of his thought. John Scotus translated his works into Latin. The great medieval theologians, such as St Bonaventure, became

acquainted with Dionysius' works through this translation. Throughout his life John Scotus devoted himself to deepening his knowledge and developing his thought, drawing on these writings, to the point that still today it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish where we are dealing with Scotus Erigena's thought and where, instead, he is merely proposing anew the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius.

The theological opus of John Scotus truly did not meet with much favour. Not only did the end of the Carolingian era cause his works to be forgotten; a censure on the part of the Church authorities also cast a shadow over him. In fact, John Scotus represents a radical Platonism that sometimes seems to approach a pantheistic vision, even though his personal subjective intentions were always orthodox. Some of John Scotus Erigena's works have come down to us among which the following in particular deserve mention: the Treatise "*On the Division of Nature*" and the expositions on "*The Heavenly Hierarchy*" of St Dionysius. In them he continues to develop stimulating theological and spiritual reflections which could suggest an interesting furthering of knowledge also to contemporary theologians. I refer, for example, to what he wrote on the duty of exercising an appropriate discernment on what is presented as *auctoritas vera*, or on the commitment to continue the quest for the truth until one achieves some experience of it in the silent adoration of God.

Our author says: "*Salus nostra ex fide inchoat*: our salvation begins with faith"; in other words we cannot speak of God starting with our own inventions but rather with what God says of himself in the Sacred Scriptures. Since, however, God tells only the truth, Scotus Erigena is convinced that the authority and reason can never contradict each other; he is convinced that true religion and true philosophy coincide. In this perspective he writes: "Any type of authority that is not confirmed by true reason must be considered weak.... Indeed there is no true authority other than that which coincides with the truth, discovered by virtue of reason, even should one be dealing with an authority recommended and handed down for the use of the successors of the holy Fathers" (I, *PL* 122, col. 513 BC). Consequently, he warns: "Let no authority intimidate you or distract you from what makes you understand the conviction obtained through correct rational contemplation. Indeed, the authentic authority never contradicts right reason, nor can the latter ever contradict a true authority. "The one and the other both come indisputably from the same source, which is divine wisdom" (I *PL* 122, col. 511 B). We see here a brave affirmation of the value of reason, founded on the certainty that the true authority is reasonable, because God is creative reason.

According to Erigena, Scripture itself does not escape the need to be approached with the same criterion of discernment. In fact, although Scripture comes from God the Irish theologian maintains, proposing anew a reflection made earlier by John Chrysostom it would not be necessary had the human being not sinned. It must therefore be deduced that Scripture was given by God with a pedagogical intention and with indulgence so that man might remember all that had been impressed within his heart from the moment of his creation, "in the image and likeness of God" (cf. Gn 1: 26) and that the Fall of man had caused him to forget. Erigena writes in his *Expositiones*: "It

is not man who was created for Scripture, which he would not have needed had he not sinned, but rather it is Scripture, interwoven with doctrine and symbols, which was given to man. Thanks to Scripture, in fact, our rational nature may be introduced to the secrets of authentic and pure contemplation of God" (II, *PL* 122, col. 146 C). The words of Sacred Scripture purify our somewhat blind reason and help us to recover the memory of what we, as the image of God, carry in our hearts, unfortunately wounded by sin.

From this derive certain hermeneutical consequences concerning the way to interpret Scripture that still today can point out the right approach for a correct reading of Sacred Scripture. In fact it is a question of discovering the hidden meaning in the sacred text and this implies a special inner exercise through which reason is open to the sure road to the truth. This exercise consists in cultivating constant readiness for conversion. Indeed, to acquire an in-depth vision of the text it is necessary to progress at the same time in conversion of the heart and in the conceptual analysis of the biblical passage, whether it is of a cosmic, historical or doctrinal character. Indeed, it is only by means of a constant purification of both the eye of the heart and the eye of the mind that it is possible to arrive at an exact understanding.

This arduous, demanding and exciting journey, that consists of continuous achievements and the relativization of human knowledge, leads the intelligent creature to the threshold of the divine Mystery where all notions admit of their own weakness and inability and thus, with the simple free and sweet power of the truth, make it obligatory ceaselessly to surpass all that is progressively achieved. Worshipful and silent recognition of the Mystery which flows into unifying communion is therefore revealed as the only path to a relationship with the truth that is at the same time the most intimate possible and the most scrupulously respectful of otherness. John Scotus, here too using terminology dear to the Christian tradition of the Greek language, called this experience for which we strive "theosis", or divinization, with such daring affirmations that he might be suspected of heterodox pantheism. Yet, even today one cannot but be strongly moved by texts such as the following in which with recourse to the ancient metaphor of the smelting of iron he writes: "just as all red-hot iron is liquified to the point that it seems nothing but fire and yet the substances remain distinct from one another, so it must be accepted that after the end of this world all nature, both the corporeal and the incorporeal, will show forth God alone and yet remain integral so that God can in a certain way be com-prehended while remaining in-comprehensible and that the creature itself may be transformed, with ineffable wonder, and reunited with God" (V, *PL* 122, col. 451 B).

In fact, the entire theological thought of John Scotus is the most evident demonstration of the attempt to express the expressible of the inexpressible God, based solely upon the mystery of the Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The numerous metaphors John Scotus used to point out this ineffable reality show how aware he was of the absolute inadequacy of the terms in which we speak of these things. And yet the enchantment and that aura of authentic mystical experience, which every now and then one can feel tangibly in his texts, endures. As proof of this it suffices to cite a passage from *De divisione naturae* which touches in depth even our mind as believers of the

21st century: "We should desire nothing", he writes, "other than the joy of the truth that is Christ, avoid nothing other than his absence. The greatest torment of a rational creature consists in the deprivation or absence of Christ. Indeed this must be considered the one cause of total and eternal sorrow. Take Christ from me and I am left with no good thing nor will anything terrify me so much as his absence. The greatest torments of a rational creature are the deprivation and absence of him" (V, *PL* 122, col. 989a). These are words that we can make our own, translating them into a prayer to the One for whom our hearts long.

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To special groups:

I warmly greet all the English-speaking visitors present today. In a special way, I welcome seminarians from the United States participating in the The Rome Experience Program, as well as pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Karachi in Pakistan. God Bless you all!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The Feast of *Corpus Christi* which we shall be celebrating tomorrow gives us the opportunity to deepen our faith and our love for the Eucharist. Dear *young people* especially you, dear boys and girls from Castellaneta who have just received your First Communion may the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ be your daily spiritual food so that you will advance on the path of holiness; for you, dear *sick people*, may it be a support and comfort in trials and suffering; and for you, dear *newlyweds*, may it be the profound reason for your love which you express in your daily behaviour.

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