



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 2 December 2009

William of Saint-Thierry

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In [a previous Catechesis](#) I presented Bernard of Clairvaux, the "Doctor Mellifluus", a great protagonist of the 12th century. His biographer a friend who esteemed him was William of Saint-Thierry on whom I am reflecting in this morning's Catechesis.

William was born in Liège between 1075 and 1080. He came from a noble family, was endowed with a keen intelligence and an innate love of study. He attended famous schools of the time, such as those in his native city and in Rheims, France. He also came into personal contact with Abelard, the teacher who applied philosophy to theology in such an original way as to give rise to great perplexity and opposition. William also expressed his own reservations, pressing his friend Bernard to take a stance concerning Abelard. Responding to God's mysterious and irresistible call which is the vocation to the consecrated life, William entered the Benedictine Monastery of Saint-Nicasius in Rheims in 1113. A few years later he became abbot of the Monastery of Saint-Thierry in the Diocese of Rheims. In that period there was a widespread need for the purification and renewal of monastic life to make it authentically evangelical. William worked on doing this in his own monastery and in general in the Benedictine Order. However, he met with great resistance to his attempts at reform and thus, although his friend Bernard advised him against it, in 1135 he left the Benedictine abbey and exchanged his black habit for a white one in order to join the Cistercians of Signy. From that time, until his death in 1148, he devoted himself to prayerful contemplation of God's mysteries, ever the subject of his deepest desires, and to the composition

of spiritual literature, important writings in the history of monastic theology.

One of his first works is entitled *De Natura et dignitate amoris* (*The nature and dignity of love*). In it William expressed one of his basic ideas that is also valid for us. The principal energy that moves the human soul, he said, is love. Human nature, in its deepest essence, consists in loving. Ultimately, a single task is entrusted to every human being: to learn to like and to love, sincerely, authentically and freely. However, it is only from God's teaching that this task is learned and that the human being may reach the end for which he was created. Indeed, William wrote: "The art of arts is the art of love.... Love is inspired by the Creator of nature. Love is a force of the soul that leads it as by a natural weight to its own place and end" (*De Natura et dignitate amoris* 1 PL 184, 379). Learning to love is a long and demanding process that is structured by William in four stages, corresponding to the ages of the human being: childhood, youth, maturity and old-age. On this journey the person must impose upon himself an effective asceticism, firm self-control to eliminate every irregular affection, every capitulation to selfishness, and to unify his own life in God, the source, goal and force of love, until he reaches the summit of spiritual life which William calls "wisdom". At the end of this ascetic process, the person feels deep serenity and sweetness. All the human being's faculties intelligence, will, affection rest in God, known and loved in Christ.

In other works too, William speaks of this radical vocation to love for God which is the secret of a successful and happy life and which he describes as a ceaseless, growing desire, inspired by God himself in the human heart. In a meditation he says "that the object of this love is Love" with a capital "L", namely God. It is he who pours himself out into the hearts of those who love him and prepares them to receive him. "God gives himself until the person is sated and in such a way that the desire is never lacking. This impetus of love is the fulfilment of the human being" (*De Contemplando Deo* 6, *passim*, SC 61 bis, pp. 79-83). The considerable importance that William gives to the emotional dimension is striking. Basically, dear friends, our hearts are made of flesh and blood, and when we love God, who is Love itself, how can we fail to express in this relationship with the Lord our most human feelings, such as tenderness, sensitivity and delicacy? In becoming Man, the Lord himself wanted to love us with a heart of flesh!

Moreover, according to William, love has another important quality: it illuminates the mind and enables one to know God better and more profoundly and, in God, people and events. The knowledge that proceeds from the senses and the intelligence reduces but does not eliminate the distance between the subject and the object, between the "I" and the "you". Love, on the other hand, gives rise to attraction and communion, to the point that transformation and assimilation take place between the subject who loves and the beloved object. This reciprocity of affection and liking subsequently permits a far deeper knowledge than that which is brought by reason alone. A famous saying of William expresses it: "*Amor ipse intellectus est* love in itself is already the beginning of knowledge". Dear friends, let us ask ourselves: is not our life just like this? Is it not perhaps true that we only truly know *who* and *what* we love? Without a certain fondness one knows no one and nothing! And this applies first of all to the knowledge of God and his mysteries

that exceed our mental capacity to understand: God is known if he is loved!

A synthesis of William of Saint-Thierry's thought is contained in a long letter addressed to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu, whom he visited and wished to encourage and console. Already in 1690, the learned Benedictine Jean Mabillon, gave this letter a meaningful title: *Epistola Aurea (Golden Epistle)*. In fact, the teachings on spiritual life that it contains are invaluable for all those who wish to increase in communion with God and in holiness. In this treatise, William proposes an itinerary in three stages. It is necessary, he says, to move on from the "animal" being to the "rational" one, in order to attain to the "spiritual". What does our author mean by these three terms? To start with, a person accepts the vision of life inspired by faith with an act of obedience and trust. Then, with a process of interiorization, in which the reason and the will play an important role, faith in Christ is received with profound conviction and one feels a harmonious correspondence between what is believed and what is hoped, and the most secret aspirations of the soul, our reason, our affections. One therefore arrives at the perfection of spiritual life when the realities of faith are a source of deep joy and real and satisfying communion with God. One lives only in love and for love. William based this process on a solid vision of the human being inspired by the ancient Greek Fathers, especially Origen who, with bold language, taught that the human being's vocation was to become like God who created him in his image and likeness. The image of God present in man impels him toward likeness, that is, toward an ever fuller identity between his own will and the divine will. One does not attain this perfection, which William calls "unity of spirit", by one's own efforts, even if they are sincere and generous, because something else is necessary. This perfection is reached through the action of the Holy Spirit who takes up his abode in the soul and purifies, absorbs and transforms into charity every impulse and desire of love that is present in the human being. "Then there is a further likeness to God", we read in the *Epistola Aurea*, "which is no longer called 'likeness' but 'unity of spirit', when the person becomes one with God, one in spirit, not only because of the unity of an identical desire but through being unable to desire anything else. In this way the human being deserves to become not God but what God is: man becomes through grace what God is by nature" (*Epistola Aurea* 262-263, SC 223, pp. 353-355).

Dear brothers and sisters, this author, whom we might describe as the "Singer of Charity, of Love", teaches us to make the basic decision in our lives which gives meaning and value to all our other decisions: to love God and, through love of him, to love our neighbour; only in this manner shall we be able to find true joy, an anticipation of eternal beatitude. Let us therefore learn from the Saints in order to learn to love authentically and totally, to set our being on this journey. Together with a young Saint, a Doctor of the Church, [Thérèse of the Child Jesus](#), let us tell the Lord that we too want to live of love. And I conclude with a prayer precisely by this Saint: "You know I love you, Jesus Christ, my Own! Your Spirit's fire of love enkindles me. By loving you, I draw the Father here, down to my heart, to stay with me always. Blessed Trinity! You are my prisoner dear, of love, today.... To live of love, 'tis without stint to give. And never count the cost, nor ask reward.... O Heart Divine, o'erflowing with tenderness, How swift I run, who all to You has given! Naught but your love I need, my life to bless" [To live of love].

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the priests from Scotland celebrating their ordination jubilees and the students and staff from St Mary's High School, Casino, Australia. May your Advent visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant Blessings!

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today is the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, which called attention to the importance of the Sacrament of Penance in the life of the Church. On this important anniversary I would like to remember certain extraordinary "apostles of the confessional", unflagging stewards of divine mercy: St John Mary Vianney, St Joseph Cafasso, St Leopold Mandic, *St Pius of Pietrelcina*. May their witness of faith and charity help you, dear *young people*, to steer clear of sin and to plan your future as a generous service to God and to your neighbour. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to experience in suffering the mercy of the Crucified Christ. And may it urge you, dear *newlyweds*, to create in your families an atmosphere of constant faith and mutual understanding. Lastly, may the example of these Saints, persevering and faithful ministers of divine forgiveness be for priests especially in this *Year for Priests* and for all Christians an invitation to trust always in the goodness of God, receiving and celebrating with trust the sacrament of Reconciliation.

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