



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Hall

Wednesday, 7 July 2010

John Duns Scotus

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This morning, after several Catecheses on various great theologians, I would like to present to you another important figure in the history of theology. He is Blessed John Duns Scotus, who lived at the end of the 13th century. An ancient epitaph on his tombstone sums up the geographical coordinates of his biography: "Scotland bore me, England received me, France taught me, Cologne in Germany holds me". We cannot disregard this information, partly because we know very little about the life of Duns Scotus. He was probably born in 1266 in a village called, precisely, "Duns", near Edinburgh.

Attracted by the charisma of St Francis of Assisi, he entered the Family of the Friars Minor and was ordained a priest in 1291. He was endowed with a brilliant mind and a tendency for speculation which earned him the traditional title of *Doctor subtilis*, "Subtle Doctor". Duns Scotus was oriented to the study of philosophy and theology at the famous Universities of Oxford and of Paris. Having successfully completed his training, he embarked on teaching theology at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and then of Paris, beginning by commenting, like all the bachelors of theology of his time, on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Indeed, Duns Scotus' main works are the mature fruit of these lessons and take the name of the places where he taught: *Ordinatio* (called in the past *Opus Oxoniense* – Oxford), *Reportatio Cantabrigiensis* (Cambridge), *Reportata Parisiensia* (Paris). One can add to these at least the *Quodlibeta* (or *Quaestiones quodlibetales*), a

quite important work consisting of 21 questions on various theological subjects. Duns Scotus distanced himself from Paris, after a serious dispute broke out between King Philip IV the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII, rather than sign a document hostile to the Supreme Pontiff as the King requested of all religious, preferring voluntary exile. Thus he left the country, together with the Franciscan Friars, out of love for the See of Peter.

Dear brothers and sisters, this event invites us to remember how often in the history of the Church believers have met with hostility and even suffered persecution for their fidelity and devotion to Christ, to the Church and to the Pope. We all look with admiration at these Christians who teach us to treasure as a precious good faith in Christ and communion with the Successor of Peter, hence with the universal Church.

However, friendly relations between the King of France and the Successor of Boniface VIII were soon restored and in 1305 Duns Scotus was able to return to Paris to lecture on theology with the title of *Magister regens* [regent master], now we would say "Professor". Later his Superiors sent him to Cologne as Professor of the Franciscan *Studium* of Theology, but he died on 8 November 1308 when he was only 43 years old, leaving nevertheless a consistent opus.

Because of the fame of his holiness, his cult soon became widespread in the Franciscan Order and Venerable [Pope John Paul II](#), wishing to confirm it, solemnly beatified him on 20 March 1993, describing him as the "minstrel of the Incarnate Word and defender of Mary's Immaculate Conception" (*Solemn Vespers*, St Peter's Basilica; *L'Osservatore Romano* [ore] English edition, n.3, 24 March 1993, p. 1). These words sum up the important contribution that Duns Scotus made to the history of theology.

First of all he meditated on the Mystery of the Incarnation and, unlike many Christian thinkers of the time, held that the Son of God would have been made man even if humanity had not sinned. He says in his "*Reportatio Parisiensis*": "To think that God would have given up such a task had Adam not sinned would be quite unreasonable! I say, therefore, that the fall was not the cause of Christ's predestination and that if no one had fallen, neither the angel nor man in this hypothesis Christ would still have been predestined in the same way" (in *III Sent.*, d. 7, 4). This perhaps somewhat surprising thought crystallized because, in the opinion of Duns Scotus the Incarnation of the Son of God, planned from all eternity by God the Father at the level of love is the fulfilment of creation and enables every creature, in Christ and through Christ, to be filled with grace and to praise and glorify God in eternity. Although Duns Scotus was aware that in fact, because of original sin, Christ redeemed us with his Passion, Death and Resurrection, he reaffirmed that the Incarnation is the greatest and most beautiful work of the entire history of salvation, that it is not conditioned by any contingent fact but is God's original idea of ultimately uniting with himself the whole of creation, in the Person and Flesh of the Son.

As a faithful disciple of St Francis, Duns Scotus liked to contemplate and preach the Mystery of

the saving Passion of Christ, as the expression of the loving will, of the immense love of God who reaches out with the greatest generosity, irradiating his goodness and love (cf. *Tractatus de primo principio*, c. 4). Moreover this love was not only revealed on Calvary but also in the Most Blessed Eucharist, for which Duns Scotus had a very deep devotion and which he saw as the Sacrament of the Real Presence of Jesus and as the Sacrament of unity and communion that induces us to love each other and to love God, as the Supreme Good we have in common (cf. *Reportatio Parisiensis*, in *IV Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, n. 3). As I wrote in my [Letter for the International Congress in Cologne marking the seventh centenary of the death of Blessed Duns Scotus](#), citing the thought of our author: "just as this love, this charity, was at the origin of all things, so too our eternal happiness will be in love and charity alone: 'willing, or the loving will, is simply eternal life, blessed and perfect'" (AAS 101 [2009], 5).

Dear brothers and sisters, this strongly "Christocentric" theological vision opens us to contemplation, wonder and gratitude: Christ is the centre of history and of the cosmos, it is he who gives meaning, dignity and value to our lives! As Pope Paul vi proclaimed in Manila, I too would like to cry out to the world: [Christ] "reveals the invisible God, he is the firstborn of all creation, the foundation of everything created. He is the Teacher of mankind, and its Redeemer. He was born, he died and he rose again for us. He is the centre of history and of the world; he is the one who knows us and who loves us; he is the companion and the friend of our life.... I could never finish speaking about him" ([Homily, Mass at Quezon Circle, Manila](#); 29 November 1970).

Not only Christ's role in the history of salvation but also that of Mary is the subject of the *Doctor subtilis'* thought. In the times of Duns Scotus the majority of theologians countered with an objection that seemed insurmountable, the doctrine which holds that Mary Most Holy was exempt from original sin from the very first moment of her conception: in fact, at first sight the universality of the Redemption brought about by Christ might seem to be jeopardized by such a statement, as though Mary had had no need of Christ or his redemption. Therefore the theologians opposed this thesis. Thus, to enable people to understand this preservation from original sin Duns Scotus developed an argument that was later, in 1854, also to be used by Bl. Pope Pius IX when he solemnly defined the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. And this argument is that of "preventive Redemption", according to which the Immaculate Conception is the masterpiece of the Redemption brought about by Christ because the very power of his love and his mediation obtained that the Mother be preserved from original sin. Therefore Mary is totally redeemed by Christ, but already before her conception. Duns Scotus' confreres, the Franciscans, accepted and spread this doctrine enthusiastically and other theologians, often with a solemn oath, strove to defend and perfect it.

In this regard I would like to highlight a fact that I consider relevant. Concerning the teaching on the Immaculate Conception, important theologians like Duns Scotus enriched what the People of God already spontaneously believed about the Blessed Virgin and expressed in acts of devotion, in the arts and in Christian life in general with the specific contribution of their thought. Thus faith

both in the Immaculate Conception and in the bodily Assumption of the Virgin was already present in the People of God, while theology had not yet found the key to interpreting it in the totality of the doctrine of the faith. The People of God therefore precede theologians and this is all thanks to that supernatural *sensus fidei*, namely, that capacity infused by the Holy Spirit that qualifies us to embrace the reality of the faith with humility of heart and mind. In this sense, the People of God is the "teacher that goes first" and must then be more deeply examined and intellectually accepted by theology. May theologians always be ready to listen to this source of faith and retain the humility and simplicity of children! I mentioned this a few months ago saying: "There have been great scholars, great experts, great theologians, teachers of faith who have taught us many things. They have gone into the details of Sacred Scripture... but have been unable to see the mystery itself, its central nucleus.... The essential has remained hidden!... On the other hand, in our time there have also been "little ones" who have understood this mystery. Let us think of St Bernadette Soubirous; of St Thérèse of Lisieux, with her new interpretation of the Bible that is "non-scientific" but goes to the heart of Sacred Scripture" (*Homily, Mass for the Members of the International Theological Commission*, Pauline Chapel, Vatican City, 1 December 2009).

Lastly, Duns Scotus has developed a point to which modernity is very sensitive. It is the topic of freedom and its relationship with the will and with the intellect. Our author underlines freedom as a fundamental quality of the will, introducing an approach that lays greater emphasis on the will. Unfortunately, in later authors, this line of thinking turned into a voluntarism, in contrast to the so-called "Augustinian and Thomist intellectualism". For St Thomas Aquinas, who follows St Augustine, freedom cannot be considered an innate quality of the will, but, the fruit of the collaboration of the will and the mind. Indeed, an idea of innate and absolute freedom - as it evolved, precisely, after Duns Scotus - placed in the will that precedes the intellect, both in God and in man, risks leading to the idea of a God who would not even be bound to truth and good. The wish to save God's absolute transcendence and diversity with such a radical and impenetrable accentuation of his will does not take into account that the God who revealed himself in Christ is the God "Logos", who acted and acts full of love for us. Of course, as Duns Scotus affirms, love transcends knowledge and is capable of perceiving ever better than thought, but it is always the love of the God who is "Logos" (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the University of Regensburg*, 12 September 2006). In the human being too, the idea of absolute freedom, placed in the will, forgetting the connection with the truth, does not know that freedom itself must be liberated from the limits imposed on it by sin. All the same, the Scotist vision does not fall into these extremes: for Duns Scotus a free act is the result of the concourse of intellect and will, and if he speaks of a "primacy" of the will, he argues this precisely because the will always follows the intellect.

In speaking to Roman seminarians last year I recalled that "Since the beginning and throughout all time but especially in the modern age freedom has been the great dream of humanity" (*Discourse at the Roman Major Seminary*, 20 February 2009). Indeed, in addition to our own daily experience, modern history actually teaches us that freedom is authentic and helps with building a truly human

civilization only when it is reconciled with truth. If freedom is detached from truth, it becomes, tragically, a principle of the destruction of the human person's inner harmony, a source of prevarication of the strongest and the violent and a cause of suffering and sorrow. Freedom, like all the faculties with which the human being is endowed, increases and is perfected, Duns Scotus says, when the human being is open to God, making the most of the disposition to listen to his voice: when we listen to divine Revelation, to the word of God in order to accept it, a message reaches us that fills our life with light and hope and we are truly free.

Dear brothers and sisters, Bl. Duns Scotus teaches us that in our life the essential is to believe that God is close to us and loves us in Jesus Christ, and therefore to cultivate a deep love for him and for his Church. We on earth are witnesses of this love. May Mary Most Holy help us to receive this infinite love of God which we will enjoy eternally to the full in Heaven, when our soul is at last united to God for ever in the Communion of Saints.

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the members of the General Chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross, together with my prayerful good wishes for the spiritual fruitfulness of your deliberations. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the groups from Wales, Ireland, the Philippines, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Yesterday was the liturgical Memorial of St Maria Goretti, virgin and martyr, a girl who, in spite of being very young, was able to show strength and courage against evil. I invoke her for you, dear *young people*, so that she may help you to choose good always, even when it is to your cost; for you, dear *sick people*, so that she may sustain you in bearing your daily suffering; and for you, dear *newlyweds*, so that your love may always be faithful and full of reciprocal respect.

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