



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 4 July 2007*

Saint Basil (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us remember today one of the great Fathers of the Church, St Basil, described by Byzantine liturgical texts as "a luminary of the Church".

He was an important Bishop in the fourth century to whom the entire Church of the East, and likewise the Church of the West, looks with admiration because of the holiness of his life, the excellence of his teaching and the harmonious synthesis of his speculative and practical gifts.

He was born in about 330 A.D. into a family of saints, "a true domestic Church", immersed in an atmosphere of deep faith. He studied with the best teachers in Athens and Constantinople.

Unsatisfied with his worldly success and realizing that he had frivolously wasted much time on vanities, he himself confessed: "One day, like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvellous light of the truth of the Gospel..., and I wept many tears over my miserable life" (cf. *Letter 223: PG 32, 824a*).

Attracted by Christ, Basil began to look and listen to him alone (cf. *Moralia*, 80, 1: *PG 31, 860bc*). He devoted himself with determination to the monastic life through prayer, meditation on the Sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and the practice of charity (cf. *Letters 2, 22*), also following the example of his sister, St Macrina, who was already living the

ascetic life of a nun. He was then ordained a priest and finally, in the year 370, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia in present-day Turkey.

Through his preaching and writings, he carried out immensely busy pastoral, theological and literary activities.

With a wise balance, he was able to combine service to souls with dedication to prayer and meditation in solitude. Availing himself of his personal experience, he encouraged the foundation of numerous "fraternities", in other words, communities of Christians consecrated to God, which he visited frequently (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 29, *in laudem Basilii*: PG 36, 536b).

He urged them with his words and his writings, many of which have come down to us (cf. *Regulae brevius tractatae*, Proemio: PG 31, 1080ab), to live and to advance in perfection.

Various legislators of ancient monasticism drew on his works, including St Benedict, who considered Basil his teacher (cf. *Rule* 73, 5).

Indeed, Basil created a very special monasticism: it was not closed to the community of the local Church but instead was open to it. His monks belonged to the particular Church; they were her life-giving nucleus and, going before the other faithful in the following of Christ and not only in faith, showed a strong attachment to him - love for him - especially through charitable acts. These monks, who ran schools and hospitals, were at the service of the poor and thus demonstrated the integrity of Christian life.

In speaking of monasticism, the Servant of God John Paul II wrote: "For this reason many people think that the essential structure of the life of the Church, monasticism, was established, for all time, mainly by St Basil; or that, at least, it was not defined in its more specific nature without his decisive contribution" (Apostolic Letter *Patres Ecclesiae*, n. 2, January 1980; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 February, p. 6).

As the Bishop and Pastor of his vast Diocese Basil was constantly concerned with the difficult material conditions in which his faithful lived; he firmly denounced the evils; he did all he could on behalf of the poorest and most marginalized people; he also intervened with rulers to alleviate the sufferings of the population, especially in times of disaster; he watched over the Church's freedom, opposing even the powerful in order to defend the right to profess the true faith (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 48-51 *in laudem Basilii*: PG 36, 557c-561c).

Basil bore an effective witness to God, who is love and charity, by building for the needy various institutions (cf. Basil, *Letter* 94: PG 32, 488bc), virtually a "city" of mercy, called "*Basiliade*" after him (cf. Sozomeno, *Historia Eccl.* 6, 34: PG 67, 1397a). This was the origin of the modern hospital structures where the sick are admitted for treatment.

Aware that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed", and "also the fount from which all her power flows" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10), and in spite of his constant concern to do charitable acts which is the hallmark of faith, Basil was also a wise "liturgical reformer" (cf. Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 34 *in laudem Basilii*: PG 36, 541c).

Indeed, he has bequeathed to us a great Eucharistic Prayer [or *anaphora*] which takes its name from him and has given a fundamental order to prayer and psalmody: at his prompting, the people learned to know and love the Psalms and even went to pray them during the night (cf. Basil, *In Psalmum* 1, 1-2: PG 29, 212a-213c). And we thus see how liturgy, worship, prayer with the Church and charity go hand in hand and condition one another.

With zeal and courage Basil opposed the heretics who denied that Jesus Christ was God as Father (cf. Basil, *Letter* 9, 3: PG 32, 272a; *Letter* 52, 1-3: PG 32, 392b-396a; *Adv. Eunomium* 1, 20: PG 29, 556c). Likewise, against those who would not accept the divinity of the Holy Spirit, he maintained that the Spirit is also God and "must be equated and glorified with the Father and with the Son (cf. *De Spiritu Sancto*: SC 17ff., 348). For this reason Basil was one of the great Fathers who formulated the doctrine on the Trinity: the one God, precisely because he is love, is a God in three Persons who form the most profound unity that exists: divine unity.

In his love for Christ and for his Gospel, the great Cappadocian also strove to mend divisions within the Church (cf. *Letters*, 70, 243), doing his utmost to bring all to convert to Christ and to his word (cf. *De Iudicio* 4: PG 31, 660b-661a), a unifying force which all believers were bound to obey (cf. *ibid.* 1-3: PG 31, 653a-656c).

To conclude, Basil spent himself without reserve in faithful service to the Church and in the multiform exercise of the episcopal ministry. In accordance with the programme that he himself drafted, he became an "apostle and minister of Christ, steward of God's mysteries, herald of the Kingdom, a model and rule of piety, an eye of the Body of the Church, a Pastor of Christ's sheep, a loving doctor, father and nurse, a cooperator of God, a farmer of God, a builder of God's temple" (cf. *Moralia* 80, 11-20: PG 31, 864b-868b).

This is the programme which the holy Bishop consigns to preachers of the Word - in the past as in the present -, a programme which he himself was generously committed to putting into practice. In 379 A.D. Basil, who was not yet 50, returned to God "in the hope of eternal life, through Jesus Christ Our Lord" (*De Baptismo*, 1, 2, 9).

He was a man who truly lived with his gaze fixed on Christ. He was a man of love for his neighbour. Full of the hope and joy of faith, Basil shows us how to be true Christians.

**Greetings to the pilgrims
gathered in the Vatican Basilica**

I am happy to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present today. May your visit to this Basilica and to the city of Rome inspire you to imitate the apostles in following Christ and serving the Church. I assure you of my prayers for your families and friends at home, especially those afflicted by illness or suffering of any kind. God bless you all!

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**Greetings to the pilgrims
gathered at Paul VI Audience Hall**

I extend a cordial greeting to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially the athletes and organizers of the European Maccabi Games. May God bestow abundant Blessings upon all of you.

Lastly, I turn my thoughts to the *young people*, the *sick* and *newly-weds*. Today, we are celebrating the liturgical Memorial of Piergiorgio Frassati. May his example strengthen you, dear *young people*, in witnessing to the Gospel in every circumstance of life; may it help you, dear *sick people*, in offering your daily sufferings so that in the world the civilization of love may be brought into being; and may it sustain you, dear *newly-weds*, as you build your family on the solid foundations of intimate union with God.

APPEAL FOR THE 23rd WORLD YOUTH DAY

My thought now turns to World Youth Day, which will be held in Sydney in approximately one year. To the young people present here and to the youth of the world who are preparing for this joyful faith event, I address a word of warm greeting and of lively encouragement in the English language:

Dear Young People,

One year from now we will meet at World Youth Day in Sydney! I want to encourage you to prepare well for this marvellous celebration of the faith, which will be spent in the company of your bishops, priests, Religious, youth leaders and one another. Enter fully into the life of your parishes and participate enthusiastically in diocesan events! In this way you will be equipped spiritually to experience new depths of understanding of all that we believe when we gather in Sydney next July.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth” (*Acts 1:8*). As you know, these words of Jesus form the theme of World Youth Day 2008. How the Apostles felt upon hearing these words, we can only imagine, but their confusion was no doubt tempered with a sense of awe and of eager anticipation for the coming of the Spirit. United in prayer with Mary and the others gathered in the Upper Room (cf *Acts 1:14*), they experienced the true power of the Spirit, whose presence transforms uncertainty, fear, and division into purpose, hope and communion.

A sense of awe and eager anticipation also describes how we feel as we make preparations to meet in Sydney. For many of us, this will be a long journey. Yet Australia and its people evoke images of a warm welcome and wondrous beauty, of an ancient aboriginal history and a multitude of vibrant cities and communities. I know that already the ecclesial and government authorities, together with numerous young Australians, are working very hard to ensure an exceptional experience for us all. I offer them my heartfelt thanks.

World Youth Day is much more than an event. It is a time of deep spiritual renewal, the fruits of which benefit the whole of society. Young pilgrims are filled with the desire to pray, to be nourished by Word and Sacrament, to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, who illuminates the wonder of the human soul and shows the way to be “the image and instrument of the love which flows from Christ” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 33).

It is this love – Christ’s love – for which the world yearns. Thus you are called by so many to “be his witnesses”. Some of you have friends with little real purpose in their lives, perhaps caught up in a futile search for endless new experiences. Bring them to World Youth Day too! In fact, I have noticed that against the tide of secularism many young people are rediscovering the satisfying quest for authentic beauty, goodness and truth. Through your witness you help them in their search for the Spirit of God. Be courageous in that witness! Strive to spread Christ’s guiding light, which gives purpose to all life, making lasting joy and happiness possible for everyone.

My dear young people, until we meet in Sydney, may the Lord protect you all. Let us entrust these preparations to Our Lady of the Southern Cross, Help of Christians. With her, let us pray: “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in them the fire of your love”.