



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 31 October 2007*

***Saint Maximus of Turin***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Between the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, another Father of the Church after St Ambrose made a great contribution to the spread and consolidation of Christianity in Northern Italy: St Maximus, whom we come across in 398 as Bishop of Turin, a year after St Ambrose's death. Very little is known about him; in compensation, we have inherited a collection of about 90 of his *Sermons*. It is possible to perceive in them the Bishop's profound and vital bond with his city, which attests to an evident point of contact between the episcopal ministry of Ambrose and that of Maximus.

At that time serious tensions were disturbing orderly civil coexistence. In this context, as pastor and teacher, Maximus succeeded in obtaining the Christian people's support. The city was threatened by various groups of barbarians. They entered by the Eastern passes, which went as far as the Western Alps. Turin was therefore permanently garrisoned by troops and at critical moments became a refuge for the populations fleeing from the countryside and urban centres where there was no protection. Maximus' interventions in the face of this situation testify to his commitment to respond to the civil degradation and disintegration. Although it is still difficult to determine the social composition of those for whom the *Sermons* were intended, it would seem that Maximus' preaching - to avoid the risk of vagueness - was specifically addressed to a chosen nucleus of the Christian community of Turin, consisting of rich landowners who had property in the Turinese countryside and a house in the city. This was a clear-sighted pastoral decision by the Bishop, who saw this type of preaching as the most effective way to preserve and strengthen his own ties with the people.

To illustrate this view of Maximus' ministry in his city, I would like to point out for example *Sermons* 17 and 18, dedicated to an ever timely topic: wealth and poverty in Christian communities. In this context too, the city was fraught with serious tensions. Riches were accumulated and hidden. "No one thinks about the needs of others", the Bishop remarked bitterly in his 17th *Sermon*. "In fact, not only do many Christians not share their own possessions but they also rob others of theirs. Not only, I say, do they not bring the money they collect to the feet of the apostles, but in addition, they drag from priests' feet their own brethren who are seeking help". And he concluded: "In our cities there are many guests or pilgrims. Do what you have promised", adhering to faith, "so that what was said to Ananias will not be said to you as well: "You have not lied to men, but to God"" (*Sermon* 17, 2-3).

In the next *Sermon*, the 18th, Maximus condemns the recurring forms of exploitation of others' misfortunes. "Tell me, Christian", the Bishop reprimands his faithful, "tell me why you snatched the booty abandoned by the plunderers? Why did you take home 'ill-gotten gains' as you yourself think, torn apart and contaminated?". "But perhaps", he continues, "you say you have purchased them, and thereby believe you are avoiding the accusation of avarice. However, this is not the way to equate purchasing with selling. "It is a good thing to make purchases, but that means what is sold freely in times of peace, not goods looted during the sack of a city... So act as a Christian and a citizen who purchases in order to repay" (*Sermon* 18: 3). Without being too obvious, Maximus thus managed to preach a profound relationship between a Christian's and a citizen's duties. In his eyes, living a Christian life also meant assuming civil commitments. Vice-versa, every Christian who, "despite being able to live by his own work, seizes the booty of others with the ferocity of wild beasts"; who "tricks his neighbour, who tries every day to nibble away at the boundaries of others, to gain possession of their produce", does not compare to a fox biting off the heads of chickens but rather to a wolf savaging pigs (*Sermon* 41, 4).

In comparison with the cautious, defensive attitude that Ambrose adopted to justify his famous project of redeeming prisoners of war, the historical changes that occurred in the relationship between the Bishop and the municipal institutions are clearly evident. By now sustained through legislation that invited Christians to redeem prisoners, Maximus, with the collapse of the civil authority of the Roman Empire, felt fully authorized in this regard to exercise true control over the city. This control was to become increasingly extensive and effective until it replaced the irresponsible evasion of the magistrates and civil institutions. In this context, Maximus not only strove to rekindle in the faithful the traditional love for their *hometown*, but he also proclaimed the precise duty to pay taxes, however burdensome and unpleasant they might appear (cf. *Sermon* 26, 2). In short, the tone and substance of the *Sermons* imply an increased awareness of the Bishop's political responsibility in the specific historical circumstances. He was "the lookout tower" posted in the city. Whoever could these watchmen be, Maximus wonders in *Sermon* 92, "other than the most blessed Bishops set on a lofty rock of wisdom, so to speak, to defend the peoples and to warn them about the evils approaching in the distance?". And in *Sermon* 89 the Bishop of Turin describes his tasks to his faithful, making a unique comparison between the Bishop's

function and the function of bees: "Like the bee", he said, Bishops "observe bodily chastity, they offer the food of heavenly life using the sting of the law. They are pure in sanctifying, gentle in restoring and severe in punishing". With these words, St Maximus described the task of the Bishop in his time.

In short, historical and literary analysis show an increasing awareness of the political responsibility of the ecclesiastical authority in a context in which it continued de facto to replace the civil authority.

Indeed, the ministry of the Bishop of Northwest Italy, starting with Eusebius who dwelled in his Vercelli "like a monk" to Maximus of Turin, positioned "like a sentinel" on the highest rock in the city, developed along these lines. It is obvious that the contemporary historical, cultural and social context is profoundly different. Today's context is rather the context outlined by my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, in which he offers an articulate analysis of the challenges and signs of hope for the Church in Europe today (nn. 6-22). In any case, on the basis of the changed conditions, the believer's duties to his city and his homeland still remain effective. The combination of the commitments of the "honest citizen" with those of the "good Christian" has not in fact disappeared.

In conclusion, to highlight one of the most important aspects of the unity of Christian life, I would like to recall the words of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: consistency between faith and conduct, between Gospel and culture. The Council exhorts the faithful "to perform their duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. It is a mistake to think that, because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to shirk our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that by our faith we are bound all the more to fulfil these responsibilities according to the vocation of each one" (n. 43). In following the Magisterium of St Maximus and of many other Fathers, let us make our own the Council's desire that the faithful may be increasingly anxious to "carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God" (*ibid.*) and thus for humanity's good.

### To special groups:

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I warmly greet the Sisters of the Resurrection present in Rome for the Beatification of their Foundress Mother Celine Chludzinska Borzecka. May the Lord grant them the grace of following generously in her footsteps. I also welcome the members of the Risso Kossei-kai Buddhist group from Japan. Upon all the English-speaking visitors, including those from England, Wales, Ireland, Australia, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, the Philippines and the United States, I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

Lastly, I address my greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the forthcoming celebrations of the Solemnity of All Saints and the Commemoration of All Souls be a favourable opportunity for each and every one to raise their gaze to Heaven and to contemplate the future, ultimate and definitive realities that await us.

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