



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 16 December 2009

[Video]

John of Salisbury

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today we shall become acquainted with John of Salisbury who belonged to one of the most important schools of philosophy and theology of the Middle Ages, that of the Cathedral of Chartres in France. Like the theologians of whom I have spoken in the past few weeks, John too helps us understand that faith, in harmony with the just aspirations of reason, impels thought toward the revealed truth in which is found the true good of the human being.

John was born in Salisbury, England, between 1100 and 1120. In reading his works, and especially the large collection of his letters, we learn about the most important events in his life. For about 12 years, from 1136 to 1148, he devoted himself to study, attending the best schools of his day where he heard the lectures of famous teachers. He went to Paris and then to Chartres, the environment that made the greatest impression on his formation and from which he assimilated his great cultural openness, his interest in speculative problems and his appreciation of literature. As often happened in that time, the most brilliant students were chosen by prelates and sovereigns to be their close collaborators. This also happened to John of Salisbury, who was introduced to Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury the Primate of England by a great friend of his, [Bernard of Clairvaux](#). Theobald was glad to welcome John among his clergy. For 11 years, from 1150 to 1161, John was the secretary and chaplain of the elderly Archbishop. With

unflagging zeal he continued to devote himself to study; he carried out an intense diplomatic activity, going to Italy ten times for the explicit purpose of fostering relations between the Kingdom and Church of England and the Roman Pontiff. Among other things, the Pope in those years was Adrian IV, an Englishman who was a close friend of John of Salisbury. In the years following Adrian IV's death, in 1159, a situation of serious tension arose in England, between the Church and the Kingdom. In fact, King Henry II wished to impose his authority on the internal life of the Church, curtailing her freedom. This stance provoked John of Salisbury to react and, in particular, prompted the valiant resistance of St Thomas Becket, Theobald's successor on the episcopal throne of Canterbury, who for this reason was exiled to France. John of Salisbury accompanied him and remained in his service, working ceaselessly for reconciliation. In 1170, when both John and Thomas Becket had returned to England, Thomas was attacked and murdered in his cathedral. He died a martyr and was immediately venerated as such by the people. John continued to serve faithfully the successor of Thomas as well, until he was appointed Bishop of Chartres where he lived from 1176 until 1180, the year of his death.

I would like to point out two of John of Salisbury's works that are considered his masterpieces, bearing elegant Greek titles: *Metalogicon* (In Defence of Logic), and *Policraticus* (The Man of Government). In the first of these works, not without that fine irony that is a feature of many scholars, he rejects the position of those who had a reductionist conception of culture, which they saw as empty eloquence and vain words. John, on the contrary, praises culture, authentic philosophy, that is, the encounter between rigorous thought and communication, effective words. He writes: "Indeed, just as eloquence that is not illuminated by reason is not only rash but blind, so wisdom that does not profit from the use of words is not only weak but in a certain way is mutilated. Indeed, although, at times, wisdom without words might serve to square the individual with his own conscience, it is of rare or little profit to society" (*Metalogicon*, 1, 1, PL 199, 327). This is a very timely teaching. Today, what John described as "eloquence", that is, the possibility of communicating with increasingly elaborate and widespread means, has increased enormously. Yet the need to communicate messages endowed with "wisdom", that is inspired by truth, goodness and beauty is more urgent than ever. This is a great responsibility that calls into question in particular the people who work in the multiform and complex world of culture, of communications, of the *media*. And this is a realm in which the Gospel can be proclaimed with missionary zeal.

In the *Metalogicon* John treats the problems of logic, in his day a subject of great interest, and asks himself a fundamental question: what can human reason know? To what point can it correspond with the aspiration that exists in every person, namely, to seek the truth? John of Salisbury adopts a moderate position, based on the teaching of certain treatises of Aristotle and Cicero. In his opinion human reason normally attains knowledge that is not indisputable but probable and arguable. Human knowledge this is his conclusion is imperfect, because it is subject to finiteness, to human limitations. Nevertheless it grows and is perfected, thanks to the experience and elaboration of correct and consistent reasoning, able to make connections

between concepts and the reality, through discussion, exchanges and knowledge that is enriched from one generation to the next. Only in God is there perfect knowledge which is communicated to the human being, at least partially, by means of Revelation received in faith, which is why the knowledge of faith, theology, unfolds the potential of reason and makes it possible to advance with humility in the knowledge of God's mysteries.

The believer and the theologian who deepen the treasure of faith, also open themselves to a practical knowledge that guides our daily activity, in other words moral law and the exercise of the virtues. John of Salisbury writes: "God's clemency has granted us his law, which establishes what it is useful for us to know and points out to us what it is legitimate for us to know of God and what it is right to investigate.... In this law, in fact, the will of God is explained and revealed so that each one of us may know what he needs to do" (*Metalogicon* 4, 41, *PL* 199, 944-945). According to John of Salisbury an immutable objective truth also exists, whose origin is in God, accessible to human reason and which concerns practical and social action. It is a natural law that must inspire human laws and political and religious authorities, so that they may promote the common good. This natural law is characterized by a property that John calls "equity", that is, the attribution to each person of his own rights. From this stem precepts that are legitimate for all peoples, and in no way can they be abrogated. This is the central thesis of *Policraticus*, the treatise of philosophy and political theology in which John of Salisbury reflects on the conditions that render government leaders' just and acceptable.

Whereas other arguments addressed in this work are linked to the historical circumstances in which it was composed, the theme of the relationship between natural law and a positive juridical order, mediated by equity, is still of great importance today. In our time, in fact, especially in some countries, we are witnessing a disturbing divergence between reason, whose task is to discover the ethical values linked to the dignity of the human person, and freedom, whose responsibility is to accept and promote them. Perhaps John of Salisbury would remind us today that the only laws in conformity with equity are those that protect the sacredness of human life and reject the licitness of abortion, euthanasia and bold genetic experimentation, those laws that respect the dignity of marriage between a man and a woman, that are inspired by a correct secularism of the State a secularism that always entails the safeguard of religious freedom and that pursue subsidiarity and solidarity at both the national and the international level. If this were not so, what John of Salisbury terms the "tyranny of princes", or as we would say, "the dictatorship of relativism" would end by coming to power, a relativism, as I recalled a few years ago, "which does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires" (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals, *Homily, Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff*, 18 April 2005).

In my most recent Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, in addressing people of good will who strive to ensure that social and political action are never separated from the objective truth about man and his dignity, I wrote: "Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be

received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love. This principle is extremely important for society and for development, since neither can be a purely human product; the vocation to development on the part of individuals and peoples is not based simply on human choice, but is an intrinsic part of a plan that is prior to us and constitutes for all of us a duty to be freely accepted" (n. 52). We must seek and welcome this plan that precedes us, this truth of being, so that justice may be born, but we may find it and welcome it only with a heart, a will and a reason purified in the light of God.

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the student groups present today from England, Ireland and the United States. My cordial greeting also goes to the pilgrims from Kenya and Nigeria. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I greet you, dear *young people*, dear *sick people* and dear *newlyweds*, with great affection. In this Season of Advent, the Lord tells us through the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "*Turn to me and be saved*" (45: 22). Dear boys and girls who come from so many schools and parishes in Italy, make room in your hearts for Jesus who comes, to testify to his joy and his peace. Dear *sick people*, welcome the Lord in your lives to find in the encounter with him comfort and consolation. And you, dear *newlyweds*, make the Christmas message of love your family's rule of life.

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