



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square  
Wednesday, 3 October 2007*

### ***Saint Cyril of Alexandria***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today too, continuing our journey following the traces left by the Fathers of the Church, we meet an important figure: St Cyril of Alexandria. Linked to the Christological controversy which led to the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the last important representative of the Alexandrian tradition in the Greek Orient, Cyril was later defined as "the guardian of exactitude" - to be understood as guardian of the true faith - and even the "seal of the Fathers". These ancient descriptions express clearly a characteristic feature of Cyril: the Bishop of Alexandria's constant reference to earlier ecclesiastical authors (including, in particular, Athanasius), for the purpose of showing the continuity with tradition of theology itself. He deliberately, explicitly inserted himself into the Church's tradition, which he recognized as guaranteeing continuity with the Apostles and with Christ himself. Venerated as a Saint in both East and West, in 1882 St Cyril was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII, who at the same time also attributed this title to another important exponent of Greek Patristics, St Cyril of Jerusalem. Thus are revealed the attention and love for the Eastern Christian traditions of this Pope, who later also chose to proclaim St John Damascene a Doctor of the Church, thereby showing that both the Eastern and Western traditions express the doctrine of Christ's one Church.

We have almost no information on Cyril's life prior to his election to the important See of Alexandria. He was a nephew of Theophilus, who had governed the Diocese of Alexandria as Bishop since 385 A.D. with a prestigious and iron hand. It is likely that Cyril was born in this

Egyptian metropolis between 370 and 380 A.D., was initiated into ecclesiastical life while he was still very young and received a good education, both culturally and theologically. In 403, he went to Constantinople in the retinue of his powerful uncle. It was here that he took part in the so-called "Synod of the Oak" which deposed the Bishop of the city, John (later known as "Chrysostom"), and thereby marked the triumph of the Alexandrian See over its traditional rival, the See of Constantinople, where the Emperor resided. Upon his uncle Theophilus' death, the still young Cyril was elected in 412 as Bishop of the influential Church of Alexandria, which he governed energetically for 32 years, always seeking to affirm her primacy throughout the East, strong also because of her traditional bonds with Rome.

Two or three years later, in 417 or 418, the Bishop of Alexandria showed himself to be realistic in mending the broken communion with Constantinople, which had lasted by then since 406 as a consequence of Chrysostom's deposition. But the old conflict with the Constantinople See flared up again about 10 years later, when in 428 Nestorius was elected, a severe and authoritarian monk trained in Antioch. The new Bishop of Constantinople, in fact, soon provoked opposition because he preferred to use as Mary's title in his preaching "Mother of Christ" (*Christotòkos*) instead of "Mother of God" (*Theotòkos*), already very dear to popular devotion. One reason for Bishop Nestorius' decision was his adherence to the Antiochean type of Christology, which, to safeguard the importance of Christ's humanity, ended by affirming the division of the Divinity. Hence, the union between God and man in Christ could no longer be true, so naturally it was no longer possible to speak of the "Mother of God".

The reaction of Cyril - at that time the greatest exponent of Alexandrian Christology, who intended on the other hand to stress the unity of Christ's person - was almost immediate, and from 429 he left no stone unturned, even addressing several letters to Nestorius himself. In the second of Cyril's letters to Nestorius (*PG 77, 44-49*), written in February 430, we read a clear affirmation of the duty of Pastors to preserve the faith of the People of God. This was his criterion, moreover, still valid today: the faith of the People of God is an expression of tradition, it is a guarantee of sound doctrine. This is what he wrote to Nestorius: "It is essential to explain the teaching and interpretation of the faith to the people in the most irreproachable way, and to remember that those who cause scandal even to only one of the little ones who believe in Christ will be subjected to an unbearable punishment".

In the same letter to Nestorius - a letter which later, in 451, was to be approved by the Council of Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council - Cyril described his Christological faith clearly: "Thus, we affirm that the natures are different that are united in one true unity, but from both has come only one Christ and Son; not because, due to their unity, the difference in their natures has been eliminated, but rather, because divinity and humanity, reunited in an ineffable and indescribable union, have produced for us one Lord and Christ and Son". And this is important: true humanity and true divinity are really united in only one Person, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Bishop of Alexandria continued: "We will profess only one Christ and Lord, not in the sense that we

worship the man together with the *Logos*, in order not to suggest the idea of separation by saying "together", but in the sense that we worship only one and the same, because he is not extraneous to the *Logos*, his body, with which he also sits at his Father's side, not as if "two sons" are sitting beside him but only one, united with his own flesh".

And soon the Bishop of Alexandria, thanks to shrewd alliances, obtained the repeated condemnation of Nestorius: by the See of Rome, consequently with a series of 12 anathemas which he himself composed, and finally, by the Council held in Ephesus in 431, the Third Ecumenical Council. The assembly which went on with alternating and turbulent events, ended with the first great triumph of devotion to Mary and with the exile of the Bishop of Constantinople, who had been reluctant to recognize the Blessed Virgin's right to the title of "Mother of God" because of an erroneous Christology that brought division to Christ himself. After thus prevailing against his rival and his doctrine, by 433 Cyril was nevertheless already able to achieve a theological formula of compromise and reconciliation with the Antiocheans. This is also significant: on the one hand is the clarity of the doctrine of faith, but in addition, on the other, the intense search for unity and reconciliation. In the following years he devoted himself in every possible way to defending and explaining his theological stance, until his death on 27 June 444.

Cyril's writings - truly numerous and already widely disseminated in various Latin and Eastern translations in his own lifetime, attested to by their instant success - are of the utmost importance for the history of Christianity. His commentaries on many of the New and Old Testament Books are important, including those on the entire Pentateuch, Isaiah, the Psalms and the Gospels of John and Luke. Also important are his many doctrinal works, in which the defence of the Trinitarian faith against the Arian and Nestorian theses recurs. The basis of Cyril's teaching is the ecclesiastical tradition and in particular, as I mentioned, the writings of Athanasius, his great Predecessor in the See of Alexandria. Among Cyril's other writings, the books *Against Julian* deserve mention. They were the last great response to the anti-Christian controversies, probably dictated by the Bishop of Alexandria in the last years of his life to respond to the work *Against the Galileans*, composed many years earlier in 363 by the Emperor known as the "Apostate" for having abandoned the Christianity in which he was raised.

The Christian faith is first and foremost the encounter with Jesus, "a Person, which gives life a new horizon" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1). St Cyril of Alexandria was an unflagging, staunch witness of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, emphasizing above all his unity, as he repeats in 433 in his first letter (PG 77, 228-237) to Bishop Succensus: "Only one is the Son, only one the Lord Jesus Christ, both before the Incarnation and after the Incarnation. Indeed, the *Logos* born of God the Father was not one Son and the one born of the Blessed Virgin another; but we believe that the very One who was born before the ages was also born according to the flesh and of a woman". Over and above its doctrinal meaning, this assertion shows that faith in Jesus the *Logos* born of the Father is firmly rooted in history because, as St Cyril affirms, this same Jesus came in time with his birth from Mary, the *Theotò-kos*, and in accordance with his promise will always be

with us. And this is important: God is eternal, he is born of a woman, and he stays with us every day. In this trust we live, in this trust we find the way for our life.

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I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from Australia, Denmark, Scotland and the United States. In a special way I greet the Maryknoll Missionaries, the priests from the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, the students from the Pontifical Beda College and Deacon Candidates from the Pontifical North American College. May God continue to strengthen you as you strive to serve his people. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings of joy and peace.

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