



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 14 November 2007

Saint Jerome (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we continue the presentation of the figure of St Jerome. As we said last Wednesday, he dedicated his life to studying the Bible, so much so that he was recognized by my Predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, as "*an outstanding doctor in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture*". Jerome emphasized the joy and importance of being familiar with biblical texts: "*Does one not seem to dwell, already here on earth, in the Kingdom of Heaven when one lives with these texts, when one meditates on them, when one does not know or seek anything else?*" (*Ep.* 53, 10). In reality, to dialogue with God, with his Word, is in a certain sense a presence of Heaven, a presence of God. To draw near to the biblical texts, above all the New Testament, is essential for the believer, because "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ". This is his famous phrase, cited also by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* (n. 25).

Truly "in love" with the Word of God, he asked himself: "How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, through which one learns to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?" (*Ep.* 30, 7). The Bible, an instrument "by which God speaks every day to the faithful" (*Ep.* 133, 13), thus becomes a stimulus and source of Christian life for all situations and for each person. To read Scripture is to converse with God: "If you pray", he writes to a young Roman noblewoman, "you speak with the Spouse; if you read, it is he who speaks to you" (*Ep.* 22, 25). The study of and meditation on Scripture renders man wise and serene (cf. *In Eph.*, Prol.). Certainly, to penetrate the Word of God ever more profoundly, a constant and progressive application is needed. Hence, Jerome recommends to the priest Nepotian: "Read the divine Scriptures frequently; rather, may your hands never set the Holy Book down. Learn here what you must teach" (*Ep.* 52, 7). To the

Roman matron Leta he gave this counsel for the Christian education of her daughter: "Ensure that each day she studies some Scripture passage.... After prayer, reading should follow, and after reading, prayer.... Instead of jewels and silk clothing, may she love the divine Books" (*Ep.* 107, 9, 12). Through meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures, one "maintains the equilibrium of the soul" (*Ad Eph.*, Prol.). Only a profound spirit of prayer and the Holy Spirit's help can introduce us to understanding the Bible: "In the interpretation of Sacred Scripture we always need the help of the Holy Spirit" (*In Mich.* 1, 1, 10, 15).

A passionate love for Scripture therefore pervaded Jerome's whole life, a love that he always sought to deepen in the faithful, too. He recommends to one of his spiritual daughters: "Love Sacred Scripture and wisdom will love you; love it tenderly, and it will protect you; honour it and you will receive its caresses. May it be for you as your necklaces and your earrings" (*Ep.* 130, 20). And again: "Love the science of Scripture, and you will not love the vices of the flesh" (*Ep.* 125, 11).

For Jerome, a fundamental criterion of the method for interpreting the Scriptures was harmony with the Church's Magisterium. We should never read Scripture alone because we meet too many closed doors and could easily slip into error. The Bible has been written by the People of God and for the People of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Only in this communion with the People of God do we truly enter into the "we", into the nucleus of the truth that God himself wants to tell us. For him, an authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmonious accord with the faith of the Catholic Church. It is not a question of an exegesis imposed on this Book from without; the Book is really the voice of the pilgrim People of God and only in the faith of this People are we "correctly attuned" to understand Sacred Scripture. Therefore, Jerome admonishes: "Remain firmly attached to the traditional doctrine that you have been taught, so that you can preach according to right doctrine and refute those who contradict it" (*Ep.* 52, 7). In particular, given that Jesus Christ founded his Church on Peter, every Christian, he concludes, must be in communion "with St Peter's See. I know that on this rock the Church is built" (*Ep.* 15, 2). Consequently, without equivocation, he declared: "I am with whoever is united to the teaching of St Peter" (*Ep.* 16).

Obviously, Jerome does not neglect the ethical aspect. Indeed, he often recalls the duty to harmonize one's life with the divine Word, and only by living it does one also find the capacity to understand it. This consistency is indispensable for every Christian, and particularly for the preacher, so that his actions may never contradict his discourses nor be an embarrassment to him. Thus, he exhorts the priest Nepotian: "May your actions never be unworthy of your words, may it not happen that, when you preach in church, someone might say to himself: 'Why does he therefore not act like this?'. How could a teacher, on a full stomach, discuss fasting; even a thief can blame avarice; but in the priest of Christ the mind and words must harmonize" (*Ep.* 52, 7). In another Epistle Jerome repeats: "Even if we possess a splendid doctrine, the person who feels condemned by his own conscience remains disgraced" (*Ep.* 127, 4). Also on the theme of

consistency he observes: the Gospel must translate into truly charitable behaviour, because in each human being the Person of Christ himself is present. For example, addressing the presbyter Paulinus (who then became Bishop of Nola and a Saint), Jerome counsels: "The true temple of Christ is the soul of the faithful: adorn it and beautify this shrine, place your offerings in it and receive Christ. What is the use of decorating the walls with precious stones if Christ dies of hunger in the person of the poor?" (*Ep.* 58, 7). Jerome concretizes the need "to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit him in the suffering, to nourish him in the hungry, to house him in the homeless" (*Ep.* 130, 14). The love of Christ, nourished with study and meditation, makes us rise above every difficulty: "Let us also love Jesus Christ, always seeking union with him: then even what is difficult will seem easy to us" (*Ep.* 22, 40).

Prosper of Aquitaine, who defined Jerome as a "model of conduct and teacher of the human race" (*Carmen de ingratis*, 57), also left us a rich and varied teaching on Christian asceticism. He reminds us that a courageous commitment towards perfection requires constant vigilance, frequent mortifications, even if with moderation and prudence, and assiduous intellectual and manual labour to avoid idleness (cf. *Epp.* 125, 11; 130, 15), and above all obedience to God: "Nothing... pleases God as much as obedience..., which is the most excellent and sole virtue" (*Hom. de Oboedientia: CCL* 78, 552). The practice of pilgrimage can also be part of the ascetical journey. In particular, Jerome promoted pilgrimages to the Holy Land, where pilgrims were welcomed and housed in the lodgings that were built next to the monastery of Bethlehem, thanks to the generosity of the noblewoman Paula, a spiritual daughter of Jerome (cf. *Ep.* 108, 14).

Lastly, one cannot remain silent about the importance that Jerome gave to the matter of Christian pedagogy (cf. *Epp.* 107; 128). He proposed to form "one soul that must become the temple of the Lord" (*Ep.* 107, 4), a "very precious gem" in the eyes of God (*Ep.* 107, 13). With profound intuition he advises to preserve oneself from evil and from the occasions of sin, and to exclude equivocal or dissipating friendships (cf. *Ep.* 107, 4, 8-9; also *Ep.* 128, 3-4). Above all, he exhorts parents to create a serene and joyful environment around their children, to stimulate them to study and work also through praise and emulation (cf. *Epp.* 107, 4; 128, 1), encouraging them to overcome difficulties, foster good habits and avoid picking up bad habits, so that, and here he cites a phrase of Publius Siro which he heard at school: "it will be difficult for you to correct those things to which you are quietly habituating yourself" (*Ep.* 107, 8). Parents are the principal educators of their children, the first teachers of life. With great clarity Jerome, addressing a young girl's mother and then mentioning her father, admonishes, almost expressing a fundamental duty of every human creature who comes into existence: "May she find in you her teacher, and may she look to you with the inexperienced wonder of childhood. Neither in you, nor in her father should she ever see behaviour that could lead to sin, as it could be copied. Remember that... you can educate her more by example than with words" (*Ep.* 107, 9). Among Jerome's principal intuitions as a pedagogue, one must emphasize the importance he attributed to a healthy and integral education beginning from early childhood, the particular responsibility belonging to parents, the urgency of a serious moral and religious formation and the duty to study for a more complete human formation.

Moreover, an aspect rather disregarded in ancient times but held vital by our author is the promotion of the woman, to whom he recognizes the right to a complete formation: human, scholastic, religious, professional. We see precisely today how the education of the personality in its totality, the education to responsibility before God and man, is the true condition of all progress, all peace, all reconciliation and the exclusion of violence. Education before God and man: it is Sacred Scripture that offers us the guide for education and thus of true humanism.

We cannot conclude these quick notes on the great Father of the Church without mentioning his effective contribution to safeguarding the positive and valid elements of the ancient Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures for nascent Christian civilization. Jerome recognized and assimilated the artistic values of the richness of the sentiments and the harmony of the images present in the classics, which educate the heart and fantasy to noble sentiments. Above all, he put at the centre of his life and activity the Word of God, which indicates the path of life to man and reveals the secrets of holiness to him. We cannot fail to be deeply grateful for all of this, even in our day.

To special groups

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Denmark, Japan, Canada and the United States of America. I greet especially the Sisters of St Anne of Tiruchirapalli, who are preparing to celebrate the 150th anniversary of their foundation. Upon all of you I cordially invoke an abundance of joy and peace in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

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