



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 21 November 2007

Aphraates, "the Sage"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our excursion into the world of the Fathers of the Church, I would like to guide you today to a little-known part of this universe of faith, in the territories where the Semitic-language Churches flourished, still uninfluenced by Greek thought. These Churches developed throughout the fourth century in the Near East, from the Holy Land to Lebanon and to Mesopotamia. In that century, which was a period of formation on the ecclesial and literary level, these communities contributed to the ascetic-monastic phenomenon with autochthonous characteristics that did not come under Egyptian monastic influence. The Syriac communities of the fourth century, therefore, represent the Semitic world from which the Bible itself has come, and they are an expression of a Christianity whose theological formulation had not yet entered into contact with different cultural currents, but lived in their own way of thinking. They are Churches in which asceticism in its various hermitic forms (hermits in the desert, caverns, recluses, stylites) and monasticism in forms of community life, exert a role of vital importance in the development of theological and spiritual thought.

I would like to introduce this world through the great figure of Aphraates, known also by the sobriquet "the Sage". He was one of the most important and at the same time most enigmatic personages of fourth century Syriac Christianity. A native of the Ninive-Mossul region, today in Iraq, he lived during the first half of the fourth century. We have little information about his life; he maintained, however, close ties with the ascetic-monastic environment of the Syriac-speaking Church, of which he has given us some information in his work and to which he dedicates part of

his reflection. Indeed, according to some sources he was the head of a monastery and later consecrated a Bishop. He wrote 23 homilies, known as *Expositions* or *Demonstrations*, on various aspects of Christian life, such as faith, love, fasting, humility, prayer, the ascetic life, and also the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, between the Old and New Testaments. He wrote in a simple style with short sentences and sometimes with contrasting parallelisms; nevertheless, he was able to weave consistent discourses with a well-articulated development of the various arguments he treated.

Aphraates was from an Ecclesial Community situated on the frontier between Judaism and Christianity. It was a community strongly-linked to the Mother Church of Jerusalem, and its Bishops were traditionally chosen from among the so-called "family" of James, the "brother of the Lord" (cf. Mk 6: 3). They were people linked by blood and by faith to the Church of Jerusalem. Aphraates' language was Syriac, therefore a Semitic language like the Hebrew of the Old Testament and like the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself. Aphraates' Ecclesial Community was a community that sought to remain faithful to the Judeo-Christian tradition, of which it felt it was a daughter. It therefore maintained a close relationship with the Jewish world and its Sacred Books. Significantly, Aphraates defines himself as a "disciple of the Sacred Scripture" of the Old and New Testaments (*Expositions* 22, 26), which he considers as his only source of inspiration, having recourse to it in such abundance as to make it the centre of his reflection.

Aphraates develops various arguments in his *Expositions*. Faithful to Syriac tradition, he often presents the salvation wrought by Christ as a healing, and thus Christ himself as the physician. Sin, on the other hand, is seen as a wound that only penance can heal: "A man who has been wounded in battle", Aphraates said, "is not ashamed to place himself in the hands of a wise doctor...; in the same way, the one who has been wounded by Satan must not be ashamed to recognize his fault and distance himself from it, asking for the medicine of penance" (*Expositions* 7, 3). Another important aspect in Aphraates' work is his teaching on prayer, and in a special way on Christ as the teacher of prayer. The Christian prays following Jesus' teaching and example of oration: "Our Saviour taught people to pray like this, saying: "Pray in secret to the One who is hidden, but who sees all"; and again: "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Mt 6: 6).... Our Saviour wants to show that God knows the desires and thoughts of the heart" (*Expositions* 4, 10).

For Aphraates, the Christian life is centred on the imitation of Christ, in taking up his yoke and following him on the way of the Gospel. One of the most useful virtues for Christ's disciple is humility. It is not a secondary aspect in the Christian's spiritual life: man's nature is humble and it is God who exalts it to his own glory. Aphraates observed that humility is not a negative value: "If man's roots are planted in the earth, his fruits ascend before the Lord of majesty" (*Expositions* 9, 14). By remaining humble in the earthly reality in which one lives, the Christian can enter into relationship with the Lord: "The humble man is humble, but his heart rises to lofty heights. The eyes of his face observe the earth and the eyes of his mind the lofty heights" (*Expositions* 9, 2).

Aphraates' vision of man and his physical reality is very positive: the human body, in the example of the humble Christ, is called to beauty, joy and light: "God draws near to the man who loves, and it is right to love humility and to remain in a humble state. The humble are simple, patient, loving, integral, upright, good, prudent, calm, wise, quiet, peaceful, merciful, ready to convert, benevolent, profound, thoughtful, beautiful and attractive" (*Expositions* 9, 14). Aphraates often presented the Christian life in a clear ascetic and spiritual dimension: faith is the base, the foundation; it makes of man a temple where Christ himself dwells. Faith, therefore, makes sincere charity possible, which expresses itself in love for God and neighbour. Another important aspect in Aphraates' thought is fasting, which he understood in a broad sense. He spoke of fasting from food as a necessary practice to be charitable and pure, of fasting understood as continence with a view to holiness, of fasting from vain or detestable words, of fasting from anger, of fasting from the possession of goods with a view to ministry, of fasting from sleep to be watchful in prayer.

Dear brothers and sisters, to conclude, we return again to Aphraates' teaching on prayer. According to this ancient "Sage", prayer is achieved when Christ dwells in the Christian's heart, and invites him to a coherent commitment to charity towards one's neighbour. In fact, he wrote:

"Give relief to those in distress, visit the ailing,
help the poor: this is prayer.

Prayer is good, and its works are beautiful.

Prayer is accepted when it gives relief to one's neighbour.

Prayer is heard when it includes forgiveness of affronts.

Prayer is strong

when it is full of God's strength" (*Expositions* 4, 14-16).

With these words Aphraates invites us to a prayer that becomes Christian life, a fulfilled life, a life penetrated by faith, by openness to God and therefore to love of neighbour.

To special groups

To all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors I extend a warm welcome. In a special way I greet Senior Staff members of the USS Harry S. Truman, diaconate candidates from the Diocese of Brownsville and members of the All-American Star Dance Team. May your visit to Rome be a time of growth and renewal. Upon all of you I cordially invoke an abundance of joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly, I greet the *youth*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. This Sunday, the last of Ordinary Time, we will celebrate the Solemnity of Christ, King of the Universe. Dear *young people*, put Jesus at the centre of your life. May Christ, who has made his Cross a royal throne, teach you, dear *sick people*, to comprehend the redemptive value of suffering lived in union with him. I invite you, dear *newly-weds*, to place Jesus at the centre of your matrimonial journey.

APPEAL

Distressing news is being reported about the precarious humanitarian situation in Somalia, especially in Mogadishu, ever more gravely afflicted by social insecurity and poverty. I am anxiously watching the evolution of events and I appeal to those who have political responsibility on the local and the international levels to find peaceful solutions and to bring relief to that beloved population. In addition, I encourage the efforts of those who, even amid insecurity and discomfort, remain in that region in order to bring help and relief to the inhabitants.

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