



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 12 December 2007

Saint Paulinus of Nola

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Father of the Church to whom we turn our attention today is St Paulinus of Nola. Paulinus, a contemporary of St Augustine to whom he was bound by a firm friendship, exercised his ministry at Nola in Campania, where he was a monk and later a priest and a Bishop. However, he was originally from Aquitaine in the South of France, to be precise, Bordeaux, where he was born into a high-ranking family. It was here, with the poet Ausonius as his teacher, that he received a fine literary education. He left his native region for the first time to follow his precocious political career, which was to see him rise while still young to the position of Governor of Campania. In this public office he attracted admiration for his gifts of wisdom and gentleness. It was during this period that grace caused the seed of conversion to grow in his heart. The incentive came from the simple and intense faith with which the people honoured the tomb of a saint, Felix the Martyr, at the Shrine of present-day Cimitile. As the head of public government, Paulinus took an interest in this Shrine and had a hospice for the poor built and a road to facilitate access to it for the many pilgrims.

While he was doing his best to build the city on earth, he continued discovering the way to the city in Heaven. The encounter with Christ was the destination of a laborious journey, strewn with ordeals. Difficult circumstances which resulted from his loss of favour with the political Authorities made the transience of things tangible to him. Once he had arrived at faith, he was to write: "*The man without Christ is dust and shadow*" (*Carm.* X, 289). Anxious to shed light on the meaning of life, he went to Milan to attend the school of Ambrose. He then completed his Christian formation

in his native land, where he was baptized by Bishop Delphinus of Bordeaux. Marriage was also a landmark on his journey of faith. Indeed, he married Therasia, a devout noblewoman from Barcelona, with whom he had a son. He would have continued to live as a good lay Christian had not the infant's death after only a few days intervened to rouse him, showing him that God had other plans for his life. Indeed, he felt called to consecrate himself to Christ in a rigorous ascetic life.

In full agreement with his wife Therasia, he sold his possessions for the benefit of the poor and, with her, left Aquitaine for Nola. Here, the husband and wife settled beside the Basilica of the Patron Saint, Felix, living henceforth in chaste brotherhood according to a form of life which also attracted others. The community's routine was typically monastic, but Paulinus, who had been ordained a priest in Barcelona, took it upon himself despite his priestly status to care for pilgrims. This won him the liking and trust of the Christian community, which chose Paulinus, upon the death of the Bishop in about 409, as his successor in the See of Nola. Paulinus intensified his pastoral activity, distinguished by special attention to the poor. He has bequeathed to us the image of an authentic Pastor of charity, as St Gregory the Great described him in chapter III of his *Dialogues*, in which he depicts Paulinus in the heroic gesture of offering himself as a prisoner in the place of a widow's son. The historical truth of this episode is disputed, but the figure of a Bishop with a great heart who knew how to make himself close to his people in the sorrowful trials of the barbarian invasions lives on.

Paulinus' conversion impressed his contemporaries. His teacher Ausonius, a pagan poet, felt "betrayed" and addressed bitter words to him, reproaching him on the one hand for his "contempt", considered insane, of material goods, and on the other, for abandoning his literary vocation. Paulinus replied that giving to the poor did not mean contempt for earthly possessions but rather an appreciation of them for the loftiest aim of charity. As for literary commitments, what Paulinus had taken leave of was not his poetic talent - which he was to continue to cultivate - but poetic forms inspired by mythology and pagan ideals. A new aesthetic now governed his sensibility: the beauty of God incarnate, crucified and risen, whose praises he now sang. Actually, he had not abandoned poetry but was henceforth to find his inspiration in the Gospel, as he says in this verse: "To my mind the only art is the faith, and Christ is my poetry" (*At nobis ars una fides, et musica Christus: Carm., XX, 32*).

Paulinus' poems are songs of faith and love in which the daily history of small and great events is seen as a history of salvation, a history of God with us. Many of these compositions, the so-called *Carmina natalicia*, are linked to the annual feast of Felix the Martyr, whom he had chosen as his heavenly Patron. Remembering St Felix, Paulinus desired to glorify Christ himself, convinced as he was that the Saint's intercession had obtained the grace of conversion for him: "In your light, joyful, I loved Christ" (*Carm. XXI, 373*). He desired to express this very concept by enlarging the Shrine with a new basilica, which he had decorated in such a way that the paintings, described by suitable captions, would constitute a visual catechesis for pilgrims. Thus, he explained his project

in a Poem dedicated to another great catechist, St Nicetas of Remesiana, as he accompanied him on a visit to his basilicas: "I now want you to contemplate the paintings that unfold in a long series on the walls of the painted porticos.... It seemed to us useful to portray sacred themes in painting throughout the house of Felix, in the hope that when the peasants see the painted figure, these images will awaken interest in their astonished minds" (*Carm.* XXVII, vv. 511, 580-583). Today, it is still possible to admire the remains of these works which rightly place the Saint of Nola among the figures with a Christian archaeological reference.

Life in accordance with the ascetic discipline of Cimitile was spent in poverty and prayer and was wholly immersed in *lectio divina*. Scripture, read, meditated upon and assimilated, was the light in whose brightness the Saint of Nola examined his soul as he strove for perfection. He told those who were struck by his decision to give up material goods that this act was very far from representing total conversion. "The relinquishment or sale of temporal goods possessed in this world is not the completion but only the beginning of the race in the stadium; it is not, so to speak, the goal, but only the starting point. In fact, the athlete does not win because he strips himself, for he undresses precisely in order to begin the contest, whereas he only deserves to be crowned as victorious when he has fought properly" (cf. *Ep.* XXIV, 7 to Sulpicius Severus).

After the ascetic life and the Word of God came charity; the poor were at home in the monastic community. Paulinus did not limit himself to distributing alms to them: he welcomed them as though they were Christ himself. He reserved a part of the monastery for them and by so doing, it seemed to him that he was not so much giving as receiving, in the exchange of gifts between the hospitality offered and the prayerful gratitude of those assisted. He called the poor his "masters" (cf. *Ep.* XIII, 11 to Pammachius) and, remarking that they were housed on the lower floor, liked to say that their prayers constituted the foundations of his house (cf. *Carm.* XXI, 393-394).

St Paulinus did not write theological treatises, but his poems and ample correspondence are rich in a lived theology, woven from God's Word, constantly examined as a light for life. The sense of the Church as a mystery of unity emerges in particular from them. Paulinus lived communion above all through a pronounced practice of spiritual friendship. He was truly a master in this, making his life a crossroads of elect spirits: from Martin of Tours to Jerome, from Ambrose to Augustine, from Delphinus of Bordeaux to Nicetas of Remesiana, from Victricius of Rouen to Rufinus of Aquileia, from Pammachius to Sulpicius Severus and many others, more or less well known. It was in this atmosphere that the intense pages written to Augustine came into being. Over and above the content of the individual letters, one is impressed by the warmth with which the Saint of Nola sings of friendship itself as a manifestation of the one Body of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Here is an important passage that comes at the beginning of the correspondence between the two friends: "It is not surprising if, despite being far apart, we are present to each other and, without being acquainted, know each other, because we are members of one body, we have one head, we are steeped in one grace, we live on one loaf, we walk on one road and we dwell in the same house" (*Ep.* VI, 2). As can be seen, this is a very beautiful

description of what it means to be Christian, to be the Body of Christ, to live within the Church's communion. The theology of our time has found the key to approaching the mystery of the Church precisely in the concept of communion. The witness of St Paulinus of Nola helps us to perceive the Church, as she is presented to us by the Second Vatican Council, as a sacrament of intimate union with God, hence, of unity among all of us and, lastly, among the whole human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). In this perspective I wish you all a happy Advent Season.

To special groups

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially the newly professed Missionaries of Charity. In this Advent season, may your hearts be filled with hope as you prepare for the coming of our Saviour. Upon all of you, and upon those who have travelled here from Sweden, Malta, Australia, Singapore, Canada and the United States, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. I hope that you, dear *young people*, will dispose your hearts to welcome Jesus, who saves us with the power of his love. Dear *sick people*, who in your illness experience the weight of the cross even more, may the forthcoming Christmas festivities bring you serenity and comfort. And dear *newly-weds* who have recently formed your family, may you grow increasingly in that love which Jesus came to give us in his Nativity.

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