



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*St Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 14 May 2008*

***Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the course of the Catechesis on the Fathers of the Church, today I would like to speak of a rather mysterious figure: a sixth-century theologian whose name is unknown and who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite. With this pseudonym he was alluding to the passage of Scripture we have just heard, the event recounted by St Luke in chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles where he tells how Paul preached in Athens at the Areopagus to an elite group of the important Greek intellectual world. In the end, the majority of his listeners proved not to be interested and went away jeering at him. Yet some, St Luke says a few, approached Paul and opened themselves to the faith. The Evangelist gives us two names: Dionysius a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris.

If five centuries later the author of these books chose the pseudonym "Dionysius the Areopagite", it means that his intention was to put Greek wisdom at the service of the Gospel, to foster the encounter of Greek culture and intelligence with the proclamation of Christ; he wanted to do what this Dionysius had intended, that is, to make Greek thought converge with St Paul's proclamation; being a Greek, he wanted to become a disciple of St Paul, hence a disciple of Christ.

Why did he hide his name and choose this pseudonym? One part of the answer I have already given: he wanted, precisely, to express this fundamental intention of his thought. But there are two hypotheses concerning this anonymity and pseudonym. The first hypothesis says that it was a

deliberate falsification by which, in dating his works back to the first century, to the time of St Paul, he wished to give his literary opus, a quasi apostolic authority. But there is another better hypothesis than this, which seems to me barely credible: namely that he himself desired to make an act of humility; he did not want to glorify his own name, he did not want to build a monument to himself with his work but rather truly to serve the Gospel, to create an ecclesial theology, neither individual nor based on himself. Actually, he succeeded in elaborating a theology which, of course, we can date to the sixth century but cannot attribute to any of the figures of that period: it is a somewhat "de-individualized" theology, that is, a theology which expresses a common thought and language. It was a period of fierce polemics following the Council of Chalcedon; indeed he said in his *Seventh Epistle*: "I do not wish to spark polemics; I simply speak of the truth, I seek the truth". And the light of truth by itself causes errors to fall away and makes what is good shine forth. And with this principle he purified Greek thought and related it to the Gospel. This principle, which he affirms in his seventh letter, is also the expression of a true spirit of dialogue: it is not about seeking the things that separate, but seeking the truth in Truth itself. This then radiates and causes errors to fade away.

Therefore, although this author's theology is, so to speak, "supra-personal", truly ecclesial, we can place it in the sixth century. Why? The Greek spirit, which he placed at the service of the Gospel, he encountered in the books of Proclus, who died in Athens in 485. This author belonged to late Platonism, a current of thought which had transformed Plato's philosophy into a sort of religion, whose ultimate purpose was to create a great apologetic for Greek polytheism and return, following Christianity's success, to the ancient Greek religion. He wanted to demonstrate that in reality, the divinities were the active forces in the cosmos. The consequence to be drawn from this was that polytheism must be considered truer than monotheism with its single Creator God. What Proclus was demonstrating was a great cosmic system of divinity, of mysterious forces, through which, in this deified cosmos, man could find access to the divinity. However, he made a distinction between paths for the simple, who were incapable of rising to the heights of truth - certain rites could suffice for them - and paths for the wise who were to purify themselves to arrive at the pure light.

As can be seen, this thought is profoundly anti-Christian. It is a late reaction to the triumph of Christianity, an anti-Christian use of Plato, whereas a Christian interpretation of the great philosopher was already in course. It is interesting that this Pseudo-Dionysius dared to avail himself of this very thought to demonstrate the truth of Christ; to transform this polytheistic universe into a cosmos created by God, into the harmony of God's cosmos, where every force is praise of God, and to show this great harmony, this symphony of the cosmos that goes from the Seraphim to the Angels and Archangels, to man and to all the creatures which, together, reflect God's beauty and are praise of God. He thus transformed the polytheistic image into a praise of the Creator and his creature. In this way we can discover the essential characteristics of his thought: first and foremost, it is cosmic praise. All Creation speaks of God and is praise of God. Since the creature is praise of God, Pseudo-Dionysius' theology became a liturgical theology: God

is found above all in praising him, not only in reflection; and the liturgy is not something made by us, something invented in order to have a religious experience for a certain period of time; it is singing with the choir of creatures and entering into cosmic reality itself. And in this very way the liturgy, apparently only ecclesiastical, becomes expansive and great, it becomes our union with the language of all creatures. He says: God cannot be spoken of in an abstract way; speaking of God is always - he says using a Greek word - a "*hymnein*", singing for God with the great hymn of the creatures which is reflected and made concrete in liturgical praise. Yet, although his theology is cosmic, ecclesial and liturgical, it is also profoundly personal. He created the first great mystical theology. Indeed, with him the word "mystic" acquires a new meaning. Until then for Christians such a word was equivalent to the word "sacramental", that is, what pertains to the "*mysterion*", to the sacrament. With him the word "mystic" becomes more personal, more intimate: it expresses the soul's journey toward God. And how can God be found? Here we note once again an important element in his dialogue between Greek philosophy and Christianity, and, in particular biblical faith. Apparently what Plato says and what the great philosophy on God says is far loftier, far truer; the Bible appears somewhat "barbaric", simple or pre-critical one might say today; but he remarks that precisely this is necessary, so that in this way we can understand that the loftiest concepts on God never reach his true grandeur: they always fall short of it. In fact these images enable us to understand that God is above every concept; in the simplicity of the images we find more truth than in great concepts. The Face of God is our inability to express truly what he is. In this way one speaks - and Pseudo-Dionysius himself speaks - of a "negative theology". It is easier for us to say what God is not rather than to say what he truly is. Only through these images can we intuit his true Face, moreover this Face of God is very concrete: it is Jesus Christ.

And although Dionysius shows us, following Proclus, the harmony of the heavenly choirs in such a way that it seems that they all depend on one another, it is true that on our journey toward God we are still very far from him. Pseudo-Dionysius shows that in the end the journey to God is God himself, who makes himself close to us in Jesus Christ. Thus, a great and mysterious theology also becomes very concrete, both in the interpretation of the liturgy and in the discourse on Jesus Christ: with all this, Dionysius the Areopagite exerted a strong influence on all medieval theology and on all mystical theology, both in the East and in the West. He was virtually rediscovered in the 13th century, especially by St Bonaventure, the great Franciscan theologian who in this mystical theology found the conceptual instrument for reinterpreting the heritage - so simple and profound - of St Francis. Together with Dionysius, the "Poverello" tells us that in the end love sees more than reason. Where the light of love shines the shadows of reason are dispelled; love sees, love is an eye and experience gives us more than reflection. Bonaventure saw in St Francis what this experience is: it is the experience of a very humble, very realistic journey, day by day, it is walking with Christ, accepting his Cross. In this poverty and in this humility, in the humility that is also lived in ecclesiality, is an experience of God which is loftier than that attained by reflection. In it we really touch God's Heart.

Today Dionysius the Areopagite has a new relevance: he appears as a great mediator in the

modern dialogue between Christianity and the mystical theologies of Asia, whose characteristic feature is the conviction that it is impossible to say who God is, that only indirect things can be said about him; that God can only be spoken of with the "not", and that it is only possible to reach him by entering into this indirect experience of "not". And here a similarity can be seen between the thought of the Areopagite and that of Asian religions; he can be a mediator today as he was between the Greek spirit and the Gospel.

In this context it can be seen that dialogue does not accept superficiality. It is precisely when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ that an ample space for dialogue also opens. When one encounters the light of truth, one realizes that it is a light for everyone; polemics disappear and it is possible to understand one another, or at least to speak to one another, to come closer. The path of dialogue consists precisely in being close to God in Christ, in a deep encounter with him, in the experience of the truth which opens us to the light and helps us reach out to others - with the light of truth, the light of love. And in the end, he tells us: take the path of experience, the humble experience of faith, every day. Then the heart is enlarged and can see and also illumine reason so that it perceives God's beauty. Let us pray to the Lord to help us today too to place the wisdom of our day at the service of the Gospel, discovering ever anew the beauty of faith, the encounter with God in Christ.

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### **Appeal for the People of China**

My thoughts turn at this moment to the populations of Sichuan and the neighbouring Provinces in China, severely hit by the earthquake that has taken a heavy toll of human life with thousands missing and caused inestimable damage. I invite you to join me in fervent prayer for all those who have lost their lives. I am spiritually close to the people sorely tried by such a devastating calamity. Let us implore God for relief for the suffering. May the Lord sustain all the rescue workers involved in responding to the immediate needs.

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I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present today, including the groups from England, Ireland, Japan, The Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States of America. May your visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings of joy and peace.

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