



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 21 May 2008*

Saint Romanus the Melodist

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the series of Catecheses on the Fathers of the Church, I would like today to talk about a little-known figure: Romanus the Melodist who was born in about 490 in Emesa (today Homs), in Syria. Theologian, poet and composer, he belonged to the great ranks of theologians who transformed theology into poetry. Let us think of his compatriot, St Ephrem the Syrian, who lived 200 years before him. However, we can also think of Western theologians, such as St Ambrose, whose hymns are still part of our liturgy and still move hearts; or of a theologian, a very vigorous thinker such as St Thomas, who gave us hymns for the *Feast of Corpus Christi* [to be celebrated] tomorrow; we think of St John of the Cross and of so many others. Faith is love and therefore creates poetry and music. Faith is joy, therefore it creates beauty.

Thus Romanus the Melodist is one of these, a poet theologian and composer. Having acquired the rudiments of Greek and Syrian culture in his native town, he moved to Berytus (Beirut), perfecting there his classical education and his knowledge of rhetoric. After being ordained a permanent deacon (c. 515), he was a preacher here for three years. He then moved to Constantinople towards the end of the reign of Anastasius I (c. 518), and settled there in the monastery adjacent to the Church of the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. It was here that the key episode of his life occurred: the *Synaxarion* [The Lives of the Orthodox Saints] informs us of the apparition of the Mother of God in a dream, and of the gift of the poetic charism. In fact, Mary enjoined him to swallow a scroll. On awakening the following morning - it was the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord - Romanus began declaiming from the ambo "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent" (Hymn "*On the Nativity*" I. *Proemio*). So it was that he became a homilist-cantor until his death

(after 555).

Romanus lives on in history as one of the most representative authors of liturgical hymns. At that time the homily was virtually the only opportunity for catechetical instruction afforded to the faithful. Thus, Romanus is an eminent witness of the religious feeling of his epoch, but also of a lively and original catechesis. In his compositions we can appreciate the creativity of this form of catechesis, the creativity of the theological thought and aesthetics and sacred hymnography of that time. The place in which Romanus preached was a sanctuary on the outskirts of Constantinople: he would mount the ambo that stood in the centre of the church and speak to the community utilizing a somewhat extravagant technique: he referred to the mural depictions or icons arranged on the ambo, and even made use of dialogue. He sung his homilies in metric verse known as *kontakia*. The term *kontakion*, "little rod", would seem to refer to the staff around which a liturgical or other manuscript was wound. Eighty-nine kontakia bearing Romanus' name have come down to us but tradition attributes 1,000 to him.

In the works of Romanus every *kontakion* is composed of strophes, the majority of which go from 18 to 24, with an equal number of syllables, structured on the model of the first strophe, the *irmo*. The rhythmic accents in the verses of all the strophes are modelled on those of the *irmo*. Each strophe ends with a refrain (*efimnio*), which is usually identical in order to create poetic unity. Furthermore, the initial letter of each stanza spell the author's name (*acrostic*), and are often preceded by the adjective "humble". A prayer referring to the events celebrated or evoked concludes the hymn. After the biblical reading, Romanus sung the *Proemium*, usually in the form of a prayer or supplication. Thus he announced the topic of the sermon and explained the *refrain* to be repeated in chorus at the end of each stanza, which he delivered in rhythmic prose.

An important example is offered to us by the *kontakion* for Good Friday: it is a dramatic dialogue between Mary and her Son that takes place on the Way of the Cross. Mary says: "Where are you going, my Child? For whose sake are you finishing this swift race? I never thought I would see you, my Son, in such necessity nor did I ever believe that the lawless would rage so, and unjustly stretch out their hands against you"; Jesus answers: "Why, mother, do you weep?... Lest I suffer? Lest I die? How then should I save Adam?". Mary's Son consoles his Mother, but reminds her of her role in the history of salvation: "Put aside your grief, mother, put it aside; mourning is not right for you

who have been called 'Full of Grace' (*Mary at the foot of the Cross*, 1-2; 4-5). Then in the hymn on Abraham's sacrifice, Sarah claims for herself the decision on Isaac's life. Abraham says: "When Sarah hears, my Lord, all your words, upon knowing your will, she will say to me: If the one who has given it desires to repossess it why did he give it? O watchful one, leave me my son, and when he who called you wants him, it is to me that he must speak" (cf. *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, 7).

Romanus did not use the solemn Byzantine Greek of the Imperial Court, but the simple Greek that

was close to the language of the populous. I would like to cite here an example of the lively and highly personal manner in which he speaks about the Lord Jesus: he calls him the "source that is never consumed by fire and the light against the darkness", and says: "I long to hold you in my hand like a lamp; indeed, anyone who carries an oil lamp among men and women is illuminated without being burned. Illuminate me, then, You who are the light that never burns out" (*The Presentation or Feast of Encounter*, 8). The force of conviction in his preaching was based on the close consistency between his words and his life. In one prayer he says: "Make my language clear, my Saviour, open my mouth and, after filling it, penetrate my heart so that my acts may correspond to my words" (*Mission of the Apostles*, 2).

Let us now examine some of his main themes. A fundamental subject that recurs in his preaching is the unity of God's action in history, the unity between Creation and the history of salvation, the unity between the Old and New Testaments. Another important theme is pneumatology, the teaching on the Holy Spirit. On the Feast of Pentecost Romanus stressed the continuity that exists between Christ, ascended into heaven, and the Apostles, that is, the Church, and he exalts missionary action in the world: "With divine virtue they conquered all men; they took up the Cross of Christ as a pen, they used words like 'fishing nets' and set them to 'catch' the world, they used the Word of God as a sharp hook and as bait they used the flesh of the Sovereign One of the universe" (*Pentecost 2*: 18).

Another central theme is, of course, Christology. Romanus did not involve himself in the difficult theological concepts, hotly debated at that time which lacerated not only the unity of theologians but also the unity of Christians in the Church. He preached a simple but fundamental Christology, the Christology of the great Councils. Above all, however, Romanus was close to popular piety - moreover the ideas of the Councils were inspired by popular piety and knowledge of the human heart - and in this way Romanus emphasized that Christ is true man and true God, and in being the true man-God, he is only one Person, the synthesis between Creation and the Creator, in whose human words we hear the voice of the Word of God himself. He said: "Christ was a man, but he was also God, yet he was not divided in two: He is One, the Son of a Father who is One alone" (*The Passion*, 19). With regard to Mariology, grateful to the Virgin for his gift of a poetic talent, Romanus mentions her at the end of almost all his hymns and dedicated to her some of his most beautiful *kontakia*: *The Nativity of Christ*, *The Annunciation*, *The Divine Motherhood*, *The New Eve*.

Lastly, his moral teachings refer to the Last Judgement (*The Ten Virgins*, [II]). He takes us towards this moment of truth in our lives, the appearance before the just Judge, and therefore exhorts us to conversion with penance and fasting. The positive aspect is that the Christian must practice charity and almsgiving. Romanus accentuated the primacy of charity over continence in two hymns - *The Wedding at Cana* and *The Ten Virgins*.

Charity is the greatest of the virtues: "Ten virgins possessed the virtue of virginity intact but for five of them the difficult practice proved unfruitful. The others shone with their lamps of love for humanity and for this reason the bridegroom invited them in" (*The Ten Virgins*, 1). Vibrant humanity, the ardour of faith and profound humility pervade the hymns of Romanus the Melodist. This great poet and composer reminds us of the whole treasure of Christian culture, born of faith, born of the heart that has encountered Christ, the Son of God. Culture, the whole of our great Christian culture, is born from this contact of the heart with the Truth who is Love. Nor, if faith stays alive, will this cultural inheritance die; rather, it will remain alive and present. To this day, images still speak to the hearts of believers, they are not relics of the past. Cathedrals are not mediaeval monuments but rather houses of life in which we feel "at home" and where we meet God and one another. Nor is great music - Gregorian chant, Bach or Mozart - something of the past; rather, it lives on in the vitality of the liturgy and in our faith. If faith is alive, Christian culture can never become "obsolete" but on the contrary will remain alive and present. And if faith is alive, today too we can respond to the imperative that is ceaselessly repeated in the Psalms: "O Sing to the Lord a new song" (Ps 98[97]: 1). Creativity, innovation, a new song, a new culture and the presence of the entire cultural heritage are not mutually exclusive but form one reality: they are the presence of God's beauty and the joy of being his children.

To special groups

I offer a warm greeting to the delegation from the Allied Joint Force Command, Naples, together with the members of their families. Dear friends, may your cooperation in the service of peace contribute to a future of hope for coming generations. I also welcome the seminarians from the Diocese of Richmond [U.S.A.] and the many student groups present. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Denmark, Nigeria, Australia and the United States, I cordially invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*, as I wish each one always to serve God in joy and to love his neighbour in the spirit of the Gospel.