



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 28 May 2008

Saint Gregory the Great (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday I spoke of a Father of the Church little known in the West, Romanus the Melodist. Today I would like to present the figure of one of the greatest Fathers in the history of the Church, one of four Doctors of the West, Pope St Gregory, who was Bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, and who earned the traditional title of *Magnus*/the Great. Gregory was truly a great Pope and a great Doctor of the Church! He was born in Rome about 540 into a rich patrician family of the *gens Anicia*, who were distinguished not only for their noble blood but also for their adherence to the Christian faith and for their service to the Apostolic See. Two Popes came from this family: Felix III (483-492), the great-great grandfather of Gregory, and Agapetus (535-536). The house in which Gregory grew up stood on the Clivus Scauri, surrounded by majestic buildings that attested to the greatness of ancient Rome and the spiritual strength of Christianity. The example of his parents Gordian and Sylvia, both venerated as Saints, and those of his father's sisters, Aemiliana and Tharsilla, who lived in their own home as consecrated virgins following a path of prayer and self-denial, inspired lofty Christian sentiments in him.

In the footsteps of his father, Gregory entered early into an administrative career which reached its climax in 572 when he became Prefect of the city. This office, complicated by the sorry times, allowed him to apply himself on a vast range to every type of administrative problem, drawing light for future duties from them. In particular, he retained a deep sense of order and discipline: having become Pope, he advised Bishops to take as a model for the management of ecclesial affairs the diligence and respect for the law like civil functionaries. Yet this life could not have satisfied him since shortly after, he decided to leave every civil assignment in order to withdraw to his home to begin the monastic life, transforming his family home into the monastery of St Andrew on the

Coelian Hill. This period of monastic life, the life of permanent dialogue with the Lord in listening to his word, constituted a perennial nostalgia which he referred to ever anew and ever more in his homilies. In the midst of the pressure of pastoral worries, he often recalled it in his writings as a happy time of recollection in God, dedication to prayer and peaceful immersion in study. Thus, he could acquire that deep understanding of Sacred Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church that later served him in his work.

But the cloistered withdrawal of Gregory did not last long. The precious experience that he gained in civil administration during a period marked by serious problems, the relationships he had had in this post with the Byzantines and the universal respect that he acquired induced Pope Pelagius to appoint him deacon and to send him to Constantinople as his "apocrisarius" - today one would say "Apostolic Nuncio" in order to help overcome the last traces of the Monophysite controversy and above all to obtain the Emperor's support in the effort to check the Lombard invaders. The stay at Constantinople, where he resumed monastic life with a group of monks, was very important for Gregory, since it permitted him to acquire direct experience of the Byzantine world, as well as to approach the problem of the Lombards, who would later put his ability and energy to the test during the years of his Pontificate. After some years he was recalled to Rome by the Pope, who appointed him his secretary. They were difficult years: the continual rain, flooding due to overflowing rivers, the famine that afflicted many regions of Italy as well as Rome. Finally, even the plague broke out, which claimed numerous victims, among whom was also Pope Pelagius II. The clergy, people and senate were unanimous in choosing Gregory as his successor to the See of Peter. He tried to resist, even attempting to flee, but to no avail: finally, he had to yield. The year was 590.

Recognising the will of God in what had happened, the new Pontiff immediately and enthusiastically set to work. From the beginning he showed a singularly enlightened vision of reality with which he had to deal, an extraordinary capacity for work confronting both ecclesial and civil affairs, a constant and even balance in making decisions, at times with courage, imposed on him by his office.

Abundant documentation has been preserved from his governance thanks to the Register of his Letters (approximately 800), reflecting the complex questions that arrived on his desk on a daily basis. They were questions that came from Bishops, Abbots, clergy and even from civil authorities of every order and rank. Among the problems that afflicted Italy and Rome at that time was one of special importance both in the civil and ecclesial spheres: the Lombard question. The Pope dedicated every possible energy to it in view of a truly peaceful solution. Contrary to the Byzantine Emperor who assumed that the Lombards were only uncouth individuals and predators to be defeated or exterminated, St Gregory saw this people with the eyes of a good pastor, and was concerned with proclaiming the word of salvation to them, establishing fraternal relationships with them in view of a future peace founded on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence between Italians, Imperials and Lombards. He was concerned with the conversion of the young people and the new civil structure of Europe: the Visigoths of Spain, the Franks, the Saxons, the immigrants in

Britain and the Lombards, were the privileged recipients of his evangelising mission. Yesterday we celebrated the liturgical memorial of St Augustine of Canterbury, the leader of a group of monks Gregory assigned to go to Britain to evangelise England.

The Pope - who was a true peacemaker - deeply committed himself to establish an effective peace in Rome and in Italy by undertaking intense negotiations with Agilulf, the Lombard King. This negotiation led to a period of truce that lasted for about three years (598-601), after which, in 603, it was possible to stipulate a more stable armistice. This positive result was obtained also thanks to the parallel contacts that, meanwhile, the Pope undertook with Queen Theodolinda, a Bavarian princess who, unlike the leaders of other Germanic peoples, was Catholic deeply Catholic. A series of Letters of Pope Gregory to this Queen has been preserved in which he reveals his respect and friendship for her. Theodolinda, little by little was able to guide the King to Catholicism, thus preparing the way to peace. The Pope also was careful to send her relics for the Basilica of St John the Baptist which she had had built in Monza, and did not fail to send his congratulations and precious gifts for the same Cathedral of Monza on the occasion of the birth and baptism of her son, Adaloald. The series of events concerning this Queen constitutes a beautiful testimony to the importance of women in the history of the Church. Gregory constantly focused on three basic objectives: to limit the Lombard expansion in Italy; to preserve Queen Theodolinda from the influence of schismatics and to strengthen the Catholic faith; and to mediate between the Lombards and the Byzantines in view of an accord that guaranteed peace in the peninsula and at the same time permitted the evangelisation of the Lombards themselves. Therefore, in the complex situation his scope was constantly twofold: to promote understanding on the diplomatic-political level and to spread the proclamation of the true faith among the peoples.

Along with his purely spiritual and pastoral action, Pope Gregory also became an active protagonist in multifaceted social activities. With the revenues from the Roman See's substantial patrimony in Italy, especially in Sicily, he bought and distributed grain, assisted those in need, helped priests, monks and nuns who lived in poverty, paid the ransom for citizens held captive by the Lombards and purchased armistices and truces. Moreover, whether in Rome or other parts of Italy, he carefully carried out the administrative reorganization, giving precise instructions so that the goods of the Church, useful for her sustenance and evangelising work in the world, were managed with absolute rectitude and according to the rules of justice and mercy. He demanded that the tenants on Church territory be protected from dishonest agents and, in cases of fraud, were to be quickly compensated, so that the face of the Bride of Christ was not soiled with dishonest profits.

Gregory carried out this intense activity notwithstanding his poor health, which often forced him to remain in bed for days on end. The fasts practised during the years of monastic life had caused him serious digestive problems. Furthermore, his voice was so feeble that he was often obliged to entrust the reading of his homilies to the deacon, so that the faithful present in the Roman Basilicas could hear him. On feast days he did his best to celebrate the *Missarum sollemnia*, that

is the solemn Mass, and then he met personally with the people of God, who were very fond of him, because they saw in him the authoritative reference from whom to draw security: not by chance was the title *consul Dei* quickly attributed to him. Notwithstanding the very difficult conditions in which he had to work, he gained the faithful's trust, thanks to his holiness of life and rich humanity, achieving truly magnificent results for his time and for the future. He was a man immersed in God: his desire for God was always alive in the depths of his soul and precisely because of this he was always close to his neighbour, to the needy people of his time. Indeed, during a desperate period of havoc, he was able to create peace and give hope. This man of God shows us the true sources of peace, from which true hope comes. Thus, he becomes a guide also for us today.

To special groups

I offer a warm greeting and prayerful good wishes to the participants in the Christian-Hindu symposium being held these days in Castel Gandolfo. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Scotland, Sweden, Australia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Canada and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

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