



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 18 June 2008

Saint Isidore of Seville

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak about St Isidore of Seville. He was a younger brother of Leander, Archbishop of Seville, and a great friend of Pope Gregory the Great. Pointing this out is important because it enables us to bear in mind a cultural and spiritual approach that is indispensable for understanding Isidore's personality. Indeed, he owed much to Leander, an exacting, studious and austere person who created around his younger brother a family context marked by the ascetic requirements proper to a monk, and from the work pace demanded by a serious dedication to study. Furthermore, Leander was concerned to have the wherewithal to confront the political and social situation of that time: in those decades in fact, the Visigoths, barbarians and Arians, had invaded the Iberian Peninsula and taken possession of territories that belonged to the Roman Empire. It was essential to regain them for the Roman world and for Catholicism. Leander and Isidore's home was furnished with a library richly endowed with classical, pagan and Christian works. Isidore, who felt simultaneously attracted to both, was therefore taught under the responsibility of his elder brother to develop a very strong discipline, in devoting himself to study with discretion and discernment.

Thus a calm and open atmosphere prevailed in the episcopal residence in Seville. We can deduce this from Isidore's cultural and spiritual interests, as they emerge from his works themselves which include an encyclopaedic knowledge of pagan classical culture and a thorough knowledge of Christian culture. This explains the eclecticism characteristic of Isidore's literary opus who glided with the greatest of ease from Martial to Augustine or from Cicero to Gregory the Great. The inner strife that the young Isidore had to contend with, having succeeded his brother Leander on the episcopal throne of Seville in 599, was by no means unimportant. The impression of excessive

voluntarism that strikes one on reading the works of this great author, considered to be the last of the Christian Fathers of antiquity, may, perhaps, actually be due to this constant struggle with himself. A few years after his death in 636, the Council of Toledo in 653 described him as "an illustrious teacher of our time and the glory of the Catholic Church".

Isidore was without a doubt a man of accentuated dialectic antitheses. Moreover, he experienced a permanent inner conflict in his personal life, similar to that which Gregory the Great and St Augustine had experienced earlier, between a desire for solitude to dedicate himself solely to meditation on the word of God, and the demands of charity to his brethren for whose salvation, as Bishop, he felt responsible. He wrote, for example, with regard to Church leaders: "*The man responsible for a Church (vir ecclesiasticus)* must on the one hand allow himself to be crucified to the world with the mortification of his flesh, and on the other, accept the decision of the ecclesiastical order - when it comes from God's will - to devote himself humbly to government, even if he does not wish to" (*Sententiarum liber III, 33, 1: PL 83, col 705 B*). Just a paragraph later he adds: "Men of God (*sancti viri*) do not in fact desire to dedicate themselves to things of the world and groan when by some mysterious design of God they are charged with certain responsibilities.... They do their utmost to avoid them but accept what they would like to shun and do what they would have preferred to avoid. "Indeed, they enter into the secrecy of the heart and seek there to understand what God's mysterious will is asking of them. And when they realize that they must submit to God's plans, they bend their hearts to the yoke of the divine decision" (*Sententiarum liber III, 33, 3: PL 83, coll. 705-706*).

To understand Isidore better it is first of all necessary to recall the complexity of the political situations in his time to which I have already referred: during the years of his boyhood he was obliged to experience the bitterness of exile. He was nevertheless pervaded with apostolic enthusiasm. He experienced the rapture of contributing to the formation of a people that was at last rediscovering its unity, both political and religious, with the providential conversion of Hermenegild, the heir to the Visigoth throne, from Arianism to the Catholic faith. Yet we must not underestimate the enormous difficulty of coming to grips with such very serious problems as were the relations with heretics and with the Jews. There was a whole series of problems which appear very concrete to us today too, especially if we consider what is happening in certain regions in which we seem almost to be witnessing the recurrence of situations very similar to those that existed on the Iberian Peninsular in that sixth century. The wealth of cultural knowledge that Isidore had assimilated enabled him to constantly compare the Christian newness with the Greco-Roman cultural heritage, however, rather than the precious gift of synthesis it would seem that he possessed the gift of *collatio*, that is, of collecting, which he expressed in an extraordinary personal erudition, although it was not always ordered as might have been desired.

In any case, his nagging worry not to overlook anything that human experience had produced in the history of his homeland and of the whole world is admirable. Isidore did not want to lose anything that man had acquired in the epochs of antiquity, regardless of whether they had been

pagan, Jewish or Christian. Hence, it should not come as a surprise if, in pursuing this goal, he did not always manage to filter the knowledge he possessed sufficiently in the purifying waters of the Christian faith as he would have wished. The point is, however, that in Isidore's intentions, the proposals he made were always in tune with the Catholic faith which he staunchly upheld. In the discussion of the various theological problems, he showed that he perceived their complexity and often astutely suggested solutions that summarize and express the complete Christian truth. This has enabled believers through the ages and to our times to profit with gratitude from his definitions. A significant example of this is offered by Isidore's teaching on the relations between active and contemplative life. He wrote: "Those who seek to attain repose in contemplation must first train in the stadium of active life; and then, free from the dross of sin, they will be able to display that pure heart which alone makes the vision of God possible" (*Differentiarum Lib. II, 34, 133: PL 83, col 91A*). Nonetheless, the realism of a true pastor convinced him of the risk the faithful run of reducing themselves to one dimension. He therefore added: "The middle way, consisting of both of these forms of life, normally turns out to be more useful in resolving those tensions which are often aggravated by the choice of a single way of life and are instead better tempered by an alternation of the two forms" (*op. cit. 134; ibid., col 91B*).

Isidore sought in Christ's example the definitive confirmation of a just orientation of life and said: "The Saviour Jesus offers us the example of active life when during the day he devoted himself to working signs and miracles in the town, but he showed the contemplative life when he withdrew to the mountain and spent the night in prayer" (*op. cit. 134: ibid.*). In the light of this example of the divine Teacher, Isidore can conclude with this precise moral teaching: "Therefore let the servant of God, imitating Christ, dedicate himself to contemplation without denying himself active life. Behaving otherwise would not be right. Indeed, just as we must love God in contemplation, so we must love our neighbour with action. It is therefore impossible to live without the presence of both the one and the other form of life, nor can we live without experiencing both the one and the other" (*op. cit., 135; ibid. col 91C*). I consider that this is the synthesis of a life that seeks contemplation of God, dialogue with God in prayer and in the reading of Sacred Scripture, as well as action at the service of the human community and of our neighbour. This synthesis is the lesson that the great Bishop of Seville has bequeathed to us, Christians of today, called to witness to Christ at the beginning of a new millennium.

To special groups

I am pleased to welcome the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles gathered in Rome for their General Chapter, and the participants in the Rome Seminar of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. I also warmly greet a group of survivors of the Holocaust who are present at today's Audience. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, South Africa, Australia, Vietnam and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. We are on the threshold of the summer period, a season of tourism and of pilgrimages, of holidays and of rest. Dear *young people*, as I think of your peers who are already facing their exams, I hope that you who are already on holiday will take advantage of the summer break for useful social and religious experiences. I hope that you, dear *sick people*, will find comfort and relief in the closeness of your relatives and to you, dear *newly-weds*, I address the invitation to use this summer period to consider ever more deeply the value of your mission in the Church and in society.

My thoughts now go to those taking part in the International Eucharistic Congress which is taking place in these days in Quebec City, Canada, on the theme: "*The Eucharist, gift of God for the life of the world*". I make myself present in spirit at this solemn ecclesial meeting, and I hope that for both the Canadian Christian Communities and for the universal Church it will be a powerful time of prayer, reflection and contemplation on the mystery of the Holy Eucharist.

May it also be a favourable opportunity to reaffirm the faith of the Church in the Real Presence of Christ in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Let us also pray that this International Eucharistic Congress will revive in believers, not only in Canada but in so many other Nations of the world, the awareness of those evangelical and spiritual values that have forged their identity throughout the course of history.

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