



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 2 September 2009

[[Video](#)]

Saint Odo of Cluny

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After a long pause, I would like to resume the presentation of important writers of the Eastern and Western Church in the Middle Ages because in their life and writings we see as in a mirror what it means to be Christian. Today I present to you the luminous figure of St Odo, Abbot of Cluny. He fits into that period of medieval monasticism which saw the surprising success in Europe of the life and spirituality inspired by the *Rule of St Benedict*. In those centuries there was a wonderful increase in the number of cloisters that sprang up and branched out over the continent, spreading the Christian spirit and sensibility far and wide. St Odo takes us back in particular to Cluny, one of the most illustrious and famous monasteries in the Middle Ages that still today reveals to us, through its majestic ruins, the signs of a past rendered glorious by intense dedication to asceticism, study and, in a special way, to divine worship, endowed with decorum and beauty.

Odo was the second Abbot of Cluny. He was born in about 880, on the boundary between the Maine and the Touraine regions of France. Odo's father consecrated him to the holy Bishop Martin of Tours, in whose beneficent shadow and memory he was to spend his entire life, which he ended close to St Martin's tomb. His choice of religious consecration was preceded by the inner experience of a special moment of grace, of which he himself spoke to another monk, John the Italian, who later became his biographer. Odo was still an adolescent, about 16 years old, when

one Christmas Eve he felt this prayer to the Virgin rise spontaneously to his lips: "My Lady, Mother of Mercy, who on this night gave birth to the Saviour, pray for me. May your glorious and unique experience of childbirth, O Most Devout Mother, be my refuge" (*Vita sancti Odonis*, 1, 9: PL 133, 747). The name "Mother of Mercy", with which young Odo then invoked the Virgin, was to be the title by which he always subsequently liked to address Mary. He also called her "the one Hope of the world ... thanks to whom the gates of Heaven were opened to us" (*In veneratione S. Mariae Magdalenae*: PL 133, 721). At that time Odo chanced to come across the *Rule of St Benedict* and to comment on it, "bearing, while not yet a monk, the light yoke of monks" (*ibid.*, I, 14, PL 133, 50). In one of his sermons Odo was to celebrate Benedict as the "lamp that shines in the dark period of life" (*De sancto Benedicto abbate*: PL 133, 725), and to describe him as "a teacher of spiritual discipline" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 727). He was to point out with affection that Christian piety, "with the liveliest gentleness commemorates him" in the knowledge that God raised him "among the supreme and elect Fathers of Holy Church" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 722).

Fascinated by the Benedictine ideal, Odo left Tours and entered the Benedictine Abbey of Baume as a monk; he later moved to Cluny, of which in 927 he became abbot. From that centre of spiritual life he was able to exercise a vast influence over the monasteries on the continent. Various monasteries or coenobiums were able to benefit from his guidance and reform, including that of St Paul Outside-the-Walls. More than once Odo visited Rome and he even went as far as Subiaco, Monte Cassino and Salerno. He actually fell ill in Rome in the summer of 942. Feeling that he was nearing his end, he was determined, and made every effort, to return to St Martin in Tours, where he died, in the Octave of the Saint's feast, on 18 November 942. His biographer, stressing the "virtue of patience" that Odo possessed, gives a long list of his other virtues that include contempt of the world, zeal for souls and the commitment to peace in the Churches. Abbot Odo's great aspirations were: concord between kings and princes, the observance of the commandments, attention to the poor, the correction of youth and respect for the elderly (cf. *Vita sancti Odonis*, I, 17: PL 133, 49).

He loved the cell in which he dwelled, "removed from the eyes of all, eager to please God alone" (*ibid.*, I, 14: PL 133, 49). However, he did not fail also to exercise, as a "superabundant source", the ministry of the word and to set an example, "regretting the immense wretchedness of this world" (*ibid.*, I, 17: PL 133, 51). In a single monk, his biographer comments, were combined the different virtues that exist, which are found to be few and far between in other monasteries: "Jesus, in his goodness, drawing on the various gardens of monks, in a small space created a paradise, in order to water the hearts of the faithful from its fountains" (*ibid.*, I, 14: PL 133, 49). In a passage from a sermon in honour of Mary of Magdala the Abbot of Cluny reveals to us how he conceived of monastic life: "Mary, who, seated at the Lord's feet, listened attentively to his words, is the symbol of the sweetness of contemplative life; the more its savour is tasted, the more it induces the mind to be detached from visible things and the tumult of the world's preoccupations" (*In ven. S. Mariae Magd.*, PL 133, 717). Odo strengthened and developed this conception in his other writings. From them transpire his love for interiority, a vision of the world as a brittle,

precarious reality from which to uproot oneself, a constant inclination to detachment from things felt to be sources of anxiety, an acute sensitivity to the presence of evil in the various types of people and a deep eschatological aspiration. This vision of the world may appear rather distant from our own; yet Odo's conception of it, his perception of the fragility of the world, values an inner life that is open to the other, to the love of one's neighbour, and in this very way transforms life and opens the world to God's light.

The "devotion" to the Body and Blood of Christ which Odo in the face of a widespread neglect of them which he himself deeply deplored always cultivated with conviction deserves special mention. Odo was in fact firmly convinced of the Real Presence, under the Eucharistic species, of the Body and Blood of the Lord, by virtue of the conversion of the "substance" of the bread and the wine.

He wrote: "God, Creator of all things, took the bread saying that this was his Body and that he would offer it for the world, and he distributed the wine, calling it his Blood"; now, "it is a law of nature that the change should come about in accordance with the Creator's command", and thus "nature immediately changes its usual condition: the bread instantly becomes flesh, and the wine becomes blood"; at the Lord's order, "the substance changes" (*Odonis Abb. Cluniac. occupatio*, ed. A. Swoboda, Leipzig 1900, p. 121). Unfortunately, our abbot notes, this "sacrosanct mystery of the Lord's Body, in whom the whole salvation of the world consists", (*Collationes*, XXVIII: PL 133, 572), is celebrated carelessly. "Priests", he warns, "who approach the altar unworthily, stain the bread, that is, the Body of Christ" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 572-573). Only those who are spiritually united to Christ may worthily participate in his Eucharistic Body: should the contrary be the case, to eat his Flesh and to drink his Blood would not be beneficial but rather a condemnation (cf. *ibid.*, XXX, PL 133, 575). All this invites us to believe the truth of the Lord's presence with new force and depth. The presence in our midst of the Creator, who gives himself into our hands and transforms us as he transforms the bread and the wine, thus transforms the world.

St Odo was a true spiritual guide both for the monks and for the faithful of his time. In the face of the "immensity of the vices widespread in society, the remedy he strongly advised was that of a radical change of life, based on humility, austerity, detachment from ephemeral things and adherence to those that are eternal (cf. *Collationes*, XXX, PL 133, 613). In spite of the realism of his diagnosis on the situation of his time, Odo does not indulge in pessimism: "We do not say this", he explains, "in order to plunge those who wish to convert into despair. Divine mercy is always available; it awaits the hour of our conversion" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 563). And he exclaims: "O ineffable bowels of divine piety! God pursues wrongs and yet protects sinners" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 592). Sustained by this conviction, the Abbot of Cluny used to like to pause to contemplate the mercy of Christ, the Saviour whom he describes evocatively as "a lover of men": "*amator hominum Christus*" (*ibid.*, LIII: PL 133, 637). He observes "Jesus took upon himself the scourging that would have been our due in order to save the creature he formed and loves (cf. *ibid.*, PL 133, 638).

Here, a trait of the holy abbot appears that at first sight is almost hidden beneath the rigour of his

austerity as a reformer: his deep, heartfelt kindness. He was austere, but above all he was good, a man of great goodness, a goodness that comes from contact with the divine goodness. Thus Odo, his peers tell us, spread around him his overflowing joy. His biographer testifies that he never heard "such mellifluous words" on human lips (*ibid.*, I, 17: *PL* 133, 31). His biographer also records that he was in the habit of asking the children he met along the way to sing, and that he would then give them some small token, and he adds: "Abbot Odo's words were full of joy ... his merriment instilled in our hearts deep joy" (*ibid.*, II, 5: *PL* 133, 63). In this way the energetic yet at the same time lovable medieval abbot, enthusiastic about reform, with incisive action nourished in his monks, as well as in the lay faithful of his time, the resolution to progress swiftly on the path of Christian perfection.

Let us hope that his goodness, the joy that comes from faith, together with austerity and opposition to the world's vices, may also move our hearts, so that we too may find the source of the joy that flows from God's goodness.

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Nigeria and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the Servants of the Holy Spirit, as well as the young people from the Holy Study House of Prayer. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I address a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I greet in particular the participants in the Inter-Christian Symposium sponsored by the Antonianum Pontifical University and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and I hope that the common reflection between Catholics and Orthodox on the figure of St Augustine will strengthen us on our way towards full communion.

Lastly, I address an affectionate greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. I invite you *young people* to welcome and live the word of God with courage and the creativity typical of your age. I encourage you, dear *sick people*, to preserve the Gospel teachings in your hearts to draw from them strength, serenity and support in the trial of suffering. I hope that you *newlyweds* will set out with generous fidelity on the way suggested by the Son of God, so that your new family may be built upon the firm rock of his word.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana