



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

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[[Video](#)]

Symeon the New Theologian

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today we pause to reflect on an Eastern monk, Symeon the New Theologian, whose writings have had a notable influence on the theology and spirituality of the East, in particular with regard to the experience of mystical union with God. Symeon the New Theologian was born in 949 in Galatai, Paphlagonia, in Asia Minor, into a provincial noble family. While he was still young he moved to Constantinople to complete his education and enter the Emperor's service. However, he did not feel attracted by the civil career that awaited him. Under the influence of the inner illumination he was experiencing, he set out in search of someone who would guide him in the period of doubt and perplexity he was living through and help him advance on the path of union with God. He found this spiritual guide in Symeon the Pious (*Eulabes*), a simple monk of the *Studios* in Constantinople who advised him to read Mark the Monk's treatise, *The Spiritual Law*. Symeon the New Theologian found in this text a teaching that made a deep impression on him: "If you seek spiritual healing, be attentive to your conscience," he read in it. "Do all that it tells you and you will find what serves you". From that very moment, he himself says, he never went to sleep without first asking himself whether his conscience had anything with which to reproach him.

Symeon entered the Studite monastery where, however, his mystical experiences and extraordinary devotion to his spiritual father caused him some difficulty. He moved to the small

convent of *St Mamas*, also in Constantinople, of which three years later he became abbot, *hegumen*. There he embarked on an intense quest for spiritual union with Christ which gave him great authority. It is interesting to note that he was given the title of the "New Theologian", in spite of the tradition that reserved this title for two figures, John the Evangelist and Gregory of Nazianzus. Symeon suffered misunderstandings and exile but was rehabilitated by Patriarch Sergius II of Constantinople.

Symeon the New Theologian spent the last stage of his life at the Monastery of St Marina where he wrote a large part of his opus, becoming ever more famous for his teaching and his miracles. He died on 12 March 1022.

The best known of his disciples, Niceta Stethatos, who collected and copied Symeon's writings, compiled a posthumous edition of them and subsequently wrote his biography. Symeon's opus consists of nine volumes that are divided into *theological, gnostic and practical chapters*, three books of *catecheses addressed to monks*, two books of *theological and ethical treatises* and one of *hymns*. Moreover, his numerous *Letters* should not be forgotten. All these works have had an important place in the Eastern monastic tradition to our day.

Symeon focused his reflection on the Holy Spirit's presence in the baptized and on the awareness they must have of this spiritual reality. "Christian life", he emphasized, "is intimate, personal communion with God, divine grace illumines the believer's heart and leads him to a mystical vision of the Lord". Along these lines, Symeon the New Theologian insisted that true knowledge of God does not come from books but rather from spiritual experience, from spiritual life. Knowledge of God is born from a process of inner purification that begins with conversion of heart through the power of faith and love. It passes through profound repentance and sincere sorrow for one's sins to attain union with Christ, the source of joy and peace, suffused with the light of his presence within us. For Symeon this experience of divine grace did not constitute an exceptional gift for a few mystics but rather was the fruit of Baptism in the life of every seriously committed believer.

A point on which to reflect, dear brothers and sisters! This holy Eastern monk calls us all to pay attention to our spiritual life, to the hidden presence of God within us, to the sincerity of the conscience and to purification, to conversion of heart, so that the Holy Spirit may really become present in us and guide us. Indeed, if rightly we are concerned to care for our physical, human and intellectual development, it is even more important not to neglect our inner growth. This consists in the knowledge of God, in true knowledge, not only learned from books but from within and in communion with God, to experience his help at every moment and in every circumstance. Basically it is this that Symeon describes when he recounts his own mystical experience. Already as a young man, before entering the monastery, while at home one night immersed in prayer and invoking God's help to fight temptations, he saw the room fill with light. Later, when he entered the monastery, he was given spiritual books for instruction but reading them did not procure for him the peace that he sought. He felt, he himself says, as if he were a poor little bird without wings. He

humbly accepted this situation without rebelling and it was then that his visions of light began once again to increase. Wishing to assure himself of their authenticity, Symeon asked Christ directly: "Lord, is it truly you who are here?". He heard the affirmative answer resonating in his heart and was supremely comforted. "That, Lord", he was to write later, "was the first time that you considered me, a prodigal son, worthy of hearing your voice". However, not even this revelation left him entirely at peace. He wondered, rather, whether he ought to consider that experience an illusion. At last, one day an event occurred that was crucial to his mystical experience. He began to feel like "a poor man who loves his brethren" (*ptochós philádelphos*). Around him he saw hordes of enemies bent on ensnaring him and doing him harm, yet he felt within an intense surge of love for them. How can this be explained? Obviously, such great love could not come from within him but must well up from another source. Symeon realized that it was coming from Christ present within him and everything became clear: he had a sure proof that the source of love in him was Christ's presence. He was certain that having in ourselves a love that exceeds our personal intentions suggests that the source of love is in us. Thus we can say on the one hand that if we are without a certain openness to love Christ does not enter us, and on the other, that Christ becomes a source of love and transforms us. Dear friends, this experience remains particularly important for us today if we are to find the criteria that tell us whether we are truly close to God, whether God exists and dwells in us. God's love develops in us if we stay united to him with prayer and with listening to his word, with an open heart. Divine love alone prompts us to open our hearts to others and makes us sensitive to their needs, bringing us to consider everyone as brothers and sisters and inviting us to respond to hatred with love and to offence with forgiveness.

In thinking about this figure of Symeon the New Theologian, we may note a further element of his spirituality. On the path of ascetic life which he proposed and took, the monk's intense attention and concentration on the inner experience conferred an essential importance on the spiritual father of the monastery. The same young Symeon, as has been said, had found a spiritual director who gave him substantial help and whom he continued to hold in the greatest esteem such as to profess veneration for him, even in public, after his death. And I would like to say that the invitation to have recourse to a good spiritual father who can guide every individual to profound knowledge of himself and lead him to union with the Lord so that his life may be in ever closer conformity with the Gospel still applies for all priests, consecrated and lay people, and especially youth. To go towards the Lord we always need a guide, a dialogue. We cannot do it with our thoughts alone. And this is also the meaning of the ecclesiality of our faith, of finding this guide.

To conclude, we may sum up the teaching and mystical experience of Symeon the New Theologian in these words: in his ceaseless quest for God, even amidst the difficulties he encountered and the criticism of which he was the object, in the end he let himself be guided by love. He himself was able to live and teach his monks that for every disciple of Jesus the essential is to grow in love; thus we grow in the knowledge of Christ himself, to be able to say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20).

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here this morning, including the priests and brothers of the Society of Mary gathered in Rome for their chapter, and the various schools and university groups present. Upon you all, I willingly invoke God's abundant graces.

I now address my greeting to the young people, the sick and the newlyweds. Yesterday we commemorated Our Lady of Sorrows, who stood beneath the cross with faith. Dear young people; do not be afraid to stand like Mary beside the Cross, to find the courage to overcome every obstacle in your life. and you, dear sick people, may you find in Mary comfort and support for learning from the Crucified Lord the saving value of suffering. May you, dear newlyweds, in difficult moments turn with trust to Our lady of Sorrows, who will help you face them with her motherly intercession.

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