



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 28 October 2009*

[\[Video\]](#)

***Monastic Theology and Scholastic Theology***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I am reflecting on an interesting page of history that concerns the flourishing of Latin theology in the 12th century which occurred through a series of providential coincidences. A relative peace prevailed in the countries of Western Europe at that time which guaranteed economic development and the consolidation of political structures in society, encouraging lively cultural activity also through its contacts with the East. The benefits of the vast action known as the "Gregorian reform" were already being felt within the Church. Vigorously promoted in the previous century, they had brought greater evangelical purity to the life of the ecclesial community, especially to the clergy, and had restored to the Church and to the Papacy authentic freedom of action. Furthermore, a wide-scale spiritual renewal supported by the vigorous development of consecrated life was spreading; new religious orders were coming into being and expanding, while those already in existence were experiencing a promising spiritual revival.

Theology also flourished anew, acquiring a greater awareness of its own nature: it refined its method; it tackled the new problems; advanced in the contemplation of God's mysteries; produced fundamental works; inspired important initiatives of culture, from art to literature; and prepared the masterpieces of the century to come, the century of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. This intense theological activity took place in two milieus: the monasteries and the

urban Schools, the *scholae*, some of which were the forerunners of universities, one of the characteristic "inventions" of the Christian Middle Ages. It is on the basis of these two milieus, monasteries and *scholae*, that it is possible to speak of the two different theological models: "monastic theology" and "scholastic theology". The representatives of monastic theology were monks, usually abbots, endowed with wisdom and evangelical zeal, dedicated essentially to inspiring and nourishing God's loving design. The representatives of Scholastic theology were cultured men, passionate about research; they were *magistri* anxious to show the reasonableness and soundness of the Mysteries of God and of man, believed with faith, of course, but also understood by reason. Their different finalities explain the differences in their method and in their way of doing theology.

In 12th-century monasteries the theological method mainly entailed the explanation of Sacred Scripture, the *sacra pagina* to borrow the words of the authors of that period; biblical theology in particular was practised. The monks, in other words, were devout listeners to and readers of the Sacred Scriptures and one of their chief occupations consisted in *lectio divina*, that is, the prayed reading of the Bible. For them the mere reading of the Sacred Text did not suffice to perceive its profound meaning, its inner unity and transcendent message. It was therefore necessary to practise a biblical theology, in docility to the Holy Spirit. Thus, at the school of the Fathers, the Bible was interpreted allegorically in order to discover on every page of both the Old and New Testaments what it says about Christ and his work of salvation.

Last year, [the Synod of Bishops on the "Word of God in the life and mission of the Church"](#) reminded us of the importance of the spiritual approach to the Sacred Scriptures. It is useful for this purpose to take into account monastic theology, an uninterrupted biblical exegesis, as well as the works written by its exponents, precious ascetic commentaries on the Books of the Bible. Thus monastic theology incorporated the spiritual aspect into literary formation. It was aware, in other words that a purely theoretical and unversed interpretation is not enough: to enter into the heart of Sacred Scripture it must be read in the spirit in which it was written and created. Literary knowledge was necessary in order to understand the exact meaning of the words and to grasp the meaning of the text, refining the grammatical and philological sensibility. Thus *Jean Leclercq*, a Benedictine scholar in the past century, entitled the essay in which he presents the characteristics of monastic theology: *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Love of words and the desire for God). In fact, the desire to know and to love God which comes to meet us through his words to be received, meditated upon and put into practice, leads us to seek to deepen our knowledge of the biblical texts in all their dimensions. Then there is another attitude on which those who practise monastic theology insist: namely an intimate, prayerful disposition that must precede, accompany and complete the study of Sacred Scripture. Since, ultimately, monastic theology is listening to God's word, it is impossible not to purify the heart in order to receive it and, especially, it is impossible not to enkindle in it a longing to encounter the Lord. Theology thus becomes meditation, prayer, a song of praise and impels us to sincere conversion. On this path, many exponents of monastic theology attained the highest goals of mystic experience and extend an

invitation to us too to nourish our lives with the word of God, for example, through listening more attentively to the Readings and the Gospel, especially during Sunday Mass. It is also important to set aside a certain period each day for meditation on the Bible, so that the word of God may be a light that illumines our daily pilgrimage on earth.

Scholastic theology, on the other hand as I was saying was practised at the *scholae* which came into being beside the great cathedrals of that time for the formation of the clergy, or around a teacher of theology and his disciples, to train professionals of culture in a period in which the appreciation of knowledge was constantly growing. Central to the method of the Scholastics was the *quaestio*, that is, the problem the reader faces in approaching the words of Scripture and of Tradition. In the face of the problem that these authoritative texts pose, questions arise and the debate between teacher and student comes into being. In this discussion, on the one hand the arguments of the authority appear and on the other those of reason, and the ensuing discussion seeks to come to a synthesis between authority and reason in order to reach a deeper understanding of the word of God. In this regard St Bonaventure said that theology is "*per additionem*" (cf. *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum*, I, *proem.*, q. 1, *concl.*), that is, theology adds the dimension of reason to the word of God and thus creates a faith that is deeper, more personal, hence also more concrete in the person's life. In this regard various solutions were found and conclusions reached which began to build a system of theology. The organization of the *quaestiones* led to the compilation of ever more extensive syntheses, that is, the different *quaestiones* were composed with the answers elicited, thereby creating a synthesis, the *summae* that were in reality extensive theological and dogmatic treatises born from the confrontation of human reason with the word of God. Scholastic theology aimed to present the unity and harmony of the Christian Revelation with a method, called, precisely "Scholastic" of the school which places trust in human reason. Grammar and philology are at the service of theological knowledge, but logic even more so, namely the discipline that studies the "functioning" of human reasoning, in such a way that the truth of a proposal appears obvious. Still today, in reading the Scholastic *summae* one is struck by the order, clarity and logical continuity of the arguments and by the depth of certain insights. With technical language a precise meaning is attributed to every word and, between believing and understanding, a reciprocal movement of clarification is established.

Dear brothers and sisters, in echoing the invitation of the First Letter of Peter, Scholastic theology stimulates us to be ever ready to account for the hope that is in us (cf. 3: 15), hearing the questions as our own and thus also being capable of giving an answer. It reminds us that a natural friendship exists between faith and reason, founded in the order of Creation itself. In the *incipit* of the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the Servant of God [John Paul II](#) wrote: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth". Faith is open to the effort of understanding by reason; reason, in turn, recognizes that faith does not mortify her but on the contrary impels her towards vaster and loftier horizons. The eternal lesson of monastic theology fits in here. Faith and reason, in reciprocal dialogue, are vibrant with joy when they are both inspired by the search for intimate union with God. When love enlivens the prayerful dimension of

theology, knowledge, acquired by reason, is broadened. Truth is sought with humility, received with wonder and gratitude: in a word, knowledge only grows if one loves truth. Love becomes intelligence and authentic theology wisdom of the heart, which directs and sustains the faith and life of believers. Let us therefore pray that the journey of knowledge and of the deepening of God's Mysteries may always be illumined by divine love.

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I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Nigeria, India and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the priests attending a course at the Pontifical North American College and to the seminarians of the Pontifical Scots College. Upon all of you I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

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