



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 25 November 2009

(Video)

Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At these Wednesday Audiences I am presenting several exemplary figures of believers who were dedicated to showing the harmony between reason and faith and to witnessing with their lives to the proclamation of the Gospel. I intend to speak today about Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor. Both were among those philosophers and theologians known as "Victorines" because they lived and taught at the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, founded at the beginning of the 12th century by William of Champeaux. William himself was a well-known teacher who succeeded in giving his abbey a solid cultural identity. Indeed, a school for the formation of the monks, also open to external students, was founded at Saint-Victor, where a felicitous synthesis was achieved between the two theological models of which I have spoken in previous Catecheses. These are monastic theology, primarily oriented to contemplation of the mysteries of the faith in Scripture; and scholastic theology, which aimed to use reason to scrutinize these mysteries with innovative methods in order to create a theological system.

We have little information about the life of Hugh of Saint-Victor. The date and place of his birth are uncertain; he may have been born in Saxony or in Flanders. It is known that having arrived in Paris the European cultural capital at that time he spent the rest of his days at the Abbey of Saint-Victor, where he was first a disciple and subsequently a teacher. Even before his death in 1141,

he earned great fame and esteem, to the point that he was called a "second St Augustine". Like Augustine, in fact, he meditated deeply on the relationship between faith and reason, between the secular sciences and theology. According to Hugh of Saint-Victor, in addition to being useful for understanding the Scriptures, all the branches of knowledge have intrinsic value and must be cultivated in order to broaden human knowledge, as well as to answer the human longing to know the truth. This healthy intellectual curiosity led him to counsel students always to give free reign to their desire to learn. In his treatise on the methodology of knowledge and pedagogy, entitled significantly *Didascalicon (On Teaching)* his recommendation was: "Learn willingly what you do not know from everyone. The person who has sought to learn something from everyone will be wiser than them all. The person who receives something from everyone ends by becoming the richest of all" (*Eruditiones Didascalicae*, 3, 14; *PL* 176, 774).

The knowledge with which the philosophers and theologians known as *Victorines* were concerned in particular was theology, which requires first and foremost the loving study of Sacred Scripture. In fact, in order to know God one cannot but begin with what God himself has chosen to reveal of himself in the Scriptures. In this regard Hugh of Saint-Victor is a typical representative of monastic theology, based entirely on biblical exegesis. To interpret Scripture he suggests the traditional patristic and medieval structure, namely, the literal and historical sense first of all, then the allegorical and anagogical and, lastly, the moral. These are four dimensions of the meaning of Scripture that are being rediscovered even today. For this reason one sees that in the text and in the proposed narrative a more profound meaning is concealed: the thread of faith that leads us heavenwards and guides us on this earth, teaching us how to live. Yet, while respecting these four dimensions of the meaning of Scripture, in an original way in comparison with his contemporaries, Hugh of Saint-Victor insists and this is something new on the importance of the historical and literal meaning. In other words before discovering the symbolic value, the deeper dimensions of the biblical text, it is necessary to know and to examine the meaning of the event as it is told in Scripture. Otherwise, he warns, using an effective comparison, one risks being like grammarians who do not know the elementary rules. To those who know the meaning of history as described in the Bible, human events appear marked by divine Providence, in accordance with a clearly ordained plan. Thus, for Hugh of Saint-Victor, history is neither the outcome of a blind destiny nor as meaningless as it might seem. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit is at work in human history and inspires the marvellous dialogue of human beings with God, their friend. This theological view of history highlights the astonishing and salvific intervention of God who truly enters and acts in history. It is almost as if he takes part in our history, while ever preserving and respecting the human being's freedom and responsibility.

Our author considered that the study of Sacred Scripture and its historical and literal meaning makes possible true and proper theology, that is, the systematic illustration of truths, knowledge of their structure, the illustration of the dogmas of the faith. He presents these in a solid synthesis in his Treatise *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei* (The Sacraments of the Christian Faith). Among other things, he provides a definition of "sacrament" which, further perfected by other theologians,

contains ideas that are still very interesting today. "The sacrament is a corporeal or material element proposed in an external and tangible way", he writes, "which by its likeness *makes present* an invisible and spiritual grace; it *signifies* it, because it was instituted to this end, and *contains* it, because it is capable of sanctifying" (9,2: *PL* 176, 317). On the one hand is the visibility in the symbol, the "corporeity" of the gift of God. On the other hand, however, in him is concealed the divine grace that comes from the history of Jesus Christ, who himself created the fundamental symbols. Therefore, there are three elements that contribute to the definition of a sacrament, according to Hugh of Saint-Victor: the institution by Christ; the communication of grace; and the analogy between the visible or material element and the invisible element: the divine gifts. This vision is very close to our contemporary understanding, because the sacraments are presented with a language interwoven with symbols and images capable of speaking directly to the human heart. Today too it is important that liturgical animators, and priests in particular, with pastoral wisdom, give due weight to the signs proper to sacramental rites to this visibility and tangibility of Grace. They should pay special attention to catechesis, to ensure that all the faithful experience every celebration of the sacraments with devotion, intensity and spiritual joy.

Richard, who came from Scotland, was Hugh of Saint-Victor's worthy disciple. He was prior of the Abbey of Saint-Victor from 1162 to 1173, the year of his death. Richard too, of course, assigned a fundamental role to the study of the Bible but, unlike his master, gave priority to the allegorical sense, the symbolic meaning of Scripture. This is what he uses, for example, in his interpretation of the Old Testament figure of Benjamin, the son of Jacob, as a model of contemplation and the epitome of the spiritual life. Richard addresses this topic in two texts, *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Maior*. In these he proposes to the faithful a spiritual journey which is primarily an invitation to exercise the various virtues, learning to discipline and to control with reason the sentiments and the inner affective and emotional impulses. Only when the human being has attained balance and human maturity in this area is he or she ready to approach contemplation, which Richard defines as "a profound and pure gaze of the soul, fixed on the marvels of wisdom, combined with an ecstatic sense of wonder and admiration" (*Benjamin Maior* 1,4: *PL* 196, 67).

Contemplation is therefore the destination, the result of an arduous journey that involves dialogue between faith and reason, that is once again a theological discourse. Theology stems from truths that are the subject of faith but seeks to deepen knowledge of them by the use of reason, taking into account the gift of faith. This application of reason to the comprehension of faith is presented convincingly in Richard's masterpiece, one of the great books of history, the *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*). In the six volumes of which it is composed he reflects perspicaciously on the Mystery of the Triune God. According to our author, since God is love the one divine substance includes communication, oblation and love between the two Persons, the Father and the Son, who are placed in a reciprocal, eternal exchange of love. However the perfection of happiness and goodness admits of no exclusivism or closure. On the contrary, it requires the eternal presence of a third Person, the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian love is participatory, harmonious and includes a superabundance of delight, enjoyment and ceaseless joy. Richard, in other words, supposes that

God is love, analyzes the essence of love of what the reality love entails and thereby arrives at the Trinity of the Persons, which really is the logical expression of the fact that God is love.

Yet Richard is aware that love, although it reveals to us the essence of God, although it makes us "understand" the Mystery of the Trinity, is nevertheless always an analogy that serves to speak of a Mystery that surpasses the human mind. Being the poet and mystic that he is, Richard also has recourse to other images. For example, he compares divinity to a river, to a loving wave which originates in the Father and ebbs and flows in the Son, to be subsequently spread with joy through the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, authors such as Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor raise our minds to contemplation of the divine realities. At the same time, the immense joy we feel at the thought, admiration and praise of the Blessed Trinity supports and sustains the practical commitment to be inspired by this perfect model of communion in love in order to build our daily human relationships. The Trinity is truly perfect communion! How the world would change if relations were always lived in families, in parishes and in every other community by following the example of the three divine Persons in whom each lives not only *with* the other, but *for* the other and *in* the other! A few months ago at the Angelus I recalled: "Love alone makes us happy because we live in a relationship, and we live to love and to be loved" ([Angelus, Trinity Sunday](#), 7 June 2009). It is love that works this ceaseless miracle. As in the life of the Blessed Trinity, plurality is recomposed in unity, where all is kindness and joy. With St Augustine, held in great honour by the *Victorines*, we too may exclaim: "*Vides Trinitatem, si caritatem vides* you contemplate the Trinity, if you see charity" (*De Trinitate* VIII, 8, 12).

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to the pilgrimage of Bishops and faithful from Japan celebrating the first anniversary of the Beatification of Blessed Peter Kibe and Companions. My cordial greeting also goes to the groups from Denmark and the United States of America. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I would also like to address a warm greeting to the directors and operators of *Télé Lumière Noursat* of Lebanon, as well as to their President, Bishop Aboujaoudé. Dear friends, I encourage you to persevere generously in your mission at the service of Gospel proclamation, peace and reconciliation in Leban and throughout the region. I impart to you all and to all the viewers of *Noursat* a special Apostolic Blessing.

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The Season of Advent begins next Sunday. I urge you, *young people*, to live this "strong time" with vigilant prayer and generous

evangelical commitment. I encourage you, *sick people*, to sustain with the offering of your suffering, the process of preparation for Holy Christmas of the Christian people. I hope that you, *newlyweds*, may be witnesses of the Spirit of love who enlivens and supports the entire Family of God.

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