



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 18 April 2007

Clement of Alexandria

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the period of celebrations, let us return to our normal Catecheses even if it is still visibly festive in the Square.

With the Catecheses we are returning, as I said, to the series begun previously. We have already spoken of the Twelve Apostles, then of the disciples of the Apostles and now of the important figures in the newborn Church, the ancient Church.

At the last one, we spoke of St Irenaeus of Lyons; today, let us speak of Clement of Alexandria, a great theologian who was probably born in Athens at around the middle of the second century.

From Athens he inherited that marked interest in philosophy which was to make him one of the pioneers of the dialogue between faith and reason in the Christian tradition. While he was still young, he arrived in Alexandria, the "city-symbol" of that fertile junction between the different cultures that was a feature of the Hellenistic age.

He was a disciple of Pantaenus until he succeeded him as head of the catechetical school. Many sources testify that he was ordained a priest. During the persecution of 202-203, he fled from Alexandria, seeking refuge in Caesarea, Cappadocia, where he died in about 215.

Of his most important works three are extant: the *Protrepticus*, the *Paedagogus* and the *Stromata*. Although it does not seem that this was the author's original intention, it is a fact that these writings

constitute a true trilogy, destined to effectively accompany the Christian's spiritual growth.

The *Protrepticus*, as the word itself suggests, is an "exhortation" addressed to those who are starting out and seek the path of faith. Better still, the *Protrepticus* coincides with a Person: the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who makes himself the exhorter of men and women so that they will set out towards the Truth with determination.

Jesus Christ himself becomes the *Paedagogus*, that is, the "tutor" of those who, by virtue of Baptism, have henceforth become children of God.

Lastly, Jesus Christ himself is also the *Didascalos*, the "Master" who presents the most profound teachings. These are gathered in Clement's third work, the *Stromata*, a Greek term which means "tapestries": indeed, they are a random composition of different topics, direct fruits of Clement's customary teaching.

Overall, Clement's catecheses accompanied the catechumens and the baptized step by step on their way, so that with the two "wings" of faith and reason they might reach intimate knowledge of the Truth which is Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Only this knowledge of the Person who is truth is the "true *gnosis*, a Greek term which means "knowledge", "understanding". It is the edifice built by reason under the impetus of a supernatural principle.

Faith itself builds true philosophy, that is, true conversion on the journey to take through life. Hence, authentic "gnosis" is a development of faith inspired by Jesus Christ in the soul united with him. Clement then distinguishes two steps in Christian life.

The first step: believing Christians who live the faith in an ordinary way, yet are always open to the horizons of holiness. Then the second step: "gnostics", that is, those who lead a life of spiritual perfection.

In any case, Christians must start from the common basis of faith through a process of seeking; they must allow themselves to be guided by Christ and thus attain knowledge of the Truth and of truth that forms the content of faith.

This knowledge, Clement says, becomes a living reality in the soul: it is not only a theory, it is a life force, a transforming union of love. Knowledge of Christ is not only thought, but is love which opens the eyes, transforms the person and creates communion with the *Logos*, with the Divine Word who is truth and life. In this communion, which is perfect knowledge and love, the perfect Christian attains contemplation, unification with God.

Finally, Clement espouses the doctrine which claims that man's ultimate end is to liken himself to God. We were created in the image and likeness of God, but this is also a challenge, a journey:

indeed, life's purpose, its ultimate destination, is truly to become similar to God. This is possible through the co-naturality with him which man received at the moment of creation, which is why, already in himself - already in himself - he is an image of God. This co-naturality makes it possible to know the divine realities to which man adheres, first of all out of faith, and through a lived faith the practice of virtue can grow until one contemplates God.

On the path to perfection, Clement thus attaches as much importance to the moral requisite as he gives to the intellectual. The two go hand in hand, for it is impossible to know without living and impossible to live without knowing.

Becoming likened to God and contemplating him cannot be attained with purely rational knowledge: to this end, a life in accordance with the *Logos* is necessary, a life in accordance with truth. Consequently, good works must accompany intellectual knowledge just as the shadow follows the body.

Two virtues above all embellish the soul of the "true gnostic". The first is freedom from the passions (*apátheia*); the other is love, the true passion that assures intimate union with God. Love gives perfect peace and enables "the true gnostic" to face the greatest sacrifices, even the supreme sacrifice in following Christ, and makes him climb from step to step to the peak of virtue.

Thus, the ethical ideal of ancient philosophy, that is, liberation from the passions, is defined by Clement and conjugated with love, in the ceaseless process of making oneself similar to God. In this way the Alexandrian creates the second important occasion for dialogue between the Christian proclamation and Greek philosophy.

We know that St Paul, at the Aeropagus in Athens where Clement was born, had made the first attempt at dialogue with Greek philosophy - and by and large had failed - but they said to him: "We will hear you again".

Clement now takes up this dialogue and ennobles it to the maximum in the Greek philosophical tradition.

As my venerable Predecessor John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Clement of Alexandria understood philosophy "as instruction which prepared for Christian faith" ([n. 38](#)). And in fact, Clement reached the point of maintaining that God gave philosophy to the Greeks "as their own Testament" (*Strom.* 6, 8, 67, 1).

For him, the Greek philosophical tradition, almost like the Law for the Jews, was a sphere of "revelation"; they were two streams which flowed ultimately to the *Logos* himself.

Thus, Clement continued to mark out with determination the path of those who desire "to account"

for their own faith in Jesus Christ. He can serve as an example to Christians, catechists and theologians of our time, whom, in the same Encyclical, John Paul II urged "to recover and express to the full the metaphysical dimension of faith in order to enter into a demanding critical dialogue with both contemporary philosophical thought and with the philosophical tradition in all its aspects".

Let us conclude by making our own a few words from the famous "prayer to Christ the *Logos*" with which Clement concludes his *Paedagogus*. He implores: "*Be gracious... to us your children... Grant us that we may live in your peace, be transferred to your city, sail over the billows of sin without capsizing, be gently wafted by your Holy Spirit, by ineffable Wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day... giving thanks and praise to the one Father... to the Son, Instructor and Teacher, with the Holy Spirit. Amen!*" (*Paed.* 3, 12, 101).

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I greet all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including groups from Britain and Ireland, Gibraltar, Scandinavia, Asia and North America. I extend a special welcome to the ecumenical visitors from Finland and to the many students and teachers present. Upon all of you I invoke the abundant Blessings of this Easter Season, and I pray that your visit to Rome will bring you closer to Christ Our Risen Lord. May God bless you all!

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