



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 13 June 2007

Eusebius of Caesarea

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the history of early Christianity there is a fundamental distinction between the first three centuries and those that followed the Council of Nicaea in 325, the first Ecumenical Council. Like a "hinge" between the two periods are the so-called "conversion of Constantine" and the peace of the Church, as well as the figure of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. He was the most highly qualified exponent of the Christian culture of his time in very varied contexts, from theology to exegesis, from history to erudition. Eusebius is known above all as the first historian of Christianity, but he was also the greatest philologist of the ancient Church.

It was to Caesarea, where Eusebius was born probably in about the year 260 A.D., that Origen had fled from Alexandria. And in Caesarea, Origen founded a school and a huge library. A few decades later, the young Eusebius educated himself with these books. In 325, as Bishop of Caesarea, he played a lead role at the Council of Nicaea. He signed the *Creed* and the affirmation of the full divinity of the Son of God, who is consequently defined as "one in being with the Father" (*homooúsios tō Patri*). The Creed we recite every Sunday in the Holy Liturgy is practically the same.

A sincere admirer of Constantine who had given peace to the Church, Eusebius in turn was esteemed and respected by Constantine. As well as with his works, Eusebius also celebrated the Emperor with panegyrics which he delivered on the 20th and 30th anniversary of his ascendance

to the throne, and upon his death in the year 337. Two or three years later, Eusebius died too.

Eusebius was an indefatigable scholar. In his numerous writings he resolved to reflect and to give an up-to-date report on the three centuries of Christianity, three centuries lived under persecution, drawing abundantly on the Christian and pagan sources preserved in particular in the great library of Caesarea.

Thus, despite the objective importance of his apologetic, exegetic and doctrinal works, the imperishable fame of Eusebius is still mainly associated with the 10 books of his *Ecclesiastical History*. He was the first person to write a history of the Church which continues to be of fundamental importance, thanks to the sources which Eusebius made available to us for ever.

With this Chronicle, he succeeded in saving from the doom of oblivion numerous events, important figures and literary works of the ancient Church. Thus, his work is a primary source of knowledge of the early centuries of Christianity.

We might wonder how he structured this new work and what his intentions were in compiling it. At the beginning of his first book, the historian lists in detail the topics he intends to treat in his work: "It is my purpose to write an account of the succession of the holy Apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Saviour to our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church; and to mention those who have governed and presided over the Church in the most prominent dioceses, and those who in each generation have proclaimed the divine Word either orally or in writing.

"It is my purpose also to give the names and number and times of those who through love of innovation have run into the greatest errors, and, proclaiming themselves interpreters and promoters of a false doctrine have, like fierce wolves, unmercifully devastated the flock of Christ... and to record the ways and the times in which the divine word has been attacked by the Gentiles, and to describe the character of the great men who in various periods have defended it in the face of blood and of tortures... and finally, the mercy and benevolence which Our Saviour has afforded them all" (cf. I, 1, 1-3).

Thus, Eusebius embraced different spheres: the succession of the Apostles as the backbone of the Church, the dissemination of the Message, the errors and then persecutions on the part of the pagans, and the important testimonies which are the light in this Chronicle.

In all this Eusebius saw the Saviour's mercy and benevolence. So it was that he inaugurated, as it were, ecclesiastical historiography, extending his account to 324, the year in which Constantine, after defeating Licinius, was acclaimed as the one Emperor of Rome. This was the year before the important Council of Nicaea, which subsequently offered the "summa" of all that the Church - doctrinally, morally and also juridically - had learned in the previous 300 years.

The citation we have just quoted from the First Book of the *Ecclesiastical History* contains a repetition that is certainly intentional. The Christological title *Saviour* recurs three times in the space of a few lines with an explicit reference to "his mercy" and "his benevolence".

Thus, we can grasp the fundamental perspective of Eusebian historiography: his is a "Christocentric" history, in which the mystery of God's love for humankind is gradually revealed.

Eusebius recognized with genuine amazement that: "Jesus alone of all those who have ever existed is even to the present day called Christ [that is Messiah and Saviour of the world] by all men throughout the world, and is confessed and witnessed to under this name, and is commemorated both by Greeks and Barbarians and even to this day is honoured as a King by his followers throughout the world, and is admired as more than a prophet, and is glorified as the true and only High Priest of God. And besides all this, as the pre-existent Logos of God, called into being before all ages, he has received august honour from the Father, and is worshipped and adored as God. But most wonderful of all is the fact that we who have consecrated ourselves to him, honour him not only with our voices and with the sound of words, but also with complete elevation of soul, so that we choose to give testimony unto him rather than to preserve our own lives" (cf. I, 3, 19-20).

Another feature thus springs to the fore which was to remain a constant in ancient ecclesiastical historiography: it is the "moral intention" that presides in the account. Historical analysis is never an end in itself; it is not made solely with a view to knowing the past; rather, it focuses decisively on conversion and on an authentic witness of Christian life on the part of the faithful. It is a guide for us, too.

Thus, Eusebius strongly challenges believers of all times on their approach to the events of history and of the Church in particular. He also challenges us: what is our attitude with regard to the Church's experiences? Is it the attitude of those who are interested in it merely out of curiosity, or even in search of something sensational or shocking at all costs? Or is it an attitude full of love and open to the mystery of those who know - through faith - that they can trace in the history of the Church those signs of God's love and the great works of salvation wrought by him?

If this is our attitude, we can only feel stimulated to a more coherent and generous response, to a more Christian witness of life, in order to bequeath the signs of God's love also to the generations to come.

"There is a mystery", Cardinal Jean Daniélou, an eminent Patristics scholar, never tired of saying: "History has a hidden content.... The mystery is that of God's works which constitute in time the authentic reality concealed behind the appearances.... However, this history which he brings about for man, God does not bring about without him.

"Pausing to contemplate the 'great things' worked by God would mean seeing only one aspect of things. The human response lies before them" (*Saggio sul mistero della storia*, Italian edition, Brescia, 1963, p. 182).

Today, too, so many centuries later, Eusebius of Caesarea invites believers, invites us, to wonder, to contemplate in history the great works of God for the salvation of humankind. And just as energetically, he invites us to conversion of life. Indeed, we cannot remain inert before a God who has so deeply loved us. The specific demand of love is that our entire life should be oriented to the imitation of the Beloved. Let us therefore spare no effort to leave a transparent trace of God's love in our life.

* * *

To special groups

I welcome the participants in the leadership course organized by the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services. My greetings also go to the Buddhist members of Rissho Kosei-kai and the representatives of the Apostolate for Family Consecration. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Nigeria, Japan and the United States, I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and *newly-weds*. Dear *young people*, for many of your peers the holidays have begun, while for others it is exam time. May the Lord help you to live this period with serenity and to experience his protection. I invite you, dear *sick people*, to find comfort in the Lord who illumines your suffering with his redeeming love. To you, dear *newly-weds*, I express the hope that you will discover the mystery of God who gives himself for the salvation of all, so that your love may be ever truer and more enduring.

© Copyright 2007 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana