



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 26 September 2007

St John Chrysostom (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, let us continue our reflection on St John Chrysostom. After the period he spent in Antioch, in 397 he was appointed Bishop of Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire of the East. John planned the reform of his Church from the outset: the austerity of the episcopal residence had to be an example for all - clergy, widows, monks, courtiers and the rich. Unfortunately, many of those he criticized distanced themselves from him. Attentive to the poor, John was also called "the Almoner". Indeed, he was able as a careful administrator to establish highly appreciated charitable institutions. For some people, his initiatives in various fields made him a dangerous rival but as a true Pastor, he treated everyone in a warm, fatherly way. In particular, he always spoke kindly to women and showed special concern for marriage and the family. He would invite the faithful to take part in liturgical life, which he made splendid and attractive with brilliant creativity.

Despite his kind heart, his life was far from peaceful. He was the Pastor of the capital of the Empire, and often found himself involved in political affairs and intrigues because of his ongoing relations with the authorities and civil institutions. Then, within the Church, having removed six Bishops in Asia in 401 A.D. who had been improperly appointed, he was accused of having overstepped the boundaries of his own jurisdiction and thus he easily became the target of accusations. Another accusation against him concerned the presence of some Egyptian monks, excommunicated by Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria, who had sought refuge in Constantinople. A heated argument then flared up on account of Chrysostom's criticism of the Empress Eudoxia

and her courtiers who reacted by heaping slander and insults upon him. Thus, they proceeded to his removal during the Synod organized by the same Patriarch Theophilus in 403, which led to his condemnation and his first, brief exile. After Chrysostom's return, the hostility he had instigated by his protests against the festivities in honour of the Empress, which the Bishop considered as sumptuous pagan celebrations, and by his expulsion of the priests responsible for the Baptisms during the Easter Vigil in 404, marked the beginning of the persecution of Chrysostom and his followers, the so-called "Johannites".

John then denounced the events in a letter to Innocent I, Bishop of Rome, but it was already too late. In 406, he was once again forced into exile, this time to Cucusus in Armenia. The Pope was convinced of his innocence but was powerless to help him. A Council desired by Rome to establish peace between the two parts of the Empire and among their Churches could not take place. The gruelling journey from Cucusus to Pityus, a destination that he never reached, was meant to prevent the visits of the faithful and to break the resistance of the worn-out exile: his condemnation to exile was a true death sentence! The numerous letters from his exile in which John expressed his pastoral concern in tones of participation and sorrow at the persecution of his followers are moving. His journey towards death stopped at Comana in Ponto. Here, John, who was dying, was carried into the Chapel of the Martyr St Basiliscus, where he gave up his spirit to God and was buried, one martyr next to the other (Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St John Chrysostom*, 119). It was 14 September 407, the Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross. He was rehabilitated in 438 through Theodosius II. The holy Bishop's relics, which had been placed in the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople, were later, in 1204, translated to the first Constantinian Basilica in Rome, and now rest in the chapel of the Choir of the Canons in St Peter's Basilica. On 24 August 2004, Pope John Paul II gave a large part of the saint's relics to Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. The Saint's liturgical Memorial is celebrated on 13 September. Blessed John XXIII proclaimed him Patron of the Second Vatican Council.

It is said of John Chrysostom that when he was seated upon the throne of the New Rome, that is, Constantinople, God caused him to be seen as a second Paul, a doctor of the Universe. Indeed, there is in Chrysostom a substantial unity of thought and action, in Antioch as in Constantinople. It is only the role and situations that change. In his commentary on Genesis, in meditating on God's eight acts in the sequence of six days, Chrysostom desired to restore the faithful from the creation to the Creator: "It is a great good", he said, "to know the creature from the Creator", He shows us the beauty of the creation and God's transparency in his creation, which thus becomes, as it were, a "ladder" to ascend to God in order to know him. To this first step, however, is added a second: this God Creator is also the God of indulgence (*synkatabasis*). We are weak in "climbing", our eyes grow dim. Thus, God becomes an indulgent God who sends to fallen man, foreign man, a letter, Sacred Scripture, so that the creation and Scripture may complete each another. We can decipher creation in the light of Scripture, the letter that God has given to us. God is called a "tender father" (*philostorgios*) (*ibid.*), a healer of souls (*Homily on Genesis*, 40, 3), a mother (*ibid.*) and an affectionate friend (*On Providence* 8, 11-12). But in addition to this second step - first, the

creation as a "ladder" to God, and then, the indulgence of God through a letter which he has given to us, Sacred Scripture - there is a third step. God does not only give us a letter: ultimately, he himself comes down to us, he takes flesh, becomes truly "God-with-us", our brother until his death on a Cross. And to these three steps - God is visible in creation, God gives us a letter, God descends and becomes one of us - a fourth is added at the end. In the Christian's life and action, the vital and dynamic principle is the Holy Spirit (*Pneuma*) who transforms the realities of the world. God enters our very existence through the Holy Spirit and transforms us from within our hearts.

Against this background, in Constantinople itself, John proposed in his continuing *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* the model of the primitive Church (Acts 4: 32-37) as a pattern for society, developing a social "utopia" (almost an "ideal city"). In fact, it was a question of giving the city a soul and a Christian face. In other words, Chrysostom realized that it is not enough to give alms, to help the poor sporadically, but it is necessary to create a new structure, a new model of society; a model based on the outlook of the New Testament. It was this new society that was revealed in the newborn Church. John Chrysostom thus truly became one of the great Fathers of the Church's social doctrine: the old idea of the Greek "polis" gave way to the new idea of a city inspired by Christian faith. With Paul (cf. I Cor 8: 11), Chrysostom upheld the primacy of the individual Christian, of the person as such, even of the slave and the poor person. His project thus corrected the traditional Greek vision of the "polis", the city in which large sectors of the population had no access to the rights of citizenship while in the Christian city all are brothers and sisters with equal rights. The primacy of the person is also a consequence of the fact that it is truly by starting with the person that the city is built, whereas in the Greek "polis" the homeland took precedence over the individual who was totally subordinated to the city as a whole. So it was that a society built on the Christian conscience came into being with Chrysostom. And he tells us that our "polis" [city] is another, "our commonwealth is in heaven" (Phil 3: 20) and our homeland, even on this earth, makes us all equal, brothers and sisters, and binds us to solidarity.

At the end of his life, from his exile on the borders of Armenia, "the most remote place in the world", John, linking up with his first preaching in 386, took up the theme of the plan for humanity that God pursues, which was so dear to him: it is an "indescribable and incomprehensible" plan, but certainly guided lovingly by him (cf. *On Providence*, 2, 6). Of this we are certain. Even if we are unable to unravel the details of our personal and collective history, we know that God's plan is always inspired by his love. Thus, despite his suffering, Chrysostom reaffirmed the discovery that God loves each one of us with an infinite love and therefore desires salvation for us all. For his part, throughout his life the holy Bishop cooperated generously in this salvation, never sparing himself. Indeed, he saw the ultimate end of his existence as that glory of God which - now dying - he left as his last testament: "Glory be to God for all things" (Palladius, *op. cit.*, n. 11).

I extend a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including groups from Britain and Ireland, New Zealand, Thailand, and North America. I greet in particular the new students from the Venerable English College and the priests from Ireland who are taking part in a renewal course here in Rome. May the time that you spend in this city deepen your love for Christ and his Church, and may God's blessings of peace and joy be with you always!

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May St Vincent de Paul's example of charity, which we will commemorate tomorrow, encourage you, dear *young people*, to plan your future as a generous service to your neighbour. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to feel Christ's comfort in our suffering. And may it prompt you, dear *newly-weds*, always to be attentive to the poor in your family.

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