



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 5 December 2007

Saint Chromatius of Aquileia

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the last two Catecheses we made an excursion through the Eastern Churches of Semitic tongue, meditating on [Aphraates the Persian](#) and [Ephrem the Syrian](#). Today, we return to the Latin world, to the North of the Roman Empire with St Chromatius of Aquileia. This Bishop exercised his ministry in the ancient Church of Aquileia, a fervent centre of Christian life located in the Roman Empire's *Decima regione*, the *Venetia et Histria*. In 388 A.D., when Chromatius assumed the Episcopal throne of the city, the local Christian communities had already developed a glorious history of Gospel fidelity. Between the middle of the third century and the early years of the fourth, the persecution of Decius, Valerian and Diocletian had taken a heavy toll of martyrs. Furthermore, the Church of Aquileia, like so many other Churches of that time, had had to contend with the threat of the Arian heresy. Athanasius himself - a standard-bearer of Nicene orthodoxy whom the Arians had banished to exile - had for some time been in Aquileia, where he had taken refuge. Under the guidance of its Bishops, the Christian community withstood the snares of the heresy and reinforced their own attachment to the Catholic faith.

In September 381, Aquileia was the seat of a Synod that gathered about 35 Bishops from the coasts of Africa, the Rhone Valley and the entire *Decima regione*. The Synod intended to eliminate the last remnants of Arianism in the West. Chromatius, a priest, also took part in the Council as *peritus* for Bishop Valerian of Aquileia (370/1 to 387/8). The years around the Synod of 381 were the "Golden Age" of the inhabitants of Aquileia. St Jerome, a native of Dalmatia, and Rufinus of

Concordia, spoke nostalgically of their sojourn in Aquileia (370-73), in that sort of theological cenacle which Jerome did not hesitate to define "*tamquam chorus beatorum*", "like a choir of blessed" (*Cronaca: PL XXVII*, 697-698). It was in this Upper Room - some aspects of which are reminiscent of the community experiences directed by Eusebius of Vercelli and by Augustine - that the most outstanding figures of the Church of the Upper Adriatic were formed.

Chromatius, however, had already learned at home to know and love Christ. Jerome himself spoke of this in terms full of admiration and compared Chromatius' mother to the Prophetess Anna, his two sisters to the Wise Virgins of the Gospel Parable, and Chromatius himself and his brother Eusebius to the young Samuel (cf. *Ep. VII: PL XXII*, 341). Jerome wrote further of Chromatius and Eusebius: "Blessed Chromatius and St Eusebius were brothers by blood, no less than by the identity of their ideals" (*Ep. VIII: PL XXII*, 342).

Chromatius was born in Aquileia in about 345 A.D. He was ordained a deacon, then a priest; finally, he was appointed Bishop of that Church (388). After receiving episcopal ordination from Bishop Ambrose he dedicated himself courageously and energetically to an immense task because of the vast territory entrusted to his pastoral care: the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Aquileia, in fact, stretched from the present-day territories of Switzerland, Bavaria, Austria and Slovenia, as far as Hungary. How well known and highly esteemed Chromatius was in the Church of his time we can deduce from an episode in the life of St John Chrysostom. When the Bishop of Constantinople was exiled from his See, he wrote three letters to those he considered the most important Bishops of the West seeking to obtain their support with the Emperors: he wrote one letter to the Bishop of Rome, the second to the Bishop of Milan and the third to the Bishop of Aquileia, precisely, Chromatius (*Ep. CLV: PG LII*, 702). Those were difficult times also for Chromatius because of the precarious political situation. In all likelihood Chromatius died in exile, in Grado, while he was attempting to escape the incursions of the Barbarians in 407, the same year when Chrysostom also died.

With regard to prestige and importance, Aquileia was the fourth city of the Italian peninsula and the ninth of the Roman Empire. This is another reason that explains why it was a target that attracted both Goths and Huns. In addition to causing serious bereavements and destruction, the invasions of these peoples gravely jeopardized the transmission of the works of the Fathers preserved in the episcopal library, rich in codices. St Chromatius' writings were also dispersed, ending up here and there, and were often attributed to other authors: to John Chrysostom (partly because of the similar beginning of their two names, *Chromatius* and *Chrysostom*); or to Ambrose or Augustine; or even to Jerome, to whom Chromatius had given considerable help in the revision of the text and in the Latin translation of the Bible. The rediscovery of a large part of the work of Chromatius is due to fortunate events, which has made it possible only in recent years to piece together a fairly consistent *corpus* of his writings: more than 40 homilies, 10 of which are fragments, and more than 60 treatises of commentary on Matthew's Gospel.

Chromatius was a wise *teacher* and a zealous *pastor*. His first and main commitment was to listen to the Word, to be able to subsequently proclaim it: he always bases his teaching on the Word of God and constantly returns to it. Certain subjects are particularly dear to him: first of all, the *Trinitarian mystery*, which he contemplated in its revelation throughout the history of salvation. Then, the theme of the *Holy Spirit*: Chromatius constantly reminds the faithful of the presence and action in the life of the Church of the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity. But the holy Bishop returns with special insistence to the *mystery of Christ*. The Incarnate Word is true God and true man: he took on humanity in its totality to endow it with his own divinity. These truths, which he also reaffirmed explicitly in order to counter Arianism, were to end up about 50 years later in the definition of the Council of Chalcedon. The heavy emphasis on Christ's human nature led Chromatius to speak of the *Virgin Mary*. His Mariological doctrine is clear and precise. To him we owe evocative descriptions of the Virgin Most Holy: Mary is the "evangelical Virgin capable of accepting God"; she is the "immaculate and inviolate ewe lamb" who conceived the "Lamb clad in purple" (cf. *Sermo XXIII*, 3: *Scrittori dell'area santambrosiana* 3/1, p. 134). The Bishop of Aquileia often compares the Virgin with the Church: both, in fact, are "virgins" and "mothers". Chromatius developed his *ecclesiology* above all in his commentary on Matthew. These are some of the recurring concepts: the Church is one, she is born from the Blood of Christ; she is a precious garment woven by the Holy Spirit; the Church is where the fact that Christ was born of a Virgin is proclaimed, where brotherhood and harmony flourish. One image of which Chromatius is especially fond is that of the ship in a storm - and his were stormy times, as we have heard: "There is no doubt", the Holy Bishop says, "that this ship represents the Church" (cf. *Tractatus XLII*, 5: *Scrittori dell'area santambrosiana* 3/2, p. 260).

As the zealous pastor that he was, Chromatius was able to speak to his people with a fresh, colourful and incisive language. Although he was not ignorant of the perfect Latin *cursus*, he preferred to use the vernacular, rich in images easy to understand. Thus, for example, drawing inspiration from the sea, he compared on the one hand the natural catching of fish which, caught and landed, die; and on the other, Gospel preaching, thanks to which men and women are saved from the murky waters of death and ushered into true life (cf. *Tractatus XVI*, 3: *Scrittori dell'area santambrosiana* 3/2, p. 106). Again, in the perspective of a good Pastor, during a turbulent period such as his, ravaged by the incursions of Barbarians, he was able to set himself beside the faithful to comfort them and open their minds to trust in God, who never abandons his children.

Lastly, as a conclusion to these reflections, let us include an exhortation of Chromatius which is still perfectly applicable today: "Let us pray to the Lord with all our heart and with all our faith", the Bishop of Aquileia recommends in one of his *Sermons*, "let us pray to him to deliver us from all enemy incursions, from all fear of adversaries. Do not look at our merits but at his mercy, at him who also in the past deigned to set the Children of Israel free, not for their own merits but through his mercy. "May he protect us with his customary merciful love and bring about for us what holy Moses said to the Children of Israel: *The Lord will fight to defend you, and you will be silent*. It is he who fights, it is he who wins the victory.... And so that he may condescend to do so, we must

pray as much as possible. He himself said, in fact, through the mouth of the prophet: *Call on me on the day of tribulation; I will set you free and you will give me glory*" (*Sermo XVI*, 4: *Scrittori dell'area santambrosiana* 3/2, pp. 100-102).

Thus, at the very beginning of the Advent Season, St Chromatius reminds us that Advent is a time of prayer in which it is essential to enter into contact with God. God knows us, he knows me, he knows each one of us, he loves me, he will not abandon me. Let us go forward with this trust in the liturgical season that has just begun.

To special groups

I am pleased to welcome the Marist and Marianist Brothers visiting Rome for a programme of spiritual renewal. I also greet the African-Methodist Choir, with gratitude for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Sweden and the United States, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. We are preparing to celebrate in a few days time the Solemnity of the Immaculate Virgin. May it be she who guides you, dear *young people*, on your way of adherence to Christ. For you, dear *sick people*, may she be a support in your suffering and awaken new hope within you, and guide you, dear *newly-weds*, to increasingly discover Christ's love.

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