



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
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Germanus of Constantinople

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, whom I would like to talk about today, does not belong among the most representative figures of the Greek-speaking world of Eastern Christianity. Yet, his name appears with a certain solemnity in the list of the great champions of sacred images drafted by the Second Council of Nicaea, the seventh Ecumenical Council (787). The Greek Church celebrates his Feast in the liturgy of 12 May. He played an important role in the overall history of the controversy over images during the "Iconoclastic Crisis": he was able to resist effectively the pressures of an Iconoclast Emperor, in other words opposed to icons, such as Leo III.

During the patriarchate of Germanus (715-730) the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, was subjected to a dangerous siege by the Saracens. On that occasion (717-718), a solemn procession was organized in the city displaying the image of the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*, and the relic of the True Cross, to invoke protection for the city from on high. In fact, Constantinople was liberated from the siege. The enemy decided to desist for ever from the idea of establishing their capital in the city that was the symbol of the Christian Empire and the people were extremely grateful for the divine help.

After that event, Patriarch Germanus was convinced that God's intervention must be considered as obvious approval of the devotion shown by the people for the holy icons. However, the Emperor

Leo III, was of the absolute opposite opinion; that very year (717) he was enthroned as the undisputed Emperor in the capital, over which he reigned until 741. After the liberation of Constantinople and after a series of other victories, the Christian Emperor began to show more and more openly his conviction that the consolidation of the Empire must begin precisely with a reordering of the manifestations of faith, with particular reference to the risk of idolatry to which, in his opinion, the people were prone because of their excessive worship of icons.

Patriarch Germanus' appeal to the tradition of the Church and to the effective efficacy of certain images unanimously recognized as "miraculous" were to no avail. The Emperor more and more stubbornly applied his restoration project which provided for the elimination of icons. At a public meeting on 7 January 730, when he openly took a stance against the worship of images, Germanus was in no way ready to comply with the Emperor's will on matters he himself deemed crucial for the Orthodox faith, of which he believed worship and love for images were part. As a consequence, Germanus was forced to resign from the office of Patriarch, condemning himself to exile in a monastery where he died forgotten by almost all. His name reappeared on the occasion of the Second Council of Nicaea (787), when the Orthodox Fathers decided in favour of icons, recognizing the merits of Germanus.

Patriarch Germanus took great care of the liturgical celebrations and, for a certain time, was also believed to have introduced the feast of the *Akathistos*. As is well known, the *Akathistos* is a famous ancient hymn to the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, that came into being in the Byzantine context. Despite the fact that from the theological viewpoint Germanus cannot be described as a great thinker, some of his works had a certain resonance, especially on account of some of his insights concerning *Mariology*. In fact, various of his homilies on Marian topics are extant, and some of them profoundly marked the piety of entire generations of faithful, both in the East and in the West. His splendid *Homilies on the Presentation of Mary at the Temple* are still living testimony of the unwritten tradition of the Christian Churches. Generations of nuns and monks and the members of a great number of institutes of consecrated life continue still today to find in these texts the most precious pearls of spirituality.

Some of Germanus' Mariological texts still give rise to wonder today. They are part of the homilies he gave *In SS. Deiparae dormitionem*, a celebration that corresponds with our Feast of the Assumption. Among these texts Pope Pius XII picked out one that he set like a pearl in his Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), with which he declared Mary's Assumption a Dogma of faith. Pope Pius XII cited this text in the above-mentioned Constitution, presenting it as one of the arguments in favour of the permanent faith of the Church concerning the bodily Assumption of Mary into Heaven. Germanus wrote: "May it never happen Most Holy Mother of God, that Heaven and earth, honoured by your presence, and you, with your departure, leave men and women without your protection? No. It is impossible to think of such things. In fact, just as when you were in the world you did not feel foreign to the realities of Heaven so too after you had emigrated from this world, you were not foreign to the possibility of communicating in spirit with

mankind.... You did not at all abandon those to whom you had guaranteed salvation... in fact, your spirit lives in eternity nor did your flesh suffer the corruption of the tomb. You, O Mother, are close to all and protect all, and although our eyes are unable to see you, we know, O Most Holy One, that you dwell among all of us and make yourself present in the most varied ways.... You (Mary, reveal your whole self, as is written, in your beauty. Your virginal body is entirely holy, entirely chaste, entirely the dwelling place of God so that, even for this reason, it is absolutely incorruptible. It is unchangeable since what was human in it has been taken up in incorruptibility, remaining alive and absolutely glorious, undamaged, and sharing in perfect life. Indeed, it was impossible that the one who had become the vase of God and the living temple of the most holy divinity of the Only Begotten One be enclosed in the sepulchre of the dead. On the other hand, we believe with certainty that you continue to walk with us" (PG 98, coll. 344B-346B, passim).

It has been said that for the Byzantines the decorum of the rhetorical form in preaching and especially in hymns or in the poetic compositions that they call *troparia* is equally important in the liturgical celebration as the beauty of the sacred building in which it takes place. Patriarch Germanus was recognized, in that tradition, as one who made a great contribution to keeping this conviction alive, that is, that the beauty of the words and language must coincide with the beauty of the building and the music.

I quote, to conclude, the inspired words with which Germanus described the Church at the beginning of his small masterpiece: "The Church is the temple of God, a sacred space, a house of prayer, the convocation of people, the Body of Christ.... She is Heaven on earth where the transcendent God dwells as if in his own home and passes through, but she is also an impression made (*antitypos*) of the Crucifixion, the tomb and the Resurrection.... The Church is God's house in which the life-giving mystical sacrifice is celebrated, at the same time the most intimate part of the shrine and sacred grotto. Within her in fact the sepulchre and the table are found, nourishment for the soul and a guarantee of life. In her, lastly, are found those true and proper precious pearls which are the divine dogmas of teaching that the Lord offered directly to his disciples" (PG 98, coll. 384B-385A).

Lastly, the question remains: what does this Saint chronologically and also culturally rather distant from us have to tell us today? I am thinking mainly of three things. The first: there is a certain visibility of God in the world, in the Church, that we must learn to perceive. God has created man in his image, but this image was covered with the scum of so much sin that God almost no longer shines through it. Thus the Son of God was made true man, a perfect image of God: thus in Christ we may also contemplate the Face of God and learn to be true men ourselves, true images of God. Christ invites us to imitate him, to become similar to him, so in every person the Face of God shines out anew. To tell the truth, in the Ten Commandments God forbade the making of images of God, but this was because of the temptations to idolatry to which the believer might be exposed in a context of paganism. Yet when God made himself visible in Christ through the Incarnation, it became legitimate to reproduce the Face of Christ. The holy images teach us to see God

represented in the Face of Christ. After the Incarnation of the Son of God, it therefore became possible to see God in images of Christ and also in the faces of the Saints, in the faces of all people in whom God's holiness shines out.

The second thing is the beauty and dignity of the liturgy. To celebrate the liturgy in the awareness of God's presence, with that dignity and beauty which make a little of his splendour visible, is the commitment of every Christian trained in his faith. The third thing is to love the Church. Precisely with regard to the Church, we men and women are prompted to see above all the sins and the negative side, but with the help of faith, which enables us to see in an authentic way, today and always we can rediscover the divine beauty in her. It is in the Church that God is present, offers himself to us in the Holy Eucharist and remains present for adoration. In the Church God speaks to us, in the Church God "walks beside us" as St Germanus said. In the Church we receive God's forgiveness and learn to forgive.

Let us pray God to teach us to see his presence and his beauty in the Church, to see his presence in the world and to help us too to be transparent to his light.

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Lastly my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. The Liturgy today celebrates St Catherine of Siena, a Dominican Virgin and Doctor of the Church as well as Co-Patroness of Italy, together with St Francis of Assisi.

Dear *young people*, especially you, altar-servers of the Roman Parish of "Santi Antonio e Annibale Maria", be in love with Christ as Catherine was, in order to follow him with fervour and faithfulness. You, dear *sick people*, immerse your sufferings in the mystery of the love of the Redeemer's Blood, contemplated with special devotion by the great Siennese Saint. And you, dear *newly weds*, with your reciprocal and faithful love, may you be an eloquent sign of Christ's love for the Church.

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Canada and the United States. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the Lord's Easter blessings of joy and peace!

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