



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*  
*Wednesday, 3 June 2009*

***Rabanus Maurus***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak of a truly extraordinary figure of the Latin West: Rabanus Maurus, a monk. Together with men such as [Isidore of Seville](#), the [Venerable Bede](#) and [Ambrose Autpert](#) of whom I have already spoken in previous Catecheses, during the centuries of the so-called "High Middle Ages" he was able to preserve the contact with the great culture of the ancient scholars and of the Christian Fathers. Often remembered as the "*praeceptor Germaniae*", Rabanus Maurus was extraordinarily prolific. With his absolutely exceptional capacity for work, he perhaps made a greater contribution than anyone else to keeping alive that theological, exegetic and spiritual culture on which successive centuries were to draw. He was referred to by great figures belonging to the monastic world such as Peter Damian, Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as by an ever increasing number of "*clerics*" of the secular clergy who gave life to one of the most beautiful periods of the fruitful flourishing of human thought in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Born in Mainz in about 780, Rabanus entered the monastery at a very early age. He was nicknamed "Maurus" after the young St Maur who, according to *Book II of the Dialogues* of St Gregory the Great, was entrusted by his parents, Roman nobles, to the Abbot Benedict of Norcia. Alone this precocious insertion of Rabanus as "*puer oblatus*" in the Benedictine monastic world and the benefits he drew from it for his own human, cultural and spiritual growth, were to provide an interesting glimpse not only of the life of monks and of the Church, but also of the whole of society of his time, usually described as "Carolingian". About them or perhaps about himself, Rabanus Maurus wrote: "There are some who have had the good fortune to be introduced to the knowledge of Scripture from a tender age ("*a cunabulis suis*") and who were so well-nourished

with the food offered to them by Holy Church as to be fit for promotion, with the appropriate training, to the highest of sacred Orders" (PL 107, col. 419 BC).

The extraordinary culture for which Rabanus Maurus was distinguished soon brought him to the attention of the great of his time. He became the advisor of princes. He strove to guarantee the unity of the Empire and, at a broader cultural level, never refused to give those who questioned him a carefully considered reply, which he found preferably in the Bible or in the texts of the Holy Fathers. First elected Abbot of the famous Monastery of Fulda and then appointed Archbishop of Mainz, his native city, this did not stop him from pursuing his studies, showing by the example of his life that it is possible to be at the same time available to others without depriving oneself of the appropriate time for reflection, study and meditation. Thus Rabanus Maurus was exegete, philosopher, poet, pastor and man of God. The Dioceses of Fulda, Mainz, Limburg and Breslau (Wrocław) venerate him as a saint or blessed. His works fill at least six volumes of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*. It is likely that we are indebted to him for one of the most beautiful hymns known to the Latin Church, the "*Veni Creator Spiritus*", an extraordinary synthesis of Christian pneumatology. In fact, Rabanus' first theological work is expressed in the form of poetry and had as its subject the mystery of the Holy Cross in a book entitled: "*De laudibus Sanctae Crucis*", conceived in such a way as to suggest not only a conceptual content but also more exquisitely artistic stimuli, by the use of both poetic and pictorial forms within the same manuscript codex. Suggesting the image of the Crucified Christ between the lines of his writing, he says, for example: "This is the image of the Saviour who, with the position of his limbs, makes sacred for us the most salubrious, gentle and loving form of the Cross, so that by believing in his Name and obeying his commandments we may obtain eternal life thanks to his Passion. However, every time we raise our eyes to the Cross, let us remember the one who died for us to save us from the powers of darkness, accepting death to make us heirs to eternal life" (*Lib. 1, fig. 1, PL 107 col. 151 C*).

This method of combining all the arts, the intellect, the heart and the senses, which came from the East, was to experience a great development in the West, reaching unparalleled heights in the miniature codices of the Bible and in other works of faith and art that flourished in Europe until the invention of printing and beyond. In Rabanus Maurus, in any case, is shown an extraordinary awareness of the need to involve, in the experience of faith, not only the mind and the heart, but also the senses through those other aspects of aesthetic taste and human sensitivity that lead man to benefit from the truth with his whole self, "mind, soul and body". This is important: faith is not only thought but also touches the whole of our being. Since God became Man in flesh and blood, since he entered the tangible world, we must seek and encounter God in all the dimensions of our being. Thus the reality of God, through faith, penetrates our being and transforms it. This is why Rabanus Maurus focused his attention above all on the Liturgy as a synthesis of all the dimensions of our perception of reality. This intuition of Rabanus Maurus makes it extraordinarily up to date. Also famous among his opus are the "*Hymns*", suggested for use especially in liturgical celebrations. In fact, since Rabanus was primarily a monk, his interest in the liturgical celebration was taken for granted. However, he did not devote himself to the art of poetry as an end in itself

but, rather, used art and every other form of erudition as a means for deepening knowledge of the word of God. He therefore sought with great application and rigour to introduce his contemporaries, especially ministers (Bishops, priests and deacons), to an understanding of the profoundly theological and spiritual meaning of all the elements of the liturgical celebration.

He thus sought to understand and to present to others the theological meanings concealed in the rites, drawing from the Bible and from the tradition of the Fathers. For the sake of honesty and to give greater weight to his explanations, he did not hesitate to indicate the Patristic sources to which he owed his knowledge. Nevertheless he used them with freedom and with careful discernment, continuing the development of patristic thought. At the end of the *"Epistola prima"*, addressed to a "chorbishop" of the Diocese of Mainz, for example, after answering the requests for clarification concerning the behaviour to adopt in the exercise of pastoral responsibility, he continues, "We have written all these things for you as we deduced them from the Sacred Scriptures and the canons of the Fathers. Yet, most holy man, may you take your decisions as you think best, case by case, seeking to temper your evaluation in such a way as to guarantee discretion in all things because it is the mother of all the virtues" (*Epistulae*, I, PL 112, col. 1510 C). Thus the continuity of the Christian faith which originates in the word of God becomes visible; yet it is always alive, develops and is expressed in new ways, ever consistent with the whole construction, with the whole edifice of faith.

Since an integral part of liturgical celebration is the word of God Rabanus Maurus dedicated himself to it with the greatest commitment throughout his life. He produced appropriate exegetic explanations for almost all the biblical books of the Old and New Testament, with clearly pastoral intentions that he justified with words such as these: "I have written these things... summing up the explanations and suggestions of many others, not only in order to offer a service to the poor reader, who may not have many books at his disposal, but also to make it easier for those who in many things do not succeed in entering in depth into an understanding of the meanings discovered by the Fathers" (*Commentariorum in Matthaeum praefatio*, PL 107, col. 727 D). In fact, in commenting on the biblical texts he drew amply from the ancient Fathers, with special preference for Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

His outstanding pastoral sensitivity later led him to occupy himself above all with one of the problems most acutely felt by the faithful and sacred ministers of his time: that of Penance. Indeed, he compiled the *"Penitenziari"* this is what he called them in which, according to the sensibility of his day, sins and the corresponding punishments were listed, using as far as possible reasons found in the Bible, in the decisions of the Councils and in Papal Decretals. The "Carolingians" also used these texts in their attempt to reform the Church and society. Corresponding with the same pastoral intentions, were works such as *"De disciplina ecclesiastica"* and *"De institutione clericorum"*, in which, drawing above all from Augustine, Rabanus explained to the simple and to the clergy of his diocese the basic elements of the Christian faith: they were like little catechisms.

I would like to end the presentation of this great "churchman" by quoting some of his words in which his basic conviction is clearly reflected: "Those who are negligent in contemplation (*"qui vacare Deo negligit"*), deprive themselves of the vision of God's light; then those who let themselves be indiscreetly invaded by worries and allow their thoughts to be overwhelmed by the tumult of worldly things condemn themselves to the absolute impossibility of penetrating the secrets of the invisible God" (*Lib I, PL 112, col. 1263 A*). I think that Rabanus Maurus is also addressing these words to us today: in periods of work, with its frenetic pace, and in holiday periods we must reserve moments for God. We must open our lives to him, addressing to him a thought, a reflection, a brief prayer, and above all we must not forget Sunday as the Lord's Day, the day of the Liturgy, in order to perceive God's beauty itself in the beauty of our churches, in our sacred music and in the word of God, letting him enter our being. Only in this way does our life become great, become true life.

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### **Greetings to special groups:**

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, the Philippines and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the Sisters of the Society Devoted to the Sacred Heart. I also greet the many student groups present. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I now address an affectionate greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear young people, next Sunday we shall be celebrating the Solemnity of the Blessed Trinity. I hope that contemplation of the Trinitarian mystery will introduce you increasingly into Divine Love. Dear *sick people*, through Baptism the Blessed Trinity is present in your life. May it be a support for you so that you may do the Lord's will in every circumstance. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you always find inspiration in Trinitarian communion in order to form a Christian family in which you are granted to experience, in reciprocal love, the joy of prayer and of accepting life.

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