



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 14 October 2009*

[\[Video\]](#)

### ***Peter the Venerable***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Peter the Venerable who I would like to present at today's Catechesis takes us back to the famous Abbey of Cluny, to its *decor* (decorum) and *nitor* (clarity) to use terms that recur in the Cluny texts a decorum and splendour that were admired especially in the beauty of the liturgy, a privileged way for reaching God. Even more than these aspects, however, Peter's personality recalls the holiness of the great abbots of Cluny: in Cluny "there was not a single abbot who was not a saint", Pope Gregory VII said in 1080. These holy men include Peter the Venerable who possessed more or less all the virtues of his predecessors although, under him, in comparison with the new Orders such as *Cîteaux*, Cluny began to feel some symptoms of crisis. Peter is a wonderful example of an ascetic strict with himself and understanding of others. He was born in about 1094 in the French region of Auvergne, he entered the Monastery of Sauxillanges as a child and became a monk there and then prior. In 1122 he was elected Abbot of Cluny and remained in this office until he died, on Christmas day 1156, as he had wished. "A lover of peace", his biographer Rudolph wrote, "he obtained peace in the glory of God on the day of peace" (*Vita*, I, 17; *PL* 189, 28).

All who knew him praised his refined meekness, his serene equilibrium, rectitude, loyalty, reasonableness and his special approach to mediation. "It is in my nature" he wrote, "to be particularly inclined to indulgence; I am urged to this by my habit of forgiveness. I am accustomed

to toleration and forgiveness" (*Ep.* 192, in: *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 446). He said further: "With those who hate peace let us always seek to be peacemakers" (*Ep.* 100, *loc. cit.*, p. 261). And he wrote of himself: "I am not the type who is discontented with his lot... whose mind is always tormented by anxiety or doubt and who complains that everyone else is resting while they are the only ones working" (*Ep.* 182, p. 425). With a sensitive and affectionate nature, he could combine love for the Lord with tenderness to his family members, especially his mother, and to his friends. He cultivated friendship, especially with his monks who used to confide in him, certain that they would be heard and understood. According to his biographer's testimony: "he did not look down on anyone and never turned anyone away" (*Vita*, 1, 3: *PL* 189, 19); "he appeared friendly to all; in his innate goodness he was open to all" (*ibid.*, 1,1: *PL*. 189, 17).

We could say that this holy Abbot also sets an example to the monks and Christians of our day, marked by a frenetic pace, when episodes of intolerance, incommunicability, division and conflict are common. His testimony invites us to be able to combine love of God with love of neighbour and not to tire of building relations of brotherhood and reconciliation. Effectively Peter the Venerable acted in this way. He found himself in charge of the Monastery of Cluny in years that were far from tranquil for various reasons, both within the Abbey and outside it, and managed to be at the same time both strict and profoundly human. He used to say: "One may obtain more from a man by tolerating him than by irritating him with reproach" (*Ep.* 172, *loc. cit.*, p. 409). By virtue of his office he had to undertake frequent journeys to Italy, England, Germany and Spain. He found it hard to be wrenched from the quiet of contemplation. He confessed: "I go from one place to the next, I hurry, I am anxious, I am tormented, dragged here and there: my mind now on my own affairs and now on those of others, not without great mental agitation" (*Ep.* 91, *loc. cit.*, p. 233). Although he was obliged to navigate between the powers and nobles who surrounded Cluny, he succeeded in preserving his habitual calm, thanks to his sense of measure, magnanimity and realism. Among the important figures with whom he came into contact was Bernard of Clairvaux with whom he maintained a relationship of increasing friendship, despite the differences of their temperaments and approaches. Bernard described him as: "an important man, occupied with important affairs" and held him in high esteem (*Ep.* 147, ed. *Scriptorium Claravallense*, Milan 1986, VI/1, pp. 658-660), while Peter the Venerable described Bernard as a "lamp of the Church" (*Ep.* 164, p. 396), and a "strong and splendid pillar of the monastic order and of the whole Church" (*Ep.* 175, p. 418).

With a lively sense of Church, Peter the Venerable affirmed that the vicissitudes of the Christian people must be felt in the "depths of the heart" by those who will be numbered "among the members of Christ's Body" (*Ep.* 164, *ibid.*, p. 397). And he added: "those who do not smart from the wounds of Christ's body are not nourished by the Spirit of Christ", wherever they may be produced (*ibid.*). In addition, he also showed care and concern for people outside the Church, in particular Jews and Muslims: to increase knowledge of the latter he provided for the translation of the Qur'an. A historian recently remarked on this subject: "In the midst of the intransigence of

medieval people, even the greatest among them, we admire here a sublime example of the sensitivity to which Christian charity leads" (J. Leclercq, *Pietro il Venerabile*, Jaca Book, 1991, p. 189). Other aspects of Christian life dear to him were love for the Eucharist and devotion to the Virgin Mary. On the Blessed Sacrament he has left passages that constitute "one of the masterpieces of Eucharistic literature of all time" (*ibid.*, p. 267) and on the Mother of God he wrote illuminating reflections, contemplating her ever closely related to Jesus the Redeemer and his work of salvation. It suffices to present his inspired prayer: "Hail, Blessed Virgin, who put execration to flight. Hail, Mother of the Most High, Bride of the meekest Lamb. You have defeated the serpent, you crushed its head, when the God you bore destroyed it.... Shining Star of the East who dispelled the shadows of the west. Dawn who precedes the sun, day that knows no night.... Pray God who was born of you to dissolve our sin and, after pardoning it, to grant us his grace and his glory" (*Carmina*, PL 189, 1018-1019).

Peter the Venerable also had a predilection for literary activity and a gift for it. He noted his reflections, persuaded of the importance of using the pen as if it were a plough, to "to scatter the seed of the Word on paper" (*Ep.* 20, p. 38). Although he was not a systematic theologian, he was a great investigator of God's mystery. His theology is rooted in prayer, especially in liturgical prayer, and among the mysteries of Christ he preferred the Transfiguration which prefigures the Resurrection. It was Peter himself who introduced this feast at Cluny, composing a special office for it that mirrors the characteristic theological devotion of Peter and of the Cluniac Order, which was focused entirely on contemplation of the glorious Face (*gloriosa facies*) of Christ, finding in it the reasons for that ardent joy which marked his spirit and shone out in the monastery's liturgy.

Dear brothers and sisters, this holy monk is certainly a great example of monastic holiness, nourished from the sources of the Benedictine tradition. For him, the ideal of the monk consists in "adhering tenaciously to Christ" (*Ep.* 53, *loc. cit.*, p. 161), in a cloistered life distinguished by "monastic humility" (*ibid.*) and hard work (*Ep.* 77, *loc. cit.*, p. 211) as well as an atmosphere of silent contemplation and constant praise of God. The first and most important occupation of the monk, according to Peter of Cluny, is the solemn celebration of the Divine Office "a heavenly action and the most useful of all" (*Statutes*, I, 1026) to be accompanied by reading, meditation, personal prayer and penance observed with discretion (cf. *Ep.* 20, *loc. cit.*, p. 40). In this way the whole of life is pervaded by profound love of God and love of others, a love that is expressed in sincere openness to neighbour, in forgiveness and in the quest for peace. We might say, to conclude, that if this lifestyle, combined with daily work, was the monk's ideal for St Benedict, it also concerns all of us and can be to a large extent the lifestyle of the Christian who wants to become an authentic disciple of Christ, characterized precisely by tenacious adherence to him and by humility, diligence and the capacity for forgiveness and peace.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the pupils and staff from St Andrew's High School, Carntyne, Glasgow, and other school and university groups from England and Norway. May your visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear friends, tomorrow we shall be celebrating the Feast of St Teresa of Avila, Doctor of the Church. May this great Saint witness to you, dear *young people*, that authentic love cannot be separated from truth: may she help you, dear *sick people*, to understand that the Cross of Christ is a mystery of love that redeems human suffering. For you, dear *newlyweds*, may she be a model of fidelity to God, who entrusts a special mission to each one.

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