



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 18 November 2009*

***The Cathedral from the Romanesque to the Gothic Architecture:  
The Theological Background***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Catecheses of the past few weeks I have presented several aspects of medieval theology. The Christian faith, however, deeply rooted in the men and women of those centuries, did not only give rise to masterpieces of theological literature, thought and faith. It also inspired one of the loftiest expressions of universal civilization: the cathedral, the true glory of the Christian Middle Ages. Indeed, for about three centuries, from the beginning of the 11th century Europe experienced extraordinary artistic creativity and fervour. An ancient chronicler described the enthusiasm and the hard-working spirit of those times in these words: "It happens that throughout the world, but especially in Italy and in Gaul, people began rebuilding churches although many had no need of such restoration because they were still in good condition. "It was like a competition between one people and another; one might have believed that the world, shaking off its rags and tatters, wanted to be reclad throughout in the white mantle of new churches. In short, all these cathedral churches, a large number of monastic churches and even village oratories, were restored by the faithful at that time" (Rodolphus Glaber, *Historiarum*, libri quinque, 3, 4).

Various factors contributed to this rebirth of religious architecture. First of all more favourable historical conditions, such as greater political stability, accompanied by a constant increase in the population and the gradual development of the cities, trade and wealth. Furthermore, architects found increasingly complicated technical solutions to increase the size of buildings, at the same

time guaranteeing them both soundness and majesty. It was mainly thanks to the enthusiasm and spiritual zeal of monasticism, at the height of its expansion, that abbey churches were built in which the Liturgy might be celebrated with dignity and solemnity. They became the destination of continuous pilgrimages where the faithful, attracted by the veneration of saints' relics, could pause in prayer. So it was that the Romanesque churches and cathedrals came into being. They were characterized by the longitudinal development, in length, of the aisles, in order to accommodate numerous faithful. They were very solid churches with thick walls, stone vaults and simple, spare lines. An innovation was the introduction of sculptures. Because Romanesque churches were places for monastic prayer and for the worship of the faithful, rather than being concerned with technical perfection the sculptors turned their attention in particular to the educational dimension. Since it was necessary to inspire in souls strong impressions, sentiments that could persuade them to shun vice and evil and to practise virtue and goodness, the recurrent theme was the portrayal of Christ as Universal Judge surrounded by figures of the Apocalypse. It was usually the portals of the Romanesque churches which displayed these figures, to emphasize that Christ is the Door that leads to Heaven. On crossing the threshold of the sacred building, the faithful entered a space and time different from that of their ordinary life. Within the church, believers in a sovereign, just and merciful Christ in the artists' intention could enjoy in anticipation eternal beatitude in the celebration of the liturgy and of devotional acts carried out in the sacred building.

In the 12th and 13th centuries another kind of architecture for sacred buildings spread from the north of France: the Gothic. It had two new characteristics in comparison with the Romanesque, a soaring upward movement and luminosity. Gothic cathedrals show a synthesis of faith and art harmoniously expressed in the fascinating universal language of beauty which still elicits wonder today. By the introduction of vaults with pointed arches supported by robust pillars, it was possible to increase their height considerably. The upward thrust was intended as an invitation to prayer and at the same time was itself a prayer. Thus the Gothic cathedral intended to express in its architectural lines the soul's longing for God. In addition, by employing the new technical solutions, it was possible to make openings in the outer walls and to embellish them with stained-glass windows. In other words the windows became great luminous images, very suitable for instructing the people in faith. In them scene by scene the life of a saint, a parable or some other biblical event were recounted. A cascade of light poured through the stained-glass upon the faithful to tell them the story of salvation and to involve them in this story.

Another merit of Gothic cathedrals is that the whole Christian and civil community participated in their building and decoration in harmonious and complementary ways. The lowly and the powerful, the illiterate and the learned; all participated because in this common house all believers were instructed in the faith. Gothic sculpture in fact has made cathedrals into "stone Bibles", depicting Gospel episodes and illustrating the content of the liturgical year, from the Nativity to the glorification of the Lord. In those centuries too, the perception of the Lord's humanity became ever more widespread and the sufferings of his Passion were represented realistically: the suffering Christ (*Christus patiens*) an image beloved by all and apt to inspire devotion and repentance for

sins. Nor were Old Testament figures lacking; thus to the faithful who went to the cathedral their histories became familiar as part of the one common history of salvation. With faces full of beauty, gentleness and intelligence, Gothic sculpture of the 13th century reveals a happy and serene religious sense, glad to show a heartfelt filial devotion to the Mother of God, sometimes seen as a young woman, smiling and motherly, but mainly portrayed as the Queen of Heaven and earth, powerful and merciful. The faithful who thronged the Gothic cathedrals also liked to find there, expressed in works of art, saints, models of Christian life and intercessors with God. And there was no shortage of the "secular" scenes of life, thus, here and there, there are depictions of work in the fields, of the sciences and arts. All was oriented and offered to God in the place in which the Liturgy was celebrated. We may understand better the meaning attributed to a Gothic cathedral by reflecting on the text of the inscription engraved on the central portal of Saint-Denis in Paris: "Passerby, who is stirred to praise the beauty of these doors, do not let yourself be dazzled by the gold or by the magnificence, but rather by the painstaking work. Here a famous work shines out, but may Heaven deign that this famous work that shines make spirits resplendent so that, with the luminous truth, they may walk toward the true light, where Christ is the true door".

Dear brothers and sisters, I would now like to emphasize two elements of Romanesque and Gothic art that are also helpful to us. The first: the masterpieces of art created in Europe in past centuries are incomprehensible unless one takes into account the religious spirit that inspired them. Marc Chagall, an artist who has always witnessed to the encounter between aesthetics and faith, wrote that "For centuries painters dipped their brushes into that colourful alphabet which was the Bible". When faith, celebrated in the Liturgy in a special way, encounters art, it creates a profound harmony because each can and wishes to speak of God, making the Invisible visible. I would like to share this encounter with artists on 21 November, renewing to them the proposal of friendship between Christian spirituality and art that my venerable Predecessors hoped for, especially the Servants of God [Paul VI](#) and [John Paul II](#). The second element: the strength of the Romanesque style and the splendour of the Gothic cathedrals remind us that the *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, is a privileged and fascinating path on which to approach the Mystery of God. What is the beauty that writers, poets, musicians, and artists contemplate and express in their language other than the reflection of the splendour of the eternal Word made flesh? Then St Augustine says: "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be controlled, the invisible souls controlling them. Question all these things. They all answer you, "Here we are, look; we're beautiful!" Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable?" (*Sermo CCXLI, 2: PL 38, 1134*).

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord help us to rediscover the way of beauty as one of the

itineraries, perhaps the most attractive and fascinating, on which to succeed in encountering and loving God.

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### To special groups

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking pilgrims at today's Audience, especially the board members of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations. Upon you all I cordially invoke God's abundant Blessings!

I now address a cordial greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I am pleased to welcome the Cardinals, Bishops and all the members of the Plenary Assembly of the [Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples](#), headed by Cardinal Ivan Dias. Your presence gives me the opportunity to renew to each one the expression of my deep gratitude for the generous commitment with which you work to spread the Gospel message. I entrust your Plenary Assembly to the protection of Mary Most Holy, Queen of Apostles, invoking her maternal help upon all who are involved in missionary action in every corner of the earth.

Lastly I greet the young people, the sick and the newlyweds. In today's Liturgy, we are celebrating the Dedication of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican and that of [St Paul on the Ostian Way](#). This celebration offers us the opportunity to shed light on the significance and value of the Church. Dear young people, love the Church and cooperate enthusiastically in building her up.

Dear sick people, live out the offering of your suffering as a precious contribution to the spiritual growth of the Christian communities. And may you, dear newlyweds, be a living sign of Christ's love in the world.

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