



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 30 December 2009

[\[Video\]](#)

Peter Lombard

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

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At this last Audience of the year I would like to speak to you about Peter Lombard: he was a theologian who lived in the 12th century and enjoyed great fame because one of his works, entitled the *Sentences*, was used as a theological manual for many centuries.

So who was Peter Lombard? Although the information on his life is scarce it is possible to reconstruct the essential lines of his biography. He was born between the 11th and 12th centuries near Novara, in Northern Italy, in a region that once belonged to the Lombards. For this very reason he was nicknamed "the Lombard". He belonged to a modest family, as we may deduce from the letter of introduction that Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to Gilduin, Superior of the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, asking him to give free accommodation to Peter who wanted to go to that city in order to study. In fact, even in the Middle Ages not only nobles or the rich might study and acquire important roles in ecclesial and social life but also people of humble origin such as, for example, Gregory VII, the Pope who stood up to the Emperor Henry VI, or Maurice of Sully, the Archbishop of Paris who commissioned the building of Notre-Dame and who was the son of a poor peasant.

Peter Lombard began his studies in Bologna and then went to Rheims and lastly to Paris. From 1140 he taught at the prestigious school of Notre-Dame. Esteemed and appreciated as a

theologian, eight years later he was charged by Pope Eugene ii to examine the doctrine of Gilbert de la Porrée that was giving rise to numerous discussions because it was held to be not wholly orthodox. Having become a priest, he was appointed Bishop of Paris in 1159, a year before his death in 1160.

Like all theology teachers of his time, Peter also wrote discourses and commentaries on Sacred Scripture. His masterpiece, however, consists of the four Books of the *Sentences*. This is a text which came into being for didactic purposes. According to the theological method in use in those times, it was necessary first of all to know, study and comment on the thought of the Fathers of the Church and of the other writers deemed authoritative. Peter therefore collected a very considerable amount of documentation, which consisted mainly of the teachings of the great Latin Fathers, especially St Augustine, and was open to the contribution of contemporary theologians. Among other things, he also used an encyclopedia of Greek theology which had only recently become known to the West: *The Orthodox faith*, composed by St John Damascene. The great merit of Peter Lombard is to have organized all the material that he had collected and chosen with care, in a systematic and harmonious framework. In fact one of the features of theology is to organize the patrimony of faith in a unitive and orderly way. Thus he distributed the sentences, that is, the Patristic sources on various arguments, in four books. In the first book he addresses God and the Trinitarian mystery; in the second, the work of the Creation, sin and Grace; in the third, the Mystery of the Incarnation and the work of Redemption with an extensive exposition on the virtues. The fourth book is dedicated to the sacraments and to the last realities, those of eternal life, or *Novissimi*. The overall view presented includes almost all the truths of the Catholic faith. The concise, clear vision and clear, orderly schematic and ever consistent presentation explain the extraordinary success of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. They enabled students to learn reliably and gave the educators and teachers who used them plenty of room for acquiring deeper knowledge. A Franciscan theologian, Alexandre of Hales, of the next generation, introduced into the *Sentences* a division that facilitated their study and consultation. Even the greatest of the 13th-century theologians, Albert the Great, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and Thomas Aquinas began their academic activity by commenting on the four books of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, enriching them with their reflections. Lombard's text was the book in use at all schools of theology until the 16th century.

I would like to emphasize how the organic presentation of faith is an indispensable requirement. In fact, the individual truths of faith illuminate each other and, in their total and unitive vision appears the harmony of God's plan of salvation and the centrality of the Mystery of Christ. After the example of Peter Lombard, I invite all theologians and priests always to keep in mind the whole vision of the Christian doctrine, to counter today's risks of fragmentation and the debasement of the single truths. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as well as the *Compendium* of this same Catechism, offer us exactly this full picture of Christian Revelation, to be accepted with faith and gratitude. However I would like to encourage the individual faithful and the Christian communities to make the most of these instruments to know and to deepen the content of our faith. It will thus

appear to us as a marvellous symphony that speaks to us of God and of his love and asks of us firm adherence and an active response.

To get an idea of the interest that the reading of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* still inspires today I propose two examples. Inspired by St Augustine's Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Peter wonders why woman was created from man's rib and not from his head or his feet. And Peter explains: "She was formed neither as a dominator nor a slave of man but rather as his companion" (*Sentences* 3, 18, 3). Then, still on the basis of the Patristic teaching he adds: "The mystery of Christ and of the Church is represented in this act. Just as, in fact, woman was formed from Adam's rib while he slept, so the Church was born from the sacraments that began to flow from the side of Christ, asleep on the Cross, that is, from the blood and water with which we are redeemed from sin and cleansed of guilt" (*Sentences* 3, 18, 4). These are profound reflections that still apply today when the theology and spirituality of Christian marriage have considerably deepened the analogy with the spousal relationship of Christ and his Church.

In another passage in one of his principal works, Peter Lombard, treating the merits of Christ, asks himself: "Why, then does [Christ] wish to suffer and die, if his virtues were sufficient to obtain for himself all the merits?". His answer is incisive and effective: "For you, not for himself!". He then continues with another question and another answer, which seem to reproduce the discussions that went on during the lessons of medieval theology teachers: "And in what sense did he suffer and die for me? So that his Passion and his death might be an example and cause for you. An example of virtue and humility, a cause of glory and freedom; an example given by God, obedient unto death; a cause of your liberation and your beatitude" (*Sentences* 3, 18, 5).

Among the most important contributions offered by Peter Lombard to the history of theology, I would like to recall his treatise on the sacraments, of which he gave what I would call a definitive definition: "precisely what is a sign of God's grace and a visible form of invisible grace, in such a way that it bears its image and its cause is called a sacrament in the proper sense" (4, 1, 4). With this definition Peter Lombard grasps the essence of the sacraments: they are a cause of grace, they are truly able to communicate divine life. Successive theologians never again departed from this vision and were also to use the distinction between the material and the formal element introduced by the "Master of the Sentences", as Peter Lombard was known. The material element is the tangible visible reality, the formal element consists of the words spoken by the minister. For a complete and valid celebration of the sacraments both are essential: matter, the reality with which the Lord visibly touches us and the word that conveys the spiritual significance. In Baptism, for example, the material element is the water that is poured on the head of the child and the formal element is the formula: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Peter the Lombard, moreover, explained that the sacraments objectively transmit divine grace and they are seven: Baptism, the Eucharist, Penance, the Unction of the sick, Orders and Matrimony (cf. *Sentences* 4, 2, 1).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, it is important to recognize how precious and indispensable for every Christian is the sacramental life in which the Lord transmits this matter in the community of the Church, and touches and transforms us. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, the sacraments are "powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit" (n. 1116). In this Year for Priests which we are celebrating I urge priests, especially ministers in charge of souls, to have an intense sacramental life themselves in the first place in order to be of help to the faithful. May the celebration of the sacraments be impressed with dignity and decorum, encourage personal recollection and community participation, the sense of God's presence and missionary zeal. The sacraments are the great treasure of the Church and it is the task of each one of us to celebrate them with spiritual profit. In them an ever amazing event touches our lives: Christ, through the visible signs, comes to us, purifies us, transforms us and makes us share in his divine friendship.

Dear friends, we have come to the end of this year and to the threshold of the New Year. I hope that the friendship of Our Lord Jesus Christ will accompany you every day of this year that is about to begin. May Christ's friendship be our light and guide, helping us to be people of peace, of his peace. Happy New Year to you all!

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to greet the pilgrimage groups from Ireland, Switzerland and the United States of America, and I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, I invoke the joy and peace of Jesus Christ, our Newborn Saviour!

I now greet the Italian-speaking pilgrims and, in particular, the *young people*, the *sick*, and the couples of *newlyweds*, expressing the wish that for all the new year will be peaceful and rich in every desired good.

Dear *young people*, especially you Scouts from Soviore, may you live the New Year as a precious gift, striving to build your lives in the light of the truth that shines out from the holy grotto of Bethlehem. May you *sick people* be heralds of the hidden riches of the mystery of suffering that in Christ became the event of Redemption. May you, *newlyweds*, be able to build a family that is truly a Church in miniature and that is always able to proclaim with its words and example the Good News brought by the Angels to human beings beloved by God.

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