

"Imitate Christ, the ideal for every Christian"

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A MAN OF ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

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In his catechesis during this morning's general audience, Benedict XVI turned his attention to St. Bonaventure who, he said, "makes me feel a certain nostalgia because, as a young scholar, my research focused on this author, who is particularly dear to me".

Bonaventure, who was born around the year 1217 in the Italian town of Bagnoregio and died in 1274, was one of the great Christian figures who contributed to the "harmony between faith and culture" in thirteenth-century Europe. He was "a man of action and contemplation, of profound piety and prudent government".

Baptised with the name of Giovanni da Fidanza, he suffered an illness during childhood from which he nearly died, but his mother entrusted him to the recently-canonised St. Francis of Assisi and the young Giovanni recovered. This event marked his whole life. During his education in Paris, where he studied theology, he decided to enter a Franciscan convent and took the name of Bonaventure. In the first years of his religious life he stood out for his knowledge of Sacred Scripture, the 'Sentences' of Peter Lombard, and other great theologians of his age.

Bonaventure's book entitled "Evangelical Perfection" was his response to critics of the Minor Orders who questioned their right to teach in universities and even the authenticity of their consecrated life. In that work the saint showed "how the Minor Orders, and especially the Friars Minor, by practicing the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, were in fact following the counsels of the Gospel itself", the Pope explained.

"Over and above these historical circumstances, Bonaventure's teachings in this book and in his own life still retain all their validity", he said. "The Church is enlightened and beautified by the faithfulness to their vocation of these sons and daughters of hers, who not only put the evangelical precepts into practice but, by God's grace, are called to observe the evangelical counsels and thus bear witness - with their poor, chaste and obedient lifestyle - to the fact that the Gospel is a source of joy and perfection".

When in 1257 Bonaventure was elected minister general of his order, the Franciscans numbered more than 30,000; most of them were in Europe but they also had a presence in North Africa, the Middle East and China. "It was necessary", said the Holy Father, "to consolidate this growth and, especially, to give it a unity of action and spirit, in complete faithfulness to the charism of St. Francis. In fact, various ways of interpreting the saint of Assisi's message had arisen among his followers and there was a real risk of internal division".

In order to preserve the saint's authentic charism, his life and teachings, Bonaventure "zealously gathered documents concerning Francis and carefully listened to the recollections of those who had known him personally". Thus the "Legenda Maior" came into being, which is considered the most complete biography of St. Francis.

Bonaventure presents Francis as "a man who passionately sought Christ. With the love that leads to imitation, he entirely conformed himself to Him. Bonaventure indicated this as a living ideal for all the followers of St. Francis.

"Such an ideal, which remains valid for all Christians, yesterday, today and always, was also suggested as a programme for the Church in the third millennium by my venerable predecessor John Paul II", Pope Benedict added.

Almost at the end of his life, Bonaventure was consecrated a bishop and appointed a cardinal by Pope Gregory X, who entrusted him with the preparations for the Council of Lyons which sought to reunify the Latin and Greek Churches. However Bonaventure never saw the results of his labours because he died while the council was still underway.

The Pope concluded his reflections with a call to take up the heritage of this saint and doctor of the Church, who "reminds us of the meaning of our lives with the following words: 'On earth we can contemplate the immensity of divine things by reason and admiration; in the heavenly homeland, on the other hand, we can view them, when we will have been made similar to God and by ecstasy will enter into the joy of God'".