

**ON THEOLOGY IN THE 12TH CENTURY: “KNOWLEDGE GROWS ONLY IF IT LOVES TRUTH”
OCTOBER 28, 2009 GENERAL AUDIENCE OF POPE BENEDICT XVI**

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today I pause to reflect on an interesting page of history, regarding the flowering of Latin theology in the 12th century, which came about by a providential series of coincidences. In the countries of Western Europe there reigned then a relative peace, which assured society of economic development and the consolidation of political structures, and fostered a lively cultural activity thanks also to contacts with the East. Perceived within the Church were the benefits of the vast action known as the “Gregorian reform,” which, vigorously promoted in the preceding century, brought greater evangelical purity to the life of the ecclesial community, above all of the clergy, and restored to the Church and the papacy genuine liberty of action. Moreover, a vast spiritual renewal was spreading, sustained by the exuberant development of consecrated life: New religious orders were being born and spreading, while those already existing experienced a promising renewal.

Theology was also flourishing, acquiring greater awareness of its own nature: It refined its method, addressed new problems, advanced in the contemplation of the mysteries of God, produced fundamental works, inspired important initiatives of culture—from art to literature—and prepared the masterpieces of the next century, the century of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.

There were two realms in which this fervid theological activity developed: the monasteries and the town schools (*scholae*), some of which very soon gave life to the universities, which constituted one of the typical “inventions” of the Christian Middle Ages. In fact from these two realms, the monasteries and the *scholae*, one can speak of two different models of theology: “monastic theology” and “scholastic theology.” The representatives of monastic theology were monks, in general, abbots, gifted with wisdom and evangelical fervor, dedicated essentially to arousing and nourishing a loving desire for God. The representatives of scholastic theology were cultured men, passionate about research; *magistri* wishing to show the

reasonableness and soundness of the mysteries of God and of man, believed in with faith, of course, but understood also by reason. The contrasting objectives explain the differences in their method and their way of doing theology.

In the monasteries of the 12th century the theological method was linked primarily to the explanation of sacred Scripture, of the *sacra pagina*, to express ourselves as the authors of that period did. Biblical theology was particularly widespread. The monks, in fact, were all devoted listeners and readers of sacred Scripture, and one of their main occupations consisted in *lectio divina*, namely, prayerful reading of the Bible. For them the simple reading of the sacred text was not enough to perceive the profound meaning, the interior unity and the transcendent message.

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Therefore, they had to practice a “spiritual reading,” leading in docility to the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the school of the Fathers, the Bible was interpreted allegorically, to discover in every page, of the Old as well as the New Testament, what is said about

Christ and his work of salvation.

Last year's synod of bishops on the “Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church” recalled the importance of the spiritual approach to sacred Scripture. To this end, it is useful to treasure monastic theology, an uninterrupted biblical exegesis, as also the works composed by its representatives, precious ascetic commentaries on the books of the Bible. Therefore, to literary preparation, monastic theology joined spiritual preparation. It was, in fact, aware that a purely theoretic or profane reading was not enough: To enter the heart of sacred Scripture, it must be read in the spirit in which it was written and created. Literary preparation was necessary to know the exact meaning of the words and to facilitate the understanding of the text, refining the grammatical and philological sensibility. Jean Leclercq, the Benedictine scholar of the last century titled the essay with which he presented the characteristics of monastic theology thus: “*L'amour des lettres et le desir de Dieu*” (The love of learning and the desire for God).

In fact, the desire to know and to love God, which comes to us through his Word received, meditated and practiced, leads to seeking to go deeper into the biblical texts in all their dimensions. There is then another attitude on which those who practice monastic theology insist, that is, a profound attitude of prayer, which must precede, support and complement the study of sacred Scripture. Because, in the last analysis, monastic theology is listening to the Word of God, one cannot but purify the heart to receive it and, above all, one cannot but kindle it with fervor to encounter the Lord. Therefore, theology becomes meditation, prayer, song of praise and drives one to a sincere conversion. Not a few representatives of monastic theology reached, along this way, the highest goal of mystical experience, and they constitute an invitation also for us to nourish our existence with the Word of God, for example, through more attentive listening to the readings and the Gospel, especially in Sunday Mass. Moreover, it is important to reserve a certain time every day for meditation of the Bible, so that the Word of God is the lamp that illumines our daily path on earth.

Scholastic theology, instead—as I was saying—was practiced in the scholae, arising next to the great cathedrals of the age, for the preparation of the clergy, or around a teacher of theology and his disciples, to form professionals of culture, at a time in which learning was increasingly appreciated. Central to the method of the scholastics was the *quaestio*, namely the problem posed to the reader in addressing the words of Scripture and Tradition. In face of the problem that these authoritative texts pose, questions arose and debate was born between the teacher and the students. In such a debate appeared, on one hand, the arguments of authority, and, on the other, those of reason, and the debate developed in the sense of finding, in the end, a synthesis between authority and reason to attain a more profound understanding of the word of God.

In this regard, St. Bonaventure says that theology is “*per additionem*” (cf. *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum*, I, proem., q. 1, concl.), that is, theology adds the dimension of reason to the word of God and thus creates a more profound, more personal faith, and therefore also more concrete in the life of man. In this connection, different solutions were found and conclusions were formed that began to construct a system of theology. The organization of the *quaestiones* led to the compilation of increasingly extensive syntheses, that is, the different *quaestiones* were composed with the answers that ensued, thus creating a synthesis, the

so-called *summae*, which were, in reality, ample theological-dogmatic treatises born from the confrontation of human reason with the word of God.

Scholastic theology sought to present the unity and harmony of Christian Revelation with a method, called specifically “Scholastic,” of the school, which gives confidence to human reason: grammar and philology are at the service of theological learning, but so increasingly is logic, namely that discipline that studies the “functioning” of human reasoning, so that the truth of a proposition seems evident. Also today, reading the scholastic *summae*, one is struck by the order, clarity, logical concatenation of the arguments, and of the depth of some of the intuitions. Attributed to every word, with technical language, is a precise meaning and, between believing and understanding, there is established a reciprocal movement of clarification.

Dear brothers and sisters, echoing the invitation of the First Letter of Peter, scholastic theology stimulates us to be always ready to answer anyone asking for the reason for the hope that is in us (cf. 3:15). To take the questions as directed to us and thus be capable also of giving an answer. It reminds us that there is between faith and reason a natural friendship, founded on the order of creation itself.

The Servant of God John Paul II, in the beginning of the encyclical “*Fides et Ratio*,” wrote: “Faith and reason are like the two wings, with which the human spirit soars towards contemplation of the truth.” Faith is open to the effort of understanding on the part of reason; reason, in turn, recognizes that faith does not mortify it, rather it drives it toward wider and loftier horizons. Inserted here is the perennial lesson of monastic theology. Faith and reason, in reciprocal dialogue, vibrate with joy when both are animated by the search for profound union with God. When love vivifies the prayerful dimension of theology, knowledge, acquired by reason, is broadened. Truth is sought with humility, received with wonder and gratitude: In a word, knowledge grows only if it loves truth. Love becomes intelligence and theology the authentic wisdom of the heart, which orients and sustains the faith and life of believers. Let us pray, therefore, that the path of knowledge and of deepening in the mysteries of God is always illumined by divine love.

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