

# The HOLY SEE



BENEDICT XVI AUDIENCES 2007

ENGLISH ▼



BENEDICT XVI

## GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 21 March 2007

### **St Justin, Philosopher and Martyr (c. 100-165)**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In these Catecheses, we are reflecting on the great figures of the early Church. Today, we will talk about St Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, the most important of the second-century apologist Fathers.

The word "apologist" designates those ancient Christian writers who set out to defend the new religion from the weighty accusations of both pagans and Jews, and to spread the Christian doctrine in terms suited to the culture of their time.

Thus, the apologists had a twofold concern: that most properly called "apologetic", to defend the newborn Christianity (*apologhía* in Greek means, precisely, "defence"), and the pro-positive, "missionary" concern, to explain the content of the faith in a language and on a wavelength comprehensible to their contemporaries.

Justin was born in about the year 100 near ancient Shechem, Samaria, in the Holy Land; he spent a long time seeking the truth, moving through the various schools of the Greek philosophical tradition.

Finally, as he himself recounts in the first chapters of his *Dialogue with Tryphon*, a mysterious figure, an old man he met on the seashore, initially leads him into a crisis by showing him that it is impossible for the human being to satisfy his aspiration to the divine solely with his own forces. He then pointed out to him the ancient prophets as the people to turn to in order to find the way to God and "true philosophy".

In taking his leave, the old man urged him to pray that the gates of light would be opened to him.

The story foretells the crucial episode in Justin's life: at the end of a long philosophical journey, a quest for the truth, he arrived at the Christian faith. He founded a school in Rome where, free of charge, he initiated students into the new religion, considered as the true philosophy. Indeed, in it he had found the truth, hence, the art of living virtuously.

For this reason he was reported and beheaded in about 165 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor to whom Justin had actually addressed one of his *Apologia*.

These - *the two Apologies* and the *Dialogue with the Hebrew, Tryphon* - are his only surviving works. In them, Justin intends above all to illustrate the divine project of creation and salvation, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the *Logos*, that is, the eternal Word, eternal Reason, creative Reason.

Every person as a rational being shares in the *Logos*, carrying within himself a "seed", and can perceive glimmers of the truth. Thus, the same *Logos* who revealed himself as a prophetic figure to the Hebrews of the ancient Law also manifested himself partially, in "seeds of truth", in Greek philosophy.

Now, Justin concludes, since Christianity is the historical and personal manifestation of the *Logos* in his totality, it follows that "whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians" (*Second Apology of St Justin Martyr*, 13: 4).

In this way, although Justin disputed Greek philosophy and its contradictions, he decisively oriented any philosophical truth to the *Logos*, giving reasons for the unusual "claim" to truth and universality of the Christian religion. If the Old Testament leaned

towards Christ, just as the symbol is a guide to the reality represented, then Greek philosophy also aspired to Christ and the Gospel, just as the part strives to be united with the whole.

And he said that these two realities, the Old Testament and Greek philosophy, are like two paths that lead to Christ, to the *Logos*. This is why Greek philosophy cannot be opposed to Gospel truth, and Christians can draw from it confidently as from a good of their own.

Therefore, my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, described St Justin as a "pioneer of positive engagement with philosophical thinking - albeit with cautious discernment.... Although he continued to hold Greek philosophy in high esteem after his conversion, Justin claimed with power and clarity that he had found in Christianity 'the only sure and profitable philosophy' (*Dial.* 8: 1)" (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 38).

Overall, the figure and work of Justin mark the ancient Church's forceful option for philosophy, for reason, rather than for the religion of the pagans. With the pagan religion, in fact, the early Christians strenuously rejected every compromise. They held it to be idolatry, at the cost of being accused for this reason of "impiety" and "atheism".

Justin in particular, especially in his first *Apology*, mercilessly criticized the pagan religion and its myths, which he considered to be diabolically misleading on the path of truth.

Philosophy, on the other hand, represented the privileged area of the encounter between paganism, Judaism and Christianity, precisely at the level of the criticism of pagan religion and its false myths. "Our philosophy...": this is how another apologist, Bishop Melito of Sardis, a contemporary of Justin, came to define the new religion in a more explicit way (*Ap. Hist. Eccl.* 4, 26, 7).

In fact, the pagan religion did not follow the ways of the *Logos*, but clung to myth, even if Greek philosophy recognized that mythology was devoid of consistency with the truth.

Therefore, the decline of the pagan religion was inevitable: it was a logical consequence of the detachment of religion - reduced to an artificial collection of ceremonies, conventions and customs - from the truth of being.

Justin, and with him other apologists, adopted the clear stance taken by the Christian faith for the God of the philosophers against the false gods of the pagan religion.

It was the choice of the *truth* of being against the myth of *custom*. Several decades after Justin, Tertullian defined the same option of Christians with a lapidary sentence that still applies: "*Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit* - Christ has said that he is truth not fashion" (*De Virgin. Vel.* 1, 1).

*It should be noted in this regard that the term consuetudo, used here by Tertullian in reference to the pagan religion, can be translated into modern languages with the expressions: "cultural fashion", "current fads".*

In a time like ours, marked by relativism in the discussion on values and on religion - as well as in interreligious dialogue - this is a lesson that should not be forgotten.

To this end, I suggest to you once again - and thus I conclude - the last words of the mysterious old man whom Justin the Philosopher met on the seashore: "Pray that, above all things, the gates of light may be opened to you; for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and his Christ have imparted wisdom" (*Dial.* 7: 3).

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### To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience. I extend particular greetings to the students from the American Taipei School, to the members of the Shinto religious delegation from Japan and to the pilgrims from St Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe. May this Lenten Season purify your hearts and fill you with joy, and may God bless you all!

Lastly, my greeting goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. In the spiritual atmosphere of Lent, a season of conversion and reconciliation, I ask you, dear *young people*, to follow Jesus' example, to be faithful heralds of his saving message. I encourage you, dear *sick people*, to bear your daily cross in close union with Christ Our Lord. Lastly, I urge you, dear *newly-weds*, to make your families communities of ardent Christian witness.

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