

Benedict XVI dedicates catechesis to St. John Damascene

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ST. JOHN DAMASCENE, A LEADING FIGURE OF BYZANTINE THEOLOGY

VATICAN CITY, 6 MAY 2009 (VIS) -

In his general audience held this morning in St. Peter's Square, the Pope focused his remarks on St. John Damascene (675- 749), "a leading figure in the history of Byzantine theology".

Above all, said Benedict XVI, this saint was "an eye witness to the move from the Greek and Syriac culture shared by the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire, to the novelty of Islam whose military conquests opened a space in the territory today known as the Middle or Near East".

St. John Damascene "was born to a rich Christian family and as a young man held the office ... of economic administrator of the caliphate. Soon, however, dissatisfied with life at court, ... he entered the Monastery of San Saba near Jerusalem around the year 700. ... There he dedicated all his energies to asceticism and writing, not disdaining some pastoral work, of which testimony is to be found in his numerous Homilies. ... Leo XIII proclaimed him a Doctor of the Universal Church in 1890".

The Pope explained how St. John Damascene's fame rests, above all, "on his three 'Discourses against the Iconoclasts' which, following his death, were condemned by the iconoclast Council of Hieria (754)". These Discourses, he went on, represent "the first attempt to legitimise the veneration of sacred images, associating them with the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the bosom of the Virgin Mary.

"St. John Damascene", the Holy Father added, "was among the first to make the distinction, in the public and private devotions of Christians, between adoration ('latreia') and veneration

('proskynesis'): the former may only be addressed to God, Who is supremely spiritual, while the latter may use an image to address the person represented in that image".

"It immediately became clear that this distinction was important in order to provide a Christian response to people who insisted that the severe Old Testament ban against the liturgical use of images was universal and perennial. This was also a subject of great discussion in the Muslim world, which accepts this Hebrew tradition of the complete exclusion of all images from worship. In this context Christians, for their part, discussed the problem and found the justification for the veneration of images".

Benedict XVI went on to highlight how St. John Damascene "remains an important witness of the veneration of icons, which would become one of the most distinctive aspects of Eastern theology and spirituality, even until today. His teaching is part of the tradition of the Universal Church whose sacramental doctrine allows elements taken from nature to become channels of grace, by virtue of the invocation ('epiclesis') of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by the confession of the true faith".

This Syrian saint also admitted "the veneration of the relics of saints, on the basis of the conviction that Christian saints, having been made participants in the resurrection of Christ, may not be simply considered a 'dead'".

Finally, the Pope referred to "the optimism" of St. John Damascene's contemplation of the natural world: the fact that "he saw the good, the beautiful and the true in the visible creation. Such Christian optimism is not ingenuous optimism. It makes allowance for the wound inflicted on human nature by the freedom of choice decreed by God and improperly used by man, with all the consequences of widespread disharmony this has led to. From here arose the need, which the theologian of Damascus saw clearly, for 'nature to be reinforced and renewed' by the descent of the Son of God into the flesh".