

Boethius and Cassiodorus

Pope Benedict XVI

These two sixth-century Christian writers helped preserve the heritage of Greek and Roman learning handed down by generations of Christians.

On Wednesday, 12 March 2008, during the General Audience in the Paul VI Hall, the Pontiff delivered the following Catechesis, translated from Italian.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, I would like to talk about two ecclesiastical writers, Boethius and Cassiodorus, who lived in some of the most turbulent years in the Christian West and in the Italian peninsula in particular.

Odoacer, King of the Rugians, a Germanic race, had rebelled, putting an end to the Western Roman Empire (476 A.D.), but it was not long before he was killed by Theodoric's Ostrogoths who had controlled the Italian Peninsula for some decades.

Boethius, born in Rome in about 480 from the noble Anicius lineage, entered public life when he was still young and by age 25 was already a senator. Faithful to his family's tradition, he devoted himself to politics, convinced that it would be possible to temper the fundamental structure of Roman society with the values of the new peoples. And in this new time of cultural encounter he considered it his role to reconcile and bring together these two cultures, the classical Roman and the nascent Ostrogoth culture.

Thus, he was also politically active under Theodoric, who at the outset held him in high esteem. In spite of this public activity, Boethius did not neglect his studies and dedicated himself in particular to acquiring a deep knowledge of philosophical and religious subjects.

However, he also wrote manuals on arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, all with the intention of passing on the great Greco-Roman culture to the new generations, to the new times. In this context, in his commitment to fostering the encounter of cultures, he used the categories of Greek philosophy to present the Christian faith, here too seeking a synthesis between the Hellenistic-Roman heritage and the Gospel message. For this very reason Boethius was described as the last representative of ancient Roman culture and the first of the Medieval intellectuals.

His most famous work is undoubtedly *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, which he wrote in prison to help explain his unjust detention. In fact, he had been accused of plotting against King Theodoric for having taken the side of his friend Senator Albinus in a court case. But this was a pretext. Actually, Theodoric, an Arian and a barbarian, suspected that Boethius was sympathizing with the Byzantine Emperor

Justinian. Boethius was tried and sentenced to death. He was executed on 23 October 524, when he was only 44 years old.

It is precisely because of his tragic end that he can also speak from the heart of his own experience to contemporary man, and especially to the multitudes who suffer the same fate because of the injustice inherent in so much of "human justices".

Through this work, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, he sought consolation, enlightenment and wisdom in prison. And he said that precisely in this situation he knew how to distinguish between apparent goods, which disappear in prison, and true goods such as genuine friendship, which even in prison do not disappear.

The loftiest good is God: Boethius — and he teaches us this — learned not to sink into a fatalism that extinguishes hope. He teaches us that it is not the event but Providence that governs and Providence has a face. It is possible to speak to Providence because Providence is God. Thus, even in prison, he was left with the possibility of prayer, of dialogue with the One who saves us.

At the same time, even in this situation he retained his sense of the beauty of culture and remembered the teaching of the great ancient Greek and Roman philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle — he had begun to translate these Greeks into Latin — Cicero, Seneca, and also poets such as Tibullus and Virgil.

Philosophy: the soul's medicine

Boethius held that philosophy, in the sense of the quest for true wisdom, was the true medicine of the soul (Bk I). On the other hand, man can only experience authentic happiness within his own interiority (Bk II). Boethius thus succeeded in finding meaning by thinking of his own personal tragedy in the light of a sapiential text of the Old Testament (Wis 7:30-8:1) which he cites: "Against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Bk III, 12: PL 63, col. 780).

The so-called prosperity of the wicked is therefore proven to be false (Bk IV), and the providential nature of *adversa fortuna* is highlighted. Life's difficulties not only reveal how transient and short-lived life is, but are even shown to serve for identifying and preserving authentic relations among human beings. *Adversa fortuna*, in fact, makes it possible to discern false friends from true and makes one realize that nothing is more precious to the human being than a true friendship.

The fatalistic acceptance of a condition of suffering is nothing short of perilous, the believer Boethius added, because "it eliminates at its roots the very possibility of prayer and of theological hope, which form the basis of man's relationship with God" (Bk V, 3: PL 63, col. 842).

The final peroration of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* can be considered a synthesis

of the entire teaching that Boethius addressed to himself and all who might find themselves in his same conditions. Thus, in prison he wrote: "So combat vices, dedicate yourselves to a virtuous life oriented by hope, which draws the heart upwards until it reaches Heaven with prayers nourished by humility. Should you refuse to lie, the imposition you have suffered can change into the enormous advantage of always having before your eyes the supreme Judge, who sees and knows how things truly are" (Bk V, 6: *PL.* 63, col. 862).

Every prisoner, regardless of the reason why he ended up in prison, senses how burdensome this particular human condition is, especially when it is brutalized, as it was for Boethius, by recourse to torture.

Then particularly absurd is the condition of those like Boethius — whom the city of Pavia recognizes and celebrates in the liturgy as a martyr of the faith — who are tortured to death for no other reason than their own ideals and political and religious convictions.

Boethius, the symbol of an immense number of people unjustly imprisoned in all ages and on all latitudes, is in fact an objective entrance way that gives access to contemplation of the mysterious Crucified One of Golgotha.

Model of cultural encounter

Marcus Aurelius Cassiodorus was a contemporary of Boethius, a Calabrian born in Scyllacium in about 485 A.D. and who died at a very advanced age in Vivarium in 580. Cassiodorus, a man with a privileged social status, likewise devoted himself to political life and cultural commitment as few others in the Roman West of his time. Perhaps the only men who could stand on an equal footing in this twofold interest were Boethius, whom we have mentioned, and Gregory the Great, the future Pope of Rome (590-604).

Aware of the need to prevent all the human and humanist patrimony accumulated in the golden age of the Roman Empire from vanishing into oblivion, Cassiodorus collaborated generously, and with the highest degree of political responsibility, with the new peoples who had crossed the boundaries of the Empire and settled in Italy.

He too was a model of cultural encounter, of dialogue, of reconciliation. Historical events did not permit him to make his political and cultural dreams come true; he wanted to create a synthesis between the Roman and Christian traditions of Italy and the new culture of the Goths.

These same events, however, convinced him of the providentiality of the monastic movement that was putting down roots in Christian lands. He decided to support it and gave it all his material wealth and spiritual energy.

He conceived the idea of entrusting to the monks the task of recovering, preserving

and transmitting to those to come the immense cultural patrimony of the ancients so that it would not be lost. For this reason he founded *Vivarium*, a coenobitic community in which everything was organized in such a way that the monk's intellectual work was esteemed as precious and indispensable.

He arranged that even those monks who had no academic training must not be involved solely in physical labour and farming but also in transcribing manuscripts and this helping to transmit the great culture to future generations.

And this was by no means at the expense of monastic and Christian spiritual dedication or of charitable activity for the poor. In his teaching, expounded in various works but especially in the Treatise *De Anima* and in the *Institutiones Divinarum Litterarum* (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1108), prayer nourished by Sacred Scripture and particularly by assiduous recourse to the Psalms (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1149) always has a central place as the essential sustenance for all.

Thus, for example, this most learned Calabrian introduced his *Expositio in Psalterium*: "Having rejected and abandoned in Ravenna the demands of a political career marked by the disgusting taste of worldly concerns, having enjoyed the Psalter, a book that came from Heaven, as true honey of the soul, I dived into it avidly, thirsting to examine it without a pause, to steep myself in that salutary sweetness, having had enough of the countless disappointments of active life" (*PL* 70, col. 10).

The search for God, the aspiration to contemplate him, Cassiodorus notes, continues to be the permanent goal of monastic life (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1107). Nonetheless, he adds that with the help of divine grace (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1131, 1142), greater profit can be attained from the revealed Word with the use of scientific discoveries and the "profane" cultural means that were possessed in the past by the Greeks and Romans (cf. *PL* 69, col. 1140).

Personally, Cassiodorus dedicated himself to philosophical, theological and exegetical studies without any special creativity, but was attentive to the insights he considered valid in others. He read Jerome and Augustine in particular with respect and devotion.

Of the latter he said: "In Augustine there is such a great wealth of writings that it seems to me impossible to find anything that has not already been abundantly treated by him" (cf. *PL* 70, col. 10).

Citing Jerome, on the other hand, he urged the monks of Vivarium: "It is not only those who fight to the point of bloodshed or who live in virginity who win the palm of victory but also all who, with God's help, triumph over physical vices and preserve their upright faith. But in order that you may always, with God's help, more easily overcome the world's pressures and enticements while remaining in it as pilgrims constantly journeying forward, seek first to guarantee for yourselves the salutary help

suggested by the first Psalm which recommends meditation night and day on the law of the Lord. Indeed, the enemy will not find any gap through which to assault you if all your attention is taken up by Christ" (*De Institutione Divinarum Scripturarum*, 32: PL 69, col. 1147).

This is a recommendation we can also accept as valid. In fact, we live in an intercultural time with its danger of violence that destroys cultures, and of the necessary commitment to pass on important values and to teach the new generations the path of reconciliation and peace.

We find this path by turning to the God with the human Face, the God who revealed himself to us in Christ...

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