



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 7 October 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The day after tomorrow, 9 October, will be the 400th anniversary of the death of St John Leonardi, Founder of the religious order of Clerics Regular of the Mother of God. He was canonized on 17 April 1938 and chosen as Patron of Pharmacists on 8 August 2006. He is also remembered for his great missionary zeal. Together with Mons. Juan Bautista Vives and Martín de Funes, a Jesuit, he planned and contributed to founding a specific Congregation of the Holy See for the missions, *Propaganda Fide*, which has forged thousands of priests down the centuries, many of them martyrs. Thus he was a luminous priestly figure whom I like to point out as an example to all presbyters in this Year for Priests. He died in 1609 from influenza, contracted while he was doing all he could to minister to those stricken by the epidemic in the Campitelli neighbourhood of Rome.

John Leonardi was born in 1541 at Diecimo in the Province of Lucca. The youngest of seven siblings, his adolescence was marked by the rhythm of faith lived in a healthy, hard-working family, as well as by regular visits to a workshop in his home town that made and sold essences and medicines. When John was 17, his father enrolled him in an ordinary apothecary's course in Lucca, aiming to make him a future pharmacist, indeed an apothecary, as it was then termed. For about 10 years young John attended this course, alert and hardworking, but when, in accordance with the legislation of the ancient Republic of Lucca he earned the official recognition that would authorize him to open his own apothecary's shop, he started wondering whether the moment had not come to carry out a plan he had always had at heart. After mature reflection he decided to train for the priesthood. Thus, having left the apothecary's shop and having acquired an adequate theological formation, he was ordained a priest and, on the day of Epiphany 1572, celebrated his first Mass. However, he never lost his interest in medicine, because he felt that the professional mediation of the pharmacist would permit him to fulfil his vocation to the full, one in which he could pass on to men and women, by means of a holy life, "*the medicine of God*", which is the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ, the "measure of all things".

Inspired by the conviction that all human beings need this medicine more than anything else, St John Leonardi sought to make the personal encounter with Jesus Christ his fundamental *raison d'être*. "It is necessary to start afresh from Christ", he liked to repeat again and again. The primacy of Christ over all things became for him the concrete criterion of judgement and action and the vital

principle of his priestly activity, which he exercised while a vast and widespread movement of spiritual renewal was taking place in the Church, thanks to the flourishing of new religious institutes and the luminous witness of Saints such as Charles Borromeo, Philip Neri, Ignatius of Loyola, Joseph Calasanctius, Camillus de Lellis and Aloysius Gonzaga. He dedicated himself enthusiastically to the apostolate among boys through the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, gathering around him a group of young men with whom, on 1 September 1574, he founded the Congregation of Reformed Priests of the Blessed Virgin, later called the Order of Clerics Regular of the Mother of God. He recommended his disciples to keep "before their eyes and minds only the honour, service and glory of Jesus Christ Crucified", and, as a good pharmacist used to administering doses, he added using a precise reference: "lift up your hearts a little higher to God and with him measure all things".

Motivated by apostolic zeal, in May 1605 he sent Pope Paul V, who had just been elected, a *Petition* in which he suggested the criteria for an authentic renewal of the Church. Observing that it is "necessary for those who aspire to the reform of human morals to seek especially and above all things, the glory of God", he added that they must shine out "for their integrity of life and the excellence of their morals so that, rather than constraining people, they gently draw them to reform".

He remarked that "any one who wishes to carry out a serious religious and moral reform must first of all, like a good doctor, make an attentive diagnosis of the evils besetting the Church, thereby to be able to prescribe the most appropriate remedy for each one of them". And he noted that "likewise the renewal of the Church must be brought about in her leaders and in their subordinates, both above and below. It must be started by those in charge and extended to their subjects". For this reason, while asking the Pope to promote a "universal reform of the Church", he concerned himself with the Christian formation of the people and especially of children, to be educated "from their earliest years... in the purity of Christian faith and holy morals".

Dear brothers and sisters, the luminous figure of this Saint invites priests in the first place, and all Christians, to strive constantly for "the high standard of Christian living", which means holiness, naturally each one in accordance with his own state. Indeed, authentic ecclesial renewal can only stem from faithfulness to Christ. In those years, on the cultural and social threshold between the 16th and 17th centuries, the premises of the contemporary culture of the future began to be outlined. It was characterized by an undue separation between faith and reason that produced, among its negative effects, the marginalization of God, with the illusion of the possible and total autonomy of man who chooses to live "as though God did not exist". This is the crisis of modern thought, which I have frequently had the opportunity to point out and which often leads to forms of relativism. John Leonardi perceived what the real medicine for these spiritual evils was and summed it up in the expression: "Christ first of all", Christ at the centre of the heart, at the centre of history and of the cosmos. And, St John said forcefully, humanity stands in extreme need of Christ because he is our "measure". There is no area that cannot be touched by his power; there is no evil that cannot find a remedy in him, no problem that is not resolved in him. "Either Christ or nothing!". This was his recipe for every type of spiritual and social reform.

There is another aspect of St John Leonardi's spirituality that I would like to emphasize. On various occasions he reasserted that the living encounter with Christ takes place in his Church, holy but frail, rooted in history and in its sometimes obscure unfolding, where wheat and weeds grow side by side (cf. Mt 13: 30), yet always the sacrament of salvation. Since he was clearly aware that the Church is God's field (cf. Mt 13: 24), St John was not shocked at her human weaknesses. To combat the weeds he chose to be good wheat: that is, he decided to love Christ in the Church and to help make her, more and more, a transparent sign of Christ. He saw the Church very realistically, her human frailty, but he also saw her as being "God's field", the instrument of God for humanity's

salvation. And this was not all. Out of love for Christ he worked tirelessly to purify the Church, to make her more beautiful and holy. He realized that every reform should be made within the Church and never against the Church. In this, St John Leonardi was truly extraordinary and his example is ever timely. Every reform, of course, concerns her structures, but in the first place must have an effect in believers' hearts. Only Saints, men and women who let themselves be guided by the divine Spirit, ready to make radical and courageous decisions in the light of the Gospel, renew the Church and make a crucial contribution to building a better world.

Dear brothers and sisters, St John Leonardi's life was illumined throughout by the splendour of the "Holy Face" of Jesus, preserved and venerated in the Cathedral Church of Lucca, which has become an eloquent symbol and an indisputable synthesis of the faith that enlivened him. Conquered by Christ, like the Apostle Paul, he pointed out to his followers and continues to point out to all of us, the Christocentric ideal for which "it is necessary to strip oneself of every personal interest and look only to the service of God", keeping "before the eyes of the mind only the honour, service and glory of Jesus Christ Crucified". Besides the Face of Christ, St John fixed his gaze on the motherly face of Mary. The One whom he chose to be Patroness of his Order was for him a teacher, sister and mother, and he experienced her constant protection. May the example and intercession of this "fascinating man of God" be a reference and an encouragement, particularly in this Year for Priests, for priests and for all Christians to live their own vocation with passionate enthusiasm.