

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Hall

Wednesday, 3 November 2010



Marguerite d'Oingt

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With Marguerite d'Oingt, of whom I would like to speak to you today, we are introduced to Carthusian spirituality which draws its inspiration from the evangelical synthesis lived and proposed by St Bruno. We do not know the date of her birth, although some place it around 1240. Marguerite came from a powerful family of the old nobility of Lyons, the Oingt. We know that her mother was also called Marguerite, that she had two brothers — Giscard and Louis — and three sisters: Catherine, Elizabeth and Agnes. The latter followed her to the Carthusian monastery, succeeding her as Prioress.

We have no information on her childhood, but from her writings it seems that she spent it peacefully in an affectionate family environment. In fact, to express God's boundless love, she valued images linked to the family, with particular reference to the figure of the father and of the mother. In one of her meditations she prays thus: "Most gentle Lord, when I think of the special graces that you have given me through your solicitude: first of all, how you took care of me since my childhood and how you removed me from the danger of this world and called me to dedicate myself to your holy service, and how you provided everything that was necessary for me: food, drink, dress and footwear (and you did so) in such a way that I had no occasion to think of these things but of your great mercy" (Marguerite d'Oingt, *Scritti Spirituali, Meditazione V*, 100, Cinisello Balsamo, 1997, p. 74).

Again from her meditations we know that she entered the Carthusian monastery of Poiteins in response to the Lord's call, leaving everything behind and accepting the strict Carthusian Rule in order to belong totally to the Lord, to be with him always. She wrote: "Gentle Lord, I left my father and my mother and my siblings and all the things of this world for love of you; but this is very little, because the riches of this world are but thorns that prick; and the more one possesses the more unfortunate one is. And because of this it seems to me that I left nothing other than misery and poverty; but you know, gentle Lord, that if I possessed a gentle thousand worlds and could dispose of them as I pleased, I would

abandon everything for love of you; and even if you gave me everything that you possess in Heaven and on earth, I would not consider myself satiated until I had you, because you are the life of my soul, I do not have and do not want to have a father and mother outside of you” (*ibid.*, *Meditazione* II, 32, p. 59).

We also have little data on her life in the Carthusian monastery. We know that in 1288 she became its fourth Prioress, a post she held until her death, 11 February 1310. From her writings, however, we do not deduce particular stages in her spiritual itinerary. She conceived the entirety of life as a journey of purification up to full configuration with Christ. He is the book that is written, which is inscribed daily in her own heart and life, in particular his saving Passion. In the work “Speculum”, referring to herself in the third person Marguerite stresses that by the Lord's grace “she had engraved in her heart the holy life that Jesus Christ God led on earth, his good example and his good doctrine. She had placed the gentle Jesus Christ so well in her heart that it even seemed to her that he was present and that he had a closed book in his hand, to instruct her” (*ibid.*, I, 2-3, p. 81). “In this book she found written the life that Jesus Christ led on earth, from his birth to his ascension into Heaven” (*ibid.*, I, 12, p. 83). Every day, beginning in the morning, Marguerite dedicated herself to the study of this book. And, when she had looked at it well, she began to read the book of her own conscience, which showed the falsehoods and lies of her own life (cf. *ibid.*, I, 6-7, p. 82); she wrote about herself to help others and to fix more deeply in her heart the grace of the presence of God, so as to make every day of her life marked by comparison with the words and actions of Jesus, with the Book of his life. And she did this so that Christ's life would be imprinted in her soul in a permanent and profound way, until she was able to see the Book internally, that is, until contemplating the mystery of God Trinity (cf. *ibid.*, II, 14-22; III, 23-40, pp. 84-90).

Through her writings, Marguerite gives us some traces of her spirituality, enabling us to understand some features of her personality and of her gifts of governance. She was a very learned woman; she usually wrote in Latin, the language of the erudite, but she also wrote in Provençal, and this too is a rarity: thus her writings are the first of those known to be written in that language. She lived a life rich in mystical experiences described with simplicity, allowing one to intuit the ineffable mystery of God, stressing the limits of the mind to apprehend it and the inadequacy of human language to express it. Marguerite had a linear personality, simple, open, of gentle affectivity, great balance and acute discernment, able to enter into the depths of the human spirit, discerning its limits, its ambiguities, but also its aspirations, the soul's *élan* toward God. She showed an outstanding aptitude for governance, combining her profound mystical spiritual life with service to her sisters and to the community. Significant in this connection is a passage of a letter to her father. She wrote: “My dear father, I wish to inform you that I am very busy because of the needs of our house, so that I am unable to apply my mind to good thoughts; in fact, I have so much to do that I do not know which way to turn. We did not harvest the wheat in the seventh month of the year and our vineyards were destroyed by the storm. Moreover, our church is in such a sorry state that we are obliged to reconstruct it in part” (*ibid.*, *Lettere*, III, 14, p. 127).

A Carthusian nun thus describes the figure of Marguerite: “Revealed through her work is a fascinating personality, of lively intelligence, oriented to speculation and at the same time favoured by mystical graces: in a word, a holy and wise woman who is able to express with a certain humour an affectivity altogether spiritual” (*Una Monaca Certosina; Certosine*, in the *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, Rome, 1975, col. 777). In the dynamism of mystical life, Marguerite valued the experience of natural affections, purified by grace, as a privileged means to understand more profoundly and to second divine action with greater alacrity and ardour. The reason lies in the fact that the human person is created in the image of God and is therefore called to build with God a wonderful history of love, allowing himself to be totally involved in his initiative.

The God-Trinity, the God-love who reveals himself in Christ fascinated her, and Marguerite lived a relationship of profound love for the Lord and, in contrast, sees human

ingratitude to the point of betrayal, even to the paradox of the Cross. She says that the Cross of Christ is similar to the bench of travail. Jesus' pain is compared with that of a mother. She wrote: "The mother who carried me in her womb suffered greatly in giving birth to me, for a day or a night, but you, most gentle Lord, were tormented for me not only for one night or one day, but for more than 30 years!... How bitterly you suffered because of me throughout your life! And when the moment of delivery arrived, your work was so painful that your holy sweat became as drops of blood which ran down your whole body to the ground" (*ibid.*, *Meditazione I*, 33, p. 59). In evoking the accounts of Jesus' Passion, Marguerite contemplated these sorrows with profound compassion. She said: "You were placed on the hard bed of the Cross, so that you could not move or turn or shake your limbs as a man usually does when suffering great pain, because you were completely stretched and pierced with the nails... and... all your muscles and veins were lacerated.... But all these pains... were still not sufficient for you, so much so that you desired that your side be pierced so cruelly by the lance that your defenceless body should be totally ploughed and torn and your precious blood spurted with such violence that it formed a long path, almost as if it were a current". Referring to Mary, she said: "It was no wonder that the sword that lacerated your body also penetrated the heart of your glorious Mother who so wanted to support you... because your love was loftier than any other love" (*ibid.*, *Meditazione II*, 36-39.42, p. 60f).

Dear friends, Marguerite d'Oingt invites us to meditate daily on the life of sorrow and love of Jesus and that of his mother, Mary. Here is our hope, the meaning of our existence. From contemplation of Christ's love for us are born the strength and joy to respond with the same love, placing our life at the service of God and of others. With Marguerite we also say: "Gentle Lord, all that you did, for love of me and of the whole human race, leads me to love you, but the remembrance of your most holy Passion gives unequalled vigour to my power of affection to love you. That is why it seems to me that... I have found what I so much desired: not to love anything other than you or in you or for love of you" (*ibid.*, *Meditazione II*, 46, p. 62).

At first glance this figure of a Medieval Carthusian nun, as well as her life and her thought, seems distant from us, from our life, from our way of thinking and acting. But if we look at the essential aspect of this life we see that it also affects us and that it would also become the essential aspect of our own existence.

We have heard that Marguerite considered the Lord as a book, she fixed her gaze on the Lord, she considered him a mirror in which her own conscience also appeared. And from this mirror light entered her soul. She let into their own being the word, the life of Christ and thus she was transformed; her conscience was enlightened, she found criteria and light and was cleansed. It is precisely this that we also need: to let the words, life and light of Christ enter our conscience so that it is enlightened, understands what is true and good and what is wrong; may our conscience be enlightened and cleansed. Rubbish is not only on different streets of the world. There is also rubbish in our consciences and in our souls. Only the light of the Lord, his strength and his love, cleanses us, purifies us, showing us the right path. Therefore let us follow holy Marguerite in this gaze fixed on Jesus. Let us read the book of his life, let us allow ourselves to be enlightened and cleansed, to learn the true life. Thank you.