December 4th: Saint John Damascene, Priest and Doctor of the Church

Gospel text (*Mt* 25:14-30): Imagine someone who, before going abroad, summoned his servants to entrust his property to them. He gave five talents of silver to one, then two to another, and one to a third, each one according to his ability; and he went away. He who received five talents went at once to do business with the money and gained another five. The one who received two did the same and gained another two. But the one with one talent dug a hole and hid his master's money. After a long time, the master of those servants returned and asked for a reckoning (...)».

Saint John Damascene, priest and doctor of the Church (675-749)

EDITORIAL TEAM evangeli.net (based on texts by Benedict XVI)
(Città del Vaticano, Vatican)

Today, I should like to speak about John Damascene, a personage of prime importance in the history of Byzantine Theology. Above all he was an eyewitness of the passage from the Greek and Syrian Christian cultures shared by the Eastern part of the Byzantine Empire, to the Islamic culture, which spread through its military conquests in the territory commonly known as the Middle or Near East. Very soon, he decided on a monastic life, and entered the monastery of Mar Saba, near Jerusalem. This was around the year 700. He dedicated all his energy to ascesis and literary work.

In the East, his best remembered works are the three "Discourses against those who calumniate the Holy Images", the first important theological attempts to legitimize the veneration of sacred images, relating them to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. John Damascene was also among the first to distinguish, in the cult of the Christians, between "worship" and "veneration": «In other ages God had not been represented in images, being incorporate and faceless. But since God has now been seen in the flesh, and lived among men, I represent that part of God which is visible. I do not venerate matter, but [I adore] the Creator of matter».

—God became flesh and flesh became truly the habitation of God, whose glory shines in the human Face of Christ. Considering the very great dignity that matter has acquired through the Incarnation, it is capable of becoming, through faith, a sign and a sacrament, efficacious in the meeting of man with God.