

## Saint Dionysius the Areopagite

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SAINT OF THE DAY

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The Acts of the Apostles mention Dionysius in the famous passage on Paul's speech at the Areopagus, an ancient court that stood on the hill of the same name in Athens: «When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said: "We will hear you on this matter another time". So Paul came out of that meeting. But some joined him and became believers, including Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them» (Acts 17:32-34). The convert Dionysius became bishop of Athens, as reported by another Saint Dionysius († 2nd century),

bishop of Corinth, who is cited as a source by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Church History*. Among the cities that have him as their patron saint are the Greek capital and Crotone.

**We have no other information about the saint**, but it is very interesting that a theologian of the 5th-6th century decided to write his works under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite. It was only in the 19th century, after a debate that began in the Middle Ages, that the pseudonymy of the author was established. Today he is therefore known as Pseudo-Dionysius. In the light of various traces of the Neoplatonist Proclus' (412-485) ideas in his writings, according to some, Pseudo-Dionysius was initially a Neoplatonist, and later converted to Christianity. A series of works are associated with him, first of all the *De coelesti Hierarchia*, which contains a scheme on angelic hierarchies later adopted and developed by St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, testifying to the influence this mysterious thinker had on theology.

**But why did he choose the name of the saint converted by Paul as his pseudonym?** Benedict XVI, in an audience in 2008, gave a stimulating interpretation: “If the author of these books five centuries later chose the pseudonym of Dionysius Areopagite, it means that his intention was to put Greek wisdom at the service of the Gospel, to help the encounter between Greek culture and intelligence and the proclamation of Christ”. Therefore it could be based on a praiseworthy missionary intent.

**According to Ratzinger, with the choice of anonymity Pseudo-Dionysius** wanted to perform “an act of humility. Not to create a monument for himself with his works, but really to serve the Gospel, to create an ecclesial theology”. And this theology of his contrasted an anti-Christian use of Plato, inherent in the thought of Proclus and other Neoplatonists: “It is interesting that this Pseudo-Dionysius dared to use this very thought to show the truth of Christ”.

**Learn more:**

[Catechesis of Benedict XVI on the Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite](#) (14 May 2008)