



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 27 December 2006

Why did God do it?

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's meeting takes place in the Christmas atmosphere pervaded with an intimate joy for the birth of the Saviour. We have just celebrated, the day before yesterday, this mystery, whose echo expands in the liturgy of all these days.

It is a mystery of light that men and women of every age can relive in faith.

The words of John the Evangelist, whose feast we celebrate today, resound in our hearts: "*Et Verbum caro factum est* - the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1: 14).

At Christmas, therefore, God comes to dwell among us; he comes for us, to remain with us. A question passes through these 2,000 years of Christian history: "But why did he do it, why did God become man?".

The song that the angels intone over the grotto of Bethlehem helps us to respond to this question: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2: 14).

The canticle of Christmas night, found in the *Gloria*, is already part of the liturgy like the other three canticles of the New Testament which refer to the birth and the infancy of Jesus: the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc dimittis*.

While these latter are inserted respectively in the morning Lauds, in the evening prayer of Vespers and in the night prayer of Compline, the *Gloria* has found its own place in the Holy Mass.

From the second century some acclamations were added to the angels words: "We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your immense glory"; and later, other invocations: "Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, who takes away the sin of the world...", to formulate an arioso hymn of praise that is sung for the first time in the Mass of Christmas and thereafter, on all feast days.

Inserted at the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, the *Gloria* emphasizes the continuity that exists between the birth and the death of Christ, between Christmas and Easter, inseparable aspects of the one and the same mystery of salvation.

The Gospel narrates that the angelic multitude sang: "Glory to God in the highest of heavens and peace on earth to those whom he loves". The angels announce to the shepherds that the birth of Jesus "is" glory for God in the highest of heavens; and "is" peace on earth to those whom he loves. It is thus opportune to place these angelic words over the grotto to explain the mystery of the birth that takes place in the crib.

The term "glory" (*doxa*) indicates the splendour of God that sparks the thankful praise of creatures. St Paul will say: it is "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Cor 4: 6).

"Peace" (*eirene*) summarizes the fullness of the messianic gifts, the salvation that, as the Apostle notes, identifies with Christ himself: "For he is our peace" (Eph 2: 14).

Lastly, there is the reference to men "of good will". "Good will" (*eudokia*), in common language, makes one think of the "good will" of men; but here, it means the "good will" of God toward men, which knows no limits. And here then is the Christmas message: with the birth of Jesus, God has manifested his good will toward all.

Let us return to the question: "Why did God make himself man?". St Irenaeus writes: "The Word made himself dispenser of the Father's glory for the benefit of men.... The glory of God is the living man - *vivens homo* - and the life of man consists in the vision of God" (*Adv. Haer.* 20: 5, 7).

The glory of God is manifest, therefore, in the salvation of man, whom God so loved as "to give", as the Evangelist John affirms, "his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3: 16).

Hence, love is the ultimate reason for the Incarnation of Christ.

In this regard the reflection of the theologian H.U. von Balthasar is eloquent, in which he wrote:

God "is not, in the first place, absolute power, but absolute love, whose sovereignty is not manifest in keeping for himself what belongs to him, but in his abandonment" (*Mysterium Paschale* I, 4). The God we contemplate in the crib is God-Love.

At this point the message of the angels resounds for us as an invitation: glory "be" to God in the highest of heavens, peace "be" on earth to those whom he loves. The only way to glorify God and to build peace in the world consists in the humble and trusting welcoming of the gift of Christmas: love.

The song of the angles can then become a prayer to repeat often, not only in this Christmas season. It is a hymn of praise to God in the highest of heavens and a fervent invocation of peace on earth, which translates into a concrete commitment to build it with our life. This is the duty that Christmas entrusts to us.

To special groups

I offer a very cordial welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially the groups from Ireland and the United States of America. May your visit to Rome in these holy days be a source of spiritual joy and deepened faith in the Word made flesh. Upon you and your families I invoke the grace and peace of the Newborn Saviour. Happy Christmas!

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