



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 2 January 2013

[Video]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Once again the Nativity of the Lord illuminates the gloom that often envelops our world and our hearts and with its light brings hope and joy. Where does this light come from? From the Bethlehem Grotto where the shepherds found “Mary and Joseph, and the babe, lying in a manger” (Lk 2:16). Another, deeper question arises before this Holy Family: how can that tiny, frail Child have brought into the world a newness so radical that it changed the course of history? Is there not perhaps something mysterious about his origins which goes beyond that grotto?

The question of Jesus’ origins recurs over and over again. It is the same question that the Procurator Pontius Pilate asked during the trial: “where are you from?” (Jn 19:9). Yet his origins were quite clear. In John’s Gospel when the Lord says: “I am the bread which came down from heaven”, the Jews reacted, murmuring: “is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn 6:41, 42).

Moreover, a little later the citizens of Jerusalem strongly opposed Jesus’ messianic claim, asserting that “where this man comes from” was well known; and that “when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from” (Jn 7:27). Jesus himself points out how inadequate their claim to know his origins is and by so doing he already offers a clue to knowing where he came from: “I have not come of my own accord; he who sent me is true, and him you do not know” (Jn 7:28). Jesus was of course a native of Nazareth, he was born in Bethlehem; but what is known of

his true origins?

In the four Gospels, the answer is clear as to where Jesus “comes from”. His true origins are in the Father, God; he comes totally from him [God], but in a different way from that of any of God’s prophets or messengers who preceded him. This origin in the mystery of God, “whom no one knows” is already contained in the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that we are reading during this Christmastide. The Angel Gabriel proclaimed: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

We repeat these words every time we recite the *Creed*, the Profession of Faith: “*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto, ex Maria Virgine*”, “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary”. At this sentence we kneel, for the veil that concealed God is lifted, as it were, and his unfathomable and inaccessible mystery touches us: God becomes the Emmanuel, “God-with-us”. When we hear the Masses written by the great composers of sacred music — I am thinking, for example, of Mozart’s Coronation Mass — we immediately notice how they pause on this phrase in a special way, as if they were trying to express in the universal language of music what words cannot convey: the great mystery of God who took flesh, who was made man.

If we consider carefully the words: “by the Holy Spirit [he] was incarnate of the Virgin Mary”, we notice that they include four active subjects. The Holy Spirit and Mary are mentioned explicitly, but “he”, namely, the Son, who took flesh in the Virgin’s womb, is implicit. In the Profession of Faith, the *Creed*, Jesus is described with several epithets: “Lord... Christ, Only-Begotten Son of God... God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God... consubstantial with the Father” (*Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*). We can therefore see that “he” refers to another person, the Father. Consequently the first subject of this sentence is the Father who, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, is the one God.

This affirmation of the *Creed* does not concern God’s eternal being but, rather, speaks to us of an action in which the three divine Persons take part and which is brought about “*ex Maria Virgine*”. Without Mary God’s entry into the history of humanity would not have achieved its purpose, and what is central to our Profession of Faith would not have taken place: God is a “God-with-us”. Thus Mary belongs irrevocably to our faith in God who acts, who enters history. She makes her whole person available, she “agrees” to become God’s dwelling place.

Sometimes, on our journey and in our life of faith, we can sense our poverty, our inadequacy in the face of the witness we must offer to the world. However God chose, precisely, a humble woman, in an unknown village, in one of the most distant provinces of the great Roman Empire. We must always trust in God, even in the face of the most gruelling difficulties, renewing our faith in his presence and action in our history, just as in Mary’s. Nothing is impossible to God! With him our existence always journeys on safe ground and is open to a future of firm hope.

In professing in the *Creed*: “by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary”, we affirm that the Holy Spirit, as the power of the Most High God, mysteriously brought about in the Virgin Mary the conception of the Son of God. The Evangelist Luke recorded the Archangel Gabriel’s words: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35).

Two references are obvious: the first is to the moment of the Creation. At the beginning of the Book of Genesis we read that “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (1:2); this is the Creator Spirit who gave life to all things and to the human being. What is brought about in Mary, through the action of this same divine Spirit, is a new creation: God, who called forth being from nothing, by the Incarnation gives life to a new beginning of humanity. The Fathers of the Church sometimes speak of Christ as the new Adam in order to emphasize that the new creation began with the birth of the Son of God in the Virgin Mary’s womb. This makes us think about how faith also brings us a newness so strong that it produces a second birth. Indeed, at the beginning of our life as Christians there is Baptism, which causes us to be reborn as children of God and makes us share in the filial relationship that Jesus has with the Father. And I would like to point out that Baptism is *received*, we “are baptized” — it is passive — because no one can become a son of God on his own. It is a gift that is freely given. St Paul recalls this adoptive sonship of Christians in a central passage of his Letter to the Romans, where he writes: “all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:14-16), not slaves. Only if we open ourselves to God’s action, like Mary, only if we entrust our life to the Lord as to a friend whom we totally trust, will everything change, will our whole life acquire a new meaning, a new aspect: that of children with a father who loves us and never deserts us.

We have spoken of two elements: the first was the Spirit moving on the surface of the waters, the Creator Spirit: there is another element in the words of the Annunciation. The Angel said to Mary: “The power of the Most High will overshadow you”. This is an re-evocation of the holy cloud that, during the Exodus, halted over the tent of meeting, over the Ark of the Covenant that the People of Israel were carrying with them and that indicated God’s presence (cf. Ex 40:34-38).

Mary, therefore, is the new holy tent, the new ark of the covenant: with her “yes” to the Archangel’s words, God received a dwelling place in this world, the One whom the universe cannot contain took up his abode in a Virgin’s womb.

Let us therefore return to the initial question, the one about Jesus’ origins that is summed up by Pilate’s question: “where are you from?”. What Jesus’ true origins are is clear from our reflections, from the very beginning of the Gospels: he is the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, he comes from God. We have before us the great and overwhelming mystery which we are celebrating in this Christmas season. The Son of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, was incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This is an announcement that rings out ever new and in itself brings

hope and joy to our hearts because, every time, it gives us the certainty that even though we often feel weak, poor and incapable in the face of the difficulties and evil in the world, God's power is always active and works miracles through weakness itself. His grace is our strength (cf. 2 Cor 12:9-10). Many thanks.

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I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking visitors present, including pilgrims from Norway, Japan, Vietnam and the United States. Upon you and your families I invoke the Lord's blessings of joy, peace and prosperity for the year which has just begun. Happy New Year!

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