



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERS
WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ROME
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Thursday, 17 December 2009

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

What is this wisdom born in Bethlehem? I would like to ask myself and all of you this question during this traditional pre-Christmas meeting with the University world of Rome. Today, instead of Holy Mass, we are celebrating Vespers, and to mark the felicitous coincidence with the beginning of the Christmas novena we will soon be singing the first of the "Greater Antiphons":

"O Wisdom from the mouth of the Most High,
you fill the whole world.
With strength and gentleness you order all things:
come to teach us the way of prudence"
(Liturgy of the Hours, Vespers of 17 December).

This wonderful invocation is addressed to "Wisdom", the central figure in the Books of Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach. These are in fact called the "Sapiential" Books, and in them the Christian tradition discerns a prefiguration of Christ. This invocation becomes truly stimulating and even provocative when we find ourselves before the Nativity scene that is, before the paradox of a Wisdom that "from the mouth of the Most High" comes to lie in swaddling cloths in a manger (cf. Luke 2: 7, 12, 16).

Already we can anticipate the response to that initial question: the One born in Bethlehem is the Wisdom of God. St Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, uses the phrase: "a hidden wisdom of God" (1 Cor 2: 7): in other words, a divine plan, which has long been kept hidden and that God himself has revealed in the history of salvation. In the fullness of time, this Wisdom took on a human Face, the Face of Jesus, who as recited in the Apostle's Creed "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the God the Father Almighty; from hence he shall come to judge the living and the dead". The Christian paradox consists precisely in the identification of divine Wisdom, that is the eternal *Logos*, with the man Jesus of Nazareth and with his story. A solution to this paradox cannot be found if not in the word "Love", which naturally in this case is written with a capital "L", in reference to a Love that infinitely exceeds human and historical dimensions. Therefore, the Wisdom that we invoke this evening is the Son of God, the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. It is the Word who, as we read in John's prologue, "was in the beginning with God", or rather, "was God": who with the Father and the Holy Spirit created all things and who "became flesh" to reveal the God whom no one can ever see (cf. Jn 1: 2-3, 14, 18).

Dear friends, a Christian professor, or a young Christian student, carries within him a passionate love for this Wisdom! He reads everything in her light; he finds Wisdom's imprints in the elementary particles and in the verses of poets; in juridical codes and in the events of history; in works of art and in mathematic formulas. Without Wisdom not anything was made that was made (cf. Jn 1: 3) and therefore in every created reality one can see Wisdom reflected, clearly visible in different ways and degrees. Everything understood by human intelligence can be grasped because in some sense and to a certain extent it participates in creative Wisdom. Herein lies, in the last analysis, the very potential of study, of research, of scientific dialogue in every field of knowledge.

At this point I cannot omit to reflect on something a bit disquieting but nevertheless useful for us here who belong to the academic world. Let us ask ourselves: who was present on Christmas night at the grotto in Bethlehem? Who welcomed Wisdom when he was born? Who hurried to see him, to recognize him and adore him? They were not doctors of law, scribes or sages. There were Mary and Joseph, and then the shepherds. What does this mean? Jesus was one day to say: "Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Mt 11: 26); you revealed your mystery to the little ones (cf. Mt 11: 25). But then is there no use in studying? Or is it even harmful counterproductive in understanding the truth? The two thousand-year-old history of Christianity excludes the latter hypothesis, and suggests to us the correct one: studying entails deepening one's knowledge while maintaining a spirit similar to the "little ones", an ever humble and simple spirit, like that of Mary, the "Seat of Wisdom". How often have we been afraid to draw near to the Grotto in Bethlehem for fear that doing so would be an obstacle to our critical sense and to our "modernity"! Rather, in that Grotto, each of us can discover the truth about God and about humanity, about ourselves. In that Child, born of the Virgin, the two came together: mankind's longing for eternal life softened the

heart of God, who was not ashamed to assume the human condition.

Dear friends, helping others to see the true Face of God is the first form of love, which for you takes on the role of intellectual charity. I was glad to learn that the diocesan university ministry's programme will have "The Eucharist and Intellectual Charity" as its theme this year: a demanding but appropriate choice. Indeed, in every Eucharistic Celebration God enters history in Jesus Christ in his Word and in his Body, giving himself in that love which enables us to serve humanity in its concrete existence. The project "One culture for the city", then, offers a promising proposal of the Christian presence in the cultural sphere. As I express the hope that your itinerary may be fruitful, I cannot fail to invite all the Athenaeums to be places of formation for authentic workers of intellectual charity. The future of society depends largely on them, above all in drawing up a new humanistic synthesis and of a new vision for the future (cf. Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 21). I encourage all of the heads of academic institutions to continue to collaborate in the construction of a community in which all young people may develop into mature human beings who hold themselves responsible for the creation of a "civilization of love".

At the conclusion of this Celebration, the Australian university student delegation will consign the Icon of Mary *Sedes Sapientiae* to the delegation from Africa. Let us entrust to the Most Holy Virgin all university students on the African continent; following the Special Synod for Africa, the cooperative commitment has been developing in these months between the Athenaeums of Rome and those in Africa. I renew my encouragement of this new prospect of collaboration, and I hope it may lead to the creation and growth of cultural projects capable of promoting a truly integral human development. May this Christmas, dear friends, bring joy and hope to you, your families and to the entire university environment, in Rome and throughout the whole world.

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