



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 17 December 2008

Spiritual meaning of Christmas

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On this very day, the days of Advent that directly prepare us for the Nativity of the Lord begin: we are in the *Christmas Novena* which in many Christian communities is celebrated with liturgies rich in biblical texts, all oriented to fostering the expectation of the Saviour's Birth. Indeed, the whole Church focuses her gaze of faith on this Feast that is now at hand, preparing herself, as she does every year, to join in the joyful singing of the Angels who will announce to the shepherds in the heart of the night the extraordinary event of the Birth of the Redeemer, inviting them to go to the Grotto in Bethlehem. It is there that the Emmanuel lies, the Creator who made himself a creature, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a poor manger (cf. Lk 2: 13-16).

Because of the atmosphere that distinguishes it, Christmas is a universal celebration. In fact, even those who do not profess themselves to be believers can perceive in this annual Christian event something extraordinary and transcendent, something intimate that speaks to the heart. It is a Feast that praises the gift of life. The birth of a child must always be an event that brings joy; the embrace of a newborn baby usually inspires feelings of kindness and care, of emotion and tenderness. Christmas is the encounter with a newborn baby lying in a humble grotto. In contemplating him in the manger, how can we fail to think of all those children who continue to be born today in great poverty in many regions of the world? How can we fail to think of those newborn infants who are not welcomed, who are rejected, who do not manage to survive because of the lack of care and attention? How can we fail to think also of the families who long for the joy

of a child and do not see their hope fulfilled? Unfortunately, under the influence of hedonist consumerism Christmas risks losing its spiritual meaning and being reduced to a mere commercial opportunity for purchases and the exchange of gifts! However, it is true that the difficulties, the uncertainties and the financial crisis itself that numerous families have had to come to terms with in recent months and which is affecting all humanity could be an incentive to rediscover the warmth of simplicity, friendship and solidarity: typical values of Christmas. Stripped of its consumerist and materialistic encrustations, Christmas can thus become an opportunity for welcoming, as a personal gift, the message of hope that emanates from the mystery of Christ's Birth.

However, none of this enables us to fully grasp the ineffable value of the Feast for which we are preparing. We know that it celebrates the central event of history: the Incarnation of the divine Word for the redemption of humanity. In one of his many Christmas Homilies, St Leo the Great exclaims: "Let us be glad in the Lord, dearly-beloved, and rejoice with spiritual joy that there has dawned for us the day of ever-new redemption, of ancient preparation, of eternal bliss. For as the year rolls round, there recurs for us the commemoration of our salvation, which promised from the beginning, accomplished in the fullness of time will endure for ever" (*Homily XXII*). St Paul returns several times in his Letters to this fundamental truth. For example, he writes to the Galatians: "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law... so that we might receive adoption as sons" (4: 4). In the Letter to the Romans he highlights the logic and the demanding consequences of this salvific event: "If we are children of God... then [we are] heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (8: 17). However, in the Prologue to the fourth Gospel, it is above all St John who meditates profoundly on the mystery of the Incarnation. And it is for this reason that the Prologue has been part of the Christmas liturgy since the very earliest times. Indeed, in it are found the most authentic expression and the most profound synthesis of this Feast and of the basis of its joy. St John writes: "*Et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis* / and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1: 14).

At Christmas, therefore, we do not limit ourselves to commemorating the birth of a great figure: we do not simply and abstractly celebrate the birth of the man or in general the mystery of life; even less do we celebrate only the beginning of the new season. At Christmas we commemorate something very tangible and important for mankind, something essential for the Christian faith, a truth that St John sums up in these few words: "*The Word became flesh*". This was a historical event that the Evangelist Luke was concerned to situate in a well-defined context: in the days when the decree was issued for the first census of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria (cf. Lk 2: 1-7). Therefore, it was on a historically dated night that the event of salvation occurred for which Israel had been waiting for centuries. In the darkness of the night of Bethlehem a great light really was lit: the Creator of the universe became flesh, uniting himself indissolubly with human nature so as truly to be "God from God, Light from Light" yet at the same time a man, true man. What John calls in Greek "*ho logos*" translated into Latin as "*Verbum*" and

Italian as "il Verbo" also means "the Meaning". Thus we can understand John's words as: the "eternal Meaning" of the world made himself tangible to our senses and our minds: we may now touch him and contemplate him (cf. 1 Jn 1: 1). The "Meaning" that became flesh is not merely a general idea inherent in the world; it is a "Word" addressed to us. The *Logos* knows us, calls us, guides us. The Word is not a universal law within which we play some role, but rather a Person who is concerned with every individual person: he is the Son of the living God who became man in Bethlehem.

To many people, and in a certain way to all of us, this seems too beautiful to be true. In fact, here it is reaffirmed to us: yes, a meaning exists, and the meaning is not a powerless protest against the absurd. The meaning has power: it is God. A good God who must not be confused with any sublime and remote being, whom it would never be possible to reach, but a God who made himself our neighbour and who is very close to us, who has time for each one of us and who came to stay with us. It then comes naturally to ask ourselves: "However could such a thing be possible? Is it dignified for God to make himself a child?". If we are to seek to open our hearts to this truth that illuminates the whole of human existence we must bend our minds and recognize the limitations of our intelligence. In the Grotto of Bethlehem God shows himself to us as a humble "infant" to defeat our arrogance. Perhaps we would have submitted more easily to power and wisdom, but he does not want us to submit; rather, he appeals to our hearts and to our free decision to accept his love. He made himself tiny to set us free from that human claim to grandeur that results from pride. He became flesh freely in order to set us truly free, free to love him.

Dear brothers and sisters, Christmas is a privileged opportunity to meditate on the meaning and value of our existence. The approach of this Solemnity helps us on the one hand to reflect on the drama of history in which people, injured by sin, are perennially in search of happiness and of a fulfilling sense of life and death; and on the other, it urges us to meditate on the merciful kindness of God who came to man to communicate to him directly the Truth that saves, and to enable him to partake in his friendship and his life. Therefore let us prepare ourselves for Christmas with humility and simplicity, making ourselves ready to receive as a gift the light, joy and peace that shine from this mystery. Let us welcome the Nativity of Christ as an event that can renew our lives today. The encounter with the Child Jesus makes us people who do not think only of themselves but open themselves to the expectations and needs of their brothers and sisters. In this way we too will become witnesses of the radiance of Christmas that shines on the humanity of the third millennium. Let us ask Mary Most Holy, Tabernacle of the Incarnate Word, and St Joseph, the silent witness of the events of salvation, to communicate to us what they felt while they were waiting for the Birth of Jesus, so that we may prepare ourselves to celebrate with holiness the approaching Christmas, in the joy of faith and inspired by the commitment to sincere conversion.

Happy Christmas to you all!

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including the various student groups and those coming from Ireland and the United States of America. To you and your families, especially those who may be in difficulty or suffering, I extend my best wishes for a happy and blessed Christmas!

Lastly, I would like to greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear friends, I thank you for taking part in this meeting. In a few days' time Christmas will be here and I imagine that in your homes you are putting the finishing touches on the manger, which is a particularly evocative representation of the Mystery of the Nativity of Christ. I hope that such an important element, not only of our faith but also of Christian culture and art, may continue to be part of this great Solemnity: it is at its roots a simple and eloquent way of commemorating Jesus who, in making himself man, came "to dwell among us", and in the manger really lives with us. Thank you everyone. Once again Happy Christmas.

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