



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 21 December 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

## *Holy Christmas*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to welcome you at the General Audience a few days before the celebration of the Lord's Birth. The greeting on everyone's lips in these days is "Happy Christmas! Best wishes for the Christmas festivities!". Let us ensure that in today's society too the exchange of good wishes does not lose its profound religious value and that the feast is not emptied by the exterior aspects which pluck at our heartstrings. The external signs are of course beautiful and important, as long as they do not distract us but rather help us to live Christmas in its truest sense, as sacred and Christian, so that our joy too may not be superficial but profound.

With the Christmas liturgy the Church ushers us into the great Mystery of the Incarnation. Christmas, in fact, is not merely an anniversary of Jesus' Birth; it is also this, but it is more, it is celebrating a mystery that has marked and continues to mark human history. God himself came to dwell among us (cf. Jn 1:14), he made himself one of us. It is a mystery that concerns our faith and our life; a mystery that we actually experience in the liturgical celebrations, and, in particular, in Holy Mass. Some people might ask themselves: how is it possible for me to experience this event today that happened so long ago? How can I participate fruitfully in the Birth of the Son of God that occurred more than 2,000 years ago?

In Holy Mass on Christmas Night we shall repeat these words in the refrain of the Responsorial Psalm: “Today is born our Saviour, Christ the Lord”. This adverb of time, “today”, recurs several times throughout the Christmas celebrations and is applied to the event of the Birth of Jesus and to the salvation that the Incarnation of the Son of God comes to bring us. In the liturgy this event goes beyond the limits of time and space and becomes real, becomes present; its effect endures, even with the passing of days, years and centuries. In pointing out that Jesus is born “today”, the liturgy is not using a meaningless sentence but stresses that this Birth invests and permeates the whole of history and that today too it remains a reality we can attain in the liturgy itself.

For us believers the celebration of Christmas renews our certainty that God is really present with us, still “flesh” and not far away: although he is with the Father he is close to us. In the Child born in Bethlehem God came close to man: we can still encounter him now, in a “today” on which the sun never sets.

I would like to insist on this point because people of today, people of the “tangible”, of what can be experienced empirically, are finding it ever harder to open their horizons and enter the world of God. Of course, humanity’s redemption happened at a precise and identifiable moment in history: in the manifestation of Jesus of Nazareth; but Jesus is the Son of God, he is God himself, who not only has spoken to man, showed him miraculous signs and guided him throughout the history of salvation, but also became man and remains man.

The Eternal One entered the limits of time and space to make the encounter with him possible “today”. The liturgical texts of Christmas help us to understand that the events of salvation brought about by Christ are always up to date and concern every person and all people. When in the liturgical celebrations we hear or proclaim: “today is born our Saviour”, we are not using an empty, conventional expression. Rather, we mean that God is offering to us “today”, now, to me, to each one of us, the possibility of recognizing and welcoming him, as did the shepherds in Bethlehem, so that he may also be born in our lives and renew, illuminate and transform them by his Grace and by his Presence.

Therefore, while Christmas commemorates the Birth of Jesus in the flesh from the Virgin Mary — and many liturgical texts bring one episode or another to life before our eyes — it is an effective event for us. Pope St Leo the Great, in presenting the profound meaning of the Feast of Christmas invited his faithful with these words: “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” (*Sermo 22, In Nativitate Domini, 2, 1: PL 54, 193*).

And, St Leo the Great also said in another of his Christmas sermons: “Today the Maker of the world was born of a Virgin’s womb, and he, who made all natures, became Son of her, whom he

created. Today the Word of God appeared clothed in flesh, and that which had never been visible to human eyes began to be tangible to our hands as well. Today the shepherds learned from angels' voices that the Saviour was born in the substance of our flesh and soul" (*Sermo 26, In Nativitate Domini*, 6, 1: PL 54, 213).

There is a second aspect that I would like to mention briefly: the event of Bethlehem must be considered in the light of the Paschal Mystery; they are both part of Christ's one work of redemption. Jesus' Incarnation and Birth are already an invitation to us to direct our gaze to his death and his Resurrection. Christmas and Easter are both feasts of redemption. Easter celebrates it as a victory over sin and death; it marks the final moment when the glory of the Man-God shines out like the light of day. Christmas celebrates it as God's entry into history, his becoming man in order to restore mankind to God. It marks, so to speak, the initial moment when we see the first gleam of dawn.

However just as daybreak precedes and heralds the light of the day, so Christmas already proclaims the Cross and the glory of the Resurrection. And the two seasons of the year in which the two great feasts are placed, at least in some parts of the world, can help us understand this aspect. Indeed, whereas Easter comes at the beginning of Spring, when the sun dispels the thick, cold fog and renews the face of the earth, Christmas falls at the very beginning of Winter, when the sun's light and warmth do not succeed in reawakening nature, enveloped in the cold beneath whose pall life is nevertheless pulsating and the victory of the sun and its warmth begins again.

The Church Fathers always interpreted Christ's Birth in the light of the whole redemptive work which culminates in the Paschal Mystery. The Incarnation of the Son of God not only appears as the beginning and condition for salvation, but as the very presence of the Mystery of our salvation: God is made man, he is born an infant, like us, he takes our flesh to conquer death and sin.

Two important texts of St Basil illustrate this clearly. St Basil said to the faithful: "God takes flesh precisely in order to destroy death that is concealed in it. Just as antidotes to poison neutralize its effects as soon as they are ingested and as the shadows in a house are dispelled by sunlight, so death that held sway over human nature was destroyed by God's presence. But just as ice in water remains solid as long as night lasts and darkness prevails, it quickly melts in the heat of the sun, so death, that reigned until Christ's coming, as soon as God the Saviour's grace appeared and the sun of justice awoke, unable to coexist with life, 'is swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor 15:54)" (*Homily on the Birth of Christ*, 2: PG 31, 1461).

In another text St Basil again formulates this invitation: "Let us celebrate the salvation of the world, the birth of the human race. Today, Adam's sin has been pardoned. Now we can no longer say "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19) but: united to him who came from heaven, you will be admitted to heaven (*Homily on the Birth of Christ*, 6: PG 31, 1473).

In Christmas we find the tenderness and love of God who stoops to our limitations, to our weaknesses, to our sins, and who bends down even to us. St Paul declares that Jesus Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:6-7).

Let us look at the Bethlehem Grotto: God humbled himself to the point of being laid in a manger, already a prelude to the humbling of himself in the hour of his passion. The culmination of the love story between God and man passes through the manger in Bethlehem and the tomb in Jerusalem.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us experience Christmas that is now at hand with joy. Let us experience this wondrous event: the Son of God is born again “today”, God is truly close to each one of us and wants to meet us, he wants to bring us to him. He is the true light that dispels and dissolves the shadows that envelop our life and humanity. Let us experience the Nativity of the Lord contemplating the path of the immense love of God who lifts us up to him through the Mystery of the Incarnation, passion death and resurrection of his Son; for, as St Augustine said, “In [Christ] the divinity of the Only Begotten One was made to share in our mortality, that we might share in his immortality” (*Epistola* 187, 6. 20: PL 33, 839-840).

Above all let us contemplate and live this Mystery in the celebration of the Eucharist, the heart of Holy Christmas; in it Jesus becomes present in a real way, the true Bread come down from heaven, the true Lamb immolated for our salvation.

I wish all of you and your families a truly Christian celebration of Christmas so that the exchange of greetings on that day may also be an expression of the joy of knowing that God is close to us and wants to accompany us on our journey through life. Many thanks.

### **To special groups:**

I greet all the English-speaking visitors present, including the pilgrimage groups from Singapore and the United States. My special greetings and good wishes go to the Tenth World Congress of the International Association of Maternal and Neonatal Health. My greeting also goes to the primary school children from Korea. I welcome the alumni of the Pontifical North American College who are celebrating their fiftieth anniversary of ordination, and the students of Holy Spirit Seminary in Brisbane, Australia. Upon all of you and your families I invoke God’s abundant blessings. Merry Christmas!

I address a special greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, especially you, students at the Braucci di Caivano Secondary School, may you draw close to the mystery of Bethlehem with the same sentiments of faith as those of the Virgin Mary; may you be granted, dear *sick people*, to draw from the Crib that joy and deep peace that Jesus comes to

bring to the world; and may you, dear *newlyweds*, contemplate with perseverance the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth to impress the virtues practised in it on your journey of family life on which you have just set out.

In reciprocating your greetings, I wish everyone a Holy Christmas filled with every good thing.

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