



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 13 December 1978

1. For the third time already in these Wednesday meetings of ours, I am dealing again with the subject of Advent, following the rhythm of the Liturgy, which introduces us into the life of the Church in the simplest and at the same time deepest way. The Second Vatican Council, which gave us a rich and universal teaching on the Church, called our attention also to the Liturgy. Through it we get to know not only what the Church is, but we experience, day by day, what she lives on.

We, too, live by it because we are the Church: "It is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2).

Now the Church is living Advent and therefore our Wednesday meetings are centred on this liturgical period. Advent means "Coming". To penetrate the reality of Advent, we have tried so far to look in the direction of *who* comes and *for whom* he comes. We have therefore spoken of a God who, creating the world, reveals himself: of a God Creator. And last Wednesday we spoke of man. Today we will continue, in order to find a more complete answer to the question: why "Advent"? Why does God come? Why does he want to come to man?

The liturgy of Advent is based mainly on the texts of the Old Testament Prophets. The prophet Isaiah speaks in it nearly every day. In the history of the People of God of the Old Covenant, he was a particular "interpreter" of the promise, which this people had obtained from God a long time before in the person of the founder of the race: Abraham. Like all the other prophets, and perhaps

more than them all, Isaiah strengthened in his contemporaries faith in God's promises confirmed by the Covenant at the foot of Mount Sinai. He taught above all perseverance in waiting and faithfulness: "O people in Zion ... The Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard for the joy of your heart" (cf. Is 30:19, 30).

When Christ was in the world, he referred several times to Isaiah's words. He said clearly: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21).

2. The liturgy of Advent is of historical character. The expectation of the coming of the Anointed (Messiah) was a historical process. In fact, it permeated the whole history of Israel, which was chosen for the very purpose of preparing the Saviour's coming.

In a certain way, however, our reflections go beyond the daily liturgy of Advent. Let us return therefore to the basic question: why does God come? Why does he want to come to man, to humanity? Let us look for adequate answers to these questions and let us look for them at the very beginnings, that is, even before the history of the chosen people began. This year, our attention goes to the first chapters of the book of Genesis. The "historical" advent would not be understandable without a careful reading and analysis of those chapters.

Therefore, seeking an answer to the question: "Why" advent?, we must once more reread carefully the whole description of the creation of the world and, in particular, the creation of man. It is significant (as I have already had occasion to mention) how the single days of creation end with the observation: "God saw that it was good"; and, after the creation of man: "... God saw it was very good". This observation, as I already said last week, is accompanied by the blessing of creation, and above all by an explicit blessing of man.

In all this description we have before us a God who, to use St Paul's expression, rejoices in truth, in the good (cf. 1 Cor 13:6). Where there is joy, springing from the good there is love. And only where there is love, is there the joy that comes from the good. The book of Genesis, right from its first chapters, reveals to us God who is Love (although this expression will be used much later by St John). He is Love, because he rejoices in the good. Creation is, therefore, at the same time a real giving: where there is love, there is giving.

The book of Genesis indicates the beginning of the existence of the world and of man. Interpreting this existence, we must certainly, as St Thomas Aquinas did, construct a consistent philosophy of being, a philosophy in which the very order of existence will be expressed. However, the book of Genesis speaks of the creation as a gift. God who creates the visible world is the giver; and man is the one who receives the gift. He is the one for whom God creates the visible world, the one whom God, right from the beginning, introduces not only to the order of existence, but also to the order of giving.

The fact that man is the "image and likeness" of God means, among other things, that he is able to receive the gift, that he appreciates this gift, and that he is capable of reciprocating it. That is why God from the beginning establishes the covenant with man, and only with him. The book of Genesis reveals to us not only the natural *order of existence*, but at the same time, right from the beginning, the supernatural *order of grace*. We can speak of grace only if we admit the reality of the Gift. Let us recall from the catechism: grace is God's supernatural gift as the result of which we become children of God and heirs to heaven.

3. What connection has all this with Advent?—we may rightly wonder. I answer: Advent took shape for the first time on the horizon of man's history, when God revealed himself as the one who delights in the good, who loves and who gives. In this gift to man God did not just "give him" the visible world—this is clear from the beginning—but giving man the visible world, God wants to give him Himself too, just as man is capable of giving himself, just as he "gives himself" to the other man: from person to person; that is, to give Himself to him, admitting him to participation in his mysteries, and even to participation in his life. This is carried out in a tangible way in the relationships between members of a family: husband-wife, parents- children. That is why the prophets refer very often to these relationships, to show God's true image.

The order of grace is possible only "in the world of persons". It concerns the gift which always aims at the formation and communion of persons; in fact the book of Genesis presents to us such a giving. The form of this "communion of persons" is delineated in it right from the beginning. Man is called to familiarity with God, to intimacy and friendship with him. God wants to be close to him. He wants to make him a participant in his plans. He wants to make him a participant in his life. He wants to make him happy with his own happiness (with his own Being) .

Because of all this *the Coming of God* is necessary, as is the expectation of man: *the availability of man*.

We know that the first man, who enjoyed original innocence and the particular closeness of his Creator, did not show this availability. This first covenant of God with man was interrupted, but the will to save man did not cease on the part of God. The order of grace was not broken, and therefore Advent lasts always.

The reality of Advent is expressed, among other things, by the following words of St Paul: "God ... *desires* all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim 2:4).

That "God desires" is precisely Advent, and it is at the basis of every advent.

A special greeting and blessing to the sick present here and to all those who are suffering. My thought flies and extends wherever in the world physical or moral pain torments and mortifies human beings.

Following the daily news items, we come across dramas and sufferings that wring our hearts. In

particular I would like to recall today those who are in affliction owing to a form of violence which has, unfortunately, become so frequent in the last few years: that of kidnapping.

It is a scourge unworthy of civil countries, which has, unfortunately also reached horrifying forms of cruelty.

In God's name I beseech those responsible to release those whom they keep sequestered and I remind them that God is the avenger of men's actions. May the Lord really touch their hearts and cause that spark of humanity which cannot be absent from their spirits, to triumph, thus giving a laudable conclusion to a deeply deplorable act.

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