



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 18 December 2002

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In this season of Advent, the invitation of the Prophet Isaiah accompanies us: *"Say to those who are fearful of heart. Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God ... will come and save you"* (Is 35,4). It becomes more urgent as Christmas approaches, enriched with the exhortation *to prepare our hearts to welcome* the Messiah. The one awaited by the people *will certainly come* and his salvation will be for all.

On the Holy Night, we will again recall his birth in Bethlehem, in a certain sense, we will relive the feelings of the shepherds, their joy and their wonder. With Mary and Joseph we will contemplate the glory of the Word made flesh for our redemption. We will pray that all men may accept the new life that the Son of Man brought into the world by assuming our human nature.

2. The liturgy of Advent, filled with constant allusions to the joyful expectation of the Messiah, helps us *to understand the fullness of the value and meaning* of the mystery of Christmas. It is not just about commemorating the historical event, which occurred some 2,000 years ago in a little village of Judea. Instead, we must understand that *our whole life should be an "advent"*, in vigilant expectation of Christ's final coming. To prepare our hearts to welcome the Lord who, as we say in the Creed, will come one day to judge the living and the dead, we must learn to recognize his presence in the events of daily life. Advent is then a *period of intense training* that directs us decisively to the One who has already come, who will come and who continuously comes.

3. With these sentiments, the Church prepares to contemplate in ecstasy, in a week, *the mystery of the Incarnation*. The Gospel recounts the conception and birth of Jesus, and reports the many providential circumstances that preceded and surrounded such a miraculous event: the angel's annunciation to Mary, the birth of John the Baptist, the choir of angels in Bethlehem, the arrival of

the Magi from the East, St Joseph's visions. These are all signs and witnesses that highlight the divinity of this Child. In Bethlehem is born Emmanuel, God-with-us.

In the liturgy of these days, the Church offers us three *outstanding "guides"* to show us the proper attitude to assume in going to meet the divine "guest" of humanity.

4. First of all, Isaiah, the prophet of consolation and hope. He proclaims a true and proper Gospel for the people of Israel, enslaved in Babylon, and *urges them to remain vigilant in prayer*, to recognize "the signs" of the coming of the Messiah.

Then there is *John the Baptist*, the precursor of the Messiah, who is presented as a "voice crying in the wilderness", preaching "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" (cf. Mk 1,4). It is the only condition for recognizing the Messiah already present in the world.

Finally, *Mary*, who in this novena of preparation for Christmas, guides us towards Bethlehem. Mary is the *Woman of the "yes"* who, contrary to Eve, makes the plan of God her own without reservation. Thus she becomes a *clear light* for our steps and *the highest model* for our inspiration.

Dear brothers and sisters, may we allow the Virgin to accompany us on our way towards the Lord who comes, remaining "vigilant in prayer and rejoicing in praise".

I wish everyone a proper preparation for the coming celebration of Christmas.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present today, including the groups from Denmark and the United States. I wish you a fruitful preparation for Christmas, and upon all of you and your families I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy Christmas!

To the bridge players

I then greet the young Bridge players who have come here in such large numbers.

To young people, the sick, and newly-weds

Finally, I would like to greet the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, I thank you all for your participation in this encounter. Dear *young people*, in these few days before the Solemnity of Christmas, I pray that the love that God manifests to humanity in the birth of Christ increase in you the desire to serve your brothers and sisters. Dear *sick people*, may the Lord who comes to visit us in the mystery of Christmas, bring comfort and hope to you. Dear *newly-weds*,

may the joy of the celebration of Christmas reinforce your pledge of love and reciprocal fidelity.

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