



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 4 August 2004

Canticle in Philippians (2: 6-11)

He emptied himself!

1. On our journey through the Psalms and Canticles that make up the Liturgy of the Hours we have come to the Canticle in Philippians (2: 6-11) that is a feature of First Vespers on all of the four Sundays that the Liturgy covers.

We are meditating upon it for the second time, exploring more deeply the wealth of its theology. These verses shine with the Christian faith of the origins, centred on the figure of Jesus, recognized and proclaimed our brother in humanity but also Lord of the universe. Thus, it is a real confession of Christological faith that mirrors clearly the thought of St Paul but may also echo the voice of the Judeo-Christian community before the Apostle's time.

2. The Canticle starts from the divinity of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the divine "nature" and condition are his - in Greek, *morphé* - that is, the essential transcendent reality of God (cf. v. 6). Yet he does not consider his supreme and glorious identity as a proud privilege of which to boast nor as a sign of power and mere superiority.

Our hymn clearly moves downwards, that is, towards humanity. It is on this path of "emptying" himself, or as it were, stripping himself of that glory to take on the *morphé*, in other words, the reality and condition of a servant, that the Word takes on in order to enter the horizon of human history. Indeed, he assumes the "likeness" of human beings (cf. v. 7) and even goes so far as to accept the sign of limitation and finality which death is. It is an extreme humiliation, for he even accepted death on the cross, which the society in his time held to be the vilest form (v. 8).

3. Christ chose to lower himself from glory to death on a cross; this is the first movement of the Canticum to which, in order to reveal its other nuances, we will have occasion to return.

The second movement is in the opposite direction: from below it ascends to the heights, from humiliation it rises towards exaltation. It is now the Father who glorifies the Son, snatching him from the clutches of death and enthroning him as Lord of the universe (cf. v. 9). St Peter too, in his discourse at Pentecost, declares that "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2: 36). Easter, therefore, is the solemn Epiphany of the divinity of Christ, which is at first concealed by his condition as a servant and a mortal.

4. Before the grandiose figure of Christ glorified and enthroned, let everyone fall to their knees in adoration. A powerful profession of faith is raised not only from within the whole horizon of human history, but also from heaven and from hell (cf. Phil 2: 10): "Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11) "We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2: 9).

Let us end our brief analysis of the Canticum in Philippians, to which we will need to return, by listening to the words of St Augustine who, in his Commentary on the Gospel according to St John (*Commento al Vangelo di San Giovanni*), refers to the Pauline hymn to celebrate the life-giving power of Christ who brings about our resurrection, snatching us from our mortal end.

5. These are the words of the great Father of the Church: "Christ, "though his nature was divine, did not jealously keep his equality with God to himself". What would have become of us, here below in the abyss, weak and attached to the earth, hence, incapable of reaching God? Could we have been left to ourselves? Absolutely not. He "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant", but without abandoning his divine form. Consequently, he who was God, made himself man, taking on what he was not without losing what he was; thus, God became man. Here, on the one hand, you find help in your weakness, and on the other, you find what you need to attain perfection. Christ raises you up by virtue of his humanity, he guides you by virtue of his human divinity and leads you to his divinity. All Christian preaching, O brothers, and the economy of salvation centred on Christ is summed up in this and in nothing else: in the resurrection of souls and the resurrection of bodies.

Both died: the body because of its weakness, the soul because of its wickedness; both were dead and both, the soul and the body, had to be raised. By virtue of whom is the soul raised if not by Christ as God? By virtue of whom is the body raised, if not by Christ as Man?... Your soul rises from wickedness by virtue of his divinity and your body rises from corruption by virtue of his humanity" (*Commento al Vangelo di San Giovanni*, 23, 6, Rome, 1968, p. 541).

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. I greet particularly the groups from Ireland and Japan. Wishing you a pleasant stay in Rome, I cordially invoke upon you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy vacation!

I now offer a warm welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I greet in particular the Apostolic Oblates founded by Mons. Guglielmo Giaquinta, who are taking part in their Institute's General Assembly, and the faithful of Biancavilla who are commemorating the fourth centenary of the inauguration of their parish church. I invite them all to witness with new dynamism to the Gospel of charity.

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, today's liturgy commemorates a priest who was deeply loved by his contemporaries: St John Mary Vianney, the holy Curé d'Ars.

May his example and intercession be an incentive to you, dear *young people*, to respond generously to the invitations of grace; may it help you, dear *sick people*, to understand better and better the value of suffering accepted out of love for the Lord; may it make you appreciate, dear *newly-weds*, the virtue of humility that is the basis of harmony in the family.