



The Holy See

MIDNIGHT MASS ON CHRISTMAS EVE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 24 December 1978

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We are in Saint Peter's Basilica at this unusual hour. Around us is the architecture in which whole generations have for centuries expressed their faith in God Incarnate, following the message brought to Rome by the apostles Peter and Paul: All our surroundings speak with the voice of the two millennia that separate us from the birth of Christ. The second millennium is speedily approaching its end. In these circumstances, in this context of time and place, let me go with you to the cave near the little town of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. Let us all be there rather than here—there where "in the silence of the night" was heard the wail of the newborn infant, that eternal expression of the children of the earth. At the same moment was heard the voice of Heaven, that "world" of God dwelling in the inaccessible tabernacle of Glory. The majesty of the eternal God and mother earth making herself known by the wail of the newborn Infant enable us to glimpse the prospect of a new Peace, Reconciliation, and Covenant:

"To us is born the Saviour of the world,"

"all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God."

2. Nevertheless at this moment, at this strange hour, the ends of the earth are still afar off. They are pervaded by a period of waiting, far from peace. The hearts of people are filled rather with weariness; people have fallen asleep, as have the shepherds in the Bethlehem valleys close by. What is happening in the stable, in the rock cave, has a dimension of profound intimacy: it is something between the Mother and the Babe to be born. No outside person has access. Even Joseph, the Nazareth carpenter, is but a silent witness. She alone is fully aware of her Motherhood. She alone perceives the special expression of the infant's wailing. The birth of Christ

is pre-eminently her mystery, her great day. It is the feast of the Mother.

It is a strange feast: there is no trace of the synagogue liturgy, no reading of the prophets or singing of the psalms. "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body has thou prepared for me" (Heb 10:5) seems to be what is said by the wailing of the one who, although he is the Eternal Son, the Word who is of one being with the Father, "God from God, Light from Light," has become flesh (Jn 1: 14). He reveals himself in that body as one of us, a little infant, in all his frailty and vulnerability. Dependent upon people's care, entrusted to their love, undefended. He wails, and the world does not hear him, cannot hear him. The newborn infant's wail can only just be heard a few steps away.

3. And so, Brothers and Sisters crowding this Basilica, I beg you: let us try to be more present there than here. Not many days ago, I manifested the great desire I felt to be in the cave of the Nativity, to celebrate in that very place the beginning of my Pontificate. Since circumstances do not allow me to do that, finding myself here with all of you, I am endeavouring all the more to be there spiritually with you all, in order to crown this Liturgy with the depth, the ardour, the authenticity of an intense inner feeling. The liturgy of Christmas Night is rich with a special realism: the realism of the moment that we are renewing, and also the realism of the hearts that are reliving that moment. All of us in fact are deeply moved, although what we are celebrating happened some two thousand years ago.

In order to have a complete picture of the reality of that event, in order to penetrate more deeply still into the realism of that moment and the realism of human hearts, let us remember that the event occurred precisely in the way it did: in abandonment and extreme poverty, in the cave stable outside the town, because people in the town refused to receive the Mother and Joseph into any of their homes. Nowhere was there room. From the beginning, the world showed itself inhospitable towards the God who was to be born as Man.

4. Now let us reflect briefly on the lasting meaning of this lack of hospitality on man's part towards God. All of us here wish it were different. We wish that everything within us men should be open to God born as a man. It is with this desire that we have come here!

On this night let us therefore think of all the human beings that fall victim to man's inhumanity, to cruelty, to the lack of any respect, to contempt for the objective rights of every human being. Let us think of those who are lonely, old, or sick; of the homeless, those suffering from hunger, and those whose misery is the result of the exploitation and injustice of economic systems. Let us also think of those who on this night are not allowed to take part in the liturgy of God's Birth and who have no priest to celebrate Mass. And let us give a thought also to those whose souls and consciences are tormented no less than their faith.

The stable at Bethlehem is the first place for solidarity with man: for one man's solidarity with

another and for all men's with all men, especially with those for whom there is "no room at the inn" (cf. Lk 2:7), whose personal rights are refused recognition

5. The newborn Infant is wailing. Who hears the baby's wail?

But Heaven speaks for him, and it is Heaven that explains it with these words:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy his favour" (Lk 2:14).

Touched by the fact of the birth of Jesus, we must hear this cry from Heaven.

That cry must reach all the ends of the earth, all men must hear it anew.

A Son is given to us.

Christ is born to us. Amen.

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