



The Holy See

URBI ET ORBI

Christmas Day, 25 December 1997

1. "The earth has seen its Saviour".

Today, Christmas Day, we live to the full
the truth of these words: the earth has seen its Saviour.
The first to see him were the shepherds of Bethlehem
who, at the words of the angels,
hastened with joy to the poor cave.

It was night, a night charged with mystery.

What did they see before them?

A Child placed in a manger
and at his side, lovingly, Mary and Joseph.

They saw a child but, enlightened by faith,
in this fragile creature they recognized God made man
and they offered him their poor gifts.

Thus they began, without realizing it,
that hymn of praise to Emmanuel, God come to dwell amongst us,
which would resound

from generation to generation.

The joyous canticle, the heritage of all
who today journey in spirit to Bethlehem,
to celebrate the birth of the Lord,
and praise God for his marvellous works.

We too unite ourselves in faith to them
in this unique encounter of praise
which is traditionally renewed every year at Christmas,
here in St Peter's Square, and which concludes with the blessing
which the Bishop of Rome imparts *Urbi et Orbi*:

Urbi: to this City which, thanks to the ministry of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, has "seen" in a unique way the Saviour of the world.

Et Orbi: to the whole world in which the Good News of salvation has spread far and wide, to the very ends of the earth. The joy of Christmas has thus become the heritage of countless peoples and nations. In truth, "all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (Ps 97 [98]:3).

2. To all, therefore, is addressed the message of today's solemnity.

All are called to share in the joy of Christmas.

"Acclaim the Lord all the earth cry out and exult with songs of joy" (Ps 97 [98]:4).

Christmas is a day of extraordinary gladness!

This gladness has penetrated people's hearts and has been expressed in many different ways in the history and culture of Christian nations.

It has found an echo in liturgical and popular song, in painting, literature and every field of art.

For the Christian formation of whole generations such traditions and songs, sacred plays and, above all, the crib are of great importance.

The canticle of the angels at Bethlehem has thus found a universal and varied echo in the customs, attitudes, cultures of every age.

It has found an echo in the heart of every believer.

3. Today, a day of joy for all, a day filled with so many calls for peace and brotherhood, more intense and sharp become the imploring cries of peoples who long for freedom and harmony, in situations of disturbing ethnic and political violence. Today there resound more strongly the voices of those who give themselves generously

to breaking down barriers of fear and aggression,
 promoting understanding between peoples
 of different origins, colour and religious creeds.
 Today there appear more tragic to us
 the sufferings of peoples fleeing
 to the mountains of their own land
 or seeking a safe haven on the coasts of neighbouring countries,
 in order to pursue the faint hope of a less precarious and more secure existence.
 More distressing today is the tense silence
 of the ever growing multitude of the new poor:
 men and women without work and without shelter,
 infants and children injured and violated,
 adolescents enlisted in the wars of adults,
 young victims of drugs
 or attracted by deceptive myths.
 Today is Christmas Day, a day of confidence for peoples long divided
 who have finally come back to meet one another and talk.
 These are often timid and fragile prospects,
 slow and tiring dialogues,
 but animated by the hope
 of eventually reaching agreements
 which respect the rights and duties of all.

4. It is Christmas! This straying humanity of ours
 journeying towards the Third Millennium,
 awaits You, o Child of Bethlehem,
 who come to manifest the love of the Father.
 You, the King of Peace, invite us today to fear not,
 and you open our hearts to prospects of hope.
 For this reason "let us sing to the Lord a new song
 for he has worked wonders" (cf. Ps 97 [98]: 1).
 Behold the greatest wonder worked by God:
 He himself became man, he was born on Christmas night
 he offered his life for us on the Cross,
 he rose on the third day according to the Scriptures
 and through the Eucharist he remains with us
 to the end of time.
 In truth "... the Word became flesh
 and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).
 The light of faith enables us to recognize
 in the new-born Child

the eternal and immortal God.

Of his glory we become witnesses.

Almighty though he was

he clothed himself in extreme poverty.

This is our faith, the faith of the Church,

which enables us to confess the glory of the only-begotten Son of God,

even if our eyes only see the man,

a Child born in the stable at Bethlehem.

God made man lies here today in the manger

and silently the universe contemplates him.

May humanity recognize him as its Saviour!