The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS ***GENERAL AUDIENCE***

Wednesday, 27 December 2017

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to reflect with you on the meaning of the Nativity of the Lord Jesus, which in these days we are living in faith and in celebrations.

The construction of the Nativity scene and, above all, the liturgy, with its biblical Readings and its traditional hymns, have enabled us to relive “this day” in which to us “is born ... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11).

In our day, especially in Europe, we are witnessing a type of “distortion” of Christmas: in the name of a false respect which is not Christian, which often hides the wish to marginalize faith, all reference to Christ’s birth is eliminated from the holiday. But in reality, this event is the only true Christmas! Without Jesus there is no Christmas; there is another holiday, but not Christmas. And if he is at the centre, then all the trimmings, that is, the lights, sounds, various local traditions, including the characteristic foods, all contribute to creating an atmosphere of celebration, but with Jesus at the centre. If we remove him, the light goes out and everything becomes feigned, illusory.

Through the message of the Church, we, as the shepherds of the Gospel (cf. Lk 2:9), are led to seek out and find the true light, that of Jesus who, becoming human like us, reveals himself in a surprising way: he is born to a poor, unknown maiden, who gives birth to him in a stable, with only the help of her husband. The world does not notice anything, but in heaven the angels who know of the event exult! And it is in this way that the Son of God presents himself to us today: as God’s gift to humanity, which is immersed in darkness and in the listlessness of slumber (cf. Is 9:1). And again today we witness the fact that humanity often prefers darkness, because it knows that the light would reveal all those actions and thoughts that would make us blush or stir our conscience. Thus, we prefer to remain in the dark and not subvert our own bad habits.

We can thus ask ourselves what it means to welcome God's gift, which is Jesus. As he himself has taught us with his life, it means becoming daily a gift freely given to those we meet on our own path. This is why Christmas gifts are exchanged. The true gift to us is Jesus, and like him we seek to be gifts to others. And, since we want to be gifts to others, we exchange gifts, as a sign, as a symbol of this attitude that Jesus teaches us: he, sent by the Father, was a gift to us, and we are gifts to others.

The Apostle Paul offers us a concise key to understanding, when he writes — this passage of Paul is beautiful — "the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us ... to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (Tit 2:11-12). The grace of God "has appeared" in Jesus, the face of God, to whom the Virgin Mary gave birth like every child of this world, but he came not "from the earth", he came "from heaven", from God. In this way, with the incarnation of the Son, God opened the way of new life, founded not on selfishness but on love. Jesus' birth is our Heavenly Father's greatest gesture of love.

And lastly, a final important aspect: in Christmas we can see how human history, that movement of the powerful of this world, is visited by the history of God. And God engages those who, confined to the margins of society, are the first beneficiaries of his gift, namely — the gift — the salvation borne by Jesus. With the little ones and the scorned Jesus establishes a friendship that continues in time and that nourishes hope for a better future. To these people, represented by the shepherds of Bethlehem, "appeared a great light" (cf. Lk 2:9-12). They were marginalized; they were frowned upon, scorned, and the Good News appeared to them first. With these people, with the little ones and the scorned, Jesus establishes a friendship that endures in time and that nourishes hope for a better future. To these people, represented by the shepherds of Bethlehem, appears a great light which leads them straight to Jesus. With them, in all ages, God wishes to build a new world, a world in which there are no longer rejected, mistreated and indigent people.

Dear brothers and sisters, in these days let us open our minds and hearts to welcome this grace. Jesus is God's gift to us and, if we welcome him, we too can become so to others — be a gift of God to others — first and foremost to those who have never experienced attention and tenderness. How many people in our life have never experienced a caress, loving attention, a kind gesture. Christmas spurs us to do so. In this way Jesus comes to be born again in each of our lives and, through us, he continues to be the gift of salvation for the little ones and the excluded.

Special greetings:

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, particularly those from the United States of America. May each of you, and your families, cherish the joy of this Christmas season, and draw near in prayer to the Prince of Peace who has come to dwell among us. God bless you all!

With the joy of the Christmas spirit I welcome the dear Italian-speaking pilgrims. I greet the artists and workers of Liana Orfei's Golden Circus, and I thank them for their delightful performance. Like beauty, circus art always brings us closer to God! And you, with your work, with your art, bring people to God. Thank you for what you do!

In this Christmas Season we have before our eyes the mystery of Jesus, God's gift to all mankind. Without Jesus — let us remember this — it is not Christmas; it is something else.

I am pleased to offer a special greeting to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, may you know how to be steadfast in faith, looking to the divine Child who in the mystery of Christmas offers himself to the whole of mankind. Dear *sick people*, I hope that you may perceive, in the bright light of Bethlehem, the meaning of your suffering. And I exhort you, dear *newlyweds*, to keep constant — in building your family — love and devotion surpassing all sacrifice.

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