



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Jesus' birth reveals depth of God's love

1. *"Let us rejoice and be glad in the Lord, for eternal salvation has appeared in the world, alleluia"*. With these words the liturgy today invites us to remain absorbed in the "holy joy" of Christmas. At the beginning of a new year, this exhortation directs us to live it entirely in the light of Christ, whose salvation appeared in the world for all human beings.

The Christmas season, in fact, once again brings Jesus' mystery and his work of salvation to the attention of Christians. Before the crib, the Church adores the august mystery of the Incarnation: the Child stirring in Mary's arms is the Eternal Word who has entered time and taken on human nature wounded by sin, to unite it to himself and redeem it. Every human reality and every temporal event thus acquire an eternal resonance: in the person of the Incarnate Word creation is wondrously exalted.

St Augustine writes: *"God became man so that man might become God"*. Between heaven and earth a bridge has been built forever: in the God-Man humanity rediscovers the way to heaven. Mary's Son is the universal Mediator, the supreme Pontiff. This Child's every act is a *mystery* meant to *reveal God's unfathomable benevolence*.

2. At the stable in Bethlehem, the infinite love God has for every human being is expressed with disarming simplicity. In the crib we contemplate God made man for us.

St Francis of Assisi had the idea of portraying this message in a live nativity scene at Greccio on 25 December 1223. His biographer, Thomas of Celano, relates that he was radiant with joy

because that moving scene shone with Gospel simplicity, poverty was praised and humility recommended. The biographer ends by noting that "after the solemn vigil, everyone went home filled with unspeakable joy" (cf. *Vita prima*, chap. XXX, 86, 479).

Francis' insight is surprising: the crib is not only a new Bethlehem because it recalls the historical event and makes present its message, but it is also an occasion of joy and consolation: it is *the day of joy, the time of exultation*. Thomas of Celano further observes that *that Christmas night was as clear as broad day and sweet to men and animals* (cf. *ibid.*, 85, 469).

3. The crib celebrates the covenant between God and man, between heaven and earth. Bethlehem, a place of joy, also becomes a school of goodness, because the mercy and love that joins God to his children are expressed there. It visibly demonstrates the brotherhood that must bind all who are brothers and sisters in faith, since they are all children of the one heavenly Father. In this place of communion, Bethlehem shines as the house where everyone can find nourishment - etymologically its name means "house of bread" - and the paschal mystery of the Eucharist is, in a certain way, already foretold.

In Bethlehem, as if on a symbolic altar, the undying Life is already celebrated and the people of all time are granted, as it were, a foretaste of the food of immortality, which is "the pilgrims' food, truly bread for sons" (*Sequence for Corpus Christi*). Only the Redeemer, born in Bethlehem, can fulfil the deepest longings of the human heart and soothe its sufferings and wounds.

4. At the stable in Bethlehem we contemplate Mary, who brought forth the Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. "The woman who was docile to the voice of the Spirit, a woman of silence and attentiveness, a woman of hope who, like Abraham, accepted God's will "hoping against hope" (cf. Rom 4: 18)" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 48), Our Lady shines out as a model to all who wholeheartedly put their trust in God's promises.

With her and Joseph, we remain in adoration before the cradle of Bethlehem, as we imploringly call upon heaven: "Let your face shine upon us and save us, Lord!".

Consoled by the gift of the Saviour's birth, let us intensify our commitment in these final days of the Holy Year. Let us open our heart to Christ, the one, universal way that leads to God. Thus we can continue in the new year with steadfast confidence. May the powerful intercession of Mary, the faithful Virgin, the silent witness to the mystery of Bethlehem, sustain us on our way.

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present, especially those from Australia and the United States of America. In this season of joy, may the Word made flesh bless you and your families with abundant graces and consolations. I wish you all a happy and blessed

New Year!

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