



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 23 December 2009

(Video)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With the Christmas Novena which we are celebrating in these days the Church invites us to live intensely and profoundly the preparation for the Saviour's Birth, now at hand. The desire we all carry in our hearts is that in the midst of the frenzied activity of our day the forthcoming Feast of Christmas may give us serene and profound joy to make us tangibly feel the goodness of Our Lord and imbue us with new courage.

To understand better the meaning of the Lord's Birth I would like to make a brief allusion to the historical origins of this Solemnity. In fact, at the outset the Liturgical Year of the Church did not develop primarily from Christ's Birth but rather from faith in his Resurrection. Thus Christianity's most ancient Feast is not Christmas but Easter; the Christian faith is founded on Christ's Resurrection, which is at the root of the proclamation of the Gospel and gave birth to the Church. Therefore being Christian means living in a Paschal manner, letting ourselves be involved in the dynamism that originated in Baptism and leads to dying to sin in order to live with God (cf. Rom 6: 4).

Hippolytus of Rome, in his commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel, written in about a.d. 204, was the first person to say clearly that Jesus was born on 25 December. Moreover, some exegetes note that the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem, instituted by Judas Machabee in 164 b.c., was celebrated on that day. The coincidence of dates would consequently

mean that with Jesus, who appeared as God's Light in the darkness, the consecration of the Temple, the Advent of God to this earth, was truly brought about.

For Christianity the Feast of Christmas acquired its definitive form in the fourth century when it replaced the Roman Feast of the *Sol invictus*, the invincible sun. This highlighted the fact that Christ's Birth was the victory of the true Light over the darkness of evil and sin. However, the special, intense spiritual atmosphere that surrounds Christmas developed in the Middle Ages, thanks to St Francis of Assisi who was profoundly in love with the man Jesus, God-with-us. The Saint's first biographer, Thomas of Celano, recounts in his *Vita Secunda* that St Francis "Over and above all the other Solemnities, celebrated with ineffable tenderness the Nativity of the Child Jesus, and called 'the Feast of Feasts' the day on which God, having become a tiny child, suckled at a human breast" (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, n. 199, p. 492). This particular devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation gave rise to the famous celebration of Christmas at Greccio. Francis probably drew the inspiration for this from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and from the manger at St Mary Major in Rome. What motivated the *Poverello* of Assisi was the wish to experience as real, living and actual the humble grandeur of the event of the Child Jesus' Birth, and to communicate the joy of it to all.

In his first biography Thomas of Celano speaks of the night of the nativity scene at Greccio in a lively and moving way, making a crucial contribution to spreading the most beautiful Christmas tradition, that of the crib. Indeed, the night at Greccio restored to Christianity the intensity and beauty of the Feast of Christmas and taught the People of God to perceive its most authentic message, its special warmth, and to love and worship the humanity of Christ. This particular approach to Christmas gave the Christian faith a new dimension. Easter had focused attention on the power of God who triumphs over death, inaugurates new life and teaches us to hope in the world to come. St Francis with his crib highlighted the defenceless love of God, his humanity and his kindness; God manifested himself to humanity in the Incarnation of the Word to teach people a new way of living and loving.

Celano relates that on that Christmas night Francis was granted the grace of a marvellous vision. He saw lying in the manger a tiny Child who was awakened by Francis' presence. And Celano adds: "Nor did this vision differ from the events because, through the work of his grace which acted through his holy servant, Francis, the Child Jesus was revived in the hearts of many who had forgotten him and was deeply impressed upon their loving memory" (cf. *Vita Prima, op. cit.*, n. 86, p. 307). This setting describes in great detail all that Francis' living faith and love for Christ's humanity imparted to the Christian celebration of Christmas: the discovery that God reveals himself in the tender limbs of the Infant Jesus. Thanks to St Francis, the Christian people were able to perceive that at Christmas God truly became the "Emmanuel", the God-with-us from whom no barrier nor any distance can separate us. Thus, in that Child, God became close to each one of us, so close that we are able to speak intimately to him and engage in a trusting relationship of deep affection with him, just as we do with any newborn baby.

In that Child, in fact, God-Love is manifest: God comes without weapons, without force, because he does not want to conquer, so to speak, from the outside, but rather wants to be freely received by the human being. God makes himself a defenceless Child to overcome pride, violence and the human desire to possess. In Jesus God took on this poor, disarming condition to win us with love and lead us to our true identity. We must not forget that the most important title of Jesus Christ is, precisely, that of "Son", Son of God; the divine dignity is indicated with a term that extends the reference to the humble condition of the manger in Bethlehem, although it corresponds uniquely to his divinity, which is the divinity of the "Son".

His condition as a Child also points out to us how we may encounter God and enjoy his presence. It is in the light of Christmas that we may understand Jesus' words: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18: 3). Those who have not understood the mystery of Christmas, have not understood the crucial element of Christian life. Those who do not welcome Jesus with a child's heart, cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven: this is what Francis wished to remind the Christians of his time and of all times, until today. Let us pray the Father to grant us that simplicity of heart which recognizes the Lord in the Child, just as Francis did in Greccio. Then what Thomas of Celano recounts referring to the experience of the shepherds on the Holy Night (cf. Lk 2: 20) with regard to those who were present at the event in Greccio might happen to us: "each one went home full of ineffable joy" (cf. *Vita Prima, op. cit.*, n. 86, p. 479).

This is the wish that I formulate with affection for you, for your families and for all your loved ones. Happy Christmas to you all!

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the groups from the Philippines and the United States. In these holy days, may you and your families draw ever closer to the Lord and experience his heavenly gifts of love, joy and peace. Merry Christmas!

I would now like to greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. A few days before the Solemnity of Christmas may the love that God expressed to humanity in Christ's Birth increase in you, dear *young people*, the desire to serve the brethren generously. May it be for you, dear *sick people*, a source of serene comfort. May it inspire you, dear *newlyweds*, to consolidate your promise of love and reciprocal fidelity.

