



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 6 December 1978

Beloved Sisters and Brothers!

I am returning to last Wednesday's subject.

1. To penetrate into the biblical and liturgical fullness of the meaning of Advent, it is necessary to follow two directions. We must "go back" to the beginnings, and at the same time "go down" in depth. We did so already, for the first time, last Wednesday, choosing as the subject of our meditation the first words of the book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created" (*Beresit bara Elohim*).

Towards the end of the subject developed last week, we pointed out, among other things, that, to understand Advent in its full meaning, it is also necessary to tackle the subject of "man". The full meaning of Advent emerges from reflection on the Reality of God who creates—and creating reveals himself (this is the first and fundamental revelation, and also the first and fundamental truth of our "Creed"). The full meaning of Advent comes at the same time from deep reflection on the reality of man. We will approach this second reality, man, a little more during today's meditation.

2. A week ago we dwelt on the words of the book of Genesis, in which man is defined the "image and likeness of God". It is necessary to reflect with greater intensity on the texts that speak of it. They belong to the first chapter of the book of Genesis, in which the description of the creation of the world is presented in the succession of seven days. The description of the creation of man, on the sixth day, is somewhat different from the preceding descriptions. In these descriptions we are witnesses only of the act of creation, expressed with the words: "God said—Let there be ... "; here,

on the contrary, the author wishes to highlight first the intention and the plan of the Creator (of God-Elohim); we read, in fact: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen 1:26). As if the Creator entered into himself; as if, creating, not only did he call things into existence from nothingness with the words: "Let there be", but, as if, in a special way, he drew man from the mystery of his own Being. That is understandable, because it is not a question just of Being, but of the Image. The image must "reflect", it must, in a certain way, almost reproduce "the substance" of its Prototype. The Creator says, furthermore, "after our likeness". It is clear that it must not be understood as a "portrait", but as a living being, who will live a life similar to that of God.

Only after these words, which bear witness, so to speak, to the plan of God-Creator, does the Bible speak of the act itself of the creation of man:

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1 :27).

This description is made complete by the blessing. There are, therefore: the plan, the act of creation itself and the blessing:

"And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'". (Gen 1 :28).

The last words of the description: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1: 31)—seem to be the echo of this blessing.

3. Certainly the text of Genesis is among the most ancient ones: according to biblical scholars, it was written about the 9th century B.C. That text contains the fundamental truth of our faith, the first article of the "Apostles' Creed". The part of the text, which presents the creation of man, is stupendous in its simplicity and at the same time in its depth. The affirmations it contains correspond to our experience and to our knowledge of man.

It is clear to everyone, regardless of ideologies on the conception of the world, that man, though belonging to the visible world, to nature, is in some way differentiated from this nature itself. In fact, the visible world exists "for him" and he "has dominion" over it; although, in various ways, he is "conditioned" by nature, he "dominates" it. He dominates it, by the strength of what he is, of his capacities and faculties of the spiritual order, which differentiate him from the natural world. It is these very faculties that constitute man. On this point the book of Genesis is extraordinarily precise. Defining "God's image", it shows the reason why man is man; the reason why he is a being distinct from all the other creatures of the visible world.

Science has made—and continues to make—a great many attempts in the various fields, to prove man's ties with the natural world and his dependence on it, in order to integrate him in the history of the evolution of the various species. While respecting these researches, we cannot limit ourselves to them. If we analyse man in the depth of his being, we see that he differs more from the world of nature than he resembles it. Also anthropology and philosophy proceed in this direction, when they try to analyse and understand man's intelligence, freedom, conscience and spirituality.

The book of Genesis seems to meet all these experiences of science, and, speaking of man as "God's image", lets it be understood that the answer to the mystery of his humanity is not to be found along the path of similarity with the world of nature. Man resembles God more than nature. Psalm 82:6 says so: "You are gods", the words that Jesus will take up again subsequently (cf. Jn 10:34).

4. This is a bold affirmation. It is necessary to have faith to accept it. Reason, however, if unprejudiced, does not oppose this truth about man; on the contrary, it sees in it a complement to what emerges from the analysis of human reality, and above all of the human spirit.

It is extremely significant that already the same book of Genesis, in the long description of the creation of man, obliges man—the first man created (Adam)—to make a similar analysis. What we read there may "scandalize" some people, owing to the archaic way of expression, but at the same time it is impossible not to be astonished at the relevance of that narrative today, when it considers the heart of the matter.

Here is the text:

"Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers ...

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it ... Then the Lord God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'. So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:7-20).

What do we witness? The first "man" carries out the first and fundamental act of knowledge of the world. At the same time this act enables him to know and distinguish himself, "man", from all other

creatures, and above all from those which as "living beings"—endowed with vegetative and sensitive life—show proportionally the greatest similarity with him, "with man", who is also endowed with vegetative and sensitive life. It could be said that this first man does what every man of any time usually does; that is: he reflects on his own being and asks himself who he is.

The result of this cognitive process is the realization of the fundamental and essential difference: I am different. I am more "different" than "similar". The Bible description concludes: "for the man there was not found a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:20).

5. Why are we speaking of all this today?—We are doing so to understand better the mystery of Advent, to understand it from its very foundations—and thus penetrate with greater depth into our Christianity.

Advent means "the Coming".

If God "comes" to man, he does so because in the human being he has prepared a "dimension of expectation" through which man can "welcome" God, is capable of doing so.

Already the book of Genesis, and particularly this chapter, explains this when, speaking of man, it states that God "created (him)... in his own image" (Gen 1 :27).

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