



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 20 December 1978

1. Our meeting today offers us the opportunity for the fourth and last meditation on Advent. The Lord is near, the Liturgy of Advent reminds us every day. This closeness of the Lord is felt by all of us: both by us priests, reciting every day the marvellous "major antiphons" of Advent, and by all Christians who try to prepare their hearts and their consciences for his coming. I know that in this period the confessionals of churches in my country, Poland, are thronged (no less than during Lent). I think that it is certainly the same in Italy also, and wherever a deep spirit of faith makes the need felt of opening one's soul to the Lord who is about to come.

The greatest joy of this expectation of Advent is that felt by children. I remember that it was just they who hurried most willingly in the parishes of my country to the Masses celebrated at dawn, the so-called "Rorate ...", from the word with which the liturgy opens: .. "Rorate coeli", (Drop down dew, O ye heavens, from above, Is 45:8). Every day they counted how many "rungs" still remained on the "heavenly ladder", by which Jesus would descend to the earth. in order to be able to meet him at midnight of Christmas in the crib of Bethlehem.

The Lord is near!

2. A week ago already, we spoke of this approach of the Lord. It was, in fact, the third subject of the Wednesday considerations chosen for Advent this year. We have meditated successively—going back to the very beginnings of mankind, that is, to the book of Genesis—on the fundamental truths of Advent: *God* who creates (Elohim) and in creating reveals himself at the same time; *man*, created in the image and likeness of God, "reflects" God in the visible created world. These were the first and fundamental subjects of our meditations during Advent.

Then the third subject, which can be briefly summed up in the word: "*grace*". "*God wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1Tim 2:4). God wishes man to become a participant in his truth, his love, his mystery, so that he may share in the life of God himself. "The tree of life" symbolizes this reality already from the first pages of Holy Scripture. In the same pages, however, we also meet another tree: the book of Genesis calls it "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2: 16). In order that man may eat the fruit of the tree of life, he must not touch the fruit of the tree "of the knowledge of good and evil".

This expression may sound like an archaic legend. But the more we penetrate "the reality of man", as we can understand it from his earthly history—and as our human inner experience and our conscience speak of it to each of us—the more we feel we cannot remain indifferent, shrugging our shoulders before these primitive biblical images. How charged they are with existential truth on man! A truth that each of us feels as his own.

Did not Ovid, the ancient Roman poet, a pagan, say explicitly: "*Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*"—I see and approve what is better, but I follow what is worse (*Metamorphoses* VII, 20). His words are not so different from what St Paul wrote later: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (cf. Rom 7:15). Man himself, after original sin, is between "good and evil".

"The reality of man"—the deepest "reality of man"—seems to be unfolded continuously between that which from the beginning was defined as the "tree of life" and that which has been defined as "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". Therefore in our meditations on Advent, which concern the fundamental laws, the essential realities, we cannot exclude another subject: the one that is expressed by the word: sin.

3. Sin. The catechism tells us in a simple way, easy to remember, that it is a transgression of God's commandment. Unquestionably sin is the transgression of a moral principle, the violation of a "norm"—and on this everyone agrees, even those who do not want to hear of "God's commandments". They, too, agree in admitting that the principal moral norms, the most elementary principles of behaviour, without which life and coexistence among men is not possible, are precisely what we know as "God's commandments" (in particular the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh and the eighth). Man's life, social life among men, takes place in an ethical dimension, and this is its essential characteristic, and it is also the essential dimension of human culture.

Today, however, I would like us to concentrate on that "first sin" which—in spite of what is commonly thought—is described in the book of Genesis so precisely that it shows all the depth of the "reality of man" contained in it. This sin "is born" contemporaneously "from outside", that is, from temptation, and "from inside". The temptation is expressed in the following word of the tempter: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3: 5).

'The content of the temptation strikes what the Creator himself moulded in man—for, in fact, he was created "in the likeness of God", which means: "in a way like God". It also strikes the desire for knowledge that exists in man, and the desire for dignity. Except that both are falsified, so that the desire for knowledge like that for dignity—that is, resemblance to God—are in the act of temptation used to set man against God.

The tempter puts man against God by suggesting that God is his enemy, that he tries to keep him, man, in a state of "ignorance"; that he tries to "limit him" in order to subject him. The tempter says: "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (according to the old translation: "you will be like gods") (Gen 3:4-5).

We must meditate, and not just once, on this "archaic" description. I do not know if many other passages can be found in Holy Scripture in which the reality of sin is described not only in its original form, but also in its essence, that is, where the reality of sin is presented in such full and deep dimensions, showing how man used *against God* exactly what in him was *God's*, that is, what should have served to bring him *nearer to God*.

4. Why are we speaking of all this today? In order to understand Advent better. Advent means: *God who comes, because he wills* "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). He comes because he created the world and man out of love and established the order of grace with him.

He comes, however, "because of sin".

He comes "in spite of sin".

He comes to take away sin.

Let us not be surprised, therefore, that on Christmas night, he does not find room in the houses of Bethlehem and has to be born in a stable (in the cave which served as a shelter for the animals) .

All the more important, however, is the fact *that he comes*.

Every year Advent reminds us that grace, and that is God's will to save man, is more powerful than sin

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