



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Now is the Time for Conversion to Peace

1. In the last nine days before Christmas the Church calls us in the Novena to prepare more deeply and intensely for the great feast of the Birth of our Saviour. The Liturgy sets forth a wise programme to prepare us to meet the Lord who comes; each day we have points for prayer and reflection. The Church invites us to conversion and to the docile acceptance of the mystery of Christmas.

In the Old Testament the prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah and kept alive the Chosen People's expectation. We are invited to live this time in a similar way so that we can savour the joy of the impending Christmas celebrations.

Our waiting sums up the hopes of all mankind and is expressed in a number of eloquent appeals that we use each day in the Eucharistic Liturgy, as the verse before the Gospel and at Vespers, as the antiphon for the *Magnificat*. They are the "O" antiphons in which to Him who is approaching the Church directs her prayer with exquisite poetical titles, that express our basic need for peace and salvation, a need that humanity can only find fully and completely satisfied in God made man.

2. Like ancient Israel, the Church speaks for the men and women of all time as she sings the Advent of the Saviour. From day to day she prays, "*O Wisdom that comes forth from the mouth of the Most High*", "*O Guide of the House of Israel*", "*O Root of Jesse*", "*O Key of David*", "*O Rising Sun*", "*O Sun of Justice*", "*O King of the nations, O Emmanuel, God-with-us*".

In each of these fervent appeals, full of biblical references, one finds the ardent desire that

believers have to see completed their waiting for peace. For this reason one implores the gift of the birth of the promised Saviour. At the same time however one sees clearly that it entails a concrete effort to prepare a worthy dwelling place not just in their souls, but also in the setting around them. In a word, if we ask Him who brings peace into the world to come, that entails opening ourselves docilely to the renewing truth and power of the Gospel.

3. In the journey of preparation for our meeting with Christ, who comes to meet mankind at Christmas, *the special day of fast and prayer* that we observed on Friday, 14 December, was inserted so that we could ask God for the gift of reconciliation and peace. It was a powerful moment of Advent, a chance to reflect on the causes of war and the reasons for peace. In reaction to the tensions and violence that afflict so many places on earth these days, including the Holy Land that itself witnessed the mystery of the Birth of Jesus, we Christians need to make resound more forcefully than ever the message of peace that comes from the cave of Bethlehem.

We should be converted to peace; we should be converted to Christ, our peace, certain that his disarming love in the crib overcomes every dire threat and plan for violence. With confidence we need to continue to ask the Child, born of the Virgin Mary for us, that the enormous energy of his peace might drive out the hatred and revenge that lurk in the human soul. Let us ask God that the good and our love might overcome evil.

4. As the Liturgy of Advent suggests, let us ask the Lord for the gift of "preparing ourselves with joy for the mystery of his Birth" so that the Birth of the Lord might find us "vigilant in prayer and rejoicing in praise" (*Second Preface for Advent*). Only then will Christmas be a feast of joy and a meeting with the Lord who gives us peace.

Isn't this the best thing that we can make for the coming Christmas celebrations? To that end in this week let us make our prayer more intense and more persistent. "*Christus est pax nostra - Christ is our peace*". May his peace renew every angle of our daily lives. May he fill our hearts so that they will be open to the transforming action of his grace; may he pervade families so that, gathered before the crib or around the Christmas tree, they may reinforce their faithful communion; may his peace reign in cities, in nations and in the international community and spread to every corner of the globe.

As the shepherds did on the night of Bethlehem, let us make haste to go to Bethlehem. There we will contemplate in the silence of the Holy Night the holy "infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger", along with Mary and Joseph (Lk 2,12.16). May She, who received the Word of God in her virginal womb and held him tight in her motherly arms, help us to live more intensely this last segment of the liturgical journey of Advent.

With these reflections, I offer my best wishes to all of you present, to your families and dear ones. A Happy Christmas to all!

At the end of his catechesis, the Holy Father greeted the pilgrims in French, Polish, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Slovak; with a special word to young people, the sick and newly-weds. To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors he said:

I offer a special word of greeting to the English-speaking visitors, especially those from England and the United States of America: may the coming of our Saviour as a newborn babe fill you and your families with his gifts of joy and peace. Happy Christmas to everyone!