

Choose [\[PDF Version \]](#) [\[RTF Version \]](#) [\[EBook Version \]](#)
 for saving the document.



JESUS CHRIST EMPTIED HIMSELF

General Audience 1988 February 17, 1988

"Behold the man!" (Jn 19:5). In last week's reflection we recalled these words of Pilate when he presented Jesus to the high priests and guards, after having had him scourged and before pronouncing the definitive sentence of death on a cross. Jesus is the symbol of suffering humanity, covered with wounds, crowned with thorns, clothed in purple, mocked and smitten by the soldiers and already close to death.

"Behold the man!" This expression contains in a certain sense the whole truth about Christ, true man; about him who "is like us in all things but sin"; about him who "has united himself in some fashion with every man" (cf. GS 22). They called him the "friend of tax collectors and sinners." Precisely as a victim for sin, Jesus entered into solidarity with all humanity including "sinners," even to death on a cross. Precisely in this condition of victim to which Jesus was reduced, a final aspect of his humanity stands out. This aspect must be accepted and profoundly meditated on in the light of the mystery of his self-emptying (kenosis). According to St. Paul, "though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8).

This text from the Letter to the Philippians introduces us into the mystery of Christ's kenosis. To express this mystery the apostle uses first of all the words "emptied himself," which refers especially to the reality of the Incarnation. "The Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14). God the Son assumed human nature, humanity, and became true man, while remaining God! The truth about Christ as man must always be considered in relation to God the Son. This permanent reference itself is indicated by St. Paul's text. "He emptied himself" does not in any way mean that he ceased to be God; that would be absurd! It means rather, as the apostle perceptively expressed it, that "he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped," but "though he was in the form of God" (in forma Dei), as the true Son of God, he assumed a human nature deprived of glory, subject to suffering and death, in which he could live in obedience to the Father,

even to the ultimate sacrifice.

In this context, his becoming like man involved a voluntary renunciation, which extended even to the privileges he could have enjoyed as man. He assumed "the form of a slave." He did not wish to belong to the powerful; he wished to be as one who serves. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45).

We see in the Gospels that Christ's earthly life was marked by poverty from the very beginning. This was clearly set out in the account of his birth, when the evangelist Luke observed that "there was no room for them [Mary and Joseph] in the inn," and that Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger (cf. Lk 2:7). From Matthew we learn that already in the first months of Jesus' life, he experienced the lot of a refugee (cf. Mt 2:13-15). His hidden life at Nazareth was lived in extremely modest conditions; the head of the family was a carpenter (cf. Mt 13:55) and Jesus himself worked with his putative father (Mk 6:3). When he began his teaching, his situation continued to be one of extreme poverty, as he himself bore witness to in a certain way by referring to the precarious conditions of life imposed by his ministry of evangelization. "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head" (Lk 9:58).

From its beginning, Jesus' messianic mission encountered opposition and misunderstanding, despite the signs which he worked. He was observed and persecuted by those who had power and influence over the people. Finally, he was accused, condemned and put to death on a cross, the most infamous of all forms of capital punishment. It was applied only for crimes of extreme gravity, especially to those people who were not Roman citizens, and to slaves. For this reason also it can be said with the Apostle that Christ literally took "the form of a slave" (Phil 2:7).

In this self-emptying which profoundly characterizes the truth about Christ, true man, we can say that it re-establishes it and restores it. When we read that the Son "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped," we cannot but see in these words an allusion to the first and original temptation to which Adam and Eve yielded in the beginning: "You will become (that is, you will be) like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). They yielded to the temptation to be like God, even though they were only creatures. He who is God the Son "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped." In becoming man, "he emptied himself" and by that choice he restored all human beings, however poor and deprived, to their original dignity.

To express this mystery of Christ's kenosis St. Paul also used another phrase: "He

humbled himself." He used this expression in the context of the reality of the redemption. He wrote that Jesus Christ "humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). Here Christ's kenosis is described in its definitive dimension. From the human point of view it is the dimension of the self-emptying by means of his passion and cruel death. From the divine point of view, it is the redemption effected by the merciful love of the Father through the Son, who freely obeyed out of love for the Father and to save humanity. In that moment there was a new beginning of God's glory in human history, the glory of Christ, his Son made man. The Pauline text says, "Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:9).

Commenting on this text of the Letter to the Philippians, St. Athanasius says, "This expression, 'has exalted him,' does not imply that the nature of the Word was exalted. The latter has been and always will be equal to God. It indicates, however, the exaltation of human nature. These words, therefore, were uttered only after the Incarnation of the Word, so that it would be clear that terms such as humbled and exalted refer solely to the human dimension. In fact, only what is humble can be exalted" (Athanasius, *Adversus Arianos Oratio I*, 41). Here we shall add merely that the whole of human nature, all humanity, humiliated in the painful condition to which it has been reduced by sin, finds the source of its new glory in the exaltation of Christ the man.

We cannot conclude without a final remark about the fact that Jesus generally referred to himself as "Son of Man" (e.g., Mk 2:10, 28; 14:62; Mt 8:20; 16:27; Lk 9:22; 11:30; Jn 1:51; 8:28; 13:31; etc.). According to the meaning of the common language of the time, this expression could also indicate that he is true man just like all other human beings, and undoubtedly it refers to his real humanity.

However, the strictly biblical meaning, even in this case, must be established by bearing in mind the historical context deriving from the tradition of Israel. This was expressed and influenced by Daniel's prophecy which gave rise to the formulation of a messianic concept (cf. Dan 7:13-14). In this context, "Son of Man" did not signify merely a common man belonging to the human race. Rather, it refers to a personage who would receive from God a universal dominion, transcending history, in the eschatological era.

On the lips of Jesus and in the Gospel texts, the expression is fraught with a full meaning that embraces the divine and human, heaven and earth, history and eschatology. Jesus himself gave us to understand this when, testifying before Caiaphas

that he is the Son of God, he emphatically predicted, "From now on you will see 'the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power' and 'coming on the clouds of heaven'" (Mt 26:64). The power and glory of God is therefore immanent in the Son of Man. We are once again face to face with the unique Man-God, true man and true God. This reflection brings us back continually to him so that we may believe, and that believing, we may pray and adore.