



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 4 January 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

Nativity of the Lord: Mystery of Joy and Light

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am glad to welcome you at this first General Audience of the New Year and I cordially offer all of you and your families my affectionate greetings. May God, who with the birth of Christ his Son imbued the whole world with joy, provide for deeds and days in his peace. We are in the [liturgical Time of Christmas](#), which begins on the evening of 24 December with the Vigil Mass and ends with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. The span of days is short but full of celebrations and mysteries and it all takes place around the two great Solemnities of the Lord: Christmas and Epiphany. The very names of these two feasts indicate their respective traits.

Christmas celebrates the historical event of Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem. Epiphany, which came into being as a feast in the East, indicates an event but above all one aspect of the Mystery: God reveals himself in the human nature of Christ and this is the meaning of the Greek verb *epiphaino*, to make oneself visible. In this perspective, Epiphany calls to mind a whole series of events focused on the manifestation of the Lord: in a special way the adoration of the Magi, who recognize Jesus as the Messiah awaited, but also the Baptism in the River Jordan with its theophany — the voice of God from on high — and the miracle of the Wedding at Cana, as the first “sign” worked by Christ.

A very beautiful Antiphon of the Liturgy of the Hours unifies these three events around the theme of the wedding of Christ with his Church: “Today the Bridegroom claims his bride, the Church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan’s waters; the Magi hasten with their gifts to the royal wedding; and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine (*Antiphon of Lauds*). We can say, as it were, that on the Feast of Christmas God’s hiddenness is emphasized in the humility of the human condition, in the Child of Bethlehem, whereas in the Epiphany his manifestation is highlighted, the appearance of God through this same humanity.

In this Catechesis I would like to recall briefly several themes proper to the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord so that each one of us may quench our thirst at the inexhaustible source of this Mystery and bear fruits of life.

First of all, let us ask ourselves: what is the first reaction to this extraordinary action of God who makes himself a child, who makes himself man? I think that the first reaction can only be one of joy. “Let us all rejoice in the Lord, for our Saviour is born to the world”. The Mass on Christmas Eve begins with these words and we have just heard what the Angel said to the Shepherds: “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy” (Lk 2:10). This is the theme with which the Gospel begins and also with which it concludes, since the Risen Jesus was to reprimand the Apostles precisely for being sad (cf. Lk 24:17) — incompatible with the fact that he remains Man for eternity. However, let us take another step; what gives rise to this joy? I would say that it is born from the heart’s wonder at seeing that God is close to us, that God thinks of us, that God acts in history; it is therefore a joy born from contemplating the face of that humble Child because we know that he is the Face of God present for ever in humanity, for us and with us. Christmas is joy because at last we see and are certain that God is the goodness, life, and truth of human beings and that he stoops down to them to lift them up to him.

God becomes so close that it is possible to see and touch him. The Church contemplates this ineffable mystery and the liturgical texts of this Season are steeped in wonder and joy; all Christmas carols express this joy. Christmas is the point at which Heaven and earth converge and the various expressions we hear in these days stress the greatness of what has come about: the remote — God who seems very remote — has become close, “The inaccessible wanted to be accessible, he who exists before time began to be in time, the Lord of the universe, veiling the greatness of his majesty, took the nature of a servant” St Leo the Great exclaimed (*Sermon 2 on the Nativity of the Lord*, 2.1). In that Child who needed everything as all children do, what God is — eternity, strength, holiness, life and joy — is united with what we are: weakness, sin, suffering and death.

The theology and spirituality of Christmas use a phrase to describe this event, they speak of an *admirabile commercium*, that is, a wondrous exchange between divinity and humanity. St Athanasius of Alexandria says: “The Son of God became man so that we might become God” (*De Incarnatione*, 54, 3: PG 25, 192), but it is above all with St Leo the Great and his famous sermons

on Christmas that this reality became the object of profound meditation.

Indeed, the Holy Pontiff says: “so that we may have recourse to that unutterable condescension of the Divine Mercy, whereby the Creator of men deigned to become man, and be found ourselves in his nature whom we worship in ours” (*Sermon 8 on the Nativity*: CCL 138, 139). The first act of this wondrous exchange is brought about in Christ’s humanity itself. The Word took on our humanity and in exchange human nature was raised to the divine dignity. The second act of the exchange consists in our real and intimate participation in the divine nature of the Word. St Paul says: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5). Christmas, therefore, is the feast on which God made himself so close to man as to share in his own act of being born, to reveal to him his deepest dignity: that of being a son of God. Thus the dream of humanity beginning in Paradise — we would like to be like God — is brought about in an unexpected manner not because of the greatness of man who cannot make himself God but because of the humility of God who comes down and thus enters us in his humility and raises us to the true greatness of his being. The Second Vatican Council said in this regard: “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22); otherwise it remains an enigma: what does this creature man mean?

It is only by seeing that God is with us that we can see light for our being, that we can be content to be human beings and live with trust and joy. And where does this wondrous exchange become truly present, so that it may work in our life and make it an existence of true children of God? It becomes tangible in the Eucharist. When we participate in Holy Mass we present what is ours to God: the bread and the wine, fruit of the earth, so that he will accept them and transform them, giving us himself and making himself our food, in order that in receiving his Body and his Blood we may participate in his divine life.

I would like to reflect, lastly, on another aspect of Christmas. When the Angel of the Lord appeared to the Shepherds on the night of Jesus’ Birth, Luke the Evangelist notes that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Lk 2:9); and the Prologue of John’s Gospel speaks of the Word made flesh as of the true light coming into the world, the light that can enlighten every man (cf. Jn 1:9). The Christmas liturgy is bathed in light.

Christ’s coming dispels the shadows of the world, fills the Holy Night with a heavenly brightness and reflects the splendour of God the Father on human faces. Today too. Enveloped in Christ’s light, we are insistently invited by the Christmas Liturgy to let our minds and hearts be illuminated by God who has shown the radiance of his Face. The First Preface of Christmas proclaims: “In the wonder of the incarnation your eternal Word has brought to the eyes of faith a new and radiant vision of your glory. In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see”. In the Mystery of the Incarnation God, having spoken and intervened in history through messengers and with signs, “appeared”, emerged from his inaccessible light to illuminate

the world.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, 6 January, which we shall be celebrating in a few days, the Church presents a very important passage from the Prophet Isaiah: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Is 60:1-3)

It is an invitation addressed to the Church, the community of Christ, but also to each one of us, to acquire an ever livelier awareness of the mission and of the responsibility to the world in witnessing to and bringing the new light of the Gospel. At the beginning of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, we find the following words: “Christ is the light of humanity; and it is, accordingly, the heartfelt desire of this sacred Council, being gathered together in the Holy Spirit, that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature, it may bring to all men that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church” (n. 1). The Gospel is not a light to hide but to set upon a stand. The Church is not light but receives the light of Christ, receives it to be illuminated by it and to radiate it in its full splendour. And this must also happen in our personal life. Once again, I cite St Leo the Great who said on Holy Night: “Recognize, O Christian, your dignity and, enabled to share in the divine nature, do not wish to relapse into your former base condition with unworthy conduct. Remember who is your Head and to which Body you belong. Remember that you were snatched from the power of darkness and transferred into the light and into the Kingdom of God” (*Sermon 1 on the Nativity*, 3, 2: CCL 138, 88).

Dear brothers and sisters, Christmas means pausing to contemplate that Child, the Mystery of God who became man in humility and poverty, but above all it means welcoming within us once again that Child who is Christ the Lord, to live of his own life, to ensure that his sentiments, his thoughts and his actions are our sentiments, our thoughts and our actions. Celebrating Christmas is therefore showing the joy, the newness and the light that this Birth brought to the whole of our life, so that we too may be heralds of joy, of true newness, of the light of God to others. Once again I wish you all a Christmas Season blessed by God’s presence!

To special groups:

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking visitors present, including the pilgrimage groups from Wales, Australia and the United States. I offer a special greeting to the priests and seminarians of the Pontifical College Josephinum. My welcome also goes to the La Salette Brothers taking part in a programme of spiritual renewal. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you and your families I invoke the Lord’s blessings of joy, peace and prosperity for the year which has just begun. Happy New Year!

Lastly my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. I hope that you, dear *young people*, will be able to consider every day as a gift of God to be received with gratitude and lived with rectitude. May the New Year bring you, dear *sick people*, comfort in body and in mind, and may you, dear *newlyweds*, strive to imitate the Holy Family of Nazareth, achieving an authentic communion of love and life.

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