

ON THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

"Like the Shepherds, We Hasten Our Steps Toward Bethlehem"

VATICAN CITY, DEC. 19, 2007 (Zenit.org).- Here is a translation of the reflection on Christmas that Benedict XVI delivered today at the general audience in Paul VI Hall.

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Dear brothers and sisters!

As we approach the great feast of Christmas, the liturgy encourages us to intensify our preparation, placing at our disposal numerous biblical texts from the Old and the New Testaments, which serve to motivate us to focus on the significance and value of this annual celebration.

On one hand, Christmas is a commemoration of the incredible miracle of the birth God's only son, born of the Virgin Mary in the cave of Bethlehem. On the other hand, Christmas exhorts us to keep watch and pray, waiting for our Redeemer, who will come "to judge the living and the dead." Perhaps we today, even we believers, truly await the Judge; we all await justice. We see so much injustice in the world, in our small world, at home, in our neighborhoods, as well as in the large world of states, of societies. And we wait for justice to be done.

Justice is an abstract concept: Justice is done. We await the coming of the very one who can effect justice. In this context we pray: "Come, Lord, Jesus Christ, as judge, come as you must." The Lord knows how to enter the world and bring justice.

We ask the Lord, the Judge, to respond, to truly effect justice in the world. We await justice, but our demands with respect to others cannot be the only the expression of this waiting. The Christian significance of waiting for justice implies that we begin to live under the eyes of the Judge, according to the criteria of the Judge; that we begin to live in his presence, rendering justice in our lives. By being just, putting ourselves in the presence of the Judge, we await justice. This is the meaning of Advent, of vigilance. The vigilance of Advent means to live under the eyes of the Judge and to prepare ourselves and the world for justice. By living under the eyes of the God-Judge, we can open the world to the arrival of his Son, preparing our heart to welcome "the Lord who comes."

The Child, adored 2,000 years ago by the shepherds in a cave of Bethlehem, never stops visiting us in our daily life as we, like pilgrims, walk toward the Kingdom. As he waits, the believer becomes the spokesperson for the hopes of all humankind; humanity longs for justice, and thus, though often unaware, waits for God, waits for the salvation that only God can give us.

For us Christians the wait is marked by assiduous prayer, as indicated by the particularly evocative series of invocations that are proposed to us in these days of the Christmas novena in the Mass, in the Gospel, and in the celebration of vespers, before the canticle of the Magnificat. Each appeal

that implores the coming of Wisdom, the Sun of Justice, and God-With-Us, contains a prayer directed to the Awaited one of the nations, so that his arrival be hastened.

To invoke the gift of the birth of the promised Savior also means to commit myself to prepare the way, to prepare a worthy home not only in the environment around us, but above all in our souls. With the guidance of the Evangelist John, we try to turn our thoughts and hearts to the eternal Word, to the Logos, to the Word that has become flesh and has given us grace after grace (cf. 1:14,16).

This faith in the Creator Logos, in the Word that created the world, in the one who came like a Child, this faith and its great hope seem to be far from our daily public and private reality. It seems this truth is too great. We manage the best we can, so it seems at least. But the world is becoming more chaotic and violent: We witness this every day. And the light of God, the light of Truth, is put out. Life becomes dark and without a compass.

It is therefore very important that we are true believers, and as believers, that we reaffirm forcefully, with our lives, the mystery of salvation that comes with the celebration of Christ's birth! In Bethlehem, the Light which illumines our life was made manifest to the world; the Way which leads to the fullness of our humanity was revealed to us. What sense does it make to celebrate Christmas if we don't acknowledge that God has become man? The celebration becomes empty.

Before all else, we Christians have to reassert with deep and heartfelt conviction the truth of Christ's birth in order to bear witness before all the awareness of an unparalleled gift that enriches not only us, but everyone.

The duty of evangelization is to convey this "eu-angelion," the "good news." This was recalled by the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith titled "Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization," which I would like to offer for your reflection and personal as well as communal study.

Dear friends, in these days of preparation leading up to Christmas the prayer of the Church intensifies, so that the hopes for peace, salvation, justice, and all that the world urgently needs, be made a reality. We ask God that violence be defeated by the power of love, that opposition be replaced by reconciliation, that the desire to dominate be transformed into desires for forgiveness, justice and peace.

May the wishes of kindness and love that we exchange in these days reach all sectors of our daily lives. May peace be in our hearts, so that we can be open to the action of God's mercy. May peace live in all families and may they spend Christmas united before the crib and the tree decorated with lights. May the Christmas message of solidarity and welcome contribute to create a deeper sensibility toward old and new types of poverty, and toward the common good that we are all called to share.

May all family members, especially the children and the elderly -- the weakest ones -- feel the warmth of this feast, and may that warmth spread out through every day of the year. May Christmas be a celebration of peace and joy: joy for the birth of the Savior, Prince of peace. Like the shepherds, we hasten our steps toward Bethlehem. In the heart of the Holy Night we will be able to contemplate the "infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," together with Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:12,16).

We ask the Lord to open our soul, so that we can enter the mystery of his birth. May Mary, who gave her virginal womb to the Word of God, who contemplated the child between her arms, and who offers him to everyone as the Redeemer of the world, help us make next Christmas a moment of growth in the knowledge and love of Christ. This is the wish that I warmly extend to you all, to your families and your dear ones.

Merry Christmas to you all!

[Translation by Laura Leoncini]

[After praying the Angelus, the Holy Father greeted pilgrims in six languages. In English, he said:]
I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims and students present at this Audience, especially those from the United States of America. Upon you and your loved ones, I invoke the Lord's blessings of health and joy during this holy Season.

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