



CHRISTMAS: AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

VATICAN CITY, 17 DEC 2008 (VIS) - Benedict XVI dedicated the last general audience of 2008, celebrated in the Paul VI audience hall, to Christmas, "a universal festivity".

"Even non-believers", he said, "perceive something extraordinary and transcendental, something intimate that touches our hearts in this yearly Christian event. It is the festivity that sings of the gift of life. The birth of a child should always be a joyful occurrence".

"Christmas is the encounter with a new-born baby, wailing in a wretched grotto", the Holy Father added. "Contemplating Him in this crèche how can we not think of all the children who still today, in many regions of the world, are born amidst such poverty? How can we not think of those newborns who have been rejected, not welcomed, those who do not survive because of a lack of care and attention? How can we not think of the families who desire the joy of a child and do not have this hope fulfilled?"

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"Unfortunately, under the drive of a hedonist consumerism, Christmas runs the risk of losing its spiritual meaning, reduced to a mere commercial occasion to buy and exchange gifts. Actually, however, the difficulties, uncertainty, and the economic crisis that many families are living in these months, and which affects all humanity, can truly serve as a stimulus for rediscovering the warmth of the simplicity, friendship, and solidarity that are the typical values of Christmas. Stripped of its materialist and consumerist trappings, Christmas can become the opportunity to welcome, as a personal gift, the message of hope that emanates from the mystery of Christ's birth".

"Nevertheless, all of this does not suffice to capture the value of this celebration we are preparing for in all its fullness. We know that it celebrates the central event of history: the Incarnation of the Divine Word for the redemption of humanity. ... 'Thus the recurring annual cycle of the mystery of our salvation is renewed that, promised at the beginning and given to the end of time, is destined to last without end'".

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"At Christmas, therefore, we do not limit ourselves to commemorating the birth of a great person. We do not celebrate, simply and in the abstract, the mystery of the birth of humanity or, in general, the mystery of life. ... At Christmas we recall something that is quite concrete and important for human beings, something essential to the Christian faith, a truth that St. John summarizes in these few words: 'The Word became flesh': This is a historical fact that St. Luke the evangelist is careful to place in a particular historical context: during the days of the decree of the first census of Caesar Augustus".

"In the darkness of the night in Bethlehem a great light was lit: the Creator of the universe became flesh, indissolubly and eternally joining himself to human nature, to the point of being 'God from God, light from light' and at the same time truly human. By 'the Word' ... John also intends the 'Meaning'" and "the 'Meaning' that became flesh is not just a general idea inherent in the world; it is a Word addressed to us".

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"The Meaning has power: it is God. A good God who cannot be confused with some being on high and far away who cannot be reached, but God who made Himself our neighbour and who is very near to us", "God reveals Himself to us as a poor 'infant' in order to conquer our pride. ... He made Himself small in order to free us from the human delusion of grandeur that arises from pride; He freely became flesh so that we might be truly free, free to love Him".

"Christmas", the Pope concluded, "is the privileged opportunity to contemplate the meaning and value of our existence. The nearness of this solemnity helps us to reflect, on the one hand, on the dramatic nature of a history in which human beings, wounded by sin, are perennially

seeking happiness and a reason for living and dying; on the other hand, it exhorts us to contemplate the merciful goodness of God, who has come to meet humanity that He might communicate the saving Truth to us directly and make us to participate in His friendship and His life".