



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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1. Mankind's last night of waiting, which is recalled to us every year by the liturgy of the Church on the eve and the feast of the Nativity of the Lord, is at the same time the night in which the Promise was fulfilled. The One who was awaited, who was, and does not cease to be, the end of the advent, is born. Christ is born. That happened once, in the night at Bethlehem, but in the liturgy it is repeated every year, in a certain way it "is actualized" every year. And every year, too, it is rich with the same content: divine and human, which is so superabundant that man is not capable of embracing it all with one glance; and it is difficult to find words to express it altogether. Even the liturgical period of Christmas seems to us too short to dwell on this event, which presents more the characteristics of "mysterium fascinosum", than those of "mysterium tremendum". Too short, to "enjoy" fully the coming of Christ, the birth of God in human nature. Too short, to untangle the single threads of this event and of this mystery.

2. The liturgy centres our attention on one of those threads and highlights it particularly. The birth of the Child in the night at Bethlehem started the Family. For this reason, the Sunday during the octave of Christmas is the feast of the Family of Nazareth. This is the Holy Family, because it was moulded for the birth of the One whom even his "Adversary" will be compelled to proclaim, one day, "the Holy One of God" (Mk 1:24). The Holy Family, because the holiness of the One who was born became the source of an extraordinary sanctification, both of his Virgin-Mother, and of her Bridegroom, who, as her lawful husband, was considered, before men as the father of the Child born during the census in Bethlehem.

This Family is at the same time a human Family, and therefore the Church, in the period of Christmas, addresses, through the Holy Family, every human family. Holiness imprints on this Family, in which the Son of God came into the world, a unique, exceptional, unrepeatable,

supernatural character. And at the same time all that we can say of every human family, its nature, its duties, its difficulties, can be said also of this Sacred Family. In fact, this Sacred Family is really poor; at the moment of the birth of Jesus it is without a roof to its head; then it will be forced to go into exile, and when the danger is over, it remains a family which lives modestly, in poverty, with the work of its hands.

Its condition is similar to that of so many other families. It is the meeting-place of our solidarity with every family, with every community of a man and a woman in which a new human being is born. It is a Family which does not remain only on the altars, as an object of praise and veneration, but, through so many episodes well known to us from the Gospel of St Luke and St Matthew, approaches, in a certain way, every human family. It takes over those deep, beautiful and at the same time difficult problems which married and family life bring with it. When we read attentively what the Evangelists (particularly Matthew) wrote about the events lived by Joseph and Mary before the birth of Jesus, these problems, to which I referred above, become even more evident.

3. The solemnity of Christmas, and, in its context, the feast of the Holy Family, are particularly near and dear to us, just because we meet in them the fundamental dimension of our faith, that is, the mystery of the Incarnation, with the no less fundamental dimension of the affairs of man. Everyone must recognize that this essential dimension of the affairs of man is precisely the family. And in the family it is procreation: a new man is conceived and is born, and through this conception and this birth the man and the woman, in their capacity as husband and wife, become father and mother, parents, reaching a new dignity and assuming new duties.

The importance of these fundamental duties is very great from many points of view. Not only from the point of view of this concrete community, their family, but also from the point of view of every human community, every society, nation, state, school, profession and environment. Everything depends, generally speaking, on how the parents and the family carry out their first and fundamental duties, on the way and to the extent to which they teach this creature—who, thanks to them, has become a human being, has obtained "humanity"—to "be a man". The family cannot be replaced in this. Everything must be done in order that the family should not be replaced. That is necessary not only for the "private" good of every person, but also for the common good of every society, nation, and state of any continent. The family is placed at the very centre of the common good in its various dimensions, precisely because man is conceived and born in it. Everything possible must be done in order that this human being should be desired, awaited and experienced as a particular, unique and unrepeatable value right from the beginning, from the moment of his conception. He must feel that he is important, useful, dear and of great value, even if infirm or handicapped; even more loved, in fact, for this reason.

This is what the mystery of Incarnation teaches us. This is the logic of our faith. This is also the logic of all true humanism. I think, in fact, that it cannot be otherwise. We are not looking here for elements of contrast, but we are looking for meeting points, which are the simple consequence of the full truth about man. Faith does not take believers away from this truth, but brings them right to its heart.

4. And another thing. On Christmas night, the Mother who was to give birth (*Virgo paritura*) did not find a roof over her head. She could not find the conditions in which that great, divine, and at the same time, human Mystery of giving birth to a man, normally takes place. Allow me to use the logic of faith and the logic of a consistent humanism. This fact of which I am speaking is a great cry, it is a permanent challenge to individuals and to all, particularly, perhaps, in our time, in which a great proof of moral consistency is often asked of the expectant mother. In fact, what is euphemistically defined as "interruption of pregnancy" (abortion) cannot be evaluated with truly human categories other than those of the moral law, that is, of conscience. Certainly, if not the confidences made in the confessionals, those in the advisory bureaux for responsible motherhood, could tell us a great deal in this connection. Consequently, the mother who is about to give birth cannot be left alone with her doubts, difficulties and temptations. We must stand by her side, so that she will not put a burden on her conscience, so that the most fundamental bond of man's respect for man will not be destroyed. Such, in fact, is the bond that begins at the moment of conception, as a result of which we must all, in a certain way, be with every mother who must give birth; and we must offer her all the help possible. Let us look to Mary: *Virgo Paritura* (the Virgin about to give birth). Let us, the Church, us men, look, and let us try to understand better what responsibility Christmas brings with it towards every man who is to be born on earth. For the present we will stop at this point and interrupt these considerations: we will certainly have to return to them again, and not just once. Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana