



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD
30th WORLD DAY OF PEACE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

1 January 1998

1. *"When the time had fully come"* (Gal 4:4). These words of the Letter of St Paul to the Galatians correspond very well to the character of today's celebration. We are at the beginning of the New Year. According to the civil calendar, today is the first day of 1998; according to that of the liturgy, we are celebrating the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

Based on Christian tradition, the custom of counting the years from Christ's birth has spread throughout the world. Therefore on this day the lay and ecclesial dimensions converge in their celebration. While the Church celebrates the Octave of Christmas, the civil world celebrates the first day of a new solar year. Precisely in this way, year after year, that "fullness of time" described by the Apostle is gradually expressed: it is a sequence that advances gradually down the centuries and millenniums and will be ultimately fulfilled at the end of the world.

2. We are celebrating the Octave of the Lord's Birth. For eight days in the liturgy we have been reliving the great event of Jesus' birth, according to the narrative offered to us by the Gospels. Today St Luke describes the Christmas scene in Bethlehem once again. Indeed today's account is far more condensed than that of Christmas Eve. It confirms and in a certain sense completes the text of the Letter to the Galatians. The Apostle writes: "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman ... so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'. So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal 4:4-7).

St Paul's marvellous text perfectly expresses what can be described as "the theology of Christ's birth". It is a theology similar to that proposed by the Evangelist John who, in his Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, writes: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.... To all who received him, who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:14, 12). St Paul expresses the same truth but, we can say, in a certain sense he completes it. This is the great proclamation that resounds in today's liturgy: man becomes the adoptive son of God thanks to the birth of the Son

of God himself. Man receives this sonship through the work of the Holy Spirit — the Spirit of the Son — whom God has sent into our hearts. It is thanks to the Holy Spirit's gift that we can say: Abba! Father! Thus St Paul seeks to explain in what our adoptive sonship consists and how it is expressed in relation to God.

3. Aided by St Paul and by the Apostle John in our theological reflection on the Lord's Birth, we understand better why we are accustomed to counting the years with reference to Christ's birth. History is divided into centuries and millenniums "before" and "after" Christ, since the Bethlehem event represents the basic measure of human time. Jesus' birth is the centre of time. The Holy Night has become the essential reference point for the years, centuries and millenniums in which God's saving action unfolds.

Christ's coming into the world is important from the standpoint of human history, but it is even more important from the standpoint of man's salvation. Jesus of Nazareth willingly submitted to the limits of time and opened it once and for all to the dimension of eternity. Through his life, and especially by his Death and his Resurrection, Jesus revealed unequivocally that man's existence is not "oriented to death" and destined to be extinguished in it. Man exists not "for death", but "for immortality". Thanks to today's liturgy, this basic truth on man's eternal destiny is re-presented at the beginning of every New Year. In this way light is shed on the value and on the proper dimension of every age, and also of the relentless passing of time.

4. In this perspective of the value and meaning of human time, on which the light of the faith is cast, the Church places the beginning of the New Year under the banner of prayer for peace. As I hope that all humanity may walk more decisively and harmoniously on the paths of justice and reconciliation, I am pleased to greet the distinguished ambassadors to the Holy See who are present at this solemn celebration. I address a cordial thought to dear Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and to all his co-workers in this dicastery, to which is entrusted the specific task of witnessing to the concern of the Pope and the Apostolic See for the various situations of tension and war, as well as the Church's constant preoccupation with building a more just and fraternal world.

In my Message for the World Day of Peace this year, I wished to reflect on a topic I have particularly at heart: the close interaction between the promotion of justice and the building of peace. In fact, as the theme chosen for this day says: *"From the justice of each comes peace for all"*. Addressing the Heads of State and all people of goodwill, I stressed how the quest for peace cannot progress without an active commitment to justice. It is a responsibility that no one can shirk. "Justice and peace are not abstract concepts or remote ideals. They are values which dwell, as a common patrimony, in the heart of every individual. Individuals, families, communities and nations, all are called to live in justice and to work for peace. No one can claim exemption from this responsibility" (n. 1).

The Virgin most holy, whom we address on this first day of the year by the title "Mother of God", turns her loving gaze to the whole world. Through her motherly intercession, the people of all the continents can feel more like brothers and prepare their hearts to welcome her Son, Jesus. Christ

is the genuine peace that reconciles man with man and all humanity with God.

5. “May God be gracious to us and bless us” (Responsorial Psalm). Salvation history is marked by God’s blessing on creation, on humanity, on his believing people. This blessing is continuously repeated and confirmed in the development of the saving events. From the Book of Genesis we see how God, as the days of the creation follow one another, blesses all he has created. In a most particular way, he blesses man made in his own image and likeness (cf. *Gn* 1:1-2, 4, 26).

Today, the first day of the year, in a certain sense the liturgy renews the Creator’s blessing that marks man’s history from the very beginning, borrowing Moses' words: “The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (*Nm* 6:24-26).

It is a blessing for the year now beginning and for us, who are starting to live another moment of time, a precious gift of God. The Church, as it were identifying with the provident hand of God the Father inaugurates this New Year with a special blessing, addressed to every person. She says: The Lord bless you and keep you!

Yes, may God fill our days with good fruits. May he allow the whole world to live in justice and peace!

Amen.

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