



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 5 January 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

Light in the Christmas Season

Dear Brothers and Sisters

I am glad to welcome you at this first General Audience of the New Year and I cordially offer you and your families my fervent good wishes. May the Lord of time and history guide our steps on the path of goodness and grant to each one an abundance of grace and prosperity.

Still surrounded by the light of Holy Christmas that invites us to rejoice at the coming of the Saviour, today on the eve of the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of the Lord to all peoples. The Feast of Christmas fascinates us today — just as it once did — more than the Church's other great feasts. It fascinates us because everyone in some way feels that the Birth of Jesus has to do with the deepest aspirations and hopes of man. Consumerism can distance us from this inner longing, but if in our hearts there is the desire to welcome that Child who brings God's newness, who came to give us life in its fullness, the lights of the Christmas decorations can indeed become a reflection of the Light that came into being with the Incarnation of God.

In the liturgical celebrations of these holy days we have lived in a mysterious but real way the entry into the world of the Son of God and we have been illumined once again by the light of his radiance. Every celebration is an actual presence of Christ's mystery and in it the history of salvation is prolonged.

Pope St Leo the Great said of Christmas: “Even if the succession of bodily actions has now passed, as was preordained in the eternal plan... nevertheless we continuously adore the Virgin’s giving birth that brings about our salvation (*Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord* 29, 2). And St Leo explains: “because that day has not passed away in such a way that the power of the work, which was then revealed, has passed away with it” (*Sermon on the Epiphany*, 36, 1).

Celebrating the events of the Incarnation of the Son of God is not merely remembering past events, but it is making present those mysteries that bring salvation. Today in the Liturgy, in the celebration of the sacraments, those mysteries become present and effective for us.

St Leo the Great said further: “All therefore that the Son of God did and taught for the world’s reconciliation, we not only know as a matter of past history, but appreciate in the power of their present effect” (*Sermon* 52, 1).

In the [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy](#) the Second Vatican Council emphasized that the work of salvation brought about by Christ continues in the Church through the celebration of the holy mysteries, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit. We already have in the Old Testament, in the journey towards the fullness of faith, testimonies of how God’s presence and action were mediated through signs, for example, that of fire (*cf.* Ex 3:2ff; 19:18).

However, from the Incarnation something overwhelming happens: the regime of salvific contact with God is radically transformed and flesh becomes the instrument of salvation: “*Verbum caro factum est*”, “the Word was made flesh”, the Evangelist John writes, and Tertullian, a third-century Christian author affirms: “*Caro salutis est cardo*”, “the flesh is the pivot of salvation” (*De resurrectione carnis*, 8, 3: PL 2, 806).

Christmas is already the first fruit of the “*sacramentum-mysterium paschale*”, that is, it is the beginning of the central mystery of salvation that culminates in the Passion, death and Resurrection, because Jesus begins the offering of himself through love from the very first moment of his human existence in the Virgin Mary’s womb. Christmas Night is thus deeply linked to the great nocturnal vigil of Easter, when the redemption is brought about in the glorious sacrifice of the dead and Risen Lord. The crib itself, as an image of the Incarnation of the Word, in the light of the Gospel narrative already alludes to Easter; and it is interesting to see, as in certain icons of the Nativity in the Eastern tradition, that the Child Jesus is portrayed wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger in the form of a tomb, an allusion to the moment when he will be deposited from the Cross, wrapped in a winding-sheet and laid in a tomb hollowed out in the rock (*cf.* Lk 2:7, 23:53).

The Incarnation and Easter are not one beside other but they are the two inseparable key points of the one faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God Incarnate and Redeemer. The Cross and the Resurrection presuppose the Incarnation. Only because the Son and, in him, God himself truly

“came down”, and “was made flesh”, are the death and Resurrection of Jesus events that prove to be contemporary to us and concern us, they snatch us from death and open to us a future in which this “flesh”, the earthly and transitory existence will enter God’s eternity. In this unitive perspective of the Mystery of Christ, the visit to the crib orients us to the visit to the Eucharist, where we encounter present in a real way the Crucified and Risen Christ, the living Christ.

The liturgical celebration of Christmas, then, is not only a memory but is above all a mystery; it is not only commemoration but also presence. In order to grasp the meaning of these two inseparable aspects it is necessary to live intensely the whole of the Christmas Season as the Church presents it. If we consider it in a broad sense, it lasts for 40 days, from 25 December to 2 February, from the celebration of Christmas Night to Mary, Mother of God, to the Epiphany, to the Baptism of Jesus, to the Wedding at Cana, to the Presentation in the Temple, which forms a unit of 50 days, until Pentecost. The manifestation of God in the flesh is the event that revealed the Truth in history. In fact, the date of 25 December, linked to the idea of the solar manifestation — God who appears as a light that never sets on the horizon of history — reminds us that it is not only an idea, that God is the fullness of light, but a reality for us men and women that has already been brought about and is ever timely: today, as then, God reveals himself in the flesh, that is, in the “living body” of the Church, a pilgrim in time, and in the sacraments that give us salvation today.

The symbols of the Christmas celebrations, recalled by the Readings and by the prayers, give to the Liturgy of this Season a profound sense of the “epiphany” of God in his Christ-Word Incarnate, namely his “manifestation”, which also possesses an eschatological meaning, in other words which orients us to the last times.

Already in Advent the two comings, the historical coming and the coming at the end of history were directly connected, but it is in particular in the Epiphany and in the Baptism of Jesus that the messianic manifestation is celebrated in the perspective of the eschatological expectations: the messianic consecration of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a visible form, leads to the fulfilment of the time of the promises and ushers in the last times.

It is necessary to recover the meaning of this Christmas Season, divesting it of excessive moralistic sentimentality. What the celebration of Christmas proposes to us, besides examples to imitate, such as the Lord’s humility and poverty or his benevolence and love for human beings, is to let ourselves be totally transformed by the One who took on our flesh.

St Leo the Great exclaimed: “the Son of God... so united himself with us and us with him that the descent of God to man’s estate became the exaltation of man to God’s” (*Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord*, 27, 2).

The manifestation of God aims at our participation in the divine life, in the realization within us of

the mystery of his Incarnation. This mystery is the fulfilment of the human vocation. St Leo the Great explains further the practical and ever timely importance of the mystery of Christmas for Christian life: “The words of the Gospel and of the Prophets... inflame our spirit and teach us to understand the Lord’s Nativity, this mystery of the Word made flesh, not so much as the memory of a past event, as rather an event that takes place before our eyes... as though the words: ‘I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord’” (*ibid.* 29,1), were still being proclaimed to us at today’s Solemnity.

And, St Leo added: “Christian, acknowledge your dignity, and becoming a partner in the Divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct” (*Sermon 1 on the Nativity of the Lord*, 3).

Dear friends, let us live this Christmas Season deeply: after having adored the Son of God made man and laid in the manger, we are called to move on to the altar of the Sacrifice, where Christ, the living Bread come down from Heaven, offers himself to us as true nourishment for eternal life. And let us proclaim joyfully to the world, what we have seen with our own eyes at the table of the Word and of the Bread of Life, what we have contemplated, in other words what our hands have touched, namely, the Word made flesh, and witness to him generously with our whole life.

I warmly renew to all of you and to your loved ones my warmest good wishes for the New Year and I wish you a good celebration of Epiphany.

To special groups:

I am pleased to greet the students and professors from the University of Helsinki. My warm greetings also go to the seminarians of the Pontifical College Josephinum. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience I invoke God’s Blessings of joy and peace today and throughout the coming year!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Tomorrow, the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, we shall remember the Magi’s journey toward Christ, guided by the light of the star. May their example, dear *young people*, nourish within you the desire to encounter Jesus and to pass on to all the joy of his Gospel; may it lead you, dear *sick people*, to offer your pain and suffering, made precious by faith, to the Child of Bethlehem; may it constitute for you, dear *newlyweds*, a constant incentive to make your families “domestic churches”, that welcome the mysterious signs of God and the gift of life.

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