



# The Holy See

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CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERS OF THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*St Peter's Basilica*

*Saturday, 1st December 2007*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Advent is, par excellence, the season of hope. Every year this basic spiritual attitude is reawakened in the hearts of Christians, who, while they prepare to celebrate the great Feast of Christ the Saviour's Birth, revive the expectation of his glorious second coming at the end of time. The first part of Advent insists precisely on the *parousia*, the final coming of the Lord. The antiphons of these First Vespers are all oriented, with different nuances, to this perspective. The short Reading from the *First Letter to the Thessalonians* (5: 23-34) refers explicitly to the final coming of Christ using precisely the Greek term *parousia* (cf. v. 23). The Apostle urges Christians to keep themselves sound and blameless, but above all encourages them to trust in God, who "is faithful" (v. 24) and will not fail to bring about this sanctification in all who respond to his grace.

This entire Vespers liturgy is an invitation to hope, pointing on the horizon of history to the light of the Saviour who comes: "on that day a great light will appear" (Antiphon 2); "the Lord will come with great might" (Antiphon 3); "his splendour fills the whole world" (*Magnificat* Antiphon). This light, which shines from the future of God, was already manifest in the fullness of time; therefore, our hope does not lack a foundation but is supported by an event situated in history, which at the same time exceeds history: the event constituted by Jesus of Nazareth. The Evangelist John applies to Jesus the title of "light": it is a title that belongs to God. Indeed, in the Creed we profess that Jesus Christ is "God from God, Light from Light".

I wanted to dedicate [my second Encyclical](#), which was published yesterday, to the theme of hope. I am pleased to offer it in spirit to the entire Church on this First Sunday of Advent, so that, during

preparation for Holy Christmas, the communities and individual faithful can read and meditate upon it to rediscover *the beauty and depth of Christian hope*. This, in fact, is inseparably bound to knowledge of the Face of God, the Face which Jesus, the Only-Begotten Son, revealed to us with his Incarnation, his earthly life and his preaching, and especially with his death and Resurrection. True and steadfast hope is founded on faith in God Love, the Merciful Father who "so loved the world that he gave his Only Son" (Jn 3: 16), so that men and women and with them all creatures might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10: 10). Advent, therefore, is a favourable time for the rediscovery of a hope that is not vague and deceptive but certain and reliable, because it is "anchored" in Christ, God made man, the rock of our salvation.

From the outset, as becomes clear in the New Testament and especially in the Letters of the Apostles, a new hope distinguishes Christians from those who live in pagan religiosity. In writing to the Ephesians, St Paul reminds them that before embracing faith in Christ, they had "no hope and [were] without God in the world" (2: 12). This appears an especially apt description for the paganism of our day: in particular, we might compare it with the contemporary nihilism that corrodes the hope in man's heart, inducing him to think that within and around him nothingness prevails: nothing before birth and nothing after death. In fact, if God is lacking, hope is lacking. Everything loses its "substance". It is as if the dimension of depth were missing and everything were flattened out and deprived of its symbolic relief, its "projection" in comparison with mere materiality. At stake is the relationship between existence here and now and what we call the "hereafter": this is not a place in which we end up after death; on the contrary, it is the reality of God, the fullness of life towards which every human being is, as it were, leaning. God responded to this human expectation in Christ with the gift of hope.

Man is the one creature free to say "yes" or "no" to eternity, that is, to God. The human being is able to extinguish hope within him, eliminating God from his life. How can this be? How can it happen that the creature "made for God", intimately oriented to him, the creature closest to the Eternal One, can deprive himself of this richness? God knows the human heart. He knows that those who reject him have not recognized his true Face, and so he never ceases to knock at our door like a humble pilgrim in search of hospitality. This is why the Lord grants humanity new time: so that everyone may manage to know him! This is also the meaning of a new liturgical year which is beginning: it is a gift of God, who once again wishes to reveal himself to us in the mystery of Christ, through the Word and the Sacraments. He wants to speak to humanity and to save the people of today through the Church. And he does so by going out to meet them in order "to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19: 10). In this perspective, the celebration of Advent is the answer of the Church-Bride to the ever new initiative of God the Bridegroom, "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rv 1: 8). God offers to humanity, which no longer has time for him, further time, a new space in which to withdraw into itself in order to set out anew on a journey to rediscover the meaning of hope.

Here, then, is the surprising discovery: my, our hope is preceded by the expectation which God

cultivates in our regard! Yes, God loves us and for this very reason expects that we return to him, that we open our hearts to his love, that we place our hands in his and remember that we are his children. This attitude of God always precedes our hope, exactly as his love always reaches us first (cf. I Jn 4: 10). In this sense Christian hope is called "theological": God is its source, support and end. What a great consolation there is in this mystery! My Creator has instilled in my spirit a reflection of his desire of life for all. Every person is called to hope, responding to the expectations that God has of him. Moreover, experience shows us that it is exactly like this. What keeps the world going other than God's trust in humankind? It is a trust reflected in the hearts of the lowly, the humble, when they strive daily to do their best through difficulties and labours, to do that little bit of good which is nonetheless great in God's eyes: in the family, in the work place, at school, in the various social contexts. Hope is indelibly engraved in the human heart because God our Father is life, and for eternal life and beatitude we are made.

Every child born is a sign of trust in God and man and a confirmation, at least implicit, of the hope in a future open to God's eternity that is nourished by men and women. God has responded to this human hope, concealing himself in time as a tiny human being. St Augustine wrote: "We might have thought that your Word was far distant from union with man, if this Word had not become flesh and dwelt among us" (Conf. X, 43, 69, cited in *Spe Salvi*, n. 29). Thus, let us allow ourselves to be guided by the One who in her heart and in her womb bore the Incarnate Word. O Mary, Virgin of expectation and Mother of hope, revive the spirit of Advent in your entire Church, so that all humanity may start out anew on the journey towards Bethlehem, from which it came, and that the Sun that dawns upon us from on high will come once again to visit us (cf. Lk 1: 78), Christ our God. Amen.

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