



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 19 November 2003

Canticle of the first Sunday of Vespers, Philippians 2: 6-11

"Christ, servant of God"

1. In addition to the Psalms, the *Liturgy of Vespers* includes certain Biblical Canticles. The Canticle just proclaimed is undoubtedly one of the most significant and theologically rich. It is a hymn placed in the second chapter of the Letter of St Paul to the Christians of Philippi, the Greek city that was the Apostle's first stop of missionary proclamation in Europe. The Canticle is thought to be an expression of the original Christian Liturgy and it is a joy for our generation, after two millennia, to join in the prayer of the Apostolic Church.

The Canticle unfolds in a double vertical trajectory: a first movement is one of descent followed by ascension. Indeed, on one hand, there is the humiliating descent of the Son of God when, in the Incarnation, he becomes man out of love for humankind. He plummets into the *kenosis*, the "emptying" of his divine glory, pushed to the point of death on the Cross, the punishment of slaves who were least among men, thus making him a true brother of suffering humanity, sinful and rejected.

2. On the other hand, there is the triumphant ascension which takes place on Easter Day, when the Father reinstates Christ in the divine splendour and he is celebrated as Lord by the entire cosmos and by all men and women now redeemed. We are placed before a magnificent re-reading of Christ's mystery, primarily the Paschal one. St Paul, along with proclaiming the Resurrection (cf. I Cor 15: 3-5), defines Christ's Paschal mystery as the "exaltation", "raising up", "glorification".

Therefore, from the bright horizon of divine transcendence, the Son of God crossed the infinite distance between Creator and creature. He did not grasp on, as if to a prey, to his "equality with

God", which was due to him by nature and not from usurpation. He did not want to claim jealously this prerogative as a treasure, nor use it for his own interests. Rather, Christ "emptied", "humbled" himself and appeared poor, weak, destined for the shameful death of crucifixion; it is precisely from this extreme humiliation that the great movement of ascension takes off, described in the second part of the Pauline hymn (cf. Phil 2, 9-11).

3. God now "exalts" his Son, conferring upon him a glorious "name" which, in Biblical language, indicates the person himself and his dignity. Now this "name" *Kyrios* or "Lord", the sacred name of the Biblical God, is given to the Risen Christ. This places heaven, earth and hell, according to the division of the universe into three parts, in a state of adoration.

In this way, at the close of the hymn, Christ appears in glory as the *Pantocrator*, that is, the omnipotent Lord triumphantly enthroned in the apses of the Palaeochristian and Byzantine basilicas. He still bears the signs of the passion, of his true humanity, but now reveals the splendour of divinity. Near to us in suffering and death, Christ now draws us to himself in glory, blessing us and letting us share in his eternity.

4. Let us conclude our reflection on the Pauline hymn with the words of St Ambrose, who often uses the image of Christ who "emptied himself", humiliating himself and, as it were, annihilating himself (*exinanivit semetipsum*) in the Incarnation and his oblation on the Cross.

Particularly in his *Explanatio super Psalmos CXVIII [Comment on Psalm CXVIII]*, the Bishop of Milan says: "Christ, hung on the tree of the Cross... was pierced by the lance, whereby blood and water flowed out, sweeter than any ointment, from the victim acceptable to God, spreading throughout the world the perfume of sanctification.... Thus, Jesus, pierced, spread the perfume of the forgiveness of sins and of redemption. Indeed, in becoming man from the Word which he was, he was very limited and became poor, though he was rich, so as to make us rich through his poverty (cf. II Cor 8: 9). He was powerful, yet he showed himself as deprived, so much so that Herod scorned and derided him; he could have shaken the earth, yet he remained attached to that tree; he closed the heavens in a grip of darkness, setting the world on the cross, but he had been put on the Cross; he bowed his head, yet the Word sprung forth; he was annihilated, nevertheless he filled everything. God descended, man ascended; the Word became flesh so that flesh could revindicate for itself the throne of the Word at God's right hand; he was completely wounded, and yet from him the ointment flowed. He seemed unknown, yet God recognized him" (III, 8, *Saemo IX*, Milan-Rome 1987, pp. 131, 133).

To special groups

I then greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

Dear young people, put Jesus at the centre of your lives, and you will receive from him the light for all of your choices. *Dear sick people*, entrust yourselves to Christ and you will understand the redemptive value of suffering lived in union with him. And to you, dear *newly-weds*, place the Lord at the heart of your family to participate in the construction of his kingdom of justice, love and peace.

Annual Day for the Cloistered

This Friday, 21 November, the liturgical Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Temple, the *Day of Cloistered Nuns* is observed. I wish to assure my special closeness, together with that of the entire ecclesial community, to these Sisters of ours whom the Lord has called to the contemplative life.

At the same time I renew the invitation to all believers to provide cloistered monasteries with the necessary spiritual and material support. Indeed, we are indebted to these persons who are entirely consecrated to ceaseless prayer for the Church and the world!

To the English-speaking visitors

I offer a cordial greeting to the members of the International Council of Jewish War Veterans. I also thank the various choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Japan and the United States, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.