



The Holy See

"URBI ET ORBI"
HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
CHRISTMAS 1996

1. "All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God" (Ps 98:3). On this day of joy, the people of Rome and the whole world hear the joyful proclamation of the birth of the Son of God: Christmas is a mystery of grace to be contemplated; Christmas is a marvellous event to be shared. The source of today's happiness is described, in tones of wonder, by a Polish Christmas carol: "God is born, man's might is amazed: the Lord of Heaven empties himself! The fire subsides, the splendour is veiled, the Infinite is encompassed. Scorned, yet clothed with glory, the mortal King of the ages! And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (F. Karpiński, 18th century).² The Poet recalls the Prologue of the Gospel of John, which presents as a mystery what Matthew and Luke describe as an event. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... In him was life, and the life was the light of men; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:1-5). The light shone in the night over the stable of Bethlehem; it shone before the eyes of men, revealing to all that God's Word had come into the world.³ But the Evangelist tells us: "The world was made through him, yet the world knew him not" (Jn 1:10). Only the shepherds of Bethlehem recognized him: in their poverty, watchful, they hastened to follow the light that showed them the place where the Son of Mary had been born. They were the first to receive the Word: and the Word gave them "power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12).⁴ The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb 1:1-2). The Son, who reflects the glory of the Father and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholds all things by his word of power (cf. Heb 1:3). It was he who created the universe: in him it exists and by him is preserved in existence. Yes, the Incarnation of the Son of God is as it were the crowning of creation. For this reason another Polish Christmas carol says that "on Christmas day all creation rejoices", for in the newborn Son of the Virgin, creation recognizes its Creator and Lord.⁵ Brothers and sisters the world over, Let us join in this song of joy, as everywhere there resound, in different tongues, the traditional melodies of Christmas. Let them resound with joy in churches and cathedrals, where Christians gather about the crib. and welcome the Son of God. May these melodies bring peace and serenity especially to those places where, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Guatemala, after long years of war at home and abroad, weapons have at last fallen silent and men tread anew the path of understanding and fraternity.⁶ But the echo of the songs of Christmas must travel much farther! It must resound beyond walls where the clash of arms is still heard, shattering the spell of peace brought by this holy day. I am thinking of Bethlehem and all the Holy Land, where Jesus was born and lived: the land which he loved, the land where hope must not die, despite provocations and profound differences. I am thinking of Cyprus, still divided, and Algeria, in the throes of unjustifiable

violence. On this festive day I also look to the East, to Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, where fratricidal struggles and conflicts of identity continue, spawning desolation and death.⁷ And how can we forget Africa? At its very heart, in the region of the Great Lakes, this young continent is experiencing, amid the general indifference of the international community, one of the cruellest human tragedies of its history. Thousands and thousands of people — our brothers and sisters — wander, displaced, victims of fear, hunger and disease; they — alas! — will not be able to feel the joy of Christmas. No one can remain indifferent before this scandal, which words and pictures can only faintly begin to describe.⁸ To resign ourselves to such violence and injustice would be too grave a rejection of the joy and hope which Christmas brings. God becomes man and tells us once again that hatred can be overcome, that it is beautiful to love one another as brothers and sisters. O Divine Child, by your gentle presence encourage men and women to overcome hatred and rancour, help them to return to dialogue and to walk together along the path of life. Voicing the silent longing of all mankind, the Polish poet also says: “Raise your hand, Divine Child! Bless our dear country with good counsel and well-being. Sustain her strength by your own. Bless our home, our fields, and every town and city. This is my wish for every country in the world. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”.⁹ Today’s Christmas Liturgy tells us once again “A holy day has dawned for us; come, let us adore the Lord” (Gospel verse). We come to you, Word of God, to receive of your wisdom; we come to you, Christ, Son of God, to beg your graces and blessings. You, Child of Bethlehem, Son of God and Son of the Virgin Mary, are our Redeemer. You save every human being by the gift of your life. Grant that peace may flourish wherever your name is spoken. Raise your hand, Divine Child, and bless the earth which has seen your salvation: out of love, you have come to dwell among us.