



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 24 November 2004

Hymn from the Letter to the Colossians (Col 1: 3, 12-20)

Firstborn of all creation

1. We have just heard resound the great Christological hymn that opens the Letter to the Colossians. It exalts the glorious figure of Christ, the heart of the liturgy and centre of all ecclesial life. The horizon of the hymn, however, soon widens to embrace creation and redemption, involving every created being and the whole of history.

In this Canticle we can identify the quality of the faith and prayer of the ancient Christian community; it is the voice and testimony of this community that the Apostle has recorded, although he has set his own seal upon the hymn.

2. After an introduction in which thanks are given to the Father for our redemption (cf. vv. 12-14), our hymn is divided into two strophes that the Liturgy of Vespers proposes anew each week. The first celebrates Christ as the "firstborn of all creation", that is, begotten before all other beings. Hence, this strophe affirms his eternity which transcends space and time (cf. vv. 15-18a). He is the "image", the visible "icon" of God who remains invisible in his mystery. It was through this experience of Moses, in his ardent desire to look upon God's personal reality, that he heard in response: "You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Ex 33: 30; cf. Jn 14: 8-9).

Instead, the face of the Father, Creator of the universe, becomes accessible in Christ, the architect of created reality: "All things were created through him... and in him all things hold together" (Col 1: 16-17). Thus, while on the one hand Christ is superior to created realities, on the other hand he is involved in their creation. For this he can be seen by us as an "image of the invisible God",

brought close to us through the act of creation.

3. In the second strophe (cf. vv. 18b-20), the praise in Christ's honour reaches to a further horizon: of salvation, redemption, the rebirth of humanity created by him but which, through sin, had been plunged into death.

Now, the "fullness" of grace and of the Holy Spirit that the Father instilled in the Son enabled him, through dying and being raised, to communicate new life to us (cf. vv. 19-20).

4. He is therefore celebrated as "the firstborn from the dead" (1: 18b). With his divine "fullness" but also by shedding his blood on the Cross, Christ "reconciles" and "makes peace" with all things, in heaven and on earth. Thus, he brings them back to their original condition, recreating the initial harmony that God desired in accordance with his plan of love and life. Creation and redemption are thus connected, like the stages of one and the same saving event.

5. In accordance with our customary practice, let us now make room for the meditation of those great teachers of faith, the Fathers of the Church. One of them will guide us in our reflection on the work of redemption that Christ brought about through his sacrificial blood.

Commenting on our hymn, St John Damascene, in the *Commentary on the Letters of St Paul* that has been attributed to him, writes: "St Paul speaks of 'redemption through his blood' (Eph 1: 7). The ransom given is in fact the Blood of the Lord which leads prisoners from death to life. The subjects of the kingdom of death could not be set free in any other way except through the One who shared with us in death.... By the work wrought by his coming, we became acquainted with the nature of God who existed before his coming. Indeed, it was God who stamped out death, restoring life and leading the world back to God. He therefore says: 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Col 1: 15), to show that he is God, even if he is not the Father but the image of the Father and shares the identity of the Father, although he is not the Father" (*I Libri della Bibbia Interpretati dalla Grande Tradizione*, Bologna, 2000, pp. 18, 23).

John Damascene then concludes by giving us an overall picture of the saving work of Christ: "The death of Christ saved and renewed man; and it brought the angels back to their original joy because of the people saved, and combined earthly realities with those above.... Indeed, he made peace and took away enmity. Therefore, the angels said: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth"" (*ibid.*, p. 37).

To English-speaking pilgrims

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including groups from

England, Denmark, Australia and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the peace and joy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and I pray that your stay in Rome will bring you abundant blessings.

To special groups

Lastly, I greet you, dear *sick people* and dear *newly-weds*.

May Christ, who made the Cross a royal throne, help you, dear *sick people*, to understand the redeeming value of suffering lived in union with him; may he fill you with his love, dear *newly-weds*, so that your families will be holy and full of joy.

I am very glad to meet you, dear *young people* and *students* from various parts of Italy. With affection I address a cordial greeting to each one of you.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Solemnity of Christ the King. Dear friends, may Jesus always be the centre of your lives! May he be your light and your guide in all your decisions; with your witness, take part generously in building his Kingdom of justice and peace.