



The Holy See

MIDNIGHT MASS IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL

*HOMILY OF PAUL VI **

Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, 25 December 1971

Dear Brothers and Sons, Dear Friends,

The hour that finds us gathered here is an hour of intense meditation. Everything it evokes, reminds us forcefully of this: the late hour, the object of the celebration – the birth of the Saviour, the impact of this feast on our family and social customs. To keep vigil is duty at this moment and we are all called to attention. The darkness of the night becomes light for the spirit.

What are we meditating about? We are meditating on the birth of Jesus Christ in the world, one thousand nine hundred and seventy one years ago, at Bethlehem in Judea, David's city, in circumstances that we all know. We have in our mind's eye the picture of the event. It is reflected, renewed, like an image in a mirror, in each of our souls; and in a moment it will be renewed in a mystical and sacramental form, with a mysterious realism, on this altar. Here Christ will be with us.

A special attraction holds our attention and invites us to contemplate.

Here our attention can take two paths. One is that of the historical, perceptible scene evoked by the Gospel of St. Luke who probably heard the story from Mary herself, the Mother, the heroine of the fact commemorated. It is the scene of the crib, the idyllic scene of the poor make-shift lodging chosen by the two pilgrims, Mary and Joseph, for the imminent event, a birth. Everything interests us here: the night, the cold, the poverty, the solitude; and, then, Heaven opening up, the incomparable message of the angels, the arrival of the shepherds. The imagination reconstructs the details; it is an Arcadian landscape which seems familiar to us, framing a story that holds us spell-bound. Here we all become children again and savour a moment of delight.

But our spirit is drawn by another path of reflection: the prophetic path. Who is the One who is born? The announcement that resounds this same night tells us exactly: «to you is born this day... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord...». The event at once takes on a marvellous quality: that of a goal attained. What is before us is not merely a fact, great and moving as it may be, of a new human being entering the world (cfr. *Jn. 16, 2t*). It is a story, it is a plan that spans the centuries, that comprises those events, dissimilar and spaced out, happy and unhappy, which describe the formation of a people and, above all, the formation in it of a characteristic and unique awareness, that of a choice, of a vocation, of a promise, of a destiny, of a unique and sovereign man, a King, a Saviour: the messianic awareness.

Let us pay great attention to this aspect of Christmas. It is a point of arrival, which reveals and testifies to a line preceding it, a divine thought, a mystery operating in the succession of the ages, an indefinite and grand hope, cherished by a small fraction of mankind; but such a hope that it gives a meaning to the unconscious march of all peoples (cf. *Is. 55, 5*). The birth of Christ marks on the dial of the centuries the destined moment of the fulfilment of this divine plan, which serenely dominates the rushing torrent of human history. It indicates the «fullness of time» of which St. Paul speaks (*Gal. 4, 4; Eph. 1, 10*) and where the destinies of mankind are seen to converge. The distant prophecy of Isaiah comes true: «Lo, a child is born us, a son has been given to us; the sovereignty rests on his shoulders; and he is called wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, eternal Father, Prince of Peace. The empire will be great and peace endless, upon the throne of David and in his kingdom. He will establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness, now and for ever» (*Is. 9, 5-6*). Yes, the whole transcendent tradition, of which Israel was the bearer, led to that child who is the Son of God and the Son of Mary, born under the Mosaic law (*Gal. 4, 4*): in Him it is regenerated, transformed and spreads over the world. This little, Jesus of Bethlehem, is the central point of human history; in him are concentrated all human journeyings which come to join the direct line of the choice of the children of Abraham who, from far away, saw in the night of the centuries, this future luminous point and, as Christ himself told us, «he saw it and was glad» (*Jn. 8, 56*).

Still the marvel continues. As happens to rays that dissolve at the focus of a lens, and set out again in a new beam of light; so, too, the religious history of mankind, the history that gives unity, significance and value to the generations that follow one another, bustle about and advance, with lowered head, over the hearth this history has its lens in Christ who absorbs all past history and illuminates all future history until the end of time (cf. *Mt. 28, 20*).

This vision of Christmas, which is the true one, applies especially to you, diplomats, representatives of the peoples, gathered here tonight to celebrate the mystery of Christmas: it is an invitation to everyone to reflect on the destiny of mankind. This destiny, of which you are the highly qualified artisans, is bound up with the very humble crib where lies the Word of God become flesh. What is more, it depends on it: wheresoever appears this Christian irradiation of which we were speaking, and which is called the Gospel, there appears light, there appears unity,

there appears man, no longer with bowed head but drawn up to his full stature; there appears the dignity of his person, there appears peace, there appears salvation.

Gentlemen, friends and brothers who are seeking and discovering Christ; let us pay attention to this extraordinary moment. It is likely that a dual sentiment awakens in hearts. One of mistrust and fear with regard to the new King who, anew today, is born in the world! This King is a power: and what do the Powerful of this world fear more than a new power? Now if he is indeed a power, this Jesus, who declares that his kingdom is not of this world but belongs to a transcendent sphere, perhaps we fear him and reject him even more today, jealous as we are of our sovereign autonomy, agnostic, laicist or atheistic, which does not admit a kingdom of God.

The other sentiment, on the contrary, is one of trust. Is not that power which is Christ completely for us, for our benefit, for our salvation, for our love? «*Non eripit mortalia, qui regna dat caelestia*: He who came to give his heavenly kingdom, does not take from us our earthly kingdoms» (Hymn of Epiphany). He came for us, not against us. He is not a rival. He is not an enemy. He is a guide for us on our way, he is a friend. And that means for all of us: everyone can rightly say: For me.

Of course, once he has come among us, a drama may begin, a struggle: for or against Christ. Human history now develops around him; the Gospel is the meeting point, or the battle field (cf. *Luke 2, 34*).

But on this night, in this place, at this meeting, the choice is easy, it is sweet, it is strong; and everyone can say, with a heart exulting with joy: He came for me! (cf. *Gal. 2, 20*).

*ORa 1972 n.2 p.2.