



JANUARY 9, 2013. HE BECAME A MAN

The Catechesis of the Holy Father Benedict XVI during the Year of Faith



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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[VIDEO]

He became a man

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Christmas season let us reflect once again on the great mystery of God who came down from heaven to enter our flesh. In Jesus God was incarnate, he became a man like us and in this way opened for us the road to his heavenly Kingdom, to full communion with him.

In these days the term the “Incarnation” of God has rung out several times in our churches, expressing the reality we celebrate at Holy Christmas: the Son of God was made man, as we say in the *Creed*. But what does this word, so central to the Christian faith, mean? Incarnation derives from the Latin *incarnatio*. St Ignatius of Antioch — at the end of the first century — and, especially, St Irenaeus used this term in reflecting on the Prologue to the Gospel according to St John, in particular in the sentence “the Word became flesh” (Jn

1:14). Here the word “flesh”, according to the Hebrew usage, indicates man in his whole self, the whole man, but in particular in the dimension of his transience and his temporality, his poverty and his contingency. This was in order to tell us that the salvation brought by God, who became man in Jesus of Nazareth, affects man in his material reality and in whatever situation he may be. God assumed the human condition to heal it from all that separates it from him, to enable us to call him, in his Only-Begotten Son, by the name of “Abba, Father”, and truly to be children of God.

St Irenaeus stated: “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God” (*Adversus Haereses*, 3, 19, 1: PG 7,939; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 460).

“The Word was made flesh” is one of those truths to which we have grown so accustomed that the greatness of the event it expresses barely makes an impression on us. Effectively, in this Christmastide in which these words often recur in the Liturgy, we at times pay more attention to the external aspects, to the “colours” of the celebration rather than to the heart of the great Christian newness that we are celebrating: something that utterly defeats the imagination, that God alone could bring about and into which we can only enter with faith.

The *Logos*, who is with God, is the *Logos* who is God, the Creator of the world (cf. Jn 1:1) through whom all things were created (cf. 1:3) and who has accompanied men and women through history with his light (cf. 1:4-5; 1:9), became one among many and made his dwelling among us, becoming one of us (cf. 2:14).

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council said: “The Son of God... worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin” (Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22). Thus it is important to recover our wonder at the mystery, to let ourselves be enveloped by the grandeur of this event: God, the true God, Creator of all, walked our roads as a man, entering human time to communicate his own life to us (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-4). And he did not do so with the splendour of a sovereign who dominates the world with his power, but with the humility of a child.

I would like to stress a second element. At holy Christmas we generally exchange a few gifts with the people closest to us. At times this may be a conventional gesture, but it usually expresses affection; it is a sign of love and esteem. In the Prayer over the Offerings at the Vigil Mass of the Solemnity of Christmas the Church prays: “may the oblation of this day’s feast be pleasing to you, O Lord, we pray, that through this most holy exchange we may be found in the likeness of Christ in whom our nature is united to you. Who lives and reigns for ever”.

The idea of giving is therefore at the heart of the liturgy and makes us aware of the original gift of Christmas: on that Holy Night, in taking flesh God wanted to make a gift of himself to men and women, he gave himself for us; God made his Only Son a gift for us, he took on our humanity to give his divinity to us. This is the great gift. In our giving too it does not matter whether or not a gift is expensive; those who cannot manage to give a little of themselves always give too little. Indeed, at times we even seek to substitute money or material things for our hearts and the commitment to giving ourselves.

The mystery of the Incarnation shows that God did not do this: he did not give some thing but he gave himself in his Only-Begotten Son. We find here our model for the giving so that our relationships, especially those that are most important, may be guided by giving love freely.

I would like to offer a third thought: the event of the Incarnation, of God who became man, like us, shows us the daring realism of divine love. God’s action, in fact was not limited to words. On the contrary we might say that he was not content with speaking, but

entered into our history, taking upon himself the effort and burden of human life. The Son of God truly became a man. He was born of the Virgin Mary in a specific time and place, in Bethlehem during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, under the Governor Quirinius (cf. Lk 2:1-2); he grew up in a family, he had friends, he formed a group of disciples, he instructed the Apostles to continue his mission and ended the course of his earthly life on the Cross. The way God acted gives us a strong incentive to question ourselves on the reality of our faith, which must not be limited to the sphere of sentiment, of the emotions; rather, it must enter into the practicality of our existence, that is, it must touch our everyday life and give it practical guidance. God did not stop at words, but showed us how to live, sharing in our own experience, except for sin.

The *Catechism of St Pius X*, which some of us studied as children answers with simple brevity the question “What must we do to live according to the will of God?”: “to live according to the will of God, we must believe the truths that he has revealed and obey his commandments with the help of his grace, which is obtained through the sacraments and through prayer”. Faith has a fundamental aspect that does not only involve our mind and heart but also our whole life.

I suggest one last element for you to think about. St John says that the Word, the *Logos*, was with God in the beginning and that everything was done through the Word and nothing that exists was done without him (cf. Jn 1:1-13). The Evangelist is clearly alluding to the Creation narrative in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, and reinterprets it in the light of Christ. This is a fundamental criterion in the Christian interpretation of the Bible: The Old and New Testaments should always be read together and, starting with the New, the deepest meaning of the Old Testament is also revealed. That same Word, who has always existed with God, who is God himself and through whom and for whom all things were created (cf. Col 1:16-17), became man: the eternal and infinite God immersed himself in human finiteness, in his creature, to bring back man and the whole of creation to himself.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “the first creation finds its meaning and its summit in the new creation in Christ, the splendour of which surpasses that of the first creation” (n. 349). The Fathers of the Church compared Jesus to Adam, even to the point of calling him “the second Adam”, or the definitive Adam, the perfect image of God. With the Incarnation of the Son of God a new creation was brought about that gave the complete answer to the question “who is man?”. God’s plan for the human being was fully manifest in Jesus alone. He is the definitive man according to God’s will.

The Second Vatican Council reasserted this forcefully: “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear.... Christ the new Adam... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling”. (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 359). In that Child, the Son of God contemplated at Christmas, we can recognize the true face not only of God but also of the human being; and only by opening ourselves to his grace and seeking to follow him every day do we fulfil God’s plan for us, for each one of us.

Dear friends, in this period let us meditate on the great and marvellous richness of the Mystery of the Incarnation, to permit the Lord to illuminate us and to change us, more and more, into an image of his Son made man for us.

To special groups:

I greet all the English-speaking visitors present, including the pilgrimage groups from Nigeria, Taiwan and Brazil. My cordial greeting goes to the Conference of Roman Catholic Cathedral Musicians from the United States. I also thank the choirs, including those from Saint Joseph University and from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I invoke the Lord’s blessings of joy and peace!

I address a special greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Next Sunday we shall be celebrating the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, a favourable opportunity for rethinking our own belonging to Christ in the faith of the Church. Dear *young people*, may you rediscover every day the grace that comes from the Sacrament you have received. May you, dear *sick people*, draw from Baptism the strength to stand up to moments of suffering and hardship. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, be able to express the commitments of Baptism in your journey of family life. May the Lord bless all of you.

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