

CHILD OF BETHLEHEM, CALL TO END SUFFERING OF OTHER CHILDREN

VATICAN CITY, 24 DEC 2008 (VIS) - The Pope celebrated Midnight Mass tonight in the Vatican Basilica on the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord.

"God stoops down", the Pope said in his homily. "This is a prophetic word", which "that night in Bethlehem, ... took on a completely new meaning. God's stooping down became real in a way previously inconceivable. ... He becomes a child and puts Himself in the state of complete dependence typical of a newborn child. The Creator who holds all things in His hands, on whom we all depend, makes Himself small and in need of human love. ... How, indeed, could His love for humanity, His solicitude for us, have appeared greater and more pure? ... The glory of the true God becomes visible when the eyes of our hearts are opened before the stable of Bethlehem".

The Holy Father recalled the Gospel of Luke that narrates the announcement to the shepherds, "people of very lowly status, people who were looked down upon by society at large. ... Luke tells us that they were 'keeping watch'. This phrase reminds us of a central theme of Jesus' message, which insistently bids us to keep watch, ... the command to stay awake, to recognize the Lord's coming, and to be prepared. Here too the expression seems to imply more than simply being physically awake during the night hour. The shepherds were truly 'watchful' people, with a lively sense of God and of His closeness. They were waiting for God, and were not resigned to His apparent remoteness from their everyday lives. .. And who are these people ... if not the poor, the watchful, the expectant, those who hope in God's goodness and seek him, looking to Him from afar?".

Quoting the Church Fathers the Pope explained that if at the moment of the announcement to the shepherds "the angels had known God in the grandeur of the universe, in the reason and the beauty of the cosmos that come from Him and are a reflection of him" then that night "something new had happened, something that astounded them. ... The God who sustains all things and bears them in His hands - He Himself had entered into human history, He had become someone who acts and suffers within history. From the joyful amazement that this unimaginable event called forth, from God's new and further way of making Himself known ... a new song was born, one verse of which the Christmas Gospel has preserved for us: 'Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace to His people on earth'. ... God's glory is in the highest heavens, but His high state is now found in the stable - what was lowly has now become sublime. God's glory is on the earth, it is the glory of humility and love. And even more: the glory

of God is peace. Wherever He is, there is peace. He is present wherever human beings do not attempt, apart from him, and even violently, to turn earth into heaven. He is with those of watchful hearts; with the humble and those who meet Him at the level of His own 'height', the height of humility and love. To these people He gives His peace, so that through them, peace can enter this world".

"The medieval theologian William of Saint Thierry once said that God - from the time of Adam - saw that His grandeur provoked resistance in man, that we felt limited in our own being and threatened in our freedom. Therefore God chose a new way. He became a child. He made Himself dependent and weak, in need of our love. Now - this God who has become a child says to us - you can no longer fear me, you can only love me".

"In every child we see something of the Child of Bethlehem", exclaimed Benedict XVI. "Every child asks for our love. This night, then, let us think especially of those children who are denied the love of their parents. Let us think of those street children who do not have the blessing of a family home, of those children who are brutally exploited as soldiers and made instruments of violence, instead of messengers of reconciliation and peace. Let us think of those children who are victims of the industry of pornography and every other appalling form of abuse, and thus are traumatized in the depths of their soul. The Child of Bethlehem summons us once again to do everything in our power to put an end to the suffering of these children; to do everything possible to make the light of Bethlehem touch the heart of every man and woman. ... Only if people change will the world change; and in order to change, people need the light that comes from God, the light which so unexpectedly entered into our night".

"And speaking of the Child of Bethlehem", he concluded, "let us think also of the place named Bethlehem, of the land in which Jesus lived, and which He loved so deeply. And let us pray that peace will be established there, that hatred and violence will cease. Let us pray for mutual understanding, that hearts will be opened, so that borders can be opened. Let us pray that peace will descend there, the peace of which the angels sang that night".