



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 7 September 2005

Canticle cf. Chapter of St Paul's Letter to the Colossians

"Firstborn of all creation!"

Evening Prayer - Wednesday of Week Three

1. We have already reflected earlier on the grandiose fresco of Christ, Lord of the universe and of history, that dominates the hymn St Paul placed at the beginning of the Letter to the Colossians. This canticle, in fact, punctuates all four of the weeks spanned by the Liturgy of Vespers.

The heart of the hymn consists of verses 15-20, into which Christ enters directly and solemnly as the "image" of "the invisible God" (v. 15).

The Greek term *ekon*, "icon", is dear to the Apostle: in his Letters he uses it nine times, applying it both to Christ, the perfect icon of God (cf. II Cor 4: 4), and to man, the image and glory of God (cf. I Cor 11: 7).

However, by sin, men and women "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images representing mortal man" (Rom 1: 23), choosing to worship idols and become like them.

We must therefore continuously model our being and life on the image of that of the Son of God (cf. II Cor 3: 18), so that we may be "delivered... from the dominion of darkness" and "transferred... to the Kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1: 13).

This is a first imperative in this hymn: to model our life on the image of the Son of God, entering into his sentiments, his will and his thoughts.

2. Christ is then proclaimed the "firstborn" of "all creation" (v. 15). Christ is before all things (cf. v. 17) because he has been begotten since eternity, for "all things were created through him and for him" (v. 16). The ancient Jewish tradition also says that "the whole world was created in view of the Messiah" (*Sanhedrin*, 98b).

For the Apostle, Christ is the principle of coherence ("in him all things hold together"), the mediator ("through him") and the final destination toward which the whole of creation converges. He is the "firstborn of many brothers" (Rom 8: 29), that is, the Son par excellence in the great family of God's children, into which we are incorporated by Baptism.

3. At this point, our gaze turns from the world of creation to that of history. Christ is "the Head of the Body, the Church" (Col 1: 18); he already became this through his Incarnation.

Indeed, he entered the human community to support it and make it into a "body", that is, in harmonious and fruitful unity. Christ is the root, the vital pivot and "the beginning" of the coherence and growth of humanity.

Precisely with this primacy Christ can become the principle of the resurrection of all, the "firstborn from the dead", so that "in Christ all will come to life again": first Christ, the first fruits; then, at his coming, all those who belong to Christ (cf. I Cor 15: 22-23).

4. The Canticle draws to a close celebrating the "fullness", in Greek *pleroma*, which Christ possesses in himself as a gift of love of the Father. It is the fullness of divinity that shines out, both in the universe and in humanity, becoming a source of peace, unity and perfect harmony (Col 1: 19-20).

This "reconciliation" and "reconciliation" is brought about through "the blood of his Cross", by which we are justified and made holy. By pouring out his Blood and giving himself, Christ has spread peace, which in biblical language is a synthesis of the Messianic goods and saving fullness extended to the whole of created reality.

The hymn ends, therefore, with a shining horizon of reconciliation, unity, harmony and peace, against which the figure of its architect solemnly rises: Christ, the "Beloved Son" of the Father.

5. Many historians of the ancient Christian tradition have reflected on this important passage. St Cyril of Jerusalem, in one of his dialogues, cites the Canticle of the Letter to the Colossians in response to an anonymous correspondent who had asked him: "So can we say that the Word begotten by God the Father suffered for us in his flesh?".

The answer, echoing the Canticle, is in the affirmative. Indeed, Cyril says, "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature, visible and invisible, for whom and in whom all things

exist, was given - Paul says - to be the Head of the Church: he is also the firstborn from the dead", that is, the first in the series of the dead who are raised.

"He made his own", Cyril continues, "all that is of the flesh of man and "endured the Cross, heedless of its shame' (Heb 12: 2). We do not say that a simple man, heaped with honours, I know not how because of his connection with him, was sacrificed for us, but that the Lord of glory himself was the One crucified" (*Perché Cristo è uno: Collana di Testi Patristici, XXXVII, Rome, 1983, p. 101*).

Before this Lord of glory, a sign of the supreme love of the Father, let us also raise our song of praise and bow down before him, in adoration and thanksgiving.

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the group of priests from Scotland, the Capuchin Friars from Indonesia and the Lutheran pilgrims from Sweden. I also greet with affection the groups from England, Denmark, Malta, New Zealand and the United States of America. I wish you all a pleasant stay in Rome!

Lastly, I greet you, *young people, sick people and newly-weds*. Tomorrow we will be celebrating the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin. May the heavenly Mother of God guide and sustain you on your journey to an ever more perfect attachment to Christ and his Gospel.

Let us end our meeting by singing the Pater Noster.

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