



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE POLISH COMMUNITY OF ROME

Monday, 23 December 1996

*Venerable Brother,
Mr Ambassador,
Dear Compatriots,*

1. Tomorrow at midnight, this Christmas carol will ring out all over Poland:

“In the deep night a voice resounds: Come, Shepherds, God is born for you! Hasten to Bethlehem to greet the Lord”.

These Christmas verses translate into the language of song the story from St Luke’s Gospel that will be proclaimed during the “Mass of the Shepherds”. Behold: Mary arrived with Joseph in Bethlehem to be registered, in accordance with the orders of the Roman authorities. During the night “the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (Lk 2:6-12).

We will read the rest of the passage during the Mass at Dawn. After the angels had gone, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem. They went with haste and “found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (Lk 2:16-18). All this is translated in the Christmas carol with poetic and musical language.

What the carol *In the deep night* expressed as a story, the wonderful Polish Christmas carol *God is born*, written by the poet Franciszek Karpiński, transforms into mystagogy, into a hymn that brings us into the mystery.

“God is born, man’s might is amazed: the Lord of heaven empties himself! The fire subsides, the splendour is veiled, the Infinite is encompassed”.

With these words the poet presented the mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son, using contrasts to express what is essential to the mystery: in assuming human nature, the infinite God at the same time assumed the limitations of a creature. And he continues:

“The Infinite is encompassed. Scorned, yet clothed with glory, the mortal King of the ages!”.

And lastly the Christmas carol uses St John's words:

“And the Word was made flesh and came to dwell amongst us”.

Thus the Christmas verses have translated into musical language what is found in the readings of the three Holy Masses of Christmas, at midnight, at dawn and during the day.

2. As I think of these expressions of popular piety, I remember all the other Christmas carols whose musical and theological wealth is enormous. I remember the Polish churches where the sound of the sublime melodies reechoes, full of joy and sometimes full of melancholy, touching in tone and content, telling of the profound truths connected with the event and mystery of the birth of God's Son. I remember Nowa Huta, where at midnight on Christmas Eve I used to celebrate the “Mass of the Shepherds”, or at Bieńczyce, or at Mistrzejowice, or at Wzgórza Krzesławickie, when we had to struggle to have churches built. Then the Christmas carols were the particular sign of unity of the people who came, as in Bethlehem, to Christ who “had found no room”. Those same people wanted to invite Jesus into their hearts, into their communities and into their daily lives. These Christmas carols not only belong to our history; in a certain sense, they form our national and Christian history. They are many and of considerable spiritual richness. From the oldest to those of today, from the liturgical to the popular. I remember, for example, the so-called Christmas carol of the mountain people which we so love to hear: *O little one, little one*.

We must not lose this treasure. That is why, as I break the Christmas wafer with you, I hope that all of you, dear compatriots, whether in our homeland or here in Rome or anywhere in the world, may sing these Christmas carols, meditating on what they say, on their content, and that in them you may discover the truth about the love of God who became man for us.

Many other elements could be added to today’s exchange of greetings as we listen to Christmas carols. But I like to recall the fervent announcement of peace: “Glory to God in the highest, and on

earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (cf. Lk 2:14), together with the Christmas carol *When Christ is born*.

This carol has particular meaning for me this year, when the Pope from Poland was able to pause before the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. This was also a very profound experience for the chancellor of modern Germany, Helmut Kohl, who was with me on that occasion. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased — these are the words of the Christmas carol *When Christ is born*.

Lastly, I wish to return once more to the carol *God is born*, to conclude by addressing a fervent prayer to the newborn Jesus: “Raise your hand, divine Child! Bless our dear country with good counsel and well-being. Sustain her strength with your own. Bless our home, our fields, and all the villages and towns. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”.

I offer my best wishes to all those present and to all your families, to my compatriots in Poland and to Poles all over the world. May God reward you.

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