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## "KEEP ALIVE THE MEMORY OF JESUS"

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This was one of the Church's beautiful injunctions, down the centuries, one especially fitting as Christmas draws near and as we get ever closer to the year 2000 Jubilee. It is good that at this time we consider the place Jesus occupies in our lives, at the heart of our society. According to biblical tradition, a person's name is of the utmost importance: in a way it indicates that person's mission in life. If we remember the reason why Mary and Joseph named their child "Jesus" and why, later on, he was given the title "Christ," we shall better understand his mission within our world.

### AT THE HEART OF OUR HISTORY

*The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the center of mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations. "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He made known to us the invisible God. Jesus is the first-born of all creation, in him all things exist. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is our shepherd, our leader, our brother. Like us and more than us, he is modest, poor, humiliated, a worker, oppressed, suffering. He is the master and redeemer of humankind: he was born, he died, he has risen for us. He is the Son of Man because he is Son of God. He is the son of Mary, blessed among all women."*

### "WHAT IS HIS NAME"

In these days leading up to the birth of Jesus, it is important to be able to "name" Jesus, to remind ourselves and our brothers and sisters who Jesus is, why we celebrate him, and what he means to us, on a daily basis. The magazine *Fêtes et Saisons* published in September a special issue on Jesus Christ, authored by Bishop Jacques Perrier of Chartres [France]. What follows are excerpts on *"When you think of Jesus or speak about him, how do you call him? Jesus Christ? Lord? God?.. Or otherwise?"*

### JESUS

How did Mary and Joseph call him? How did his neighbours in Nazareth call him? How did his disciples call him? They certainly called him "Jesus," "Yeshua," in the Hebrew language of the Bible. This was a common name at the time, as were Moshe (Moses), David, Myriam, (Mary), and Yohannan (John). ["Jesus" or "Yeshua"] had been the name of an especially prominent leader, Joshua, successor to Moses; it was this Joshua who led the people of Israel into the Promised Land. This had happened 2000 years earlier, but all Jews still commemorated the man and the event. Would Jesus of Nazareth established another Promised Land, open to all nations? Like many biblical names, the name "Jesus" has a religious connotation. It means "God saves." What an agenda! Mary, according to St. Luke, and Joseph, according to St. Matthew, are ordered by the angel to give him that name. In St. Matthew, it is explained that *"he will save his people from their sins."* "His people." That is, Israel. "Jesus" is the name which history has retained; it refers to a Jew who lived at the beginning of the first century. No one seriously denies his having lived: without such an extraordinary personality at its founding, the spread of the Gospel and the birth of the Church would be incomprehensible.

## THE CHRIST

But Christians give him another name. They also call him "the Christ." It is because they live "in Christ" that they are known as "Christians." The word "Christ" is Greek, and it corresponds to the Hebrew "Messiah." Popular lore has the saying "waiting for the Messiah" to express the idea of expecting a bearer of good tidings or a solution to our problems. And this common usage points us in the right direction. In Israel, the messiahs were those who had been charged by God with a mission to the people. Among these were, first of all, the kings: Saul, David, Solomon; they were charged by God to guide the people in fidelity to the Covenant. Because of this, these men were held as sacred, as consecrated. They were anointed with holy oil, a sign of the Spirit of God, whence the name "Messiah" which means "anointed with oil." Besides David and Solomon in the tenth century B.C., the kings were a sorry lot. In the sixth century B.C., the kings disappeared and were replaced by the prophets and the priests. In time these too were silenced and, at the time of Jesus, the high priests were not commendable. Still, God's promises could not disappear. Since the authorities were in league with the pagans, religious Jews expected God to send them a messiah, the Messiah who would recover for Israel its freedom and fervour. Isaiah's prophecies had mentioned him: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me."* This Messiah would be the perfect Servant of God. He would be His Elect, His Beloved. He would be given wonderful names: Emmanuel (God-with-Us), Powerful God, Prince of Peace.

## JESUS CHRIST

Jesus' first disciples were all Jews. They shared in the faith and hopes of their people. They dared believe and proclaim, *"We have found the Messiah!"* This was very much Peter's profession of faith when Jesus questioned him: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* The budding Church is therefore this part of the people of God which recognises Jesus the Messiah. In Jesus, the Church believes in Christ. This is of such importance that the name "Christian" remained even after the Gospel began to be proclaimed to the Greeks for whom the idea of messiah was altogether unfamiliar. Two thousand years later, we have for the most part forgotten why Jesus is called "the Christ," and we are thus deprived of a great spiritual riches. The name reminds us of Israel's long expectation and of God's fidelity in keeping His promises. May Jesus the Christ and Messiah be your joy and your peace!

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