

December 25, 2020 Midnight St. Augustine Cathedral

The Nativity of Our Lord----Mass at Midnight

There are hundreds of Christmas Carols; many of them we know off by heart. Some are traditional; others are modern. My nephew Matthew called earlier today to tell me about one that's become a favorite of his by a Christian group known as "Go Fish", and the Carol's title is: "Christmas with a Capital 'C'". I found it to be ----shall we say "interesting". However of all the Carols there have ever been, there's none that can come close to the original one that we just heard sung by "*the multitude of the Heavenly Host*", and their song was: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, Peace to those on whom His favor rests*"!

It's interesting as we listen to that "song" on this very early Christmas morning, it's really not about Jesus, or the Manger, or Mary or Joseph; it's giving Glory and Praise to our God for the Incredible Gift that He has given to the World. And that Gift is twofold: the Gift of Himself thru His only-begotten Son Jesus; AND the Gift of His Peace to live in all people who open their hearts to receive it.

And so, dear Family of Faith---my sisters and brothers in Christ---all of you here in person and all of you participating via live stream---on behalf of Father Creagan, Msgr. Osborn, our newest ordained priest, Father David Pinto, and myself, I wish each of you a Blessed and very Merry "Christmas with a capital 'C'", and I pray that you will all experience the Peace of Christ in your hearts on this day, throughout this Season, and into the new Year.

It would be an understatement to say that Christmas 2020 is quite different. This Day, that traditionally brings people closer together, this year has to be a time to maintain social distance from one another, and one that will keep many families (including my own) apart. Large gatherings for dinner will be substituted with virtual visits; gift exchanges will be handled by the U.S. Post Office/Amazon/UPS instead of being delivered in-person. Even our Christmas Masses are different, with smaller attendance required, no choirs, and having to exchange nods and smiles in place of hugs and handshakes to share our Christmas Peace. But we can't lose sight of the fact that in spite of the modified gatherings and restricted celebrations, Christmas is still Christmas, and because of what the Angels revealed to the Shepherds, the first ones to be told this world-changing Good News, we should still Rejoice with as much Joy as ever---maybe even more than usual---because on this day, 2,000 years ago, "*in the City of David, a Savior*

has been born for you Who is Christ and Lord!" While we might have to celebrate differently, the Reason for our Joy remains the same; so give Glory to God, open your hearts to receive the Favor of His Peace, and live your lives with the Joy of knowing how much you are Loved by God Himself.

As much as we love the Christmas Story, and to gaze upon the Manger, and to remember all that Mary and Joseph had to endure----as they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of more than 100 miles---to be counted for the Census, and then because of that, there was no room for them to give Birth to the Baby except in a cold and smelly stable, laying the Baby Jesus in the manger which was where the animals' food was placed----As much as we like to focus our attention on that, as we heard in this morning's Gospel, St. Luke barely mentions it. He simply says: *"When Mary and Joseph were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn Son; she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the Inn."*

St. Luke was much more interested in sharing the joyful message about Jesus' Birth to all the world. The fact that Jesus was born was earth-shattering; but for St. Luke, the important point was in sharing this Good News to any and all who would listen.

And that's still what's important. Even though we have to celebrate Christmas differently this year, we can not allow the circumstances of the world around us, as challenging as they might be, to keep us from rejoicing at the significance of what Christmas means.

Christmas takes place in the harshness of Winter, and this Mass at Night takes place when the darkness of the night is most intense, which this year, because of the blustery and snowey conditions, is even more intensified. Darkness in the Scriptures always represents the power of sin, and darkness also means a time of great challenge.

That's why the cherished passage from Isaiah is always the First Reading at this Mass at Midnight: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone."* On that first Christmas, into a world darkened by sin, with the world's people separated from God, Jesus' Birth dispelled that darkness and began the process of reuniting us with God.

That Reading really hits home this Christmas. We have lived in a lot of darkness in 2020. For the past 9 months, we have lived with fear, anxiety, uncertainty; we have experienced restrictions, separation from loved ones, financial stress, unemployment; we have applauded front line healthcare workers, and cheered the scientists, and pharmaceutical companies (especially our own Pfizer) who have developed a vaccine in record time with mind-boggling speed; but we still mourn the more than 300,000 people in the U.S., and more than 1.7 million people worldwide who have died from this awful virus.

The sense of “darkness” at times can feel overwhelming. But...into this darkness, the Light has come. Our God came to be with us on that first Christmas, and He has never left us. The Light of Christ is still with us. And that is why we rejoice, even if our celebrations are modified, or not all that we wish they could be.

While there have been challenges that we’ve all had to face throughout our lives, and while there have been dark periods in history that may have brought about suffering and death in the past, this may very well be the first time that the entire world has had to do battle with an invisible, novel and quite contagious and deadly virus which no one in the world knew how to defeat. Even the vaccine, which is now being made available throughout the world for which we truly rejoice, will only help to protect us against it, not necessarily to defeat it.

In many ways, the deadly virus is comparable to that even more powerful spiritual virus of sin in the world. All of us are victims of that deadly force which separates us from God and from one another in minor, and sometimes in major, ways. Jesus’ Birth brought the Light of His Love to dispel that Darkness; Jesus’ Presence in the world began the process of healing the division between God and Humanity; and ultimately, His great Act of Love on Calvary brought Salvation to the world---and He definitely defeated the lasting power of sin and death forever!

It is that Love of Jesus----what we might call the Spirit of Christmas----that is much more powerful than the spiritual virus of sin; it is that Spirit---the Holy Spirit of Christmas---that can help us to live our lives in Hope, even while still dealing with the impact of a worldwide pandemic.

Christmas is the constant reminder that God is not removed from us. Our God has gone to extraordinary lengths; not only did He choose to be united with us--- He became One of us, as Jesus took on our human nature, and everything about

our nature, except for sin, while still maintaining His Divine Nature. Jesus' Birth is the clearest expression of God's closeness to us that there could be; and 33 years later, Jesus willingly gave His Life for the redemption of the world. That is why, in the midst of all our struggles and challenges in this world, we can live our lives with Hope---Jesus' Life gives our very existence meaning.

That's why Christmas-----and especially what we're doing here in this "O Holy Night"----is a Feast that MUST be celebrated with great Joy, even if we can't be together with family and friends and enjoy our big dinners and gift exchanges. What we are doing here in this Mass is the best way for us to celebrate the meaning of Christmas. We focus our attention on this Manger Scene, or the ones that I hope you all have in your homes. As we processed into this beautiful Cathedral just after Midnight, singing that glorious Christmas Carol, "O Come All ye Faithful----O come let us adore Him---Christ the Lord", with Christina Amat carrying the Baby Jesus for us to place in the Manger----we were able to experience part of the meaning of Christmas. Jesus is Born; God is with us; we are Loved; our hearts should be filled with Joy; and we can live our lives filled with Hope.

Perhaps some of you have already had a chance to exchange some gifts; others of you may do so after Mass. Still others may wait until morning, after seeing what Santa Claus brings, of course. The gifts that Santa brings, and the gifts that we give to one another, are symbolic expressions of our love and affection for one another. But what we celebrate here this morning---as we focus on the Manger Scene, and gaze upon the Baby Jesus--- we come to realize once again that this is the greatest Gift we could ever receive. As Pope Francis said: "*Jesus is the Smile of God, because He came to give us the Love of the Father.*" ("Jesus es la sonrisa de Dios, porque vino a darnos el amor del Padre." Papa Francisco)

And because Jesus was laid in a Manger, which was the food box for animals, that actually prefigured the fact that, on the Night before He would physically leave this world thru His human death, He gave Himself to us in the Eucharist, to be our Food for the Journey of Faith, and to keep us spiritually nourished so that we can share the Spirit of Christmas to others through our acts of love, our works of charity, and the ways that we show compassion to those who need our help----so that we, nourished by Jesus Himself in the Eucharist, can in turn be "the Smile of God" to all those we meet.

Earlier today, Pope Francis included this beautiful Prayer in his Christmas Homily: “Jesus, You are the Child who makes me also a Child of God. You love me as I am, not as I imagine myself to be. In embracing You, the Child of the Manger, I once more embrace my life. In welcoming You, the Bread of Life, I too desire to give my life. My Savior, teach me to serve. You who did not leave me alone, help me to comfort your brothers and sisters, for from this Night forward, all people are my brothers and sisters as well. Amen.”

As we pray that the Spirit of Christmas Joy will be renewed in each of our hearts this Christmas, let us consider giving, as a Christmas Gift to the Baby Jesus, our commitment to be agents of God’s Peace to everyone in our lives, and to be witnesses of great Joy to all those who are sisters and brothers in the human family. When we do so, that will make the message of the Choir of Angels more complete as we give “Glory to God in the highest, and bring peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.”

A blessed and merry Christmas to one and all!