

Homily -Christmas Midnight Mass – 2016
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Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

On this holy night, we rejoice with the shepherds who heard the words of the angel: *Today in the City of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord!* We gather in this Basilica which honors the Mother of the Savior under the title of the Immaculate Conception. The Shrine is a temple of God, a place where heaven and earth meet and is an expression of striving to bring the divine and human together! As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Pope's personal representative here in the United States, it is a joy to celebrate this my first Christmas in your country with you and to express his Holiness' closeness to each of you. His Holiness wants you to know how much God desires to be close to you – to know the tenderness of God.

That is what this Feast is about. For most of human history, humans, with their own religious sensibility, strove with all their might to reach the divine. Tonight, we remember an event – a Mystery – which changed the course of history: the Incarnation – when the Divine descended to be joined to humanity. *The Word was made flesh and made His dwelling among us.* (John 1:14). As Saint Paul said in his letter to Titus: *The grace of God has appeared!* (Titus 2:11)

When humanity was lost in sin and darkness, the grace of God appeared. He did not come in power and might to provoke fear; rather He came as a child – to show forth the tenderness of God. There in Bethlehem, the all Holy God met sinful humanity. The title of Pope Francis' most recent Apostolic Letter was *Misericordia et Misera* – The two of them alone remained: *mercy with misery*. God's mercy descended from heaven, and became man - to be one of us and to be with us, poor sinners. That is why this Feast is so joyful – the enduring misery, being lost in the bondage of sin, is over! *The grace of God has appeared!*

Saint Luke describes the moment: *The time came for Mary 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 at the inn.* (Luke 2:6-7) This child – while small, beautiful, and tender – was no ordinary child. He is the Savior! The Savior has appeared. He banishes the darkness and brings us everlasting peace.

It was not to the mighty and powerful of the world that He appeared, but to the meek and lowly. It was to these simple shepherds that God drew near. He called them through the message of an Angel. They were in the fields outside Bethlehem – at the peripheries – living in poverty, working hard under the burdens of the day – when the Heavenly Messenger suddenly appeared to them. They saw the glory of the Lord all around them and were filled with great fear, but the Angel told them immediately of the Holy Birth. He brought them a message of great joy. That same Angel speaks to us today: *Do not be afraid. Today in the City of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord!* (Luke 2:10)

Rather than being paralyzed in fear, the shepherds said to each other: *“Let us go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place that the Lord has made known to us.”* (Luke 2:15) They went with haste and were overcome with joy to find Mary and Joseph and the Child. *The grace of God had appeared.* In the midst of the misery that surrounded them, they encountered Joy in the face of a little Child!

It is this personal encounter with Christ that changes everything – that opens up new horizons; that moves the shepherds, and us with them, from fear to joy; from despair to hope; that moves hearts from sin to repentance. The shepherds were captivated by what they saw: the poverty, simplicity, and the innocence of the Child with His Mother. Their joy was overwhelming! They had not been deceived by the angel. They contemplated and felt in their hearts the presence of the Savior who had descended from heaven to be with them! Yes. The shepherds saw the face of Mercy in a tiny Child, and it changed them. They saw the face of Mercy. Pope Francis says:

“Mercy renews and redeems because it is the meeting of two hearts: the heart of God who comes to meet the human heart. The latter is warmed and healed by the former. Our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh capable of love despite our sinfulness.” (*Misericordia et misera*, 16)

At Christmas, we celebrate the Mercy of God becoming Flesh – a gift of love from God to us. Essentially, God has entered into humanity, so that humanity might share in His Divinity. We celebrate His presence which changes us! The Holy Father reminds us:

“Mercy is always a gratuitous act of our heavenly Father, an unconditional and unmerited act of love. We cannot risk opposing the full freedom of the love with which God enters into the life of every person. Mercy is this concrete action of love that ... transforms and changes our lives.” (*Misericordia et miseria*, 2)

This is the path of every person – to listen, to seek, and to find the Lord. Upon finding Him, we must let him enter our lives. How often during Advent we heard the words of the Psalmist: *Let him enter, the King of Glory!* Yes, the King of Glory enters our world and wishes to enter our hearts. For the Child, there was no room at the inn, but the true inn that He desires to enter is the inn of our hearts. He knocks at the door of our hearts, seeking a place to be born anew. When we welcome Jesus, we welcome the whole reality of Jesus – everything that He is, everything He has revealed, everything that he communicates and teaches us through His Church.

The Child born for us teaches us what it is to be poor and to be poor in spirit, to be meek and lowly, and what it means to be rejected and persecuted. In welcoming Him, we practice the virtue of humility, humbling ourselves to receive the gift of God. We show ourselves to be beggars, unable to provide for ourselves, for we cannot provide salvation! Even as an infant, He teaches us how to live. To embrace this Child is to embrace a new way of living – the way of peace.

In his message for the World Day of Peace, which concludes the Octave of Christmas, the Holy Father calls upon all of us to build peace through “active and creative nonviolence.” He writes that Jesus gives us “the manual for this strategy of peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount” in the eight Beatitudes (cf. *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace*, Message for the 50th World Day of Peace, 6).

In Bethlehem, He gave the first lesson of how to live. It was there that He “came down from heaven and by the power of the Holy Spirit was Incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man.” *Et Homo factus est*. At these words, when we profess our faith, we will genuflect this evening and contemplate this mystery – this going forth of God! He taught us in the Incarnation that the Church must go out to proclaim the saving Mercy of God. That is why “For our sake” this Child who was born would “suffer death” and become the Redeemer. To go out and to be for others: this is the model of God’s love! This is the model of Christian living!

Yes! The grace of God has appeared as a Child to show forth the tender Mercy of the Eternal Father. That grace – that Presence – makes itself known through the Church – through the love and mercy she shows. His Holiness exhorts us this Christmas to build a culture of mercy:

“We are called to promote a culture of mercy based on the rediscovery of encounter with others, a culture in which no one looks at another with indifference or turns away from the suffering of our brothers and sisters.” (*Misericordia et misera*, 20)

How can we possibly gaze into the face of this little Child without looking upon each other with the eyes of mercy?! Once more, we look to the manger scene – to the poverty of a Child whose eyes are fixed upon us and whose arms are outstretched to embraced us with Mercy. Warmed by the tender Mercy of the God who revealed his face as a Child, we go forth to the whole world to say with the angel: “*Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you, who is Christ and Lord!*”

May the Christ Child, the Son of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, bless you and your families with peace this Christmas!