

The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, Christmas: Bring Joy to the World

This is a great time of the year to drive through neighborhoods. It is wonderful seeing all the Christmas lights and decorations. I am sure that many of you have also decorated your houses with lights and nativity scenes, Santas and reindeer and all sorts of displays.

Why do we decorate at Christmas? We do this as an expression of our Christmas joy.

Joy. Joy to world. We sing that there is joy because the Savior has come. The world waited for its Savior for ages. In Genesis, Adam and Eve were told that One would come who would crush the head of the serpent with his heel. 1000 years before Christ David heard that his kingdom would be eternal. Later we would realize that the One who would be king forever would come from the line of David. 750 years before Christ, King Ahaz heard a prophecy. Isaiah told him that a virgin would be with child. He did not say that a virgin would get pregnant, there would be nothing exceptional about that, but that a virgin girl would be with child. How could she be with child and still be a virgin? God's hand had to be here. The prophet said that the child would be called Emmanuel, a name that means *God is with His people*. The ages waited. The time finally came. It was a little over 2000 years ago. The center of humanity, Jesus the Christ, was born. And the world entered a new age, an age of joy.

Joy is real in our lives, even when we are saddened by the loss of those who are very close to us. Christmas is a wonderful time, but it can also be a difficult time. We all carry the memory of loved ones who will never again be at Christmas dinner. We tell stories about Grandma and Grandpa, Mom or Dad, husband or wife, or, and, this is the greatest sadness, the antics of a beautiful child. And we are grieved. But we do not allow grief to determine the course of our lives. We are people of faith. We are convinced that there is infinitely more to the reality of our loved ones who have died than simply our memory of them. We have faith that through the mercy of God they are still alive. We believe that we will once more be fully united with them. Our acceptance of Jesus Christ has given us eternal life. Nothing, not even death, can destroy the joy of the Lord.

There are many in the world who have no real experience of the joy of Jesus Christ. So many people live with a fear that the only true happiness is manufactured happiness. Perhaps we all do this. We spend a whole lot of money at a place in Orlando which is billed as the happiest place on earth. I really do not mean to denigrate Disney World, and I do hope you enjoy visiting the mouse, but the joy that is found there is bought, temporary and shallow. We should be in fear if this is as good as life gets.

Still, if you do go to Disney have a great time. But also recognize that none of our lives will be changed even by the Star Wars Galaxy Edge experience. Well, our lives will be changed in that we will be financially impoverished a bit. A large bit. If joy

has to be bought, then billions of people are too poor to have joy. We know that this is not true. Some of the poorest people in the world are only poor in the way that the world defines poverty, but they have lives full of joy. They experience joy in their families, and they experience joy in the Lord. They are rich. What a horrible world this would be if happiness depended on what we are able to buy.

People need to hear, feel and know the joy of the Gospel. Perhaps it would be good to remember Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium, the Joy of the Gospel*. This exhortation promoted the mission of the Church. He called us to communicate the joy of the Gospel to the world. No longer should the leaders of the Church be perceived as unapproachable guardians of the faith. He counseled the hierarchy to refrain from insulating itself from the realities of daily life. He said that the Church must at times get messy. By that he meant that the Church needs to be present to all, even in the mud of those who have no floors in their home. Deeper, than that, the Church needs to be involved in the messiness of all people's lives. He told us that the main concern of the Church must be to bring the joy of Jesus Christ to the entire world.

Our beautiful Catholic Church continues to renew itself. In *Hebrews 13:8* we read: *Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever*. Like the Beauty that St. Augustine finally found in his *Confessions*, the Church is ever ancient, ever new. Perhaps you remember that passage in Augustine's *Confessions*. It is a great Christmas gift that St. Augustine has left us:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!

You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you.

In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all.

You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.

You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

This is the joy that Christ brings to the world.

And we are called to be instruments of His joy. But how can we do this? We must begin with Jesus Christ. He is our joy. Remember the Gospel reading we had the third Sunday of Advent, from Matthew 11. John the Baptist from prison sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one who is to come or should they look for another. Jesus replied, building on the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Tell John what you hear

and see: the blind have their vision restored, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the poor have the good news preached to them." Jesus has brought joy to the world.

One of the signs of the presence of the Messiah, the proof that His joy has come to the world, is that the poor have the good news preached to them. Many have said and written that a society is as strong as the way that it treats its weakest members. The world is as strong as its care for its infirm, its weak, its poor. It is the mission of the Church to assume the responsibility of caring for the poor of the world with the joy of Jesus Christ.

There are two primary ways that the Church must continue to do this. The first is caring for those with immediate needs. Here in the United States this is the mission of Catholic Relief Services or CRS. The generosity of Catholics towards this work is exhibited over and over whenever disasters effect any part of the world. Catholic Relief Services is the jewel of the American Catholic Church.

The second way of caring for the poor is to give them the means of stepping out of poverty. Here in the United States this is the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, or CCHD. Many of our people, particularly our young, have given a year or more of their lives to the missions, domestic and foreign, working to break the cycle of poverty by teaching the poor how to help themselves. They do this not just as humanitarians, but as Christians, respecting the dignity of all made in the image and likeness of God. In the poor they and we must see Jesus Christ, who proclaimed his union with the suffering in Matthew 25, "As often as you did this for the least of my brethren you did it for me." It is by caring for others that the Church makes real the joy of the Gospel. ***Indeed, it is by caring for others that the Church becomes relevant.*** Our young people return from their mission trips with the experience of joy, joy they found by caring for others, and joy they experienced in the love the poor have for them and for each other, and, mostly, joy they all experience in living in the presence of the Lord.

It is simply not enough to sing Joy to the World. We must bring joy to the world.

May you all have a beautiful celebration of Christmas. Enjoy Christmas, but do not be satisfied with the warm feelings generated by the carols, the liturgical appointments or even the sincere hospitality of those with whom you are worshipping today. Instead, be determined to join the Church in making the Gospel of Joy a reality in the world.