

**PASTOR'S MEANDERINGS
CHRISTMAS**

24 – 25 DECEMBER 2018



Ladies and Gentlemen;

As I reflect on the Scripture reading of this past Advent season, all of which point to the event that we celebrate today it is clearly evident that the greatest thing we need in our lives, this and every season, perhaps most especially at this particular time in our history, is to know that God the Father is with us. This surely is the message of Christmas and thus the message of our faith. One writer expressed it this way:

“What begins in the stable ends in our salvation. That’s why we celebrate Christmas, and it’s the best and only reason the human heart needs.”

(Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap.)

Jesus is with us! This is what our children really need to know. Jesus is not only the Babe of Bethlehem, but He is also the Son who was born to live for our righteousness, and to die for our sins. Christ is the missing piece to life. Without Him our lives are incomplete. With Him our lives, even in their most complex or disappointing parts, make sense.

Jesus is with us! This is what our middle and high school youth and college age young people need to know. In the middle of their trials, identity issues, betrayals by friends, struggles to find their way in the world, and dreams for a great future, the Babe of Bethlehem, now the enthroned Christ of all Creation, is with them. His salvation give hope to them and to you. This is the message of hope to single people, and single-again people, and young marrieds, and families with children and families without children, empty-nesters and young retired folks and senior saints. Even ministers need this message. The light we long for is the Light we have been given. To receive Him is to be warmed by that Light and shown a new way through the trials and sorrows and even joy that we have on our journey.

Our journey as a Church continues. And I am thankful to be on that journey with you. I thank God for each of you, for your generous gifts of time and talent and financial resources in support of the parish. I commend you to your true first Pastor, even the Shepherd of our souls, the dear Savior, Jesus Christ. This Christmas I want to again bow before Him with you, happy and confident that in Him all things turn out for our good and His glory.

“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but has the light of life.” This is the true foundation of our faith; ancient and unshakable, sustaining us through whatever is placed before us in the past or in the future. This is the gift we have received and are reminded of this Christmas Season. This is our hope for every New Year. May your Christmas be blessed, insightful and merry and may the New Year be graced with God’s peace.



CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

Give us, O God, the vision which can see Your love in the world.
Give us the faith, the trust, the goodness, in spite of our ignorance and weakness.
Give us the knowledge that we may continue to pray with understanding hearts.
Show us what each of us can do to set forth the coming of the day of universal peace.
(Frank Bormann, Apollo 8, Christmas Eve, 1968)

Bestow this day on us the grace upon this solemn festival to see the wonder of our Lord’s

Nativity.

Bestow this day on us the grace to order so our way of life within that it is free from grief or stain of sin.

Bestow this day on us the grace to mend our ways through life's successive hours and gather, as a garland, goodness' flowers.

Bestow this day on us the grace so blithely in the joy of God to live that those who hurt us, we this day forgive.

Bestow this day on us the grace to carol for the Birthday of our King and as a gift, an honest heart to bring.

Bestow, bestow this day on us for healing of our griefs, His Merit's Strength, and bear us joyful to His Throne at length.

(Richard de Ledrede, O.F.M., Bishop of Ossory, 14th century, translated by Robert Wayse Jackson)

Lord Jesus, You entrusted Yourself to us when You made human nature Your own in the womb of the Virgin Mary. You accepted the vulnerability of human life with a generosity that calls for our imitation, to love as You have loved us.

In the Eucharist You entrust Yourself again to us with a love that gives without reserve. May we learn in this communion with You to give ourselves to you and to those in need and thus share in Your work of redemption. May we know Your presence in those we meet and find You in all things You have created.

May our faith strengthen this vision in us, may our hope make us long for its fulfilment. Grant this to us in Your love. Amen

STEWARDSHIP: Rejoice! The Word became flesh and dwells among us! Oh, come, let us adore Him!

John Henry Cardinal Newman

"May each Christmas, as it comes, find us more and more like Him who at this time became a little child, for our sake; more simpleminded, more humble, more affectionate, more resigned, more happy, more full of God."

READINGS THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH 30 DEC

1 Sm. 1:20-22, 24-28: The child Samuel, the first of the prophets, is born as a gift from God. His mother Hannah dedicates him to God for all of his life.

Ps. 84:2-3, 5-6, 9-10:

1 Jn. 3:1-2, 21-24: presents a lovely ideal of domestic harmony and caring of each other. This is one of the clearest expressions of early Christian family morality. We are all children of God – what a breath-taking thought! But will we ever fully grasp its significance? Not in this world, says the Letter of John. Yet, we will get a sense of it if we accept Jesus into our lives and do what He did: love unconditionally.

Lk. 2:41-52: Today's Gospel is the only reference to the teenage years of Jesus; the loss and finding of Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem. It shows both His attachment to His family, and also His special vocation to be at the service of the whole human family.

Pope John XXIII

“The family, grounded on marriage freely contracted, monogamous and indissoluble, is and must be considered the first and essential cell of human society.”

CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS

MANGER CRECH NATIVITY SCENE

Manger = a long trough from which animals are fed (Old French *mangeure*, from Latin *manducare* ‘to chew’)

Crech = a nursery where babies and young children are cared for during the working day
a model or tableau representing the scene of Jesus Christ's birth, displayed
in homes or public places at Christmas.

Nativity Scene = a set of figures displayed at Christmas as an artistic representation of the birth
of Jesus Christ

The Nativity Scene is probably the most recognized, most ubiquitous symbol of Christmas.

What is its origin?

In the year 1223, St. Francis, a deacon, joined his fellow Franciscans at the town of Greccio to celebrate Christmas. Greccio was a small town built on a mountainside overlooking a beautiful valley. The people had cultivated the fertile area with vineyards. St. Francis realized that the chapel of the Franciscan hermitage would be too small to hold the congregation for Midnight Mass. So he found a niche in the rock near the town square and set up the altar. However, this Midnight Mass would be very special, unlike any other Midnight Mass.

St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) in his *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi* recorded the story:

“It happened in the third year before his death, that in order to excite the inhabitants of Greccio to commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with great devotion, [St. Francis] determined to keep it with all possible solemnity; and lest he should be accused of lightness or novelty, he asked and obtained the permission of the sovereign Pontiff. Then he prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. The man of God [St. Francis] stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy; the Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis, the Levite of Christ. Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King; and being unable to utter His Name for the tenderness of His love, He called Him the Babe of Bethlehem. A certain valiant and voracious soldier, Master John of Greccio, who, for the love of Christ, had left the warfare of this world, and become a dear friend of this holy man, affirmed that he beheld an Infant marvelously beautiful, sleeping in the manger, Whom the blessed Father Francis embraced with both his arms, as if he would awake Him from sleep. This vision of the devout soldier is credible, not only by reason of the sanctity of him that saw it, but by reason of the miracles which afterwards confirmed its truth. For the example of Francis, if it be considered by the world, is doubtless sufficient to excite all hearts which are negligent in the faith of Christ; and the hay of that manger, being preserved by the people, miraculously cured all diseases of cattle, and many other pestilences; God thus in all things glorifying his servant, and witnessing to the great efficacy of his holy prayers by manifest prodigies and miracles.”

Although the story is long old, the message is clear for us. Our own Nativity scenes which rest under our Christmas trees are a visible reminder of that night when our Savior was born. May we never forget to see in our hearts the little Babe of Bethlehem, who came to save us from sin. Moreover, we must never forget that the wood of the manger that held Him so securely would one day give way to the wood of the cross. May we too embrace Him with all of our love as did St. Francis.

'Twas the Night Before Jesus Came'
(Anonymous)

"Twas the night before Jesus came and all through the house
not a creature was praying, not one in the house.
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care,
in hopes that Jesus would not come there.
The children were dressing to crawl into bed,
not once ever kneeling or bowing a head;
And mon in her rocker with baby on her lap,
was watching the late show while I took a nap;
When out of the East there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter;
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
threw open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The light of His face made me cover my head,
it was Jesus returning, just like He said.
And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth,
I cried when I saw Him in spite of myself.
In the book of life, which He held in His hand,
was written the name of every saved man.
He spoke not a word as He searched for my name,
when He said, "It's not here!" my head hung in shame.
The people whose names had been written with love,
He gathered to take to His Father above.
With those who were ready He rose without a sound,
While all the rest were left standing around.
I fell to my knees, but it was too late:
I had waited too long and thus sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight.
Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.
In the words of this poem the meaning is clear,
To coming of Jesus is drawing near.
There's only one life and when the last name is called,
We'll find that the Bible was true after all.

ICON AT THE DOOR THE NATIVITY

During the reign of Caesar Augustus, our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem. Refer to the Gospels of Matthew (Chap. 1-2) and Luke (Chap 2) for the account of the Lord's birth in the flesh.

This icon depicts several scenes from this glorious event. In the center, the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos is depicted resting beside her newborn Son in the cave. The cave imagery recalls icons of the Resurrection, reminding the viewer that our salvation was wrought through the entirety of Christ's life, not just one part of it. The ox and donkey beside Him represent the worship of the entire human race, Jews and the Gentiles alike. In the upper right corner, an angel gives the good news of this birth to a shepherd, and on the left side, the Magi are guided by the star, carrying their gifts from the East. In the lower right corner, a midwife tends to the newborn Savior, and on the left side, Joseph the old man is tempted to leave Mary by the devil appearing in human form. (The latter two of these scenes are from the Protoevangelium of James, an early Christian text from which the Church draws a number of traditions about the Nativity.)

. The magi are visible on the left, and the shepherds on the right. Also visible is the elder Joseph, who is being tempted by the devil to leave his betrothed. Filling the heavens are the angels, praising God and proclaiming the good news of great joy.

This beautiful, vibrant icon is full of detail. This reminder of our Lord's humanity and incarnation is a fitting reminder for the whole year, and not only the Christmas season.

DATE OF CHRISTMAS

Was Jesus really born Dec. 25?

There is all kinds of speculation on the actual date of Jesus's birth, including more recently the attempt to deny His actual existence.

With our dependence on electronic communication we can certainly speculate on how wonderful it would be if Our Lord had been born in an age of information technology or even when there would have been a Clerk of Courts office that issued birth certificates with information such as time, date, birth weight etc.. Unfortunately the Gospels do not provide such information. Nevertheless, some scriptural detective work can help determine the date of Christ's birth.

St. Luke related the announcement of the birth of St. John the Baptist to his elderly parents, St. Zechariah and St. Elizabeth. St. Zechariah was a priest of the class of Abijah (Lk. 1:5), the eighth class of 24 priestly classes (Neh. 12:17). Each class served one week in the temple, twice a year. Joseph Heinrich Friedlieb has established that the priestly class of Abijah would have been on duty during the second week of the Jewish month Tishri, the week of the Day of Atonement or in our calendar, Sept. 22-30. While on duty, the Archangel Gabriel informed Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son (Lk. 1:5-24). Shortly following this, they conceived John, who after presumably 40 weeks in the womb would have been born at the end of June. For this reason, we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist on June 24.

St. Luke also recorded how the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was six months pregnant with John (Lk. 1:36), which means the Annunciation occurred March 25, as we celebrate. Nine months from March 25, or six months from June 24, renders the birth of Christ at Dec. 25, our Christmas.

On a pious note, would not our Blessed Mother herself have remembered all of these details, especially how she conceived by the Holy Spirit and bore the Savior? Surely. All mothers – including our own – remember these details. Would not the apostles have asked her these questions, at least after the Ascension? Would not St. Luke, who included the details of the Annunciation and Visitation not have learned them from our Blessed Mother? Pope Benedict in his book *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* noted this very point: “Luke indicates from time to time that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is herself one of his sources, especially when he says in 2:51 that ‘His mother kept all these things in her heart’ (cf. also 2:19). Only she could report the event of the Annunciation, for which there were no human witnesses. To sum up: What Matthew and Luke set out to do, each in his own way, was not to tell ‘stories’ but to write history, real history that had actually happened, admittedly interpreted and understood in the context of the word of God.” So given the facts of the Gospel, we discover the date of Christmas.

Now if this dating is true, then the early church must have celebrated Christmas Dec. 25. Is there evidence? Admittedly, evidence is sparse because Christianity and the church were persecuted by the Roman Empire until 313, and no one knows how much evidence has been lost. Nevertheless, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Pope St. Telesphorus (125-136) instituted the tradition of celebrating midnight Mass, which means Christmas already was being celebrated. St. Theophilus (AD 115-181), bishop of Caesarea, stated, “We ought to celebrate the birthday of Our Lord on what day soever the 25th of December shall happen.” St. Hippolytus (170-240) mentioned in his *Commentary on Daniel* that the birth of Christ occurred on Dec. 25.

After Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, the church was able to establish universal dates for the celebration of feast days, including Christmas and the Annunciation. As such, evidence shows the celebration of Christmas Dec. 25: Pope Liberius (352-66) celebrated Christmas Mass in Rome; St. Gregory Nazianzus (d. 389) in Constantinople, and St. Ambrose (d. 397) in Milan. Keep in mind that they would not have just “picked a date,” but used the date already accepted by the church.

So what about the claim of some that Christmas was substituted for the pagan holidays? The Romans did celebrate Saturnalia between Dec. 17 and 23, commemorating the winter solstice Dec. 23, but Christmas does not fit that time frame.

What about the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun” Dec. 25? Emperor Aurelian instituted this celebration in 274 (therefore, after the Christian celebration of Christmas and perhaps in an attempt to overshadow it). After legalization in 313, Dec. 25 was purged of any pagan notion: for example, an ancient codex of that time marked Dec. 25 as the “Nativity of the Unconquered” (meaning Jesus), not the “Nativity of the Unconquered Sun.” Then again, Emperor Julian the Apostate (reigned 361-63), who had apostatized and wanted to return the empire to paganism, tried to suppress Christmas and ordered the celebration of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun, a decision reversed upon his death. In sum, Christmas was celebrated Dec. 25 prior to any pagan celebration on the same date. (See Taylor Marshall’s *The Eternal City: Rome and the Origins of Christianity*).

While we can verify the date of Christmas, the most important point is celebrating the birth of Our Lord. Remember “Christmas” is derived from the Old English *Cristes Maesse*, which means

“The Mass of Christ.” This Christmas, may we lift up our hearts at the holy sacrifice of the Mass and receive Our Lord, born again into our souls through the grace of the holy Eucharist.

PRAYERS

Nativity Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian

The feast day of your birth resembles You, Lord because it brings joy to all humanity. Old people and infants alike enjoy Your day. Your day is celebrated from generation to generation. Kings and emperors may pass away, and the festivals to commemorate them soon lapse. But your festival will be remembered until the end of time. Your day is a means and a pledge of peace. At Your birth heaven and earth were reconciled, since You came from heaven to earth on that day You forgave our sins and wiped away our guilt. You gave us so many gifts on the day of your birth: A treasure chest of spiritual medicines for the sick; spiritual light for the blind; the cup of salvation for the thirsty; the bread of life for the hungry. In the winter when trees are bare, You give us the most succulent spiritual fruit. In the frost when the earth is barren, You bring new hope to our souls. In December when seeds are hidden in the soil, the staff of life springs forth from the virgin womb. Amen.

UP-COMING SCHEDULE

Saturday 22 Dec Mass 8:30 a.m.

Confessions 1:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Vigil Mass for 4th Sunday of Advent

Sunday 23 Dec Masses 7:00 a.m., 8:30 a.m. 11:30 a.m. (Pvt. Baptism & Convalidation)
5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m.

Monday 24 Dec Christmas Eve

Mass for Children 3:00 p.m.

Masses 6:00 p.m. 9:00 p.m. 12 Midnight

Tuesday 25 Dec Christmas Day

Mass at Dawn 7:30 a.m.

Mass of the Day 10:00 a.m.

Mass at Brig 7:30 p.m.

Wednesday 26 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

Thursday 27 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

Friday 28 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

Saturday 29 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

10:00 a.m. Pvt. Baptism

1:30 – 4:30 p.m. Confessions

Feast of the Holy Family Vigil Mass 5:00 p.m.

Sunday 30 Dec Feast of the Holy Family

Masses 7:00 a.m. 8:30 a.m. 11:30 a.m. 5:00 p.m. Brig 7:00 p.m.

Monday 31 Dec Tuesday 1 Jan

Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God Holy Day of Obligation