

Catholic Review Column: And Many Will Rejoice at His Birth

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord next week, let us pause to reflect on the blessings of the past year and to give thanks to God for His abundant love for us.

For our Church, the gift of Pope Francis and his ministry, which has been marked by his pastoral care for all God's children, has been a special blessing this past year. Through the kindness of his words and the goodness of his actions, he has prompted people throughout the world to reflect on our relationship with the person of Christ and to ask the question, "How well do we know Jesus?"

This question is an especially timely one to ask at Christmas and certainly one that people have pondered since the time of his life on earth.

In olden times, some imagined that the Messiah would come as mighty conqueror. They came to expect a Savior of great majesty and power, an earthly ruler, a military hero, a powerful judge, a political force like no other. Instead, the Messiah slipped into the world as a helpless baby, born in the poverty of a stable, asleep in a manger, as His mother Mary and His foster-father Joseph kept watch. Yes, the heavens sang His praises and those whose minds and hearts were prepared understood that the time of God's visitation had arrived. But most of the world did not notice the birth of the Messiah who would stand before Pontius Pilate & say, "My Kingdom is not of this world."

"Where is God?" we ask today even as He makes himself so utterly available to us. No, He has come not as a mighty ruler imposing law and order, but rather to evoke from us a response of love, a response Pope Francis has so visibly and personally demonstrated through his special care and devotion to the least of God's children. That response is why the Father sent His only begotten Son into the world.

The name of the Baby in the manger is "Emmanuel" - "God with us!" Nothing breaks down fear and evokes so much love as a baby. Nothing brings us together

like our children whom we love so much and in whom we place so many of our hopes. So *this* is how God is with us: He became one of us, He became a child. And even though the birth of Jesus took place over 2,000 years ago, we still say each Christmas that He was born “this day” in Bethlehem – for the birth of the Son of God as a baby permeates human history and must permeate our lives as well.

And the child born in Bethlehem still comes to us today: in the truth, the love, the smallness of the Eucharist, every Sunday, every day; in the whispering voice of the Holy Spirit when we read and pray the Scriptures; He is with us in the heart of our homes, in our love for our families, in our relationships with others, in our daily decisions. He is with us even when we are become estranged from our God and from one another, He is calling us from within with the persistence of a lover. Emmanuel – God is with us in all these things. He created us in freedom so that we could freely love His Father and one another, and so he does not stay the hand of those who choose to do otherwise.

As our Holy Father, Pope Francis, recently said so beautifully: “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew.”

May we allow the Child in the manger to open our hearts to that love which is above every other love, to that love which stronger than sin and more powerful than death. May all in this local Church have a blessed and merry Christmas. Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever!