

Christmas, 2001

The year we now complete is extraordinary. The events of September 11 leap to mind. Yet I mention that date only by way of introducing this celebration. And here is how I tell the story. During the month of October I was in Rome, because our conference of Bishops had chosen me as one of four representatives at the Synod of Bishops dealing at a world level with the mission and work of bishops.

Because I spent the month in Rome, many have asked me, “How is the Holy Father?” Well, I can tell you that he was with us, following our discussions day by day. He walks slowly, and with a cane. During the synod he invited every one of the participants to have a meal with him. This included 230 bishops, some priests, religious sisters and laity, as well as four fraternal delegates from other Christian churches with the office of bishop.

My invitation was to dinner with the Pope. It came the second week of the synod, and I found myself with two other cardinals, two other bishops and the four fraternal delegates. So there were nine guests and the Holy Father with his two secretaries. After offering grace, Pope John Paul turned to me and asked, “How are our people in Baltimore doing after September 11?”

I responded that it seemed to me that what happened that morning helped each of us to see better what really is important in life. We reflected quickly on relationships with God, with family, with others. We saw the frailty of human life, which so quickly can pass from this world to the next.

The Holy Father involved each one of the others at the table in the conversation – it became a philosophical reflection on the horrendous tragedy. The conversation confirmed for me the truth I perceived from the day the synod had begun, namely,

that what happened in New York and to the Pentagon were more than national tragedies; they were tragedies for the whole human family and, at least in the Catholic family of faith, that is how they were perceived.

September 11 was a turning point. But so is December 25, and for each one of us, and for our families. Each year at this time we recall the vivid gospel accounts of the first Christmas, accounts that have stood as solid, as true, as fundamental, in spite of all manner of criticism through the ages. The place of Jesus' birth is attested by ancient testimony and a shrine upheld by archeological research. The Christmas star, the ancient sighting of planets in the sky, is now a generally accepted fact of history. Most of all, however, there is the experience of our faith at Christmas. Now is the moment in which to reflect on the way that this can be a turning point in life.

For those who participated in the Birth of Jesus, Christmas was a time of new beginnings.

For St. Joseph, Christmas brought a course of life that would bring him to the most blessed of deaths, with Jesus and Mary at his side; for Mary, become the Mother of God, an incredible new responsibility; for the shepherds in the fields, an wondrous sense of God's intervening in our human ways. The Magi who came from afar brought their gifts of gold, to recognize a king, of frankincense, to acknowledge the divine, and of myrrh, to embrace the humanity and human mortality in the child.

They were told to return to their homes in the East "by a different way." That is what Christmas should bring to us, the grace to search for a new and different way to walk before our God. It is a way that is refreshed because we know that God has acted. St. John said it long ago, "He first loved us." No matter how distracted, how happy or sad we may be, God has loved us, and he has sent his only Son into our human world.

At the Walters Art Museum here in Baltimore a work of the Italian master artist Bernardo Strozzi captures the mystery and the joy surrounding the Birth of Jesus. On the glowing, serene face of Mary abides a mixture of awe and happiness. St. Joseph, on the left side, is in shadow