

Christmas 2007

Please do forgive if the following few sentences might tend to threaten the world's otherwise sentimental involvement in sleigh bells and Santa. It's cold doctrine from our recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#423)

We believe and confess that Jesus of Nazareth, born a Jew of a daughter of Israel at Bethlehem at the time of King Herod the Great and the emperor Caesar Augustus, a carpenter by trade, who died in Jerusalem under the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius, is the eternal Son of God made man. He "came from God," "descended from heaven," and "came in the flesh." For "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory..."

And that is what this holy night is all about.

It is my privilege to preach the Gospel here, my first Christmas in Baltimore. Though barely here three full months, I am most grateful to the Lord and to the Vicar of Christ, Pope Benedict XVI, for empowering me this day and every day to announce this Gospel message: "Jesus of Nazareth, born a Jew of a daughter of Israel... is the eternal Son of God made man."

It is a message, a truth, eternally relevant, eternally hopeful—to rich and to poor, of every culture and nation and era: Emmanuel, God is with us, inviting hearts to leap for joy this graced night.

And the initiative for this good—this best of all news is fully on God's part: He doesn't wait until we are emotionally ready or spiritually perfect. For Christ, while we were yet sinners, came among us and died for us.

At the root of it all is an infinite God's desperately ecstatic love for us—a passionate love for every human being, a love that has taken flesh and blood in the Son he sends to us this night in the form of a baby, Jesus Christ. A love so unrestrained that it will not find rest until he comes to live among us, encountering us face to face.

At this moment, one can readily refer to my former family—and a family we can all claim proudly to be ours—the young women and men of our armed forces, far from home this night, and so many in danger's way. It has been my privilege to be

among them each of the Christmases past for ten years. They are happy and grateful to welcome a leader from home, they are enormously generous in sharing with one another the gifts received from loved ones, and they feast upon memories of past Christmases enjoyed in surroundings similar to those we are privileged to share this night. But all the memories, all the gifts, all the visits from afar can't begin to compare to the joy they will miss most of all—a Christmas in the midst of friends and family. A joy, please God, they will all experience, and soon.

That's just the way all true love is—to delight on the close and immediate presence of those we love. Such was the plan of God from all eternity.

Our God for whom nothing is impossible, whose love for us far exceeds the totality of all the human loves that have ever existed—our God has desired to love us face to face, to be born and to dwell among us in our human nature.

In a mystery never reasoned to, but understood only by those who know what dispossessive love is, our infinite God strides across the border of eternity into history this night, and in the presence of an infant.

Interesting, isn't it, that when we humans seek to tell of our love for one another we tend to hyperbolize in God-like, heavenly imagery: words like angelic and divine. But when the God of our Scriptures reveals his love, he presents us with a Messiah helpless on a cross, a servant washing the feet of his disciples, a vulnerable, migrant infant. The Jewish people, anticipating the Messiah for so long, had never imagined that the Messiah would come as an infant, born of so humble a birth. Nor could we.

Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the one whose kingdom will last forever was not born in a palace, but in a simple animal stable. Rather than having a floor of marble, he had straw. Instead of a throne, he was placed in a feeding trough. Rather than being clothed in royal linens, he was wrapped in poor swaddling clothes.

In the thought of Pope Benedict XVI:

God is so great that he can become small. God is so powerful that he can make himself vulnerable and come to us as a defenseless child so that we can love him. God is so good that he can give up his divine splendor and come down to a stable that we might find him...

In our sorry day when not all our neighbors view newborns as gifts from God,

still do not infants draw the admiring attention of neighbors and bystanders? In their helplessness and vulnerability do they not win the attention and bring together energies of others? So does this infant Savior cause this world to pause, lost in wonder at a radiance that through the ages, has illumined so many dark nights.

He is truly God from God and Light from Light. Let our prayer this night join hosts of others throughout the world that the darkness of terror and war be banished by the radiance of this Prince of Peace.

And in many parts of this proud and historic City and Archdiocese, may the infant's radiance prompt a far deeper respect for all human life, may He strengthen feeble families and shed His light on darkened streets, and neighborhoods intimidated by violence, paralyzed by addiction, degraded and depressed by poverty.

Such can happen only if we, together, strive to find new and better ways to bring the light of Christ—his truth and his love—into these darkened, otherwise hopeless spaces around us. Past failures and false starts notwithstanding, this night gives us new hope—for God is with us!

Bethlehem is here tonight in this very Basilica/Cathedral. With all its beauty, it is adorned to call our attention to something far greater than our Christmas festivities, because it continues and intensifies the mystery of God-with-us: The mystery of Christ in the Eucharist. The same Jesus who was adored by the animals, the shepherds, the Magi and the angels tonight is born on this altar as the Bread of Life. The same Jesus who was placed in the manger comes to us as a gift placed in our hands and on our tongues.

On this Feast of Gifts, may every gift received and given reflect and remind us of the Gift God gives us this holy night. Yes, cold doctrine is involved, but doctrine that comes very much alive and attractive in a manger, in Jesus Christ, the human face of God, the divine face of man.

As once the angels sounded His praises, so are we privileged to do this night: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. Amen.