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CHRISTMAS

MIDNIGHT MASS

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, December 25th, 2023)

Domine, ut videam.
Lord, that I may see.
(Lk 18:41)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS ago, St. Francis of Assisi, three years before his death, staged in a grotto of a little town of Italy, Greccio, the first living crib: a manger full of hay, a donkey, a beef, and inhabitants of the village impersonating Mary, Joseph, shepherds and wise men. Some had also prepared

... torches and candles, to illuminate the night which saw the shining Star rising, that enlightens all centuries... The woods were resounding with songs, and the mountains reverberating with their joyful echoes.¹

St. Francis, himself a deacon, asked one of his brother priests to celebrate Mass. Above the manger, he erected an altar.

Thomas a Celano, Francis' first biographer, writes concerning the saint:

1. Life of St. Francis of Assisi, *Vita Prima*, chap. 30.

Above all, two topics were gripping him so much that he could barely think of anything else: the humility manifested in the Incarnation, and the love manifested by the Passion.^a

a. *Ibid.*

In Francis' heart, the two mysteries of Incarnation and Passion meet one another.

Providentially, and due to the disposition of the crib in our church, the same goes here. The child in the crib is gazing on the crucified towering over the main altar. In the manger, He is ready to welcome every man crossing the threshold of the church, and still able to be moved by the eyes of a child. This child will lead him step by step towards the Crucified, so that in Christ's Passover, each man may fulfil his own passover. In Bethlehem or on the Golgotha, it is the same, one, and eternal love which takes flesh and is expressed, the witness to the total gift of a life: "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends."^b

b. *Jn 15:13.*

The Epistle to the Hebrews evokes the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity, through a dialogue with the Father:

Wherefore, when He cometh into the world He saith: "Sacrifice and oblation Thou wouldest not: but a body Thou hast fitted to Me. Holocausts for sin did not please Thee. Then said I: 'Behold I come': in the head of the book it is written of Me: that I should do Thy will, O God."^c

c. *Hb 10:5-7*

Therefore, in Greccio Francis didn't aim to represent only the Lord's birth in the closest and most realistic possible way. He said: "I want to evoke... the remembrance of the Child that was borne in Bethlehem, and of all the hardships he endured from His very birth."^d

d. *Vita Prima, ibid.*

What was at stake for him was to incite the good people to realize the full extent of the divine gift, to make them enter into compassion for this newborn child,

Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.^e

e. *Ph 2:6-8*

As we have just heard, St. Luke also emphasises the hardships with which Joseph and Mary were faced: the census which entailed a journey from Galilee to Bethlehem, about 100 miles for a woman just about to give birth to her child, the lack of room in the inn, which forced the parents to make do with a manger as a crib. Wouldn't there have been in Bethlehem a single good person who might have received the spouses? God did not permit this person to encounter them.

In Bethlehem, it is the Paschal mystery that is already beginning to unfold. Thirty years later, entrance into a village of Samaria will be denied to Him under the pretext that He was going towards Jerusalem, and He will say: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests: but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."^a

a. Lk 9:58

Despite all this, or more rightly through all this, the collect of this first Christmas Mass reminds us that "God hath made this most sacred night to shine forth with the brightness of the true light." The darkness of of humanity cannot withstand the fire of divine love. In a same way, St. Paul tells Titus in his epistle in unequivocal words: "For the grace of God our Saviour hath appeared to all men."^b

b. Tt 2:11

There is a twofold lesson for us in this.

God remains at the core of situations which to us seem to be totally desperate, and it behoves us to await in hope His manifestation. Let us live, as the Apostle invites us,

soberly and justly and godly in this world, looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.^c

c. Tt 2:12-13

But how can we avoid discouragement, as time seems so long? How can we discern this presence of God? St. Luke indicates that the first visitors to the crib were shepherds, "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night."^d The shepherds, as the Wise Men will be later, are watchmen.

d. Lk 2:8

St. Mother Teresa affirmed:

It is Christmas each time you smile to your brother and hold out your hand to him, each time you keep quiet to listen to

someone, each time you refuse to listen to prejudices that banish the oppressed to the utmost end of their loneliness, each time you hope with prisoners, those who are loaded with the burden of physical, moral, or spiritual poverty, each time you acknowledge with humility your limits and weakness. It is Christmas each time you allow God to love the others through you.

Let us pray to God that for Christmas we may welcome Jesus not in a heart that would be a cold manger, but in a heart full of love and humility, vivified by the heat of the love we bear for one another.

In the *Pastorale des Santons de Provence*, the blind man asks the Child Jesus a grace: “That I may see whenever it is worth seeing.”

It depended on God alone that some day, in the time of Caesar Augustus, in the surroundings of a little village of Judaea named Bethlehem, it should be Christmas for Mary, Joseph, and a few shepherds. It also depends on us that some day, that every day, it should be Christmas for us and for all those who live with us. Therefore, O Lord, that I may see!

Have a holy night, and merry Christmas. Amen.

