



The Holy See

MIDNIGHT MASS

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Christmas, 24 December 2002

1. "Dum medium silentium teneret omnia..." – "While earth was rapt in silence and night only half through its course, your almighty Word, O Lord, came down from his royal throne" (*Antiphon to the Magnificat*, 26 December).

On this Holy Night the ancient promise is fulfilled: the time of waiting has ended and the Virgin gives birth to the Messiah.

Jesus is born for a humanity searching for freedom and peace; he is born for everyone burdened by sin, in need of salvation, and yearning for hope.

On this night God answers the ceaseless cry of the peoples: Come, Lord, save us! His eternal Word of love has taken on our mortal flesh. "Your Word, O Lord, came down from his royal throne". The Word has entered into time: Emmanuel, God-with-us, is born.

In cathedrals and great basilicas, as well as in the smallest and remotest churches throughout the world, Christians joyfully lift up their song: "Today is born our Saviour" (Responsorial Psalm).

2. Mary "gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger" (Lk 2:7).

This is the icon of Christmas: a tiny newborn child, whom the hands of a woman wrap in poor cloths and lay in a manger.

Who could imagine that this little human being is the "Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32)? Only she,

his Mother, knows the truth and guards its mystery.

On this night we too can "join" in her gaze and so recognize in this Child the human face of God. We too – the men and women of the third millennium – are able to encounter Christ and to gaze upon him through the eyes of Mary.

Christmas night thus becomes a school of faith and of life.

3. In tonight's second reading, the Apostle Paul helps us to understand the Christ-event which we celebrate on this radiant night. He writes: "The grace of God has appeared, offering salvation to all men" (Tit 2:11).

The "grace of God" appearing in Jesus is God's merciful love, which dominates the entire history of salvation and guides it to its definitive fulfilment. The self-revelation of God who "humbled himself to come among us as a man" (Preface of Advent, I) is the anticipation, here on earth, of his glorious "appearing" at the end of time (cf. Tit 2:13).

But there is more. The historical event which we are experiencing in mystery is the "way" given to us as a means of encountering the glorious Christ. By his Incarnation Jesus teaches us, as the Apostle observes, "to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age as we await our blessed hope" (Tit 2:12-13).

O Birth of the Lord, you have inspired Saints of every age! I think, among others, of Saint Bernard and his spiritual ecstasy before the touching scene of the Crib. I think of Saint Francis of Assisi, the inspired creator of the first live depiction of the mystery of Christmas night. I think of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, who by her "little way" suggested anew to the proud modern mind the true spirit of Christmas.

4. "You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (Lk 2:12).

The Child laid in a lowly manger: this is God's sign. The centuries and the millennia pass, but the sign remains, and it remains valid for us too – the men and women of the third millennium. It is a sign of hope for the whole human family; a sign of peace for those suffering from conflicts of every kind; a sign of freedom for the poor and oppressed; a sign of mercy for those caught up in the vicious circle of sin; a sign of love and consolation for those who feel lonely and abandoned. A small and fragile sign, a humble and quiet sign, but one filled with the power of God who out of love became man.

5. Lord Jesus, together with the shepherds

we draw near to your Crib.

We contemplate you, wrapped in swaddling cloths
and lying in the manger.

O Babe of Bethlehem,
we adore you in silence with Mary,
your ever-Virgin Mother.
To you be glory and praise for ever,
Divine Saviour of the World! Amen.

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