

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
MIDNIGHT MASS (MISSA IN NATIVITATE DOMINI IN NOCTE)  
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION  
WASHINGTON, DC, DECEMBER 24, 2020**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, in the name of the Holy Father, I wish you and your loved ones peace and joy on this great feast of the Savior's birth. *Today in the City of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord!* To all gathered in this Basilica, as well as those joining by radio, internet, social media, and television, courtesy of the Eternal Word Television Network, I express the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father, assuring you of his prayers.

The joy proclaimed in this season is in sharp contrast to the year we have just experienced, marked by civil unrest and great suffering, much of it due to the coronavirus. This suffering experienced is not merely physical but has had a significant impact on psychological, emotional, and spiritual health.

The year seems, on the whole, to have been a dark one, with many people living in fear and others resigning themselves to the conditions of life, losing hope that they can make a difference in the world. Perhaps, this is how people felt while awaiting the Messiah, with the heavy burden of sin and oppression upon them.

But tonight, we celebrate the fact that *the true Light, which enlightens every man, was coming into the world.* In the child whose birth we celebrate, there is hope for deliverance from the burden of sin, just as there was at the time of the prophet Isaiah, when people cried out: *O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence (Is 64:1).* This evening we recall that *the grace of God has appeared.* (Titus 2:11) This is the Mystery we celebrate tonight – *the Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us.* (John 1:14).

Today people still cry out for the Presence of the Lord who comes to save His people. There are those who still seek the face of the Lord, rather than stare into the face of meaninglessness or spiral into a passive resignation.

The poor shepherds of Saint Luke's Gospel were anything but resigned. Although they were looked down upon by the religious authorities of their day and their poverty placed them under suspicion of theft and sinfulness, the shepherds were the ones to whom the heavenly host appeared. The heavenly angels addressed the earthly shepherds, and together they rejoiced. Heaven and earth were joined, just as in the Child, Divinity and humanity were inextricably linked.

Although viewed with suspicion, the shepherds had real hopes and desires when the angel appeared to them with a great announcement – *“Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

Why did the angels tell the shepherds not to be afraid? The Prophet Isaiah answers: *“For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.”* God did not come in power and majesty, but He came as a Child, whose tender gaze pierced the hearts of the shepherds and helped them to

experience being truly loved. It was the love of this Child that made them feel valued and helped them to carry on in hope and joy. This was the Presence of God in the Flesh.

This Child, the one of Whom the Prophet Isaiah had spoken, was named “*Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.*” If the shepherds were surprised by or afraid of an angel, they would not be afraid of a baby. At the Mass at dawn, the Church listens to the account of the shepherds finally seeing the Child, His mother Mary, and Joseph. They had a simple faith and great hope. They refused to give up on their dream of a Messiah.

At the sight of the Child, they were filled with joy. The burdens of their lives seemed to dissipate, and they went home rejoicing, glorifying God. In the mystery of the Incarnation, God did rend the heavens and come down, and the earth was wrapped in wonder at His Presence.

That the shepherds saw Mary indicates that God did not merely pretend to be a man; rather, the Child had a human mother. He was truly one of us and came to redeem us in the flesh. Although the shepherds probably did not make a noble appearance and might have even seemed threatening as strangers, Mary shows them her Son.

The shepherds are drawn close to God. They are attracted by His Presence. Throughout His life, the Child would draw others to Himself, not the high and mighty of the world, but the lowly: tax collectors, sinners, lepers, blind men, and paralytics. Their burdens too – whether illness or sinfulness – would be lifted by His Presence, his gaze, His Mercy, which was before them in the flesh.

The shepherds saw Joseph too. The Holy Father has declared a year in honor of St. Joseph. In his recent Apostolic Letter, Pope Francis wrote:

Just as God told Joseph: “Son of David, do not be afraid!” (Mt 1:20), so he seems to tell us: “Do not be afraid!” We need to set aside all anger and disappointment, and to embrace the way things are, even when they do not turn out as we wish. Not with mere resignation but with hope and courage. In this way, we become open to a deeper meaning. Our lives can be miraculously reborn if we find the courage to live them in accordance with the Gospel. It does not matter if everything seems to have gone wrong or some things can no longer be fixed. God can make flowers spring up from stony ground. Even if our heart condemns us, “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (1 Jn 3:20). (Apostolic Letter *Patre Cordis*, 8 December 2020, 4)

*Do not be afraid.* Just as the Lord said this to Joseph, so too the angel said it to the shepherds. Without words, Joseph permitted the shepherds to approach God. The Mystery of Christmas invites us to let go of our fears and to draw near to God.

In tonight’s Gospel, before the shepherds encountered the Holy Family, they heard the angelic host cry out, “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*” Peace is offered to those who are loved by God, who are the object of the divine good will. If peace were accorded to us on account of our good will, then it would be limited to the few who merited it.

In contrast, since peace is accorded through God's good will, it is offered to all. Christmas is a radiant proclamation of the good will of God toward us. Again, *the grace of God has appeared.* (Tit 2:11)

Christmas is the revelation of God's love for humanity: *"The goodness of God and his love for men are manifested"* (Tit 3:4).

God even drew near to lowly shepherds, and in response, they drew near to Him. We gather as a Church this evening to celebrate a birth that overcomes fear and still offers us hope; that proposes something new – something that opens us to a sense of Mystery, a sense of God and His Plan. Just think of what the shepherds must have felt at the angel's announcement or when they saw the Child and His Mother. They had found the fulfillment of their hopes, dreams, and hearts' desire!

Tonight, God draws close once more to His people, offering them the gift of peace. This is what we, the Church, must offer – hope and the peace which this world cannot give! That is, we offer an encounter with the Child. We are invited to be heralds of hope, echoing the words of the angel to every person we meet: *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*