

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD
MASS DURING THE NIGHT**

**BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C.
DECEMBER 24, 2023**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Merry Christmas! As the personal representative of Pope Francis to the United States, it is my privilege to convey to you the Holy Father's spiritual closeness and paternal affection.

Three days ago, the Pope said to the officials who work in the Roman Curia:

"The mystery of Christmas fills our hearts with awe at an unexpected message: God has come, God is here in our midst, and his light has forever pierced the darkness of the world."¹

This is also what we heard from the prophet Isaiah. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom a light has shown."²

Indeed, when the Son of God came to earth, there was new light for those who had been in darkness. His coming brought light to many, most importantly, the light of eternal life for all who believe in him. And yet, today many people still experience darkness and gloom, especially those who live in places of war. Some are literally in darkness because the electricity has been destroyed. They live in "a land of gloom" because they are surrounded by death and destruction. What light could possibly bring hope to people in such conditions? Whether the darkness be on the grand scale of war, or at the personal level of our own distress, there is one Light who has come to scatter that darkness: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Looking at the violence of our time, a person might ask: “Has the coming of Jesus really made a difference? If God came to save us, then why do people still suffer from war and hunger? Why must people still flee their homes with no assurance of finding somewhere safe to live? Why do we continue to see the degradation of our common home, God’s creation?”

The enemy of Christ, who tempted Adam and Eve, and who tempted Jesus in the desert, also tempts us to doubt the love of God. He asks: “Are you really the children of God? Is Jesus really the Son of God? If God truly loves you, then why does humanity still labor in such darkness and gloom?”

Our faith in the Incarnation empowers us to overcome the temptation to doubt. I would like to address two ways in which we can continue to believe the mystery of Christmas, that God is with us: first, by having a vision that sees light in the midst of darkness; and second, by remembering our vocation to *be* light in the world.

First, our vision. As Christians who live in a world with much darkness, where “boots tramp in battle” and “cloaks are rolled in blood”,³ we must *look* closely in order to see the light that emerges from within the darkness. If we look closely, there are still signs of love in the midst of so much hatred. Somewhere, a door of welcome is being opened to a family seeking refuge. Somewhere right now in a war-torn city, a scrap of bread is being passed from one hungry person to another. In Holy Family Parish in Gaza, for instance, people work together to cook, to clean, to care for the sick, to pray, and to celebrate the Eucharist. This is light in the midst of darkness! Everywhere in the world where faith in God exists, there are small gestures that confirm the truth of John’s Gospel: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”⁴

A person might say: “What good are such small gestures compared to so much evil?” And yet: the Baby Jesus was “a small gesture”! And precisely because he entered this world small, vulnerable, he had the power to save the vulnerable.

We must have the vision to see what others do not see, because then we can still say, in truth: God is with us!

But to answer the temptation to doubt God's presence in the world, it is not enough for us only to *see* others doing good. We are called, not only to *see*, but to *be*, the light of Christ.

"When did we see you hungry, Lord, and feed you?... When did we see you a stranger and welcome you? When did we see you sick or in prison, and visit you?"⁵ Every time that we act with love and mercy toward one who is vulnerable, we are visiting the manger, that place where the Son of God had no food or home of his own. By our love, we are stooping down to be with God, who is with us. As the Pope says, there is only one occasion when we should look down on someone: when we are looking down on them in order to help them up.⁶ When we do this, we are loving others in the same way that Christ has loved us, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped, but rather emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men."⁷

One act of love that the Holy Father reminds us of is the act of *listening*. He says that "we need to learn the art of listening". To listen "with the heart and on our knees", that is to say:

"...free of prejudices, with openness and sincerity....trying hard to understand what our brother or sister is saying, to grasp his or her needs and in some way his or her own life, which lies hidden behind these words, and without judging.... It is one thing to hear; it is another thing to listen, which means to 'welcome within.'"⁸

This, my brothers and sisters, is the way in which God loves us. He listens to our prayers. He listens to the cry of our hearts: to our hopes, our fears, even our frustrations! He knows what is in our heart, and he welcomes it within *his* heart –

the only place where we will find ultimate meaning and peace. Our vocation, our calling, is to love and to listen to our fellow human beings, as God has done to us.

My dear friends: never let the tempter deceive you: the Light of the World has not left us to face the darkness alone. On the contrary, he has entered into our darkness, and he continues to enter in. As we celebrate this beautiful Christmas Mass, and as we observe times of prayer in the days to come, may we allow Jesus to improve our vision, so that we can see the many small gestures of love by which people are bringing light into the darkness. May Jesus also touch our hearts to contribute to this light by our own small acts of love – even if it simply means listening to someone in a deeper way.

“Do not be afraid,” said God’s angel to the shepherds.⁹ “Do not be afraid,” God says to us. The message of Christmas is still true: God is with us.

¹ Pope Francis, Address to the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Greetings, December 21, 2023.

² *Isaiah* 9:1.

³ Cf. *Isaiah* 9:4.

⁴ *John* 1:5.

⁵ *Matthew* 25:37-39.

⁶ Cf. Christmas Address to Roman Curia.

⁷ *Philippians* 2:6-7.

⁸ Christmas Address to Roman Curia.

⁹ *Luke* 2:10.