

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, in the name of the Holy Father, I want to wish you and your loved ones a blessed and peace-filled Christmas. I express the personal closeness and spiritual affection of Pope Francis and assure you of his prayers during this holy and joyful season in which we celebrate the birth of our Savior and Redeemer.

What does it mean to celebrate the birth of Christ today? Perhaps we have forgotten what happened. Let me reflect with you on the Gospel of St. Luke ... At a moment in history, in a country which was, by the way, not a free country, suffering under the occupation of the Romans in which the society was divided – between conquerors and subjects, rich and poor – *a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled ... All went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.*

In that moment something happened, something which should have been forgotten but has not been forgotten. There was an event. A man and woman were awaiting their first child. They were going to a different town to register their names during a census. They were part of a people but were among the unknown, lowly and forgotten of the earth. They were searching for a place to stay so that they could have their child, but they did not find it. They were forced to have their child in a grotto or cave. Do we realize today that this is what we celebrate – this event?!!! Do we recognize that this is why we have been so busy these days? To celebrate this event!

We will celebrate and spend time with our families, but have we taken time to remember that Christmas is a memory of an event – which still has relevance today? Busily consumed by work and activity, we often forget the meaning of history – the real meaning of this event!

Let's take time to reflect upon this event. This baby was born totally unknown, yet something profound had happened. The shepherds were mysteriously asked by an angel to come to see this child; the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they came, for the angel announced to them: *"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."*

When this Good News was announced, heaven and earth rejoiced, and the angels cried out, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men of good will."*

A bit later, the powerful of the day, including King Herod, heard about this birth. Matthew recounts that Herod became so concerned about the threat to his power that he consulted his whole administration who told him, "Something happened there!" They told him that people had been awaiting the Messiah; many people thought that this could be the Messiah. Some mysterious people came from the East, following a star, to see the newborn Infant, God made man. This Child attracted people from all over the world. This baby would be at the center of a controversy that will never finish – those who want to see Him and those who want to destroy Him.

This baby grew up, like any one of us, in a family, in a country, in a religious environment, but he remained unknown, hidden until the day of his public appearance. This is the Jesus we know. The Jesus we know is the Jesus who first encountered John in the womb and who encountered him anew at his baptism. John announced Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus appeared on the scene and began his ministry. What did He do in those three years of public life? He called disciples to accompany Him on the way to Jerusalem as he proclaimed the Kingdom of God and worked many mighty deeds. He called, and many followed Him, attracted by His mysterious Presence. They didn't believe simply because of His voice, because of his signs, or because He quoted the prophets. They believed and followed because of His Presence – because of the Presence of God revealed mysteriously in His humanity.

The miracles and his preaching were part of this Event, but there was more. People followed and believed because of what Christ showed Himself to be. He called them, and they understood that He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life – the way to God, because He was God Himself. He was the Way, not just to build up a new human venture, which it was because they had to leave everything to follow Him, but more so because He was the way to reach the Father. He promised that they would reach God if they followed Him. Jesus was opening for them the doors of heaven through their encounter with Him. The disciples would later realize that to follow Him meant following in suffering and death, but also in the Resurrection. He made a proposal to them – a proposal charged with meaning: Follow me and you will see the glory of God!

This event was unforeseen and had an unforeseeable quality – a newness. St. Paul describes it in his letter to Titus, writing *“when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.”*

The disciples who were moved by this Event would later be sent to make more disciples. This group of people became the Church. During his time on earth, Jesus established the Church – calling and forming them to be His Church, belonging to the People of God. This Church of Jesus is not just a human organization. It is divinely instituted.

Jesus gave that Church some very strong characteristics. First and foremost among these is the call for all the members of the Church to become disciples. We become disciples through baptism, when we become His and begin to follow Him on His Way, not ours. He wanted this group whom He had called and chosen to follow Him and to endure until the end of time. His disciples were educated by their Teacher to belong to Him; nevertheless, Jesus also wanted them to be united, to become missionaries, and to be His witnesses until the end of time. This was the basic structure of the Church.

Do you also remember that at some stage Jesus chose one of them to lead His flock? Do you remember his name? He was a fisherman named Simon, and Jesus changed his name and called him Peter – the Rock, saying, *“You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church.”*

The Child born in Bethlehem grew and gave a gift to the world - His Church. And this Church will not be destroyed by anybody. *The gates of hell will not prevail.* Of course, this Church is inserted in humanity; it shares all the difficulties, challenges and wounds of a fallen humanity.

Although we are the Church, it is not our Church; it is His Church. We need to remember the origin of the Church. In the end, the Church is the place where Jesus will offer each of us the opportunity to have an encounter with Him and through Him with God the Father; to receive His Holy Spirit, to receive the power of God to be His witnesses; and, to exercise this witness in our daily life.

Christianity is an announcement of an Event, not something that simply happened two thousand years ago, but that is alive, that proposes something new – something that opens to a sense of Mystery, a sense of God and His Plan. Yes, sometimes we must emerge from the past to understand the newness of what Christianity is: it is an announcement of an Event – a Person who comes to save us.

God comes to save us in Christ. God has a mysterious plan to save us as the Church and through the Church. Pope Francis writes: “It has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness. In salvation history, the Lord saved one people. We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people ... God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people.” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 6)

Yes, God wants us to belong to this people, and so here we are the Church. Yes, our Church, and, this is the case of the last few months, seems troubled, caught in the storm, tossed about here and there upon the waves. Like the disciples in the boat on the Lake of Gennesaret, we too at times become afraid and panic. The disciples panicked then, and today, the disciples still panic. Even the bishops panic! They realize at that moment they will not be able to save themselves from the storms by their own efforts. What did the Lord tell His disciples then, and what does He say to us now? Do not be afraid. Don't rely on your own security. He had the power to rebuke the winds and the sea, and when the disciples asked, “Lord, save us,” He did. And they asked, “*Who is He that even the winds and sea obey Him?*”

We – you and me – can fall back into the temptation to panic, because the boat is seemingly in turmoil. We may even be scandalized when the lives of our leaders – some of our bishops and priests – fail to correspond to their vocations. But this is not the time to leap from the ship, only to drown in the sea, that is, to put ourselves outside of the Church and to judge her. If we put ourselves outside, then we are in real danger. We cannot dissociate ourselves from the Church. None of us is perfect. We are all sinners. We need a Redeemer. For this Christ was born. Salvation comes to us in Christ through the Church – the living Presence of God in humanity.

The Church has a purpose to announce God's Presence to humanity. The Church is missionary. God calls us to help in that mission. If we detach ourselves from the Church, we do not help the Church exercise her mission. We cannot be missionary, unless we are members of the Church, whose purpose is to help humanity discover the Good News that God loves us and gives us the power to fight against sin. The newborn Child mysteriously and surprisingly invites us, fragile as we are, to be part of this journey, part of this Event, to announce with the angel: “*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.*”