

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
MIDNIGHT MASS (MISSA IN NATIVITATE DOMINI IN NOCTE) 2017
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, DC**

Today in the City of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord! What joy these words bring to the ears of people around the world and to those gathered here in this Basilica or watching on television. This Shrine, with its newly-dedicated Trinity Dome, is a place of encounter: where heaven and earth meet and is an expression of striving to bring the divine and human together! This is the Mystery we celebrate tonight – the Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:14). Indeed, as St. Paul says in his letter to Titus: The grace of God has appeared! (Titus 2:11)

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, it is a joy to express the spiritual closeness of Pope Francis to each of you and your families at Christmas. His Holiness wants you to know how much God desires to be close to you and to offer His peace to you and your loved ones.

This is my second Christmas in the United States, a country of immigrants in which many people have their own Christmas traditions, each one adding something to the celebration of this Solemnity. I see how many churches and homes are decorated with poinsettias, which were brought to the United States from Mexico by an American ambassador. Those of Irish and English descent – and now many others – decorate their homes with holly and berries, a reminder of the crown of thorns and the Passion of the Redeemer, whose birth we celebrate. Those of Austrian and German origin place candles in their windows, awaiting the Christkind – the Christ Child, who brings gifts to children; indeed, we want to welcome Christ, the true Light of the World who banishes the darkness of sin. Others, like the Dutch and the Italians, place stockings near the fireplace, preserving the memory of Saint Nicholas, who brought gifts and joy to children. Filipinos too, in the nine days leading up to Christmas, celebrate Simbang Gabi, culminating with the Misa de Gallo or “Rooster’s Mass”; they also decorate their homes with paról, which are star-shaped lanterns, symbolizing the star of Bethlehem.

All these customs come together to make the celebration of Christmas an incredibly rich experience! Everywhere in the world, this encounter of cultures enriches the whole Church. Not far from here, at the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land, there is a display of Nativity sets from around the world; the figures usually reflect the people and style of dress of the particular nation. There is even one from the United States – the so-called “Hipster Nativity”, in which Saint Joseph is using a Smart Phone to take a selfie with Jesus and Mary!

One of my favorite Christmas traditions which I witnessed during my mission in Mexico was that of the Posadas, where two people dressed as Mary and Joseph, go from house to house, followed by children and families singing songs, looking to be welcomed. Finally, someone lets them in, prayers are offered and a great feast takes place. This idea of letting Christ into our homes and lives is at the heart of Christmas. The Blessed Virgin made room in her womb for the Child, who would save His people from their sins. St. Joseph too made room for this Child, letting his plans and ideas go by the wayside in favor of God’s plans for our salvation. Yes, they welcomed Christ and offered Him – a tender Child, meek and mild – to us.

Saint Luke describes the moment: *The time came for Mary to have her child and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room at the inn.* (Luke 2:6-7) In contrast to Mary and Joseph or the poor shepherds, who greeted his arrival with joy, many others did not make room for Him, whether as a tiny child or when He began His public ministry. There was no room for Him at the inn of the human heart. We too must ask ourselves: do I prepare room for God in my life? Do I welcome Him, even when He challenges my plans? Furthermore, do I welcome Him in the stranger?

In His Message for the World Day of Peace, entitled, “Migrants and refugees: men and women in search of peace,” the Holy Father takes up this theme. Just as the people of Israel longed for the Messiah who would bring them peace, so too millions long for a better life, a peaceful place to live with their families. In our “common home”, there are nearly 250 million migrants, 22.5 million of whom are refugees, many of whom are fleeing war, hunger, discrimination, persecution, poverty and environmental degradation; in hope, they search for peace, which ultimately is found in Christ, the Prince of Peace.

At Christmastime, we must have a contemplative gaze, reflecting upon how in the Mystery of the Incarnation, God chose to dwell with His people. Through the Incarnation, He builds among peoples a desire for solidarity, fraternity, goodness, truth and justice – foundations for peace. Turning the contemplative gaze to migrants and refugees, one can see them, not as liabilities, but as persons who bring courage, skills, energy, aspirations and the richness of their own cultures to those whom they encounter. One of the strategies for peace proposed by Pope Francis is *welcoming*.

Do I welcome Christ in the stranger? Do I allow myself to be enriched by an encounter with someone who is different from me, but someone whom the Christ Child loves and came to redeem? *The grace of God appeared*, not in power and might, but as a child – to show forth the tenderness of God. Do I accept the grace offered *or* will I refuse to welcome Him? That is, is there no room at the inn?

There in Bethlehem, the all-Holy God met sinful humanity. There was an encounter between God and man that changed everything. Pope Francis encourages the Church in the United States to build this culture of encounter:

“Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to ‘go out’ from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel.” (VIDEO MESSAGE TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE USCCB, 14-17 NOVEMBER 2016)

In our common humanity, we journey together, but we must ask: where are we going together – as a nation and as a Church? To this country, a true melting pot of peoples and cultures, the Catholic Church must offer something – not only a synthesis of the culture of encounter of peoples but also the gift of faith – the true, the beautiful, and the good, which have their origin in God Himself. The Incarnate Word is meant for every culture – not to destroy it, but to purify, elevate and enrich it. Faith in Christ gives cultures a new dimension – the hope of God’s kingdom.

Faith in the God who became a Child compels us to propose to the culture the Word of Life in defense of the human person and his dignity. In proposing and welcoming Christ, the Church offers to build a bridge along the path that leads to heaven.

The Christian vocation is a call to instill in the heart of every culture a hope for a new heaven and a new earth; to bring culture to perfection through the Gospel. Because of our faith in Jesus, we Christians are focused on the new and eternal Jerusalem, a city with its gates open to people of every nation. God came down from heaven to dwell in our cities, so that we might, through Him, with Him, and in Him, enter into His city, where He has prepared a place for us to dwell with Him forever.

I began by mentioning how beautifully the different Christmas traditions are integrated in this country. Think about what might be possible for the Church and the world, if this unity in diversity extended beyond Christmas! Tonight, we have all come together – from different cultures and parts of the world – to celebrate the birthday of the One who is the Lord and Savior of us all. Whether we are close by, like the shepherds who made haste to the stable to find the Child, or we are coming from afar, like the Wise Men from the East, we come together to worship and adore this newborn King.

May Christ, who was born a Child in Bethlehem, reign in your hearts and homes, bringing to you and your families, the gift of His peace. Merry Christmas!