

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
“SIMBANG GABI” MASS, 4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
ST. COLUMBA CHURCH, OXON HILL, MARYLAND
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, in the name of our Holy Father, I greet you and express Pope Francis' closeness to and paternal affection for each of you. I too wish you joy and peace on this last day of the Simbang Gabi celebrations in preparation for Christmas. In a special way, I want to thank Father Gary Villaneuva for his kind invitation, as well as Ms. Venia Cruz, Chairperson of the Filipino Ministry here at Saint Columba.

Last year during my Christmas homily at the Basilica, I mentioned the different Christmas traditions that come together here in the United States, including the customs of the large Filipino community including Simbang Gabi, which usually culminates with the Misa de Gallo or “Rooster’s Mass” and the decoration of homes with paról, the star-shaped lanterns, symbolizing the star of Bethlehem. I didn’t mention foods like *bibingka* or *puto bumbong*, but these too are part of your culture and celebrations which help transmit the faith to new generations.

That is the task of the Church today – to hand on what is most precious to us: our faith in Jesus Christ. We know Jesus, and this brings us joy. We know what He has done for us, and God calls us to tell others about what He has done for us. That is exactly what Mary, the Mother of Jesus, does in our Gospel. She carries Jesus in her womb to Elizabeth and fills her and John the Baptist with joy. Mary is a model of what it means to be a missionary disciple.

The Gospel recounts Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth. Recall what had just happened. The Archangel Gabriel had asked Mary to bear God’s Son. Mary pondered this request, and then trusting in God, said, “*Let it be done to me according to your Word.*” Then she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and the Word became incarnate in her womb.

The angel departed from Mary, and immediately *she set out in haste to the hill country to a town of Judah where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* What do we notice? Mary takes the initiative in going forth. Her whole life is animated by her relationship with God. Her actions flow from the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her and from the Word that dwells within her. She makes haste. There is an urgency. Mary leaps into action; she travels nearly ninety miles to assist her cousin. Surrendering to God means living a life of charity and service. Mary shows us how we could or should be living our Advent – in the spirit, according to God’s Word, in humble service.

Beyond her initiative, Mary teaches us what it means to be a missionary. Most people are moved by the touching encounter between the women and the still more joyful encounter between the children. It is striking that John the Baptist leaps for joy in the womb. Mary teaches us a basic lesson that disciples not only hear and keep God’s Word, but they also share it! Mary is a model for us: she brings the joy of the Gospel – the person of her Son – to others, including to her family. Is that not what we are trying to do through these celebrations - to hand on the faith from one generation to the next?

Bringing Jesus to others is the true mission of the Church and, at the same time, it is a blessing. Recall that in the book of Exodus, the glory of the Lord and the cloud “overshadowed” the Tabernacle which contained the Ark. God blessed and comforted His people with His Presence. Mary is the New Ark of the Covenant; having been overshadowed by the Spirit, she bears the Presence of God among His People. She blesses and comforts Elizabeth with the Presence of God in her womb.

Mary, the New Ark of the Covenant, goes to visit Elizabeth to announce that salvation is at hand. This passage of the Visitation has parallels with the sixth chapter of the second book of Samuel, when David decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Mary entered Zechariah’s house and *stayed for three months*, just as the ark remained in the house of Obed-Edom for three months on route to Jerusalem. Obed-Edom’s house was blessed, just as the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth was blessed. God’s presence in our lives and homes brings abundant blessings.

Just as David *arose and went* to the hill country of Judah to bring up the ark of God, Mary *arose and went* to the hill country of Judah to visit Elizabeth. David admitted his unworthiness to receive the ark, exclaiming, “*How can the ark of the Lord come to me?*” Elizabeth too admitted her unworthiness, exclaiming, “*And how does it happen that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*” Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizes the Divine Presence in her midst.

Finally, when finally, the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem, David leaped before the ark, dancing with abandon, before it, just as John the Baptist leaped in the womb before the New Ark of the Covenant. God’s Presence brings us joy. We cannot help but shout and dance for joy!

In sum, just as Moses brought about an exodus from slavery and the first ark contained the Ten Commandments and signified God’s Presence among His People, Saint Luke wants to show that Mary is the New Ark of the Covenant and that the Child in Mary’s womb will lead a new exodus – from sin and slavery to fullness of life. This is the Good News Mary brings – her Son is the long-expected Messiah. God comes to visit His People. He comes to save them.

What does this mean for us? Who am I, not just that the Mother of Jesus, comes close to me, but that God Himself comes close to me? That He feeds me with His Body and Blood – His live-giving Presence?

More than a deepening of our Eucharistic faith and increasing our appreciation for God’s immense love for us, today’s Gospel is a reminder, that the Catholic Faith 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 us to the Mystery of God and His Plan. The newness of this Event was brought by Mary to Elizabeth and to the whole world.

Christianity is an announcement of an Event – of the Person of Christ, who comes to save us. He comes to us through His Mother, and two thousand years later, He still comes to save us through His Church. Salvation comes to us in Christ through the Church – the living Presence of God in humanity. The Church exists to announce God’s Presence – and with it the promise of blessing and salvation – to humanity. God is with us. The mission that Mary began now continues in us. This is the gift that we can share with others – faith in Jesus.

This Christmas many gifts will be exchanged, but only one gift brings lasting joy – the gift of Jesus. As Christmas approaches, let us ask the Mother of God for her help in giving the gift of Jesus – the joy of the Gospel – to others.