



*Duc in Altum*

**His Eminence José Israel, DD, RCDM. - Presiding Archbishop  
Archdiocese of St. Patrick's**

**- Corpus Christi Communion-**

**WE ARE A REFORMED CATHOLIC CHURCH**

**In the International Independent Old Catholic and Orthodox Movement**

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## **PASTORAL LETTER**

**FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD**

**AND**

**THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY: MOTHER OF GOD**

December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Greetings of peace in the Lord! *Duc in Altum*

The Church celebrates the Birth of Jesus Christ on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the first day in the octave of Christmas. Throughout Advent the Church longed ardently for the coming of our Savior. On this date we will celebrate His birth with unrestrained joy. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The Son of God became man to give us a share in that divine life which is eternally His in the Blessed Trinity. Christmas time begins on December 24 with the first Vespers of the feast and ends on the feast of the Baptism of Christ. White vestments reappear in our churches as a sign of joy.

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The Christmas feast is a festival full of joy. The Eternal Word has become Man and dwells among us. The longings of the patriarchs and prophets are fulfilled. With the shepherds we hurry to the manger and adore the Incarnate Son of God, who for us and for our salvation descended upon earth. The purpose of the Christmas feast is beautifully expressed in the Preface of the Nativity: "For by the mystery of the Word made flesh the light of Thy glory hath shone anew upon the eyes of our mind; so that while we acknowledge Him a God seen by men, we may be drawn by Him to the love of things unseen."



During the Christmas season there is an extensive exchange of greetings and good wishes among friends. These greetings are a reminder of those "good tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people, for this day is born to you a Savior Who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:11). They are a reminder, too, that all blessings and graces come to us from Christ: "Hath He not also with Him given us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

During the Christmas season there is also an exchange of gifts. This custom should recall to us that on this day God Himself gave to us the greatest of all gifts, His beloved Son: "God so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son" (John 3: 16).

The Christmas tree, of which the first-known mention was made in 1605 at Strasbourg, was introduced into France and England in 1840. It symbolizes the great family tree of Christ which through David and Jesse has its roots in Abraham, the father of the chosen race. It is often laden with gifts to remind us that Christmas brought us the priceless gifts of grace and of eternal life. It is frequently adorned with lights that recall to us that Christ is the Light of the world enlightening those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.



Though not entirely unknown before, the custom of the Christmas Crib was adopted by St. Francis of Assisi at Greccio, Italy, on Christmas 1225. It is a concrete and vivid way of representing to ourselves the Incarnation and birth of Christ. It depicts in a striking manner the virtues of the newborn Savior, especially His humility, poverty, and charity.

This great solemnity shows the world that the Word incarnate, the Savior of mankind, is finally born. God becoming truly man is an enormous event. Something truly happens that goes beyond any evolutionary process: the fusion of man and God, the creature and the Creator. It is not the progression of another step in the evolutionary process, but the eruption of a personal action, founded on love, that from this point forward reveals to men new space and possibilities.

Christmas says to us: alone we can't profoundly change the world to remedy it. Alone, we can make the world better or worse, but we can't save it. Christ came therefore, because left to ourselves; we couldn't escape the 'mortal disease' that has enveloped us from the first moment of conception in our mother's womb. This gives us hope, true hope, and true Christian optimism: I can't do it but He is there! This is the mystery of grace synthesized in the human figure of God incarnate.



Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are moments of contemplation. We consider, in many dimensions, the mystery of love that was incarnated for us. First of all, we contemplate the light and joy, without forgetting Jesus and Mary's sorrows and sufferings, and the many difficulties that had surrounded them: the cold, the uncomfortable place, the dangers ... It would be good to accompany these thoughts by reciting and meditating slowly on the Holy Rosary, preferably in front of a crib. 'Blessed grotto of Bethlehem that testified to the wonders! Who, in this hour would not turn our hearts? Who would not prefer the opulent palace of the King?'

Listen to the way that St Bonaventura, the seraphic doctor, invites us to contemplate this scene in his 'Meditation on the life of Jesus Christ': 'You have also lingered, bent your knee, adored the Lord God, venerated His Mother and greeted Joseph, the holy old man, with reverence. Therefore, kiss the feet of the baby Jesus, who lies in the manger, and pray that the Holy Virgin will allow you to hold Him. Take Him between your arms, hold Him and see His lovable face, kiss it with reverence and rejoice with Him. You can do this because He has come to bring salvation to sinners and He has humbly conversed with them, finally giving Himself as food'.

Christmas also reminds us of the great mystery of God's people, of the Church acquired through Christ's blood, animated by the life giving Spirit, governed by the legitimate shepherds in communion with the successor of Peter. On this day in which the Word came to earth, assuming human nature, body, and soul, how can we not think about His Mystical Body that is animated by the Holy Spirit? 'For this reason, by no weak analogy, [the Church] is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body' (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, n.8).

Once again, on this Christmas Day, the Church is to focus especially on the newborn Child, God become human, who embodies for us all the hope and peace we seek. We need no other special saint today to lead us to Christ in the manger, although his mother Mary and Joseph, caring for his foster-son, help round out the scene.

But if we were to select a patron for today, perhaps it might be appropriate for us to imagine an anonymous shepherd, summoned to the birthplace by a wondrous and even disturbing vision in the night, a summons from an angelic choir, promising peace and goodwill. A shepherd willing to seek out something that might just be too unbelievable to chase after, and yet compelling enough to leave behind the flocks in the field and search for a mystery.

Holy Christmas also reminds us of the mystery of Mary as Mother of God, mother of the Incarnated Word, and mother of His mystical body, the Church. Christmas encourages us to contemplate Jesus together with Mary, reflecting on Jesus with 'His mother', as recounted many times in the Gospels. If our faith must be fully evangelical, it cannot neglect a sane and profound devotion to the Mother of God, as she shows us the easiest way to reach Jesus. This brings us to the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God on January 1<sup>st</sup>.

On this date, as so many in the world celebrate the beginning of a new year, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Mother of God. It is the oldest of all Marian feasts in our liturgy. It is also a feast uniquely appropriate to those of us concerned with new beginnings, with new resolutions, and renewed hopes.

To the consternation of many non-Catholics, we sometimes let personal forms of piety towards Mary obscure the reasons behind our Church's devotion to her. Perhaps we, in our personal emotional involvement with Mary, even lose sight of

her genuine place in our faith and Church, we run the very real risk of simply sentimentalizing her, and thereby trivializing Christ.

In fact, there is very little in scripture that paints an historical portrait of Mary. What the church offers in its devotion towards her, however, is its own spiritual and prayerful experience, its reflections on her throughout the millennia. And this is, ultimately, to the good, because what we today understand of our Lady is a reflection of the Church's prayer and insight, of the Church being led by the Holy Spirit to develop an understanding of why Mary does in fact have a special role in our lives.

But we ought always to remember that development in the Church is about one thing only: that in our attempt to understand God, we grow in comprehension of the meaning of the Incarnation in our world and life. It is in this light that we must reflect on the Virgin Mary, Theotokos, Mother of God, mother of Jesus Incarnate.

And just as Mary interpreted all things, pondered all things, in her heart, so does the Church reflect on her and the Incarnation through its liturgy, its writings and its faith. That is why her oldest feast is celebrated within the octave of Christmas, of Emmanuel, of God with us: for all devotion to Mary is a corollary to our devotion to, following of, and worship of Christ.

Paul's Letter to the Galatians tells us that by being born of a woman, born under the law, the son of God fully participates in the human condition. He is one of us, because of Mary. The very fact of Mary's physicality, her embeddedness, her fleshliness, and therefore Jesus' own body, is the saving link between God and humanity. Through this link Paul writes that we become heirs of Christ, and intimately understand God as Abba, the way her Son understood His Father. It is Mary's profound human kinship with Jesus that allows us to see in her a pledge of the destiny that God has promised all his children. Mary becomes the measure of who we are and who we are to be, and are even now becoming through grace in our lives as she, full of grace, was. In Mary our Lord speaks to all mankind as if He was speaking to one person saying: "Do you want to see in Her how you are loved?" In effect, in understanding Mary we begin to understand ourselves as loved by God.

My dear brothers and sisters, Mary represents the ideal believer, for she hears the good news and ponders it in her heart, and fully responds to it. Her heart becomes the place of discovering Jesus, and who he truly is. As our own hearts must become that place of response. Mary's entire life, and the Church's entire life, is centered on that process of pondering who that child now born to us really is. Mary in contemplating her son becomes the Church reflecting on the Incarnation. It is this aspect of Mary's motherhood that is most important for our

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new year, a year in which we continue our own journey of the heart towards God.

We make a major mistake if we think that from the moment of the Annunciation Mary completely knew, or understood, the full significance of her Son. Mary pondered on who that child would be from her "Yes" at the Annunciation, when the first cells of God incarnate began to grow and divide within her, to his birth and squalling infancy, his youth, maturing, leaving home; her hearing about him from others, hearing about what he had said, what he had done; the healings and exorcisms, the confrontations, the via crucis, seeing him nailed to the cross, her holding his dead body, the body that had been within her.

And each step of the way, she had to re-assert that "yes" of the Annunciation, ever and more deeply understanding what her response meant. She spent her life pondering the visible Word of God that was and is her Son. She grew in knowing him, in comprehending the mystery of God Incarnate. And as Mary pondered that visible Word, we too must ponder that Word in scripture, that Word in each other, that Word in the created world around us. We too are asked to incarnate Jesus in our lives. This is needed by all of us in this new year, in this strange, confusing and dangerous age. And I must especially say to my monastic brethren, this seems to me to be the purpose of our life, why we live in a monastery: that we in times of silence face the Word of God, and let it shine upon us, and that we make Christ visible in our community life, in our work, in our very souls. For in incarnating Jesus in our hearts we discover ourselves.

Reflection calls for response. And Mary's response to God ought not to be thought of as simply a choice between right and wrong, good or bad, some sort of ethical or moral decision. Nor should our choices be only that. Mary gives us an example of what our choice as Christians really implies: that each genuine choice we make reveals who we are and is not simply what we do. In our choices we act out of our self, and tell of our self. Christian, human, freedom of choice is not about choosing which film we will go to see, or what we will wear, or what we will own: *it is about how we reveal and define ourselves on that journey to God.*

Mary's choice was not right or wrong, it stemmed from who she was and knew herself to be as a daughter of Israel, a child of God.

She is blessed of all women, and we are told in the great Aaronic blessing from the Book of Numbers, that God will smile upon those he loves and who love him, that his face will shine upon them. In this New Year's day, we know that the face that smiles upon Mary as she holds him in her arms, presenting Him to His Father

in the Temple, is that of her new-born Son Jesus. This is the face we yearn to see, the face of God made flesh, born of the Virgin Mary.

Blessed are you, Mary, for you gave the Son of God to our world. But even more blessed are you for having believed in him. Full of faith, you conceived Jesus first in your heart and then in your womb, and thus became the Mother of all believers (cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon*215,4).

Send us your blessing on this day consecrated to your honor. Show us the face of Jesus your Son, who bestows upon the entire world mercy and peace.

Peace and blessings be with you all on this Christmas and on the New Year!

Abp. Jose Israel

