

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 MIDNIGHT MASS (MISSA IN NATIVITATE DOMINI IN NOCTE) 2019
 BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
 WASHINGTON, DC**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, in the name of the Holy Father, I want to wish you and your loved ones peace and joy on this great feast of the Savior's birth. *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. To all, I express the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father, assuring you of his prayers.

This is my fourth Christmas with you in this Basilica. Four years ago, I reflected with you on the tenderness of God, born a Child in Bethlehem. Three years ago, I recalled the various Christmas traditions from around the world that help us appreciate, no matter our place of origin, that help us celebrate this day. Last year, I recounted the "Event" described in St. Luke's Gospel, commenting on the essence of Christmas. This year, I was very moved by the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis on the Nativity Scene, as the tradition of creating a manger scene (and perhaps you have one in your home, just as we have one here in this Basilica) helps depict the tenderness and closeness of God, born as an infant, and keeps the "event" alive in our hearts.

The Holy Father asks:

"Why does the Christmas crèche arouse such wonder and move us so deeply? First, because it shows God's tender love: the Creator of the universe lowered himself to take up our littleness. The gift of life, in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realize that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life. In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins." (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC LETTER *ADMIRABILE SIGNUM*, 1 DECEMBER 2019, 3)

This is the essence of Christmas, and the Christmas creche "touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history." Saint Francis of Assisi, already loved the people of Greccio, where he re-created the Nativity scene for the first time; he loved the people for their poverty and simplicity. There before his eyes, he realized that by becoming a Child that God was truly with us; He is Emmanuel! No barrier – whether height or distance – can any longer separate us from Him. As a Child he draws near, not to frighten us, but so that we can address Him without fear and without shame. This Child loves us.

His love is utterly defenseless. The Mighty God comes to us without weapons. He does not intimidate us or desire to conquer us from outside; rather, he wants to transform us from the inside and win our hearts. If our world is marked by pride, arrogance, greed and violence, then the one thing that may cause us to pause and to relent is the vulnerability of a Child, a child born in poverty, whom the lowly shepherds come to adore as God. Yes, against the injustice and violence of this world, God launches a revolution.

Pope Francis writes:

“By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness.” (Ibid., 6)

It was not the fierceness of God that appeared; rather, it was His kindness and gentleness. 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.”*

We are not the only ones renewed. This child born in a manger is the One who restores unity to creation. The presence of the ox and the ass in manger scenes is not insignificant, for Isaiah (1:3) had foretold that *“The ox knows its owner and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand.”*

The Fathers of the Church interpreted the ox and the ass to be the Jews and the Gentiles. It is the child who opens their eyes to the revelation of God’s love in the flesh, so that now they recognize and know their Master and are united in adoration. In his World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis speaks of ecological conversion, but more than political activity, it concerns recognizing our relationships – to God, to one another, and to all of creation and recognizing that the Redeemer came to restore unity and peace to all of creation.

Although the ox and the ass recognize their owner and Master, the people do not understand. How often our obsession with power, human respect, influence, possessions and presets obscures our vision of God! Do we recognize who this child is? Are we awestruck at the wonder of the Child? It was not to the powerful and mighty, nor to the wealthy, that the Revelation of God’s love first came, but to the lowly of the earth: the animals, simple shepherds, and to Mary and Joseph.

Again, commenting on the moment the Infant Jesus is placed in the crib, the Holy Father writes:

“God appears as a child, for us to take into our arms. Beneath weakness and frailty, he conceals his power that creates and transforms all things. It seems impossible, yet it is true: in Jesus, God was a child, and in this way, he wished to reveal the greatness of his love: by smiling and opening his arms to all.” (POPE FRANCIS, *ADMIRABILE SIGNUM*, 8)

Yes, God became a tiny child to help us recognize the greatness of His love! He wants us to know His closeness. Writing to young people earlier this year, Pope Francis reminded them and us of three great truths: **God loves you; Christ is your Savior; and He is alive!**

God loves you. He loves you, even if you sin or disappoint Him or others. Pope Francis asks us to *“Trust the memory of God.”* His memory is a heart filled with tender compassion, one that finds joy in deleting every trace of evil.” (cf. *CV*, 115) In the Gospels of Christmas, the image of God is not one of Wrath but of the tenderness of a Child.

Christ is your Savior. Jesus comes to save humanity. We live in a throwaway culture in which even people are discarded and excluded. The Pope invites us to reflect on, *“How valuable you must be, if you were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ! ... You are priceless!”* (*CV*, 122) He, who was born in Bethlehem, reconciles and saves at Calvary.

He is not the God of the dead, but of the living! ***Christ is alive!*** The Holy Father wants us to examine whether faith in the Risen Lord impacts our humanity, changes us, and helps us live differently. He writes:

“Christ is alive! We need to keep reminding ourselves of this, because we can risk seeing Jesus simply as a fine model from the distant past, as a memory, as someone who saved us two thousand years ago. But that would be of no use to us: it would leave us unchanged; it would not set us free. The one who fills us with his grace, the one who liberates us, transforms us, heals and consoles us is someone fully alive.” (CV, 124)

This Christmas, it is my prayer that the Mystery of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Mary, may be alive in you and in your families! Just as the Christ Child was the “now of God” at Bethlehem, so may we be the “now of God” in our world, bringing to others a joyful message: *“For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*