



the Christmas Journey

*A collection of homilies by Pope Francis,
that you can use for meditation in front of
the Nativity scene.*



Introduction

Contemplating the Nativity scene is a sweet and old tradition in the Church, as Pope Francis pointed out in his Apostolic letter, *Admirabile Signum*. More than just marveling at the artistry of the scene, we are called to contemplate the fate of each character depicted there. In each person in the crib, each animal and each physical object, we can see how God's plan unfolds in our own lives.

In this little booklet, you will find each chapter focusing on one of the personalities of the Nativity scene. Using different homilies preached by Pope Francis on the theme of faith as a journey, we begin with Jesus Christ, the light for our journey as the centerpiece of our contemplation. Then we go to Mary, his mother who accompanies us in our decisions along this journey and St. Joseph who protects us along the way. After this *earthly trinity*, we consider God's providence in the lives of the Shepherds and the Magi, not excluding Herod who tries to use his cunning to oppose God's plans. Lastly, we consider the donkey, a humble beast of burden that also participates in the mystery of our salvation. All creation must feel the effects of Christ's redemption, for it was "through him and for him that all things were created." (Col 1:16)

Jotham Njoroge, 25th December 2021

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The meaning and importance of the Nativity scene.

“The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus’ birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of

sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.”

*Pope Francis, Admirabile signum,
1 December 2019.*



Jesus, our Light in the midst of darkness.

1. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is 9:1).

This prophecy of Isaiah never ceases to touch us, especially when we hear it proclaimed in the liturgy of Christmas Night. This is not simply an emotional or sentimental matter. It moves us because it states the deep reality of what we are: a people who walk, and all around us – and within us as well – there is darkness and light. In this night,

as the spirit of darkness enfolds the world, there takes place anew the event which always amazes and surprises us: the people who walk see a great light. A light which makes us reflect on this mystery: the mystery of walking and seeing.

Walking. This verb makes us reflect on the course of history, that long journey which is the history of salvation, starting with Abraham, our father in faith, whom the Lord called one day to set out, to go forth from his country towards the land which he would show him. From that time on, our identity as believers has been that of a people making its pilgrim way towards the promised land. This history has always been accompanied by the Lord! He is ever faithful to his covenant and to his promises. Because he is faithful, "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5). Yet on the part of the people there are times of both light and

darkness, fidelity and infidelity, obedience, and rebellion; times of being a pilgrim people and times of being a people adrift.

In our personal history too, there are both bright and dark moments, lights and shadows. If we love God and our brothers and sisters, we walk in the light; but if our heart is closed, if we are dominated by pride, deceit, self-seeking, then darkness falls within us and around us. "Whoever hates his brother - writes the Apostle John - is in the darkness; he walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (1 Jn 2:11). A people who walk, but as a pilgrim people who do not want to go astray.

2. On this night, like a burst of brilliant light, there rings out the proclamation of the Apostle: "God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation

possible for the whole human race" (Tit 2:11).

The grace which was revealed in our world is Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, true man and true God. He has entered our history; he has shared our journey. He came to free us from darkness and to grant us light. In him was revealed the grace, the mercy, and the tender love of the Father: Jesus is Love incarnate. He is not simply a teacher of wisdom, he is not an ideal for which we strive while knowing that we are hopelessly distant from it. He is the meaning of life and history, who has pitched his tent in our midst.

3. The shepherds were the first to see this "tent", to receive the news of Jesus' birth. They were the first because they were among the last, the outcast. And they were the first because they were awake, keeping watch in the night, guarding their flocks. The pilgrim is bound by duty to keep watch and the

shepherds did just that. Together with them, let us pause before the Child, let us pause in silence. Together with them, let us thank the Lord for having given Jesus to us, and with them let us raise from the depths of our hearts the praises of his fidelity: We bless you, Lord God most high, who lowered yourself for our sake. You are immense, and you made yourself small; you are rich and you made yourself poor; you are all-powerful and you made yourself vulnerable.

On this night let us share the joy of the Gospel: God loves us, he so loves us that he gave us his Son to be our brother, to be light in our darkness. To us the Lord repeats: "Do not be afraid!" (Lk 2:10). As the angels said to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid!". And I also repeat to all of you: Do not be afraid! Our Father is patient, he loves us, he gives us Jesus to guide us on the way which leads to the promised land. Jesus is the light

who brightens the darkness. He is
mercy: our Father always forgives us.
He is our peace. Amen.

Tuesday, 24 December 2013





Mary accompanies us in our journey of faith.

The Mother of God. This is the first and most important title of Our Lady. It refers to a quality, a role which the faith of the Christian people, in its tender and genuine devotion to our heavenly Mother, has understood from the beginning.

We recall that great moment in the history of the ancient Church, the Council of Ephesus, in which the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary was authoritatively defined. The truth of her divine maternity found an echo in Rome where, a little later, the Basilica of Saint Mary Major was built, the first Marian shrine in Rome and in the entire West, in which the image of the Mother of God – the *Theotokos* – is venerated under the title of *Salus Populi Romani*. It is said that the residents of Ephesus used to gather at the gates of the basilica where the bishops were meeting and shout, “Mother of God!”. The faithful, by asking them to officially define this title of Our Lady, showed that they acknowledged her divine motherhood. Theirs was the spontaneous and sincere reaction of children who know their Mother well, for they love her with immense tenderness. But it is more: it is

the *sensus fidei* of the holy People of God which, in its unity, never errs.

Mary has always been present in the hearts, the piety and above all the pilgrimage of faith of the Christian people. "The Church journeys through time... and on this journey she proceeds along the path already trodden by the Virgin Mary" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 2). Our journey of faith is the same as that of Mary, and so we feel that she is particularly close to us. As far as faith, the hinge of the Christian life, is concerned, the Mother of God shared our condition. She had to take the same path as ourselves, a path which is sometimes difficult and obscure. She had to advance in the "pilgrimage of faith" (*Lumen gentium*, 58).

Our pilgrimage of faith has been inseparably linked to Mary ever since Jesus, dying on the Cross, gave her to us as our Mother, saying: "Behold your Mother!" (*Jn 19:27*). These words serve

as a testament, bequeathing to the world a Mother. From that moment on, the Mother of God also became our Mother! When the faith of the disciples was most tested by difficulties and uncertainties, Jesus entrusted them to Mary, who was the first to believe, and whose faith would never fail. The “woman” became our Mother when she lost her divine Son. Her sorrowing heart was enlarged to make room for all men and women, all, whether good or bad, and she loves them as she loved Jesus. The woman who at the wedding at Cana in Galilee gave her faith-filled cooperation so that the wonders of God could be displayed in the world, at Calvary kept alive the flame of faith in the resurrection of her Son, and she communicates this with maternal affection to each and every person. Mary becomes in this way a source of hope and true joy!

The Mother of the Redeemer goes before us and continually strengthens us in faith, in our vocation and in our mission. By her example of humility and openness to God's will she helps us to transmit our faith in a joyful proclamation of the Gospel to all, without reservation. In this way our mission will be fruitful, because it is modeled on the motherhood of Mary. To her let us entrust our journey of faith, the desires of our heart, our needs and the needs of the whole world, especially of those who hunger and thirst for justice and peace, and for God. Let us then together invoke her, and I invite you to invoke her three times, following the example of those brothers and sisters of Ephesus: Mother of God! Mother of God! Mother of God! Amen.

Wednesday, 1st January 2014



St. Joseph, a guide in times of difficulty.

The evangelist Matthew helps us to understand that the person of Joseph, although apparently marginal, discreet, and in the background, is in fact a central element in the history of salvation. Joseph lives his role without ever seeking to take over the scene. If we think about it, "Our lives are woven

together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines. ... How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small ways, and in everyday ways, how to accept and deal with a crisis by adjusting their routines, looking ahead and encouraging the practice of prayer. How many are praying, making sacrifices and interceding for the good of all" (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, 1).

Thus, everyone can find in Saint Joseph, the man who goes unnoticed, the man of daily presence, of discreet and hidden presence, an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of difficulty. He reminds us that all those who are seemingly hidden or in the "second row" are unparalleled protagonists in the history of salvation. The world needs these men and women: men and women in the second row, but who support the

development of our life, of every one of us, and who with prayer, and by their example, with their teaching, sustain us on the path of life.

In the Gospel of Luke, Joseph appears as the *guardian of Jesus and of Mary*. And for this reason, he is also “the Guardian of the Church”: but, if he was the guardian of Jesus and Mary, he works, now that he is in heaven, and continues to be a guardian, in this case of the Church, for the Church is the continuation of the Body of Christ in history, even as Mary’s motherhood is reflected in the motherhood of the Church. In his continued protection of the Church – please do not forget this: today, Joseph protects the Church – and by continuing to protect the Church, he continues to protect *the child and his mother*” (*ibid.*, 5). This aspect of Joseph’s guardianship is the great answer to the story of Genesis. When God asks Cain to account for Abel’s life,

he replies: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4: 9). With his life, Joseph seems to want to tell us that we are always called to feel that we are our brothers and sisters' keepers, the guardians of those who are close to us, of those whom the Lord entrusts to us through many circumstances of life.

A society such as ours, which has been defined as "liquid", as it seems not to have consistency... I will correct the philosopher who coined this definition and say: more than liquid, gaseous, a properly gaseous society. This liquid, gaseous society finds in the story of Joseph a very clear indication of the importance of human bonds. Indeed, the Gospel tells us the genealogy of Jesus, not only for a theological reason, but also to remind each one of us that our lives are made up of bonds that precede and accompany us. The Son of God chose to come into the world by way of such bonds, the way of history: he did

not come down into the world by magic, no. He took the historic route we all take.

Dear brothers and sisters, I think of the many people who find it difficult to find meaningful bonds in their lives, and because of this they struggle, they feel alone, they lack the strength and courage to go on. I would like to conclude with a prayer to help them, and all of us, to find in Saint Joseph an ally, a friend and a support.

Saint Joseph, you who guarded the bond with Mary and Jesus, help us to care for the relationships in our lives. May no one experience that sense of abandonment that comes from loneliness. Let each of us be reconciled with our own history, with those who have gone before, and recognise even in the mistakes made a way through which Providence has made its way, and evil did not have the last word. Show yourself to be a friend to those who

struggle the most, and as you supported Mary and Jesus in difficult times, support us too on our journey.

Amen.

Wednesday, 24 November 2021

...At Mary's side, shown protecting the Child and his Mother, stands Saint Joseph. He is usually depicted with staff in hand, or holding up a lamp. Saint Joseph plays an important role in the life of Jesus and Mary. He is the guardian who tirelessly protects his family. When God warned him of Herod's threat, he did not hesitate to set out and flee to Egypt (cf. Mt 2:13-15). And once the danger had passed, he brought the family back to Nazareth, where he was to be the first teacher of Jesus as a boy and then as a young man. Joseph treasured in his heart the great mystery surrounding Jesus and Mary his spouse; as a just man, he entrusted

himself always to God's will, and put it into practice.

*Except from Admirabile signum, 1
December 2019*





The Shepherds 'set out with haste' towards the light.

"The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (*Tit* 2:11). The words of the Apostle Paul reveal the mystery of this holy night: the grace of God has appeared, his free gift. In the Child given to us, the love of God is made visible.

It is a *night of glory*, that glory proclaimed by the angels in Bethlehem and by ourselves as well, all over the

world. It is a *night of joy*, because henceforth and for ever, the infinite and eternal God is *God with us*. He is not far off. We need not search for him in the heavens or in mystical notions. He is close at hand. He became man and he will never withdraw from our humanity, which he has made his own. It is a *night of light*. The light prophesied by Isaiah (cf. 9:1), which was to shine on those who walked in a land of darkness, has appeared and enveloped the shepherds of Bethlehem (cf. *Lk 2:9*).

The shepherds discover simply that “a child has been born to us” (*Is 9:5*). They realize that all this glory, all this joy, all this light, converges to a single point, the *sign* that the angel indicated to them: “You will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (*Lk 2:12*). This is *the enduring sign* for all who would find Jesus. Not just then, but also today. If we want to celebrate Christmas authentically, we

need to contemplate this sign: the frail simplicity of a tiny newborn child, the meekness with which he is placed in a manger, the tender affection with which he is wrapped in his swaddling clothes. That is where God is.

With this sign, the Gospel reveals a paradox. It speaks of the emperor, the governor, the high and mighty of those times, yet God does not make himself present there. He appears not in the splendour of a royal palace, but in the poverty of a stable; not in pomp and show, but in simplicity of life; not in power, but in astonishing smallness. In order to meet him, we need to go where he is. We need to bow down, to humble ourselves, to make ourselves small. The newborn Child challenges us. He calls us to leave behind fleeting illusions and to turn to what is essential, to renounce our insatiable cravings, to abandon our endless yearning for things we will never have. We do well to leave such

things behind, in order to discover, in the simplicity of the divine Child, peace, joy and the luminous meaning of life.

Let us allow the Child in the manger to challenge us, but let us also be challenged by all those children in today's world who are lying not in a crib, caressed with affection by their mothers and fathers, but in squalid "mangers that devour dignity". Children who hide underground to escape bombardment, on the pavements of large cities, in the hold of a boat overladen with immigrants... Let us allow ourselves to be challenged by those children who are not allowed to be born, by those who cry because no one relieves their hunger, by those who hold in their hands not toys, but weapons.

The mystery of Christmas, which is light and joy, challenges and unsettles us, because it is at once a *mystery of hope and of sadness*. It has a *taste of*

sadness, inasmuch as love is not accepted, and life discarded. Such was the case with Joseph and Mary, who met with closed doors, and placed Jesus in a manger, "because there was no place for them in the inn" (v. 7). Jesus was born rejected by some and regarded by many others with indifference. Today too, that same indifference can exist, whenever Christmas becomes a holiday with ourselves at the centre rather than Jesus; when the lights of shop windows push the light of God into the shadows; when we are enthused about gifts but indifferent to our neighbours in need. This worldliness has kidnapped Christmas; we need to liberate it!

Yet Christmas has above all a *taste of hope* because, for all the darkness in our lives, God's light shines forth. His gentle light does not frighten us. God, who is in love with us, draws us to himself with his tenderness, by being born poor and frail in our midst, as one

of us. He is born in Bethlehem, which means “house of bread”. In this way, he seems to tell us that he is born as *bread for us*; he enters our life to give us his life; he comes into our world to give us his love. He does not come to devour or to lord it over us, but instead to feed and serve us. There is a straight line between the manger and the cross where Jesus will become *bread that is broken*. It is the straight line of love that gives and saves, the love that brings light to our lives and peace to our hearts.

That night, the shepherds understood this. They were among the marginalized of those times. Yet no one is marginalized in the sight of God, and that Christmas, they themselves were the guests. People who felt sure of themselves, self-sufficient, were at home with their possessions. It was the shepherds who “set out with haste” (cf. *Lk 2:16*). Tonight, may we too be

challenged and called by Jesus. Let us approach him with trust, starting from all those things that make us feel marginalized, from our limitations and our sins. Let us be touched by the tenderness that saves. Let us draw close to God who draws close to us. Let us pause to gaze upon the crib, and relive in our imagination the birth of Jesus: light and peace, dire poverty and rejection. With the shepherds, let us enter into the real Christmas, bringing to Jesus all that we are, our alienation, our unhealed wounds, our sins. Then, in Jesus, we will enjoy the taste of the true spirit of Christmas: the beauty of being loved by God. With Mary and Joseph, let us pause before the manger, before Jesus who is born as bread for my life. Contemplating his humble and infinite love, let us simply tell him: Thank you. Thank you because you have done all this *for me*.

Saturday, 24 December 2016

...A charming legend relates that at the birth of Jesus the shepherds hurried to the stable with different gifts. Each brought what he had; some brought the fruits of their labour, others some precious item. But as they were all presenting their gifts, there was one shepherd who had nothing to give. He was extremely poor; he had no gift to present. As the others were competing to offer their gifts, he stood apart, embarrassed. At a certain point, Saint Joseph and Our Lady found it hard to receive all those gifts, especially Mary, who had to hold the baby. Seeing that shepherd with empty hands, she asked him to draw near. And she put the baby Jesus in his arms. That shepherd, in accepting him, became aware of having received what he did not deserve, of holding in his arms the greatest gift of all time. He looked at his hands, those hands that seemed to him always empty; they had become the cradle of

God. He felt himself loved and, overcoming his embarrassment, began to show Jesus to the others, for he could not keep for himself the gift of gifts.

Excerpt from Homily, Tuesday, 24th December 2019.





The Magi: actions that guide our journey towards Christ.

Three actions of the Magi guide our journey towards the Lord, who today is revealed as light and salvation for all peoples. The Magi *see the star*, they *set out* and they *bring gifts*.

Seeing the star. This is where it starts. But why, we might ask, did the Magi alone see the star? Perhaps because few people raised their eyes to heaven.

We often make do with looking at the ground: it's enough to have our health, a little money and a bit of entertainment. I wonder if we still know how to look up at the sky. Do we know how to dream, to long for God, to expect the newness he brings, or do we let ourselves be swept along by life, like dry branches before the wind? The Magi were not content with just getting by, with keeping afloat. They understood that to truly live, we need a lofty goal and we need to keep looking up.

Yet we can also ask why, among all those who looked up at the heavens, so many others did not follow that star, "his star" (*Mt 2:2*). Perhaps because the star was not eye-catching, did not shine any brighter than other stars. It was a star – so the Gospel tells us – that the Magi saw "at its rising" (vv. 2, 9). Jesus' star does not dazzle or overwhelm, but gently invites. We may ask ourselves what star we have chosen to follow in

our lives. Some stars may be bright, but they do not point the way. So it is with success, money, career, honours and pleasures when these become our life. They are meteors: they blaze momentarily, but then quickly burn out and their brilliance fades. They are shooting stars that mislead rather than lead. The Lord's star, however, may not always overwhelm by its brightness, but it is always there, ever kindly: it takes you by the hand in life and accompanies you. It does not promise material reward, but ensures peace and grants, as it did to the Magi, "exceedingly great joy" (*Mt 2:10*). But it also tells us to set out.

Setting out, the second thing the Magi do, is essential if we are to find Jesus. His star demands a decision to take up the journey and to advance tirelessly on our way. It demands that we free ourselves from useless burdens and unnecessary extras that only prove a

hindrance, and accept unforeseen obstacles along the map of life. Jesus allows himself to be found by those who seek him, but to find him we need to get up and go, not sit around but take risks, not stand still, but set out. Jesus makes demands: he tells those who seek him to leave behind the armchair of worldly comforts and the reassuring warmth of hearth and home. Following Jesus is not a polite etiquette to be observed, but a journey to be undertaken. God, who set his people free in the exodus and called new peoples to follow his star, grants freedom and joy always and only in the course of a journey. In other words, if we want to find Jesus, we have to overcome our fear of taking risks, our self-satisfaction and our indolent refusal to ask anything more of life. We need to take risks simply to meet a Child. Yet those risks are immensely worth the effort, since in finding that

Child, in discovering his tenderness and love, we rediscover ourselves.

Setting out is not easy. The Gospel shows us this through a cast of characters. There is Herod, wild with fear that the birth of a king will threaten his power. So he organizes meetings and sends people out to gather information, yet he himself does not budge; he stays locked up in his palace. Even "all Jerusalem" (v. 3) is afraid: afraid of the new things God is bringing about. They want everything to remain as it was – that is the way it has always been – no one has the courage to leave. The temptation of the priests and scribes is more subtle: they know the exact place and tell it to Herod, quoting the ancient prophecy. They know, but they themselves make no move towards Bethlehem. Theirs can be the temptation of those who are used to being believers: they can talk at length about the faith they know so well, but

will not take a *personal* risk for the Lord. They talk, but do not pray; they complain, but do no good. The Magi, on the other hand, talk little and journey much. Ignorant of the truths of faith, they are filled with longing and set out. So the Gospel tells us: They “came to worship him” (v. 2); “they set out; they went in, and fell down and worshiped him; they went back” (vv. 9, 11, 12). They kept moving.

Bringing gifts. Having come to Jesus after a long journey, the Magi do as he does: they bring gifts. Jesus is there to give his life; they offer him their own costly gifts: gold, incense and myrrh. The Gospel becomes real when the journey of life ends in giving. To give *freely*, for the Lord's sake, without expecting anything in return: this is the sure sign that we have found Jesus. For he says: “The gift you have received, give freely as a gift” (*Mt* 10:8). To do good without counting the cost, even when

unasked, even when you gain nothing thereby, even if it is unpleasant. That is what God wants. He, who became small for our sake, asks us to offer something for the least of his brothers and sisters. Who are they? They are those who have nothing to give in return, the needy, the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner, the poor (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*). We give a gift pleasing to Jesus when we care for a sick person, spend time with a difficult person, help someone for the sake of helping, or forgive someone who has hurt us. These are gifts freely given, and they cannot be lacking in the lives of Christians. Jesus reminds us that if we only love those who love us, we do as the pagans do (cf. *Mt 5:46-47*). Today let us look at our hands, so often empty of love, and let us try to think of some free gift that we can give without expecting anything in return. That will please the Lord. And let us ask him: "Lord, let me rediscover the joy of giving".

Dear brothers and sisters, let us imitate
the Magi: looking upwards, setting out,
and freely offering our gifts.

Saturday, 6 January 2018





Herod's darkness and the Light that guides the Magi.

"Lumen requirunt lumine".

These evocative words from a liturgical hymn for the Epiphany speak of the experience of the Magi: following *a* light, they were searching for *the* Light. The star appearing in the sky kindled in their minds and in their hearts a light that moved them to seek the great Light of

Christ. The Magi followed faithfully that light which filled their hearts, and they encountered the Lord.

The destiny of every person is symbolized in this journey of the Magi of the East: our life is a journey, illuminated by the lights which brighten our way, to find the fullness of truth and love which we Christians recognize in Jesus, the Light of the World. Like the Magi, every person has two great "books" which provide the signs to guide this pilgrimage: the book of creation and the book of sacred Scripture. What is important is that we be attentive, alert, and listen to God who speaks to us, who always speaks to us. As the Psalm says in referring to the Law of the Lord: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (*Ps* 119:105). Listening to the Gospel, reading it, meditating on it and making it our spiritual nourishment especially allows us to encounter the

living Jesus, to experience him and his love.

The first reading echoes, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, the call of God to Jerusalem: "Arise, shine!" (Is 60:1). Jerusalem is called to be the city of light which reflects God's light to the world and helps humanity to walk in his ways. This is the vocation and the mission of the People of God in the world. But Jerusalem can fail to respond to this call of the Lord. The Gospel tells us that the Magi, when they arrived in Jerusalem, lost sight of the star for a time. They no longer saw it. Its light was particularly absent from the palace of King Herod: his dwelling was gloomy, filled with darkness, suspicion, fear, envy. Herod, in fact, proved himself distrustful and preoccupied with the birth of a frail Child whom he thought of as a rival.

In reality Jesus came not to overthrow him, a wretched puppet, but to

overthrow the Prince of this world! Nonetheless, the king and his counsellors sensed that the foundations of their power were crumbling. They feared that the rules of the game were being turned upside down, that appearances were being unmasked. A whole world built on power, on success, possessions and corruption was being thrown into crisis by a child! Herod went so far as to kill the children. As Saint Quodvultdeus writes, "You destroy those who are tiny in body because fear is destroying your heart" (*Sermo 2 de Symbolo: PL 40, 655*). This was in fact the case: Herod was fearful and on account of this fear, he became insane.

The Magi were able to overcome that dangerous moment of darkness before Herod, because they believed the Scriptures, the words of the prophets which indicated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. And so they fled the darkness and dreariness of the

night of the world. They resumed their journey towards Bethlehem and there they once more saw the star, and the gospel tells us that they experienced “a great joy” (*Mt 2:10*). The very star which could not be seen in that dark, worldly palace.

One aspect of the light which guides us on the journey of faith is holy “cunning”. This holy “cunning” is also a virtue. It consists of a spiritual shrewdness which enables us to recognize danger and avoid it. The Magi used this light of “cunning” when, on the way back, they decided not to pass by the gloomy palace of Herod, but to take another route. These wise men from the East teach us how not to fall into the snares of darkness and how to defend ourselves from the shadows which seek to envelop our life. By this holy “cunning”, the Magi guarded the faith.

We too need to guard the faith, guard it from darkness. Many times, however, it

is a darkness under the guise of light. This is because the devil, as saint Paul, says, disguises himself at times as an angel of light. And this is where a holy “cunning” is necessary in order to protect the faith, guarding it from those alarmist voices that exclaim: “Listen, today we must do this, or that...”. Faith though, is a grace, it is a gift. We are entrusted with the task of guarding it, by means of this holy “cunning” and by prayer, love, charity. We need to welcome the light of God into our hearts and, at the same time, to cultivate that spiritual cunning which is able to combine simplicity with astuteness, as Jesus told his disciples: “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (*Mt 10:16*).

On the feast of the Epiphany, as we recall Jesus’ manifestation to humanity in the face of a Child, may we sense the Magi at our side, as wise companions on the way. Their example helps us to lift

our gaze towards the star and to follow the great desires of our heart. They teach us not to be content with a life of mediocrity, of “playing it safe”, but to let ourselves be attracted always by what is good, true and beautiful... by God, who is all of this, and so much more! And they teach us not to be deceived by appearances, by what the world considers great, wise and powerful. We must not stop at that. It is necessary to guard the faith.

Today this is of vital importance: to keep the faith. We must press on further, beyond the darkness, beyond the voices that raise alarm, beyond worldliness, beyond so many forms of modernity that exist today. We must press on towards Bethlehem, where, in the simplicity of a dwelling on the outskirts, beside a mother and father full of love and of faith, there shines forth the Sun from on high, the King of the universe. By the example of the Magi, with our little

lights, may we seek the Light and keep
the faith. May it be so.

Monday, 6 January 2014





The donkey: God speaks in surprising ways.

*Don't be disheartened; be prepared for surprises. In the book of Numbers (22:8ff.) we hear of a donkey who became a prophet of God. The Hebrews were about to end the long journey that led them to the promised land. Their passage through his territory frightened Balak, the king of Moab, who told Balaam, a seer, to stop them, in hopes of avoiding a war. Balaam, who was in

his own way a believer, asked God what to do. God told him not to go along with the king, but since the king insisted, Balaam set out on a donkey to do as the king said. The donkey, however, turned aside from the road because it saw an angel with an unsheathed sword, representing the opposition of God. Balaam tugged at the reins and beat the donkey, but could not get it to return to the road. Finally, the donkey opened his mouth and spoke, the beginning of a dialogue that would open the seer's eyes and turn his mission of cursing and death into a mission of blessing and life. This story teaches us to trust that the Spirit will always make his voice heard. Even a donkey can become the voice of God, can open our eyes and change our course when we go astray. If a donkey can do that, how much more can a baptized person, a priest, a bishop, a Pope do it? We need but rely on the Holy Spirit, who uses all of creation to speak

to us: he only asks us to clean out our ears, to hear better.

Saturday, 18 September 2021

**This address was given to the faithful of the diocese of Rome, on the occasion of announcing the forthcoming synod in 2023: "Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission."*



The Holy Family on the sorrowful road of exile.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, the Liturgy invites us to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Indeed, every nativity scene shows us Jesus together with Our Lady and St Joseph in the grotto of Bethlehem. God wanted to be born into a human family, he wanted to have a mother and father like us.

And today the Gospel presents the Holy Family to us on the sorrowful road of exile, seeking refuge in Egypt. Joseph, Mary and Jesus experienced the tragic fate of refugees, which is marked by fear, uncertainty and unease (cf. Mt 2:13-15; 19-23). Unfortunately, in our own time, millions of families can identify with this sad reality. Almost every day the television and papers carry news of refugees fleeing from hunger, war and other grave dangers, in search of security and a dignified life for themselves and for their families.

In distant lands, even when they find work, refugees and immigrants do not always find a true welcome, respect and appreciation for the values they bring. Their legitimate expectations collide with complex and difficult situations which at times seem insurmountable. Therefore, as we fix our gaze on the Holy Family of Nazareth as they were forced to become refugees, let us think

of the tragedy of those migrants and refugees who are victims of rejection and exploitation, who are victims of human trafficking and of slave labour. But let us also think of the other "exiles": I would call them "hidden exiles", those exiles who can be found within their own families: the elderly for example who are sometimes treated as a burdensome presence. I often think that a good indicator for knowing how a family is doing is seeing how their children and elderly are treated.

Jesus wanted to belong to a family who experienced these hardships, so that no one would feel excluded from the loving closeness of God. The flight into Egypt caused by Herod's threat shows us that God is present where man is in danger, where man is suffering, where he is fleeing, where he experiences rejection and abandonment; but God is also present where man dreams, where he hopes to return in freedom to his

homeland and plans and chooses life for his family and dignity for himself and his loved ones.

Today our gaze on the Holy Family lets us also be drawn into the simplicity of the life they led in Nazareth. It is an example that does our families great good, helping them increasingly to become communities of love and reconciliation, in which tenderness, mutual help, and mutual forgiveness is experienced. Let us remember the three key words for living in peace and joy in the family: "may I", "thank you" and "sorry". In our family, when we are not intrusive and ask "may I", in our family when we are not selfish and learn to say "thank you", and when in a family one realizes he has done something wrong and knows how to say "sorry", in that family there is peace and joy. Let us remember these three words. Can we repeat them all together: may I, thank you, sorry. I would also like to

encourage families to become aware of the importance they have in the Church and in society. The proclamation of the Gospel, in fact, first passes through the family to reach the various spheres of daily life.

Let us fervently call upon Mary Most Holy, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother, and St Joseph her spouse. Let us ask them to enlighten, comfort and guide every family in the world, so that they may fulfil with dignity and peace the mission which God has entrusted to them.

ANGELUS, Sunday, 29 December 2013





Epiphany: God and man journeying towards each other.

Today we are celebrating the Epiphany, that is, the “manifestation” of the Lord. This Solemnity is tied to the biblical narrative of the coming of the Magi from the East to Bethlehem in order to pay homage to the King of the Jews: an episode on which Pope Benedict gave a magnificent commentary in his book on the infancy of Jesus. This precise moment was the first “manifestation” of Christ to the nations. Thus, the Epiphany brings to the fore the universal opening of the salvation brought by Jesus. The

Liturgy today acclaims: "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you", because Jesus came for us all, for every nation, for everyone!

Thus, this Feast lets us see a double movement: in one direction, the movement of God towards the world, towards humanity — the whole of the history of salvation, which culminates in Jesus — and in the other, the movement of men towards God — let us think of religions, of the quest for truth, the journey of the nations toward peace, interior peace, justice, freedom. And this double movement is driven by a mutual attraction. What is it that draws God? It is love for us: we are his children, he loves us and wants to free us from evil, from sickness, from death, and to bring us to his home, to his Kingdom. "God, by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 112).

And from us too there arises a love, a desire: the good always draws us, truth draws us, life, happiness, beauty attracts us... Jesus is the meeting point of this mutual attraction, of this double movement. He is God and man: Jesus. God and man. But who took the initiative? God, always! God's love always comes before our own! He always takes the initiative. He waits for us, he invites us, the initiative is always his. Jesus is God made man, made flesh, he is born for us. The new star that appears to the Magi was a sign of the birth of Christ. Had they not seen the star, these men would not have set out. The light goes before us, truth goes before us, beauty precedes us. God goes before us. The Prophet Isaiah said that God is like the flower of the almond tree. Why? Because in that region the almond is the first to flower. And God goes ever before, he is always the first to seek us, he takes the first step. God goes ever

before us. His grace precedes us and this grace appeared in Jesus. He is the Epiphany. He, Jesus Christ, is the manifestation of God's love. He is with us.

The Church stands entirely within this movement of God toward the world: her joy is the Gospel, to mirror the light of Christ. The Church is the people who have experienced this attraction and bear it within, in their hearts and in their lives. "I would like to say — sincerely — I would like to say to those who feel far from God and from the Church — I would like to say respectively — to all those who are fearful or indifferent: the Lord is also calling you to be a part of his people and he does so with deep respect and love!" (cf. *ibid.*, n. 113). The Lord is calling you. The Lord is seeking you. The Lord is waiting for you. The Lord does not proselytize, he loves, and this love seeks you, waits for you, you

who at this moment do not believe or are far away. And this is the love of God. Let us ask God, on behalf of the whole Church, let us ask for the joy of evangelizing, for we were “sent by Christ to reveal and communicate the love of God to all men and to all peoples” (Ad Gentes, n. 10). May the Virgin Mary help us all to be missionary-disciples, little stars that mirror his light. Let us pray too that hearts be open to receiving the proclamation, and that all men and women may be “partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (Eph 3:6).

ANGELUS, Monday, 6 January 2014



Baptism: Jesus saves us by coming to meet us.

Today we are celebrating the Baptism of the Lord. A few days ago, we left Baby Jesus being visited by the Magi; today we find him as an adult on the banks of the Jordan. The Liturgy has us take a leap of some 30 years, 30 years about which we know one thing: they were years of hidden life, which Jesus spent with his family — some, firstly in Egypt, as a migrant to escape Herod's

persecution, the others in Nazareth, learning Joseph's trade — with family, obeying his parents, studying and working. It is striking that the Lord spent most of his time on Earth in this way: living an ordinary life, without standing out. We think that, according to the Gospels, there were three years of preaching, of miracles and many things. Three. And the others, all the others, were of a hidden life with his family. It is a fine message for us: it reveals the greatness of daily life, the importance in God's eyes of every gesture and moment of life, even the simplest, even the most hidden.

After these 30 years of hidden life, Jesus' public life begins. And it begins precisely with his baptism in the River Jordan. But Jesus is God; why does Jesus get baptized? John's baptism consisted in a penitential rite; it was a sign of one's willingness to convert, to be better, asking forgiveness of one's

sins. Jesus surely did not need it. In fact, John the Baptist tries to prevent it, but Jesus insists. Why? Because he wants to be with the sinners: for this reason he gets in line with them and does the same thing they do. He does so with the attitude of the people, with their attitude [of the people] who, as a liturgical hymn says, approached "with bare soul and bare feet". A bare soul, that is, without anything covered, like this, a sinner. This is the gesture Jesus makes, and he goes down into the river to immerse himself in the same condition we are in. Indeed, baptism actually means "immersion". On the first day of his ministry, Jesus thus offers us his "programmatically manifesto". He tells us that he does not save us from on high, with a sovereign decision or act of force, a decree, no: he saves us by coming to meet us and taking our sins upon himself. This is how God conquers the world's evil: by humbling himself, taking

charge of it. It is also the way that we can lift up others: not by judging, not by suggesting what to do, but by drawing near, empathizing, sharing God's love. Closeness is God's way with us; he himself says so to Moses: 'Think: what people has its gods as close as you have me?'. Closeness is God's way with us.

After this gesture of compassion by Jesus, an extraordinary thing happens: the heavens open and the Trinity is finally revealed. The Holy Spirit descends from the heavens in the form of a dove (cf. Mk 1:10) and the Father says to Jesus: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (v. 11). God manifests himself when mercy appears. Do not forget this: God manifests himself when mercy appears, because that is his face. Jesus becomes the servant of sinners and is proclaimed the Son; he lowers himself upon us and the Spirit descends upon him. Love calls upon love. It also applies to us: in each

act of service, in every work of mercy we perform, God manifests himself; God sets his gaze upon the world. This applies to us.

But even before we do anything, our life is marked by the mercy that was laid upon us. We have been saved freely. Salvation is free. It is the freely given gesture of God's mercy toward us. Sacramentally this is done on the day of our Baptism; but even those who are not baptized always receive God's mercy, because God is there, waiting, waiting for them to open the doors of their hearts. He draws near, allow me to say, he caresses us with his mercy.

May Our Lady, to whom we now pray, help us to cherish our baptismal identity, that is, the identity of being shown mercy, which lies at the base of faith and life.

ANGELUS, Sunday, 10 January 2021

