

Fourth Sunday of Advent A - The Call to Be a Christian

December 18, 2022.

Amidst all the activities that swirl around these final days before Christmas, the Church wants to make sure that we don't forget the real meaning of this great Christian holiday. Some may say we Christians are too commercialized spending too much money on Christmas decorations, Christmas trees and the nativity scene. During the traditional Christmas Tree Lighting in the Vatican and unveiling of the crèches, installed in St. Peter's Square and in the Paul VI Audience Hall, on December 3 Pope Francis said: **"The tree, with its lights, reminds us of Jesus who comes to illuminate our darkness...our existence often locked up in the shadow of sin, fear and pain...like trees we need roots, solid foundations to remain firm, grow and resist the winds of life. It is therefore important to cherish the roots, in life as in faith"**. He also reflected on the significance of the crib, which "speaks to us of the birth of the Son of God who became Man to be close to each one of us in its genuine poverty... **the nativity scene helps us to rediscover the true richness of Christmas...to become intimate with God, with the fragile simplicity of a small newborn, with the meekness ... with the tender affection of the swaddling clothes that surround him"**. The Pope therefore encouraged us to **"rediscover the surprise and amazement of littleness through the nativity scene, the littleness of God...who is not born in the splendor of appearances, but in the poverty of a stable."**

Yes, Christmas is the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, the day when we Christians everywhere celebrate Christ's birth. The exchange of gifts, the time that we will be spending with family and friends - these are good things, good ways to celebrate. **Exchanging gifts reminds us God gave us his greatest gift, our Saviour. Spending time with family members reminds us that the result of that gift was our salvation, which consists in our adoption into God's family through the grace we received at baptism. This is the heart of what Christmas is all about.** But it is not just something that happened in the past. Through the Church and the sacraments, **Christ wants us to stay with his newly adopted family throughout history. In a sense, every Mass is a new Bethlehem, a new coming of Christ among us. And every day he renews his invitation to us. What is that invitation?** St Paul described it well in the Second Reading (Romans 1:1-17): **a Christian is "called to belong to Jesus Christ" and "called to be holy." Christ comes at Christmas to save us, to call us out of a self-centered life and into a Christ-centered life. That's what it means to "belong to Jesus Christ" and "to be holy."**

Living a Christ-centered life means enjoying the friendship of Christ. One sign of friendship is doing things together. Friends help each other get through tough times. In the early days of American history, when new communities were springing up all over the country, groups of families used to get together for barn enlargement. A farmer needed a barn even more than he needed a house. But a single farming family couldn't construct a barn all by itself. So, all the neighboring families would get together and pitch in, making a whole day's celebration out of it, and a new barn would get built. **Christ chose to become one of us in order to build something much greater than a barn - he is building an everlasting Kingdom: his Church.** By becoming one of us, he has made himself and his efforts dependent on our cooperation. He invites us to help to build something that will last forever. For a true Christian, it is not enough just to enjoy Christ's forgiveness and grace; true Christians roll up their sleeves and take their place side-by-side with the Lord, raising up Christ's spiritual Kingdom. But how exactly do we respond to this invitation? The invitation is issued to our hearts, and so we need to respond in our hearts. In the Second Reading St Paul describes the key quality of a healthy Christian heart. He calls it the "obedience of faith." If Christ is our Lord and we are his faithful followers, then we should firmly believe in him by obeying him. He is our King; we are his subjects; we follow his law. This is what St Joseph did: as soon as God made his will clear through the message of the angel, Joseph simply obeyed. There is no way that he could have understood fully the supernatural nature of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph just took Mary home and named the child Jesus. Joseph could have

demanding a more detailed explanation. He knew that gossip would spread; his reputation was at stake. But those worldly concerns faded away as soon as God's will became clear. Joseph believed in God, and so he fulfilled God's will. That's the "obedience of faith." That's how we can continue to respond to God's invitation in our life - through obeying his will, as made clear through official Church teaching, through the commandments, or through the quiet voice of conscience. Let's not leave this Church without saying yes to God's will for us. Let's go into Christmas this year well-prepared to receive Christ, with our hearts warmed up through the obedience of faith.

Living a Christ-centered life means dedicating ourselves to Christ's priorities - and his highest priority is building up his Kingdom, the Church. In a sense, we could say that Christ has chosen to limit his omnipotence in order to involve us in his work of salvation, to give us an active role in building up his Kingdom. This is why he became a man on Christmas Day - because he wanted us to be able to become sons and daughters of God, co-workers of his Kingdom. He came to share in our humanity, so that we could share in his divinity. This is symbolized every time we celebrate Mass. During the offering of the bread and wine, the priest pours a few drops of water into the chalice full of wine. Those few drops of water get absorbed into the wine, and then together, with the words of consecration, they are transubstantiated into the blood of Christ. The water is like our human nature, and the wine is like the divine nature. The water is taken up into the wine, just as, through Christ's grace and incarnation, our human nature is taken up into God. During World War II, a church in Frankfurt, Germany, was heavily damaged by bombs. At war's end the parishioners began repairing. One badly broken object was a statue of Christ. They finally found most of the parts except the hands. After considerable debate and discussion about engaging a sculptor to make a new pair of hands, the people of the parish decided to leave the statue without hands. And they put a plaque beneath it that reads: **"Christ has no hands but our hands." We are called to carry on Christ's work, to belong to Jesus the Lord, to be holy. This is his invitation to us.**

Brothers and sisters, Christ came all the way from heaven to announce this Good News to us, to invite us to follow him to a truly abundant life. And twenty centuries later, we can still hear that invitation because his followers through the years have continued to pass that Good News on to every generation. Now it's our turn. We know Christ. We know the true meaning of Christmas. But all around us there are people who do not know Christ, or who have given up on him. There are people who may be celebrating Christmas on the outside, but they are hurting on the inside. Their lives are falling apart and they don't know where to turn. We do know where to turn. Our lives aren't in perfect shape by any means, but we have heard the call of Christ; we know his voice; we have set out on the path that leads to the only lasting fulfillment available to human beings. We at least have hope; we have access to the spiritual gas station of the Eucharist and the spiritual clinic of confession. And this gives us strength in our struggles. **It guarantees that even in the darkness of winter, at least a few Christmas lights are always shining in the depths of our hearts. All of this we have because someone, at some point, took the trouble to tell us about Jesus Christ, to invite us to follow him. Let's follow the example of Joseph in his obedience to God's call to holiness despite the difficulties or uncertainties that we have to face. We are asked to receive Christ as freely and fully into our hearts as Joseph did and to make the major decisions of our lives based on the faith given to us from God. In these beautiful days ahead of us, let's keep our eyes open for those people who need someone to tell them about Jesus Christ, and when we see them, let's pass on the Good News. That's the best possible present we can give Jesus on his birthday. God bless.**