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Church of St. Thomas More, Streaming Mass
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This Christmas is hardly the kind of Christmas anyone of us was looking forward to. Family gatherings, office parties, all the usual yuletide cheer, have been replaced by the anxiety of possible infection, the loss of a job for some, even worse, the loss of a relative or friend, the isolation, the boredom, the cancellation of long anticipated events--weddings, graduations, travel plans--with the warning that the worst is yet to come. Nine months of living in a time of plague has not made it any easier. Yet, the annual celebration of our Savior's birth comes to remind us of what is central, of what endures, of what really matters, when in years past the consumerism of the "holiday season" always threatened to overshadow its religious significance. We are thrown back to reflect on how our faith can support us in this difficult time.

The memory of Jesus' birth comes to us shrouded in mystery and trailing paradox. Here is God made flesh; infinity caught in a moment; eternity trapped in time; power and wisdom couched in a spindly arm. Angels bellow and blast the glory of the newborn King, but only darkness shrouds the poverty of that scene. In that birth we see the reversal of so many of our expectations and stereotypes. Our usual ways of judging, of evaluating what we count to be important or not, are all thrown into question. The God who is love itself takes on the flesh of a defenseless child to tell us that power and possessiveness, retaliation and revenge, will not cure what ails the human spirit. The Word is made flesh to disclose to us God's truth: that life is most truly lived, not in trying to escape from the limitations imposed on us by the conditions of space and time, by the vicissitudes of everyday life, but in engaging them more honestly, more directly, more courageously. Here is given to us in Bethlehem, in the backwaters of the then-civilized world, one who is Savior, Messiah and Lord.

We gather in faith to profess that the answer to life's riddles is found in the Babe of Bethlehem. Somehow that life has made all the difference in the world. Here we discover in God's Word, spoken in Jesus, that love is real, that hope is not an illusion, that there is no room for cynicism and despair. Here love appears vulnerable and invites from us not just detached observation but commitment, not intellectualizing but imitation, not casual observance but discipleship. Here the love that is God invites us to love as God loves--indiscriminately, unselfishly, willing to make the first move to be reconciled, not counting the costs.

Henri Nouwen makes a distinction between productivity and fruitfulness. It is the latter that Christmas gives us the opportunity to reflect upon when we honor Jesus,

the "fruit" of Mary's womb. In our working life, we concentrate a lot of our time on being productive. In making products or providing services, we strive to make them cheaper, better, faster. In our constant search for efficiency, effectiveness, competence, quality, innovation, being "Number One," we often lose sight of being human. In our relentless emphasis for success, accomplishment, relevance, power, reward, career, we put on ourselves pressure, worry, fear, doubt, stress. We often confuse making a living with making a life. Making a life is making our lives fruitful and a gift for others. St. Paul speaks of the "fruits of the Holy Spirit" (Galatians 5: 22-3) that can give life a sense of purpose and meaning.

How might the "fruits of the Holy Spirit" show themselves in our lives? They are our smiles, our laughter, our kisses, our embraces, our encouragement, our support, our hugs, our gratitude, our thanks, our care, our joy, our compassion, our gentleness, our trust in God, our kindness, our goodness, our patience, our humility, our hospitality, our presence, our friendship, our words of love, our acts of love, our every gesture of love, our faithfulness, our peace, our hopes, our gifts. Unless we spend as much time on nurturing these qualities, on being fruitful as on being productive, we are in danger of becoming a human "do-ing," rather than a human "be-ing."

St. Paul says, "Let put on the mind of Christ, that Christ may dwell in us." Now is the time to consider again the opportunity Christ offers, and see how his Spirit can transform our own human spirit. Now is the time, not tomorrow or next year, to enter into the mystery of Christ's birth. Now is the time, not just to believe in our heads, but to follow with our hearts.