There’s certainly much attention paid to family at this time of the year, what popularly is referred to as “the holidays.” It’s a time for family. Family get-togethers, family reunions; people make sacrifices to travel great distances to be with their loved ones.

And so also in the Church much attention at this time of the year logically is placed on the Holy Family. We are preparing for Christmas and the telling of the Christmas story, which is the story of how the Holy Family came about. It’s very appropriate, then, that Pope Francis inserted this Memorial of Our Lady of Loretto that we celebrate today, here at this time in the Advent season, because it’s a Memorial that focuses our attention on the house of the Holy Family, the house that Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land discovered there in the Middle Ages, and it was transported to Loretto in Italy. Now, the story goes that it was miraculously flown by angels to Loretto. Likely there was some miracle involved, but probably not without some human agency.

But the point is that whatever miracle happened for this house to be transported such a great distance, it is pointing to the greater miracle of how the Holy Family came about in the first place. We hear this story often throughout this Advent and Christmas cycle, as we heard again today, in the readings that are proper for this Memorial of Our Lady of Loretto. We heard that prophecy from Isaiah about the Virgin giving birth, and we heard about its fulfillment in our
Gospel reading for this Mass from the Gospel of St. Luke: the miracle of the Holy Family which came about not in the normal course of human events – the birth of God’s Son entering into the world, born of a virgin – but he needed a family to grow up in and his father provides that family for him; he was provided with a father – well, a stepfather – so he could grow up in an intact, loving family.

There is another prophecy we hear around this time of the year, and it’s one which gives an inspiration to the Simbang Gabi tradition. This is a prophecy from the Book of Wisdom, from which we hear, “When peaceful stillness encompassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word from heaven’s royal throne leapt into the doomed land.” God’s Word descends from heaven in the middle of the night. This finds its way into the popular Christmas carol, *Lo How a Rose Ere Blooming*: “It came a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night.” This, too, is where the tradition of Midnight Mass comes from, “Mass During the Night,” the time when it was prophesied that God’s Word would leap down from heaven to our doomed earth to redeem it.

And it also gave rise to the long-standing Catholic tradition of offering Mass early in the morning during Advent, especially in the days leading up to Christmas. In the Catholic tradition it’s called the Rorate Mass. Every Mass has an entrance antiphon – usually a short verse from Scripture – and a Mass gets its name from the first word or couple of words of that antiphon. “Rorate Mass” gets its name from the first word of this antiphon, which occurs on the fourth Sunday of Advent but it is found at other times as well as the antiphon for Mass, especially for
Votive Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary during Advent and in the Liturgy of the Hours as well.

This is a prophecy, or rather a passage, once again, from the prophet Isaiah where he says, “Drop down dew from above” (*rorate caeli*): “Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One.” God sends down His son, the Just One, to water the earth, our earth which is barren by the absence of holiness and virtue; He waters the earth to make it fertile for justice and receive the One who is just, His Son. He is the light who came down from heaven to enlighten our darkness. We, then, are called to be his light to the world. We do that only when we live ever more faithfully in the way that he teaches. His coming will make a difference if we let the dew of his grace moisten our hearts, making them fertile for his holiness, for his truth, for his justice.

The beautiful Simbang Gabi tradition – our Catholic tradition of offering these special Masses at this time of the year in Advent – it’s a cherished, special way of marking this very holy time of the year. But more than that, it is a means - and we must always be aware of this, pay attention to it - it’s a means of opening up for us the grace to bring Christ’s light into the world, Christ’s light which is symbolized by the parols which we will now bless at this Mass.

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