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Christmas and the call to holiness

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In a few short days, we will celebrate one of the most joyful events of the year: Christmas. After several weeks of preparation in the season of Advent, we will finally arrive at the glorious day when the birth of Jesus is recounted and relived by Christians all over the world. The muted spirit of Advent gives way to the full-throated rejoicing of Christmas, and our hearts are lifted up by the grace of God, which St. Paul tells us has appeared to save us all.

These recent months have been challenging and painful for our Church, as we hear of the sins and failings of some of her leaders. But, even in these days of scandal and challenge for the Church, there is cause for hope. The Son of God, dwelling eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, has come into this world, and has made his dwelling with us. As the Prologue of St. John's Gospel declares so powerfully: "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." Christ came into the world, "became flesh," because of our need for redemption. He came down to be with us out of love for humanity, in all its weakness and sinfulness. Christmas reminds us that God will never abandon us. He has thrown in his lot with us, his children, and made himself one with us forever.

It's a little known fact of history that Christmas was actually banned in New England during the seventeenth century. It was considered too "Catholic" by the Puritan rulers, and so the celebration of Christmas was outlawed. Those who dared to break this law risked fines or jail, just for celebrating our Savior's birth. All the more reason then that we, as Catholics, should celebrate Christmas with joy and vigor, not the commercialized version of Christmas hawked by retailers, but the true version that we find in the Gospels and in the Tradition of the Church. Christmas customs, like trees, presents, and special foods can come and go, but the true heart of Christmas, the birth of the God-Man in Bethlehem, remains forever.

This is a season filled with festivity and joy, and in some ways the secular world has taken over the celebration of Christmas. With all the activities that fill these weeks, it would be easy to lose sight of the real meaning of our celebration. I hope and pray that each one of us will keep our eyes fixed on Bethlehem, on the manger and the little child that lies within. He is the reason for our celebration, and his birth has changed the world — that is why we rejoice, that is why we celebrate with family and friends, that is why we exchange gifts.

It is good to remember in these happy days that not everyone is in a joyful situation. Some are homeless, and some are refugees, just as the Holy Family once was. Some don't have the means to put on a lavish feast or give brightly wrapped presents. Others are alone and isolated and have no one to celebrate with them. Let us not forget these brothers and sisters this Christmas. Just as the shepherds were invited to the stable that first Christmas, Jesus always reached out to the poor, the sick, those on the margins. Even now, he continues to reach out to the lonely, the poor, the sick, the homeless, and the sinner. But today, he does so through us, the members of his body, the Church. Our call to holiness this Christmas should include a call to charity, a call to compassion and generosity.

The celebration of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem should also bring us to a renewed spirit of prayer. The angels praised God as they announced the birth of Jesus. The shepherds came in search of this newborn child. Mary and Joseph looked in silence at the infant who was foretold to each of them, and who now was in their care. Our prayer at Christmas can follow this pattern of those first witnesses: coming into the Lord's presence, praising him with joy, and looking upon him in awed silence.

Jesus entered into our world to be near us, to be one with us, and through our celebration of Christmas, he invites us once again to enter into communion with him. This happens mostly beautifully in the celebration of the Mass, which for us as Catholics is an indispensable part of this joyful day. "Christ-Mass," the solemnity of our Lord's birth, is recounted in the liturgies that bring us back to Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," that place where the Son of God first appeared in the flesh. Jesus came to

abide with us, and so our prayer must continue, the daily prayer that allows us to abide always in his loving presence.

While the modern celebration of Christmas can get overwhelmed by material things, the humble birth of Jesus invites us all to a greater simplicity. When we can set aside the distractions of the world, it becomes easier to depend on the God who made us and redeemed us. Jesus was born in a stable to poor parents, and he was visited by shepherds who had little in the way of earthly wealth. These humble folk remind us that great wonders come to those who are not in love with the things of this world. Those who are poor in spirit, who put their trust in God through simplicity and detachment, will find it easier to recognize the Christ child who came to save us.

In short, dear friends, Christmas is about holiness. The birth of Jesus is an invitation to holiness, to a life lived in communion with our loving God. Christmas should change us and lift us up in joy and hope to the one who frees us from sin and gives us new life. May this Christmas be, for all of us, a time of grace and peace, a gateway to holiness and joy.