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Headline: The mercy of Christmas: The Word became flesh

A few weeks ago, the Church concluded the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. This year of grace was a wonderful invitation to all of us to experience more deeply the mercy of God and to live that mercy in our relationships with others. The Holy Doors of Mercy were closed, but Pope Francis reminds us that “the true door of mercy remains wide open for us.” And that door of mercy is Christ himself.

Very soon we will celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh. One of the Gospel readings for Christmas is from St. John, and proclaims the mystery of the Incarnation: “The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us.”

With these words, John expresses the profound mercy of God in the Incarnation and Birth of Jesus. From his dwelling in heaven, God literally reaches down to us and assumes our human nature, dwelling among us as one of us. He comes not to rebuke and to punish but to forgive and to save. Jesus comes as a merciful Savior, the Son of God made man.

The true mystery and beauty of Christmas seems at times to be obscured by the superficiality of our culture. In many ways, Christmas has been reduced to a commercial holiday with more than the usual festivity. Our modern way of observing Christmas has become more about presents, decorations, and food than it is about Jesus.

Don’t get me wrong. I love Christmas! Just ask my family and friends and former seminary students in Nebraska! No one enjoys the tree, the food, the music, and the gatherings more than I do. But Christmas is only what it’s meant to be if it’s focused on Jesus, who is “the reason for the season.” That phrase might sound trite, but it’s true.

Jesus took on our human nature and was born for us so we might share in his divinity and dwell forever with him in heaven. You could also say that he was born as a child to lift us out of ourselves, to raise our sights above our own agendas and desires, and to point us toward God. A little child has amazing power. We instinctively want to love and care for a child, and we are willing to put aside our own wants and needs to do so.

The child Jesus elicits that same kind of response. We are drawn to him and we want to embrace him. But in embracing Jesus, we aren’t just embracing another child. We are embracing the God-man, the Word made flesh, the one who comes to change us forever, who summons us to renewed faith and fidelity to God. God makes himself helpless to draw from us a response of love.

It is sometimes said that Christmas is a holiday for children, but I beg to differ. Certainly the excitement of this season has a special appeal to youngsters, and we can all enjoy the fun. But I would propose that Christmas is a very adult holiday.

Christmas is serious business, because it calls forth from us a deeper understanding of who we are and what our eternal destiny will be. To gaze on the Christ child is to be transformed, to be saved from the bonds of sin, to be healed of the sickness of soul that afflicts our world. To truly celebrate Christmas is to realize that God made us for holiness, for love, and for eternity. Yes, we are called to be childlike in our faith in God, but we must also have a mature understanding of what Christmas is all about.

If Christmas is all about God’s mercy, then we should avail ourselves of that mercy offered to us in the Sacraments, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. One of the best gifts we can give to our Lord is our repentance from sin, and he in turn will give us the gift of forgiveness. What greater gift could we desire? I hope each of us will make the time to go to confession during this Christmas season, and begin a regular practice of confession in the months that follow.

And the celebration of the Eucharist should also be an essential part of our Christmas joy. The name Bethlehem means “house of bread,” and in coming to the manger of Bethlehem we approach the one who is the Bread of Life. In his mercy, Jesus gives himself as heavenly bread to nourish and strengthen our souls. Let us often come to this House of Bread and receive the one who is the Word made flesh.

The festivity of Christmas can sometimes end up in a fair amount of self-indulgence. We eat, drink, make merry, and exchange gifts. But I would suggest that in all the merry-making, we should try to do something for others who can't do much for themselves. In other words, we should practice mercy. Perhaps we could help out at a holiday party or dinner for those in need, or visit an elderly neighbor who has no relatives close by. Illness is especially hard around Christmas time, so a visit to the hospital or a nursing home might give a little cheer to someone who can't be at home. There are many families who struggle to provide a joyful Christmas to their children, so it might be nice to provide a few gifts to those who can't afford them.

This is nothing more than living out the call to mercy that we've heard about for the past year. The Son of God in his mercy comes to us as a Savior, and he sends us to others as his emissaries of mercy.

Everyone should be able to enjoy Christmas, but the real joy of Christmas isn't in the tinsel and the lights. The real joy and beauty of Christmas is only found in gazing on the face of Jesus, the King of Mercy and Prince of Peace. This is the joy that endures and lasts into eternity.