

There may be some changes in our celebrations this year, but yes, dear friends, there will be Christmas, because whatever else happens, “Today is born for you a Savior, Christ the Lord.” – Bishop John Folda

Reflections for Christmas

“And the Word was made flesh and dwelled among us.” Soon after you receive this edition of *New Earth*, the Church and the world around us will celebrate Christmas. With the COVID-19 pandemic still running through our state, the celebration of Christmas might be a little different than other years, but it will still be Christmas. The celebration of our Lord’s birth is one of the pillars of our faith and our liturgical year as Catholics, and this year more than ever we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who was born in our humanity so that he could be our Savior.

The pandemic has imposed limitations on many of our routine activities, and it could put a crimp in some of our annual holiday festivities too. We might have to stay home rather than attending the regular round of holiday parties. We may decide in prudence to avoid large crowds. It might be necessary to refrain from traveling in the coming weeks. Concerns about illness might force us to forego the usual gatherings with family and friends that we look forward to at this time of year. Some of our family members might be unable to see their loved ones in person altogether because of the fear of infection. But Jesus will still be with us as he always is at Christmas. “The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us.”

A growing number of families have experienced the impact of COVID-19 in a very personal way. Family members have become sick, and many of us have lost loved ones to this mysterious disease. So, our celebration of Christmas might be touched by sorrow and mourning. But even then, we remember that Christ was born for one purpose: to conquer sin and death. Through his Incarnation, he took on our human nature in order to lift us up from our mortality into the eternal life of God.

A great number of our brothers and sisters have worked heroically during this time to care for and assist those affected by the pandemic. Our health care professionals and other caregivers have worked long, difficult hours to care for the sick and help them recover from their illnesses. These great men and women are always an inspiration, but this year in a special way we see their commitment and spirit of self-sacrifice. Many of them will not have time off to spend with their families because of the demands of their work. We owe them so much, and perhaps we can support them with our prayers and offer a special Christmas greeting to them this year in gratitude for their care for us and our loved ones. Thanks to all who care for the sick, the elderly, and the needy! You are living the spirit of Christmas every day.

There are some who are feeling economic hardship this year, perhaps because of a lost job, or a struggling business, or a difficult farm economy. They might feel the pinch especially now during the holidays. Reaching out with a word of encouragement, an offer to help, or a promise of prayer, could be a most welcome Christmas gift for a friend or neighbor trying to make ends meet. We shouldn’t forget that Jesus was made known first of all to shepherds, the humble of the earth.

If we’re feeling disappointed by the limitations we’re facing right now, it might help to remember the challenges that the Holy Family experienced at the first Christmas. Joseph and Mary were forced to travel to Bethlehem for the census, even as Mary approached the time of her delivery. They had no place to stay but a stable, where Mary finally gave birth surrounded by animals and straw. Jesus came into this world as a helpless infant, and was laid in a manger, a dirty feedbox. And then Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were forced to flee into Egypt to escape Herod’s murderous plans. Our vision of Christ’s birth is peaceful and beautiful—“All is calm, all is bright.” But we should remember that Jesus came into this world amidst poverty and the threat of violence. Certainly he can give us encouragement as we face our own present challenges. He is, after all, the newborn King.

Even in the most difficult situations, God’s grace can be found, and the circumstances of this year’s Christmas might actually bring us some unexpected blessings. If we have to curtail our festivity, this might help us to focus more intently on Jesus himself. If the season is a little quieter than usual, it could be an opportunity for some quiet prayer and additional Scripture reading, especially the narratives

of Christ's birth in Matthew and Luke. If there are fewer social gatherings, perhaps this would be a good time to make a few extra visits to adore Christ in the Eucharist at church, just as the shepherds and wise men adored him in the manger. If we don't spend quite as much on gifts for family and friends, perhaps we can give something extra to those in need, like the homeless in our community.

There may be some changes in our celebrations this year, but yes, dear friends, there will be Christmas, because whatever else happens, "Today is born for you a Savior, Christ the Lord." I pray that all of us will experience once again the joy of Christ's birth in our lives and rejoice in the hope that he gives to the world at Christmas. May we persevere in faith and continue to place our trust in the one who became a child and was born in a stable in Bethlehem.