

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 MIDNIGHT MASS (MISSA IN NATIVITATE DOMINI IN NOCTE) 2018
 BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
 WASHINGTON, DC**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, in the name of the Holy Father, I want to wish you and your loved ones a blessed and peace-filled Christmas. *Today in the City of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord!* What joy these words bring to the ears of people around the world and to those gathered here in this Basilica or watching on television. To all, I express the personal closeness and spiritual affection of Pope Francis and assure you of his prayers as we celebrate the birth of our Savior.

Tonight, heaven and earth meet, and the divine and human come together! This is the Mystery we celebrate – *the Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us.* (John 1:14). What does it mean to celebrate the Christ's birth today?

Perhaps we have forgotten what happened. Let us reflect on St. Luke's Gospel which we just heard ... At a moment in history, in a society which was divided – between conquerors and subjects, rich and poor – *a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled ... All went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.*

In that moment something happened, something which should have been forgotten but has not been. There was an event. A man and woman were awaiting their first child. They were going to a different town to register their names during a census. They were part of a people but were among the lowly and forgotten of the earth. They were searching for a place to stay so that they could have their child, but there was no room for them. They were forced to have their child in a tiny grotto.

Do we realize that this is what we celebrate – this event?!!! Do we recognize that this is why we have been so busy? To celebrate this event?! We will celebrate and spend time with our families, but have we taken time to remember that Christmas is a memory of an event – which still has relevance today? Busily consumed by work, parties, and activities, we easily forget the real meaning of this event!

This baby was born totally unknown, yet something profound had happened. The shepherds were mysteriously asked by an angel to come to see this child; the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they came, for the angel announced to them: *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

When this Good News was announced, heaven and earth rejoiced, and the angels cried out, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men of good will.”*

A bit later, the powerful of the day also heard of this birth. Matthew recounts that Herod became so concerned about the threat to his power that he consulted his whole administration who told him, “Something happened there!” They told him that people had been awaiting the Messiah; many people

thought that this Child could be the Messiah. Some mysterious people came from the East, following a star, to see the newborn Infant. This Child attracted people from all over the world.

This teaches us something about how to evangelize – not by platitudes or programs but by attraction. There was something wonderful about the Presence of this Child that drew shepherds, angels, and the Magi. Christianity is an encounter with Someone that fills us with fascination, and who not only responds to our heart, but also surpasses the most ambitious expectations that we could have.

Jesus Christ takes us out of mediocrity and middle-class boredom and leads us to wonder before a newness that fascinates life. This newness is not exhausted in an instant but continues persistently in history through the Church, that is, through the company of friends with whom we walk in ordinary life.

The Servant of God Luigi Giussani once said: “A new reality is not built on the basis of speeches or alternative projects but on living gestures of a new humanity in the present.” By concrete gestures, I mean those in which with your hands you can touch the humanity of the other, and, in this manner, we can all be more ourselves. So that this does not become an abstract phrase, closeness is necessary.

The real and tangible encounter with our brothers and sisters is necessary, especially with the most poor and vulnerable. I firmly believe that this is what Pope Francis is trying to teach the Church: In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word was made Flesh, communicating the closeness of God. God is with us. The Holy Father calls the Church, in light of our belief in the Incarnation, to be close to others.

The Word drew near to us, coming not in power in might, but in the tenderness of a little Child. The Son of God made Himself little to make us great. He gave himself to us so that we might give ourselves to Him and to love Him, even in the poorest of the poor. He shows us love so that we might respond in love. Saint Alphonsus Liguori writes:

“Jesus has chosen to become a little Child to make us love him, not only with an appreciative but even with a tender love. All infants attract the tender affection of those who look upon them, but who will not love, with all tenderness, a God whom they behold as a little Child, in want of milk to nourish, trembling with cold, poor, abased and forsaken, weeping and crying in a manger, and lying on straw? It was this that made Saint Francis cry out: ‘Let us love the Child of Bethlehem. Let us love the Child of Bethlehem.’”
(Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, Third Meditation for the Novena of Christmas)

This Child whose birth we celebrate this evening would be at the center of a controversy that will never finish – those who want to see Him and love Him and those who want to destroy Him. Those who want to see Him and those who follow Him even now, do so because of who Christ showed Himself to be: the Savior.

This event of the His coming was unforeseen and had an unforeseeable quality – a newness. St. Paul describes it in his letter to Titus, writing *“when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.”*

He promised His disciples that they would reach God if they followed Him. He made a proposal to them – a proposal charged with meaning: Follow me and you will see the glory of God! The Child born in

Bethlehem grew and gave a gift to the world – His Church. This Church, inserted in humanity, shares all the difficulties, challenges and wounds of a fallen humanity. But, in the end, the Church is the place where Jesus offers each person the chance to encounter Him, to receive His Holy Spirit, to receive the power to be His witnesses, and to exercise this witness daily.

We gather as a Church this evening to celebrate an Event, not something that simply happened two thousand years ago, but something that is alive, that proposes something new – something that opens us to a sense of Mystery, a sense of God and His Plan. Just think of what the shepherds must have felt at the Angel's announcement or when they saw the Child and His Mother. Think of the joy of the Magi when they saw the star and the fulfillment of their hearts' desire! Something absolutely new happened!

Does this birth not seize you too?!! It is this newness of His birth that must be shared with the world! Sometimes we must emerge from the past to understand the newness of what Christianity is: it is an announcement of an Event – a Person comes to save us. God comes as a Child to save us.

The Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us. The Church has a mission to announce God's Presence to humanity. It is this Presence that changes our lives – yours and mine – daily. God is still with us. The newborn Child mysteriously and surprisingly invites us, fragile as we are, to be part of this mission to announce with the angel, to each person we meet: *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*