

Let us beg God to help us receive his love

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"Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people...a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord" (Lk 2:10-11). Those words were spoken to shepherds over 2,000 years ago and are spoken to us today in our own time.

Be not afraid for a Savior is born for us. God's Word is made flesh and the promises given to us in Isaiah are fulfilled. We "have seen a great light." There is "great rejoicing...for a child is born to us, a son is given us...They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful" (Is 9:1-6). We have always understood that the promise to Isaiah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the one who brings true peace to our hearts!

St. Paul's letter to Titus reminds both him and us today, "The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways...to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-13).

My dearest sisters and brothers, tonight at this Christmas midnight Mass we celebrate the fulfillment of the promises given to us by our God. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, saves all people, even in our own time. We can ask the question, a very valid question, "Why does God do all of this? Why?"

In the course of history, we see, beginning with Adam and Eve, the constant rebellion of humanity. They desire to tell God how to be God. We observe the worship of false gods in the time of Moses, even though he has led them through the Red Sea. When Moses goes for 40 days and 40 nights, the Israelites build a golden calf. We see the rejection of the prophets. The rejection and the rebellion of the people of Israel is so deep they even participate in human sacrifice, offering their children, their infants, to the false gods, the Baals.

In the face of humanity's rejection of God, the question remains: "Why? Why does God send us a Savior?" It is a question that each of us must answer in his or her own heart if we are truly to come to know God and to receive him.

God does all of this for no other reason than love -- his love for every human person created in his image and likeness. God's deepest desire is that we freely receive that love. Even during the greatest rebellion, when the Father sends his own Son into the world and humanity thinks, "If we destroy him, we will no longer be bothered by God," Jesus is crucified for us, because of our hatred of God, because of our rejection of God, because of our sins, because we so desire to tell God how to be God. Not even amidst that rebellion does God walk away from humanity. Not even amidst that sin. Rather the Father raises Jesus from the dead so that we may know the depth of his love and his saving victory over sin.

Even in the midst of humanity's rebellion in the modern times in which we live, whether it is the false god of materialism, the false god of hedonism, of pleasure for the sake of pleasure, whether it is the false god of consumerism or war or genocide, or yes, even as we sacrifice our own children in the act of abortion, which, to those blind to God's love, seems to be "reasonable" or, even, a "good", our God still loves us and desires us to enter into his love. All of these are ways

today which express humanity's desire to tell God how to be God, or to reject God. Yet, our God still hungers and longs for us to come freely to him and to recognize the depth of his love for us. He will never impose his love on us, but only invite us into it.

The greatest struggle for a human person is to receive that love of God, because it seems too good to be true. We think it is impossible, yet when we allow God to work within us we can see the glory of our great God. We can see the truth of Jesus Christ and the depth of his love for us. And when we begin to receive that love and let that love burn within our hearts, not letting fear rule our hearts, not letting selfishness rule our hearts, but rather receiving the love that God so desires for us to know, it is precisely then that we enter into the fire of that love, that we are set free. In receiving the Father's love, we experience true freedom, the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. We no longer remain enslaved to sin and the darkness of our modern age, but are eager to do what is truly good – of God. We love God and keep his commandments, knowing in our hearts that his love will lead us into the true and good.

That is what St. Augustine experienced in his conversion. That is what St. Paul experienced in his conversion. That is what all great saints and holy people experience -- Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, St. John Vianney, Therese, the Little Flower, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and John Paul II. Every saint and holy person who has gone before us experienced and believed in God's love for them. They abandoned the influence of their own age and embraced the love and truth of the Gospel! It is precisely the reception of God's love that transforms the human being. Yes, even today in a world that so desires to determine what is good and evil, the encounter with God's love transforms us so that we may receive the truth of the Word made flesh, and the love of the Father for us!

When we gaze upon the Nativity scene, we see God who has truly become flesh. He comes not to a palace, he comes not to a rich person's home, but he comes in abject poverty to reveal the depth of his love. Certainly it isn't the way that we would plan it as human beings today who are so enamored with Hollywood, materialism and wealth. For those of you who saw the movie "The Nativity Story" you saw the poverty into which Jesus was born, and the poverty of the shepherds. In their poverty, the good news is first proclaimed to them! You see the humanity of Jesus as he is born, a defenseless infant, who is true God and true man, born from the womb of Mary. That is the love that is revealed tonight! That is the love that the Father desires each one of us to receive and to say "yes" to! It is in that encounter with our God that we see the shepherds rush to visit Jesus, trusting in the good news given to them of he who brings true peace to those who believe in him.

God's favor truly rests on each one of us when we receive that love and say "yes" to it. The Father comes to us in the midst of our own sins and wounds to tell us of his eternal love for us. It is precisely that love that St. Paul points to for Titus, and for all of us, to see. It is that love that Isaiah speaks of, the zeal of God for us. God's zeal for us tonight is that we receive his Son!

As we continue with our celebration of this feast of Christmas in 2006, I encourage each one of us to meditate upon the great love that God has for us. Each of us is created in his image and likeness. That is the dignity of the human person. Each of us is created for the love of God and to receive his love and live in that love at this time in history. That is a dignity bestowed by God that no one can ever take away from us.

I know that some of you who are here come to Mass only on Christmas. To you, my dearest brothers and sisters, I beg of you to receive the love of God in your heart. The only reason that you are not here every Sunday is because you have not received that love. Whether you are aware of it or not, you have not said "yes" to the love of the Father in your heart. The seed is there, that has been planted in your baptism, and yet you continue to rebel and continue to say "no". You will never experience peace or true happiness until you say "yes" to that love and receive it in your hearts and live it each day. I encourage you, my beloved brothers and sisters, each of us present here tonight, to meditate on the greatness of God's love for us. That is the

truth that is proclaimed in the readings tonight. A child is born for us, a Son is given us, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us. A Savior is born for you!

How much more clear does God have to make it? How much more clear must he make it for us to receive his love and to fully trust in his love for us? To say "yes" to it and to live within it, so that our every thought, word and deed flows from his love? Let us beg God tonight, each of us, even those of us who go to Mass every day, to grant to us a greater capacity to receive his love and to know his love in our hearts -- that our hearts, too, may burn with the love that he has placed in them, that our hearts may burn with the same love, the zeal, that he has for us. Beg for the grace of a deeper trust in the Father's love for you! Then may each of us hear, at this midnight Mass and each day of this week as we celebrate Christmas, the words of the angel, "Do not be afraid...a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).