

+ MIDNIGHT MASS

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
December 25, 2018

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit Amen.

And suddenly with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God, and saying: Gloria in altissimis Deo, and on earth peace to men of good will.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very dear sons,

In accordance with the age-old liturgical tradition, we celebrate today three Masses: the Angels' Mass at Midnight (now); the Shepherds' Mass at dawn; and the King's Mass in late morning. The first two of these masses emphasize the human nature of Christ, while the third takes us into the depths of the Lord's divinity, into the abyss of His eternal generation from the Father. But these various aspects of the mystery of Christmas appear to us in perfect harmony. They point to the one Christ, the one Word-Made-Flesh. It is this fully Catholic, complete, idea of the superabundant unity of the Christian mystery, that we find expressed in words that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux lends to the Blessed Virgin Mary in one of his Sermons having to do with the moment when the Son of God became Man in her immaculate womb. The holy Doctor of the Church reports thus Mary's meditation:

“Let it be done to me according to your word.” Let it be done to me concerning the Word according to your word. May the Word, who in the beginning was with God, become flesh of my flesh, according to your word. I beg that the Word be to me, not [a word] which once pronounced fades away, but which conceived remains, clothed with flesh and not with air. Let it be to me, [a Word] not only audible to the ear, but visible to the eyes, one which hands can touch and arms carry. And let it not be to me a written and mute word, but one incarnate and living, this it to say, not [a word] scratched by dumb signs on dead skins, but one in human form truly graven, lively, within my chaste womb, not by the tracings of a dead pen, but by the markings of the Holy Spirit.¹

And so it is that the true Word-Made-Flesh, conceived by the action of the Holy Spirit in the Immaculate womb of the Blessed Virgin, comes forth today, on Christmas, into the world here below, like the Bridegroom mentioned in the psalm, emerging from the bridal chamber. Saint Augustine summarizes the deeper meaning of the event as follows:

For the Word was the bridegroom, and human flesh was the bride; and both are the one Son of God and likewise the Son of Man. That womb of the Virgin Mary where he became the head of the Church was his bridal chamber; he came forth from there... [and] “has rejoiced as a giant to run the way” (Ps. 18).²

¹ Saint Bernard in 4th Homily Super Missus Est (4,11: PL 183, 86).

² Tractate 8 on Saint John.

No doubt, the holy Angels, who fill the sky above the wintry countryside with their heavenly singing of “Gloria in Excelsis Deo,” are already able to penetrate to a large extent the mystery of the Word Incarnate. They have been initiated into the secrets of God and are now ready to serve the Son of God made Man from this day forward. Even the mute elements of Creation get into the act, as the Star of Bethlehem guides the Gentiles toward the blessed place. The shepherds, on the other hand, who hurry to the Stable to investigate the message that was given to them by God through the angelic ministry, are awed by the wondrous scene that presents itself to their eyes: they do not quite realize what has happened. And yet, according to the Gospel, “they [too] understood [something] of the word that had been spoken to them concerning the child.”³ As for the new mother, the proper Mother of God, she has the highest and most intimate insight into the mystery of all, but keeps discretion, pondering in her heart all the words and events surrounding the great event of the advent or coming of the Word into the world. Truly there is nothing in the history of mankind so touching and moving as this Birth in the Stable.

How is it then that we human beings lose, little by little, the wonder of Christmas? Why are not all men, women, and children on every continent, every place totally won over by such an event, by such a mystery, whose power of attraction is more than sufficient to move the entire world? Why are not *all* men Christians? In fact, in many of our post-modern societies—for example in our America—the incomparable joy of Christmas seems to be *fading* rather than growing. Perhaps the problem lies in the fact the Christmas is so big we cannot see it anymore. It was Chesterton who wrote somewhere—paradoxically, as is his custom—that “a man can be blind to anything providing it is big enough.” Of course there is the terrible problem of superficial joy, of the tons of tinsel and of virtual reindeer running across computer screens that distract the human race from the central message of Christmas, but that is just the outer skin of the prodigious and earth-shaking fact which remains.

In reality, in point of fact, Christmas is still there and grows each year in the hearts of all men and women—and especially in children. There are joyless places, formerly vibrant Christian societies, especially in northern Europe, where the churches are almost all closed, where great is the confusion about Church and about churchmen. But Christmas is inscribed in the ancestral memories of these peoples too: it cannot be entirely forgotten. The practice of the three Masses of Christmas will return with a holy and merciful vengeance. We must hold on to the light as best we can and thank God for the beauty of the Roman Catholic liturgy, which is the greatest cultural expression ever given to the coming of the Divine Infant. “Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis”. We do not know in what tongue the Angels sang for the shepherds outside Bethlehem, but for us it will always be in Latin, the tongue God chose for the peoples of the Western World. As we assist at Holy Mass and pause for a moment before some Manger Scene, let us remember and say for ourselves what the Blessed Virgin Mary whispered (according to Saint Bernard): “I beg that the Word be to me, not [a word] which once pronounced fades away, but which conceived remains, clothed with flesh and not with air...And let it not be to me a written and mute word, but one incarnate and living.” Amen. Alleluia.

³ Luke 2:17.