

When the pandemic started back in the Spring, we were in the middle of Lent and all public masses were suspended until June 1<sup>st</sup>. And so we celebrated the liturgies for Holy Week and Easter in an empty church, which was so sad. So while we're not 100% back to normal yet, I have to say that it is *so great* to celebrate the Solemnity of Christmas *with parishioners, with all of you* in our beloved parish church!

Brothers and sisters, while the celebration of Christmas may be different this year for all of us, it's important to remember that ***COVID is not cancelling Christmas! Nothing—no force on this earth—could ever cancel Christmas!*** The small and vulnerable baby, Whose birth we celebrate tonight/today, is more powerful than any virus and pandemic! Why? Because this tiny baby *is the Son of the living God, the eternal Victor over sin, suffering, and death* and as the Light of the world, our Savior will *continue to lovingly lead* us through this global darkness that we're all facing together.

Brothers and sisters, *nothing could ever cancel Christmas because nothing could ever cancel God!* And Christmas reminds us

that God must *never* be underestimated and that His love, mercy, and goodness is more powerful than any evil or suffering in this world!

In the midst of this terrible pandemic, we need to remember one of the great pillars of our Catholic faith, which we celebrate at Christmas: *our circumstances don't define us! Our suffering and our sins don't define us! Rather, just as Christ defines Christmas, so He also defines us!* Indeed, by virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation, we are beloved children of the Father, Who invites us *through* Christ and *in* the Holy Spirit to share in His divinity and glory for all eternity!

Our circumstances, especially now in the midst of this pandemic, may include terrible pain, suffering, and loss, whether it's on a physical, emotional, familial, or economic level. Our circumstances may overwhelm us at times with anxiety, stress, fear, sorrow, discouragement, and anger. And yet Christmas reminds us that *in Christ, we are greater than our circumstances!* Just as He defined Mary and Joseph, the Christ child *defines us and because He defines us*, we can enjoy great inner happiness, peace, freedom, and joy *in spite* of our circumstances!

Centered on Christ, our Blessed Mother Mary and Joseph did not allow their difficult circumstances on that first Christmas to define them! Christ our Savior, born for us in the manger as a vulnerable and defenseless baby, is more *powerful than our circumstances!* One who belongs to Christ and gives their whole life to this baby in the manger has *every reason to rejoice!* So as disciples of this baby, we shouldn't let the circumstances of this pandemic or any other type of suffering destroy our Christmas! We shouldn't let anything rob us of our Christmas joy and peace, which comes to us from Christ our Savior!

St. Leo the Great, one of the greatest popes and Doctors of the Church living in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, eloquently wrote: "Dearly beloved, today our Saviour is born; *let us rejoice*. Sadness should have no place on the birthday of life. The fear of death has been swallowed up; life brings us joy with the promise of eternal happiness. No one is shut out from this joy; all share the same reason for rejoicing. Our Lord, victor over sin and death, finding no man free from sin, came to free us all."

While the secular world tries to manipulate Christmas for purely commercial and materialistic purposes, it doesn't take long for us to

realize that no material gift could ever bring us the lasting joy, peace, and happiness that we naturally desire as human beings. Only this small baby, the Son of Mary and Joseph born into utter poverty, can give us the lasting joy, peace, and happiness that we seek. Why? Because this child will save us from the evil that seeks to destroy us. Make no mistake: our sins are the greatest threat to us in that they can kill us spiritually and separate us from God forever—such an eternal loss should truly horrify us.

***Yet there is hope!*** Christmas reminds us that we don't have to remain dead in our sinfulness! Christmas proves that God, out of His unconditional love and infinite mercy, does not abandon His human creatures to the darkness of sin, suffering, and death. Christmas demonstrates that ***God does not give up on us as a human race!***

Literally the ***Good News*** of Christmas is that the horrors of sin and hell are about to be conquered by the all-powerful love and mercy of God, Who became ***one of us*** in order to save us! God became man in our Lord Jesus Christ ***to take back what is rightfully His*** and rescue us from the powers of hell!

Brothers and sisters, our joy tonight/today is borne out of the Truth that ***Christmas is about Easter!*** The child born in Bethlehem is destined to vanquish the forces of evil through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Sometimes, I think the cultural sentimentality of Christmas can blind us to the powerful reality that this baby, born for us in Bethlehem, is a Warrior! Jesus is a Warrior Who has come to fight for us and defeat the forces of evil once and for all! This child will not fight with hatred and violence, which are the weapons of the world. Rather He will fight with love, mercy, compassion, and justice. The name of “Jesus” literally means in Hebrew “God saves.” So in reality, Christmas is a monumental victory in God’s ongoing war against the devil and his minions, a war which will ultimately be won by Christ on the cross at Calvary!

So brothers and sisters, we celebrate Christmas ***because*** of the ultimate divine victory of Easter! As disciples of Jesus, ***we are defined*** by the definitive victory of Christ over sin, suffering, and death! Christ is ***born for us*** so that He can ***die for us*** and save us from our sins! This is the beautiful unity and continuity of our Catholic faith!

Undoubtedly, one of the most popular words of 2020 is “distance.” While we may be keeping physically distant from each other for the sake of public health and safety, ***Christmas reminds us that God does not keep His distance from us!*** Christmas, which is centered on the Incarnation—the historical reality that God became man in our Lord Jesus Christ, powerfully demonstrates ***that God is not distant from us, but rather that He is so close to us.*** Indeed, Jesus’ name is *Emmanuel*, which is Hebrew for “God-with-us.”

God did not create us for isolation or distance from Himself. Rather, ***in Jesus***, God is ***truly with us and one of us and therefore, we must rejoice at His saving presence among us!*** In assuming our human nature, God has redeemed and elevated our humanity to a divinity that we didn’t enjoy before! This is a magnificent divine gift! The Incarnation is also a great victory over the forces of evil, which despise human nature and always seek to pollute and destroy it.

The awesome reality is that the Son of God ***continues*** to be with us ***through*** His Catholic Church and the sacraments He established, ***most***

*especially* the Holy Eucharist, which is the greatest visible Gift on earth because it is truly Christ Himself: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity!

So brothers and sisters let us rejoice now and always, remembering that we are *defined* by Christ and that *nothing* can cancel Christmas because *nothing* can cancel God and His victory over sin and death—a victory that is made present to us in the Church and Her Sacraments.

As we celebrate this great Feast and victory of Christmas and prepare to adore and receive our newborn Savior in the Most Holy Eucharist, let's joyfully heed the words of St. Ambrose from the 4<sup>th</sup> century: "Open wide your door to the one who comes. Open your soul, throw open the depths of your heart to see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the sweetness of grace. Open your heart and run to meet the Sun of eternal light that illuminates all men."