Spirituality



Pope Francis delivers his Christmas blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world) from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 25, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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So that I don't forget, at the very beginning, I'm anxious to express to all of you my thanks for allowing me to become part of this parish family and to celebrate Mass in this beautiful church with such a believing community of people. I truly thank all of you. I have found this experience very enriching in my own spiritual life. I wish to all of you today all the possible blessings that Jesus can bring into your life as we celebrate his birth.

The Nativity of the Lord

December 25, 2019 — At the Vigil Mass

Isaiah 62:1-5

Psalms 89

Acts 13:16-17, 22-25

Matthew 1:1-25

Probably most of us are aware that this feast of Christmas is so important and so filled with meaning and a very powerful message for our own spiritual life. It's so important that, in fact, there are three separate liturgies to celebrate this one feast day. As you know, there's a liturgy that they usually celebrate the night before. In the old days it used to be at midnight, but not so much anymore. Then there's the liturgy at dawn and the liturgy for the day. Each of those liturgies provides its own particular experience for us.

The midnight liturgy is the first liturgy. We're all very familiar with that story as recorded in Luke where Mary and Joseph are suddenly in distress without any place to go and the baby Jesus is about to be born. They find a safe place, actually in a cave that is behind a place where people stayed. There was no room for them in the front so they were in the back with the animals. That's where Jesus was born, the son of God.

It's an amazing way for God to come into our human history, but that's how it happened. He chose to be the poorest of the poor, homeless, and one who needed support, guidance, and strength. God comes as a tiny infant. As I say, we know that story well and we draw many lessons from it. Then the Mass at dawn has a different kind of experience provided by it. It's reflective. We have the incident where the shepherds, who experienced an illumination from God about this newborn infant just outside of Bethlehem, and they come to discover who it is.

They tell Mary and Joseph what has been their experience guided by angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest." Then Luke says, after he describes this visit, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." That's a good message for us — to treasure the words that God speaks to us and to ponder them as Mary did, to try to get the deepest meaning and the deepest urging from God to bring about change in our life because Jesus has come. We must ponder all these events.

But then today, in this third liturgy of Christmas, it's a much more profound one, actually, the scripture lessons. It asks us to go back to before the beginning of time when there was only God, no universe, no world. In the beginning was God. But then John tells us how with God was God's word. It's the first beginning of our understanding of God as a community of persons. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then that word, the image of God, who is God, is born into human history.

John goes on to describe how the baptist came before him, how he led the way, prepared the way, and then how Jesus comes into our life to become part of our human history, one of us, like us in every way except sin. He is, as he himself declares later, the way, the truth, and the life. He is the one who enters our human history to bring healing for our failures, to heal the wounds that we create within our own selves by our evil actions, the wounds we create in the human family by falling away from God and God's way of love.

Jesus comes to be the way, the truth, and the life. That's what the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "In the past God has spoken to our ancestors through the prophets at many times in different ways, but in our times God has spoken definitively to us through God's son. He is the one whom God appointed heir of all things and through whom God created the universe." That's a way of reminding us and calling to our awareness again that Jesus came to show us how to live in this human family and to live in such a way that what God intended when God created

this world, this universe, perhaps other universes, but especially when God created our human family, God had intentioned that we would live in peace and come to a fullness of life and joy.

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But evil, sin enters in and destroys, or at least brings into great danger, the plan God has for every person in all of human history to have a full human life, to be happy in this world and to live with God forever in heaven. The message that the author of the letter to the Hebrews gives to us a little further on is to listen to him. Listen to this one whom God has sent. Follow him and you will find, first of all in your own heart, peace, joy, and an ability to overcome any difficulty because the son of God is with you, and the ability to try to bring about change in our human family so we can work for peace, fullness of life for every person, and make the reign of God happen.

That's why Jesus came — to show us the way. As we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate with joy and with hope, but also with some determination to bring about change in our life as we listen to Jesus and follow his way so that all those gifts of peace and love and joy that he brings, we will share more fully and share every day in every possible way. That's how we celebrate Christmas — by welcoming Jesus into our midst, into my life, trying to change my life so that it's like his. That will give us the fullest Christmas joy we could ever have.

Editor's note: *This homily was given Dec. 25 at St. Ambrose Church, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*