

**Christmas Day Mass**  
**(Venice, St Mark's Basilica - December 25, 2016)**  
**Homily of the Patriarch Francesco Moraglia**

Beloved brothers and sisters, Merry Christmas to you all!

At Christmas, we find ourselves in front of a small child who is in need of everything; thus God's mercy manifests itself.

Thank you, then, to Pope Francis for letting us live the Year of Mercy. It has helped us, in fact, to put back into the centre of the Church's life God's Mercy and this is the first message of Christmas, which does not require any human invention or addition but, rather, requires only to be welcomed and rediscovered through a simpler, freer faith. A disciple is not, in fact, greater than his master (cf. Matthew 10; 24 - 25).

Pope Francis in the Bull proclaiming the Jubilee thus outlined the features of God's Mercy: *"In the" fullness of time "... He sent forth his Son, born of the Virgin Mary to reveal to us his love permanently. Who sees Him sees the Father. Jesus of Nazareth with his word, with his gestures and with his whole person reveals the mercy of God "(Pope Francis, Misericordiae Vultus. Bull proclaiming the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, n. 1).*

Christmas is, at the same time, both a humble and a powerful expression of the Divine Mercy. The Child lying on the straw is the Mercy of God revealed to every man, in every time, in every culture and this is God's disruptive choice, open to everyone and not excluding anyone, mediated through a Child in need of everything, that only asks to be made welcome.

Who, then, is better able than this Child to recount the human drama in our time? Who better than he can express the welcome to life threatened in all its phases by death: the refugee, the unborn child, the terminally ill, the prisoner of ideology, the doubter, the sinner. Yes, bodily and spiritual works of mercy are the Christmas experience.

It is sad that at Christmas, in front of God's welcome and hospitality, some - and among them those who call themselves Christians - are able to see danger in the Child of Bethlehem, an abuse of power and, therefore, for example, those who declare their opposition to the Nativity Scene; in this way they erect barriers and offend the sensibilities of many. It is difficult to understand how they cannot grasp the message of welcome, fraternity and openness that comes directly from the Baby and the crib.

Others, however, place themselves in opposition to the Nativity Scene in the name of Secularism, which is not based on the true and full human freedom which, obviously, also applies to the religious sphere. Here we are faced, then, with a concept of secularity which is - in retrospect - a form of secularism which believes that religion must be closed within the conscience or the sphere of private life.

History repeats itself with monotonous regularity and, not infrequently, some old ideas are presented as "news." Those old speeches covered in dust are presented as modernity!

Finally, there are those who see in the Nativity Scene the expression of a worldwide sacred festival which should, therefore, be transformed into the most "politically correct" festival of lights or winter festival or Father Frost ... calendars using such expressions have even been made.

In this regard, G. K. Chesterton's words come to mind, when he writes that the unbeliever, who thinks of himself as more emancipated than the person of faith: "*When a man stops believing in God he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything.*"

However, it is difficult to see in the Crib and then, by extension, in the symbols of the crucifixion, intolerance or religious, cultural, or ethnic abuses which hinder either welcome or integration. Conversely, objective and non-ideological reflection will show that it is thanks to the crib and the crucifix – and what they express - that in the West, and especially in Italy, a society has developed which capable of welcoming, of inclusion and true secularism. However, modern Europe displays callousness in the face of the issue of migration, focussing instead on economic and financial issues.

Here Italy appears increasingly isolated, and this is a source of both true sorrow and great boldness. The welcome and assistance are never the result of chance; precisely in these situations Italy expresses, despite its widespread secularism, a culture that is inspired strongly by the Gospel, and thus makes living those works of spiritual and physical mercy that Pope Francis has repeatedly called for during the Year of Mercy. The culture of welcome is truly active in our people because, in our history, we have also experienced the hard roads of migration.

If we do not take into due consideration the culture and history of a people and the characteristics of an area, we act in an irrational and anti-historical manner. Holding "a-historical" and "a-cultural" outlooks means that we fail to understand that, in the end, God will not suffer the consequences, but humanity. Yes, the real loser, in the end, will be Man and it is not hard to see signs of this already.

The Readings we have just heard offer us an Old Testament text and one from the New Testament - the book of Isaiah and the Letter to the Hebrews; in their different ways they speak of Christmas as a work of God's Mercy, something that comes from above, from Him, and which we should simply welcome.

*"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, the messenger of good news, who publishes salvation ... the Lord hath comforted his people."* This is the message of Isaiah (Is 52: 7-10), while the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that *"God, who in many and various ways in ancient times spoke to the fathers through the prophets, lately, these days has spoken to us through his Son ..."* (Heb 1; 1 - 6).

The Gospel of John also reiterates how God's Mercy is given to us and comes to us in reality: *"In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God ... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory ... from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"* (Jn 1; 1,14,16).

God's mercy – as we know - is His own work and not a human invention - as if God were short of ideas and he needed our advice ... The Mercy of God is expressed in the humanity of

Jesus, in his gaze, in his words, in his gestures, in his way of speaking about God and man but, even more, that Mercy allows us to look, to listen, to say yes to His plans.

Living Christmas consists, first of all, in letting Him lay his eyes upon us, just as two thousand years He did with the apostle Nathanael, telling him: *Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree* (Jn 1, 48). Or when He looked at the rich young man and invited him to follow Him (Mk 10, 21).

The shepherds who answer the call of the angels and go to Bethlehem are the true guides to the Mystery of God. Mystery is both the symbol and the presence. The symbol reveals and at the same time, protects from prying eyes; that's why, if we regard the Child as someone who already knows everything, we will never truly reach the heart of the Mystery of God.

I recall another sobering thought of Chesterton that brings to mind those who are continually doubtful: *"You can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it."*

The Christian Christmas is about God who enters into history for the purpose of Salvation; so, on the one hand, He attracts and inspires closeness, on the other He holds us off and creates a distance. The presence of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds and, on the contrary, the absence of the powerful, the self-satisfied and those satiated with life, those who already feel safe. We do not find there the powerful and the strong powers of that time, those who, like the Pharisee, considered themselves superior to other men, and thanked God because they were not sinners; nor, in Bethlehem, do we find the imperial power of Rome or the theocracy of Israel.

Christmas cannot be reduced to the charm of the lights, the sounds and the gifts because, in doing so, we would not only belittle it but also betray it. At Christmas we should take seriously the statement: *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory ..."* (Jn 1:14). This implies that very real abasement and emptying which will mark the entire life of Jesus: the thirty years of life in Nazareth (almost his entire lifespan), the three years of public life and, finally, the passion and death.

God's mercy is sharing in God's offer of Himself to humanity, it is He who has time for us and makes plans with us whilst walking alongside us, step by step, day after day. This is the realism of Christmas and the Christian: *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (Jn 1:14). A reality which is actualised in history.

Christmas shows, in a simple and strong manner, the Christian reality that - from the perspective of the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* - summons, announces, clothes, educates and transfigures everything in order to include everything in the logic of God who comes to meet Humanity.

Thus the spirituality of Christmas demands that we be faithful to the Master and, therefore, to *"become flesh"*; Today this spirituality is alive, and there are more and more demands from a culture in which it is increasingly difficult to recognize and welcome the human being. This becoming flesh, following the example of God who becomes man, leads us to be within the world without being of the world and to love it with the guidance of Christ who is Mercy itself, namely forgiveness and conversion.

The novelty of Christianity is to stay in the world, not loving simply because we are loved in return or benefit in some way, but because our love, in its turn, begets love; the spiritual and physical acts of mercy give substance to Christmas through personal relationships and in those social situations where we can seek to build human relations from the Word made flesh.

Christmas cannot be switched on and off like the lights at night, but asks to be witnessed throughout the entire year, by taking on the interest that God has in humanity.

In becoming flesh He thus becomes part of our own bodies, and this is also expressed in the prayer that, for Christians, we should be able to participate in the characteristics of the Incarnation through Christmas. A Christian prayer - as taught by Teresa of Avila, a great teacher of prayer - then asks us to gaze also on the totality of the mystery of Christ's humanity, to contemplate not only the light of the resurrection, but also the darkness and shadows of the mystery of the passion and, finally, not only what He bore on his physical body but also that which is a continuing symbol of the Church, his mystical body. We must also, rediscover prayer through the actual perspective of Christmas.

This year Christmas challenges us once more about our way of life. Yes, even our own Christmas could be a post-Christian Christmas; it is easy, in fact, to even store Jesus in the attic among the things we don't use alongside the crib and the crucifix. Many Christmas celebrations exclude Jesus ... instead, Christmas, should include Jesus alongside us, to whom he offers His salvation!

The Gospel which is expressed concretely in the spiritual and physical works of Mercy is challenging. Christmas makes us more human and kindles hope in us, which is not an indefinite desire for the future but is the expectation of a certain fulfilment "already" begun although "not yet" completed.

With the prophet Isaiah we say our hope: "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ...*" (Is 9,1). And with the Apostle Paul we repeat: "*... the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men ...*" (Titus 2:11).

In Mary, Mother of Mercy, who brought Jesus to the world, let us put our trust in full confidence on this Christmas day and in the approaching 2017.