

My friends in Christ, we are gathered now at long last for Christmas, and Christmas is, as we know, the great occasion of celebrating our Catholic Christian faith, celebrating the birth of the little Christ Child...celebrating with family, with friends, with gifts, with endless supplies of festive – and fattening! – holiday treats...and *all* of it in the beautiful spirit of love, joy, peace, and all good things.

And all of this, *certainly*, is good; indeed, as the Lord Himself might say (as He said way back in the Book of Genesis): it is *very* good. But wait, it gets even *better!* Our Christmas celebration is a story of a weary world rejoicing in blessed hope for the coming of a Savior. It is the *Sacred* Story of Jesus Christ...God-made-man...God-Incarnate (God “in the flesh”). The Sacred Story is one that features a loving, merciful God (our Father, Who art in Heaven), Who could no longer bear to see the world suffer in darkness and in the shadow of death, and so the Father sent the Son (“for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son”), and the Son became man, to save a fallen, broken humanity...and the Son is Light to shine upon us who shiver in the darkness...and the Son is Life for us who tremble in the shadow of death.

But the Sacred Story of Jesus is *not*, in fact, the *beginning* of *the* Story (the Greatest Story ever told) but, in very truth, is only Chapter Three of the Greatest Story, the beginning of the Third Act, as it were, of the great, cosmic play. And the Greatest Story ever told is called the *kerygma* in Greek, which (as usual!) is just fancy Greek-talk for our English word “story.” And the *kerygma* is our epic, four-chapter story of creation, damnation, redemption, and salvation.

The *kerygma* Chapter One begins thus: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth....” Pretty standard beginning; maybe just a smidge “ho-hum” but otherwise a fine start; and Chapter One goes on to set the stage for the rest of the Great Story. God created us. God did not *have* to create us; after all, God does not *have* to do *anything*...and yet here we are. God is love; God created us; therefore, we are here *why?* Because God loves us. We are made *by* love, *for* love, and *to* love.... The *kerygma* Chapter One: so far, so good.

But then comes along the *kerygma* Chapter Two; Chapter Two *not* so good. It begins with a serpent and ends with sin; and our response to having been created, our response to God’s love for us, is that we rejected God’s love. We sinned. Adam and Eve beguiled themselves to entertain that

insidious temptation of a sneaky snake; they ate the forbidden fruit; and thus, sin and death entered the world. And we have been sinning and dying ever since – a sad chapter of human history that is told in horrifying (yet at times *hopeful*) detail, starting with Genesis 3 and going through the entirety of the Old Testament right up through the final words of the final prophet, Malachi: thus says the Lord, “lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction.” Yikes. Come on, Malachi! What a way to end the Old Testament! But so it is.... The *kerygma* Chapter Two: *not* so good.

And now, we come to the *kerygma* Chapter Three. Now we are told of *God's* response to *our* response of rejecting divine love. We remember that, in the beginning, God spoke – and everything came to be. And *now*, God speaks *again*, speaks *now* in response to our rejection of divine love...and the word that God speaks *now*: *the* Word. Jesus Christ. The Word of God became flesh – was born of the Blessed Mary Ever-Virgin – so that *now*, God really, truly is one *of* us...one *with* us. (“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” for “God is with us.”) And Chapter Three of the *kerygma*, incidentally, begins exactly the same as Chapter One: “In the beginning.” Because Emmanuel comes, and God is with us so as to help us get a new start – a new lease on life, as it were...a new *beginning*. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us...” The *kerygma* Chapter Three: starting to get good again.

And as for the *kerygma* Chapter Four...let us wait on that for a moment. For now, we need to unpack Chapter Three just a little bit more; Chapter Three, after all, is the Sacred Story of Christ, and the Sacred Story of Christ begins with His birth, and His birth is what we are celebrating at this present time. So let us dig a little deeper. Let us consider, just briefly, these three things: the three-fold birth of Jesus; relationship between the manger of the Child and the cross of Christ; and at the end, the City of David – Bethlehem – which is a Hebrew word meaning “House of Bread.”

The three-fold birth of Christ. Saint John has already told us that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The first birth of God the Son, then, is an *eternal* birth from the heavenly heart of God the Father, “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God.” And Saint John, as well as Saint Matthew

and Saint Luke, tells us of the second birth of God the Son: the temporal birth (in the context both of space and time) from the immaculate womb of Mary, His Mother. Of course, *this* is the primary focus of our celebration right now.

The *first* birth is eternal, from the heart of the Father. The *second* birth is temporal, from the womb of the Mother. And the *third* birth...is spiritual. And it occurs in the souls of believers; in *us*, in other words, when we accept Him and receive Him and embrace Him as Lord and God – Savior and Redeemer.... Thus, we are given to encounter the three-fold birth of God the Son.

Next, the relationship between the manger of the Child and the cross of Christ. Now, as we often seem to find in the Sacred Story of Jesus Christ, there frequently is a poetic interplay of mystic symmetry of what *has* happened *before* and what *will* happen *later*. And what I mean by this is I think what we see in the mysterious connection between manger and cross. In Bethlehem, in the manger, the Lord is laid down amid brute cattle. On Calvary, on the cross, the Lord is nailed up amid brutal criminals. In the manger, He is helpless and poor in the midst of poor shepherds; on the cross, He is helpless and poor in the midst of poor souls in need of a Shepherd. In the manger, He is bound by swaddling clothes; on the cross, He is stripped of all clothes and bound by nails. In the manger, He lies low and is gazed upon by the Gentile Magi, but on the cross, He is lifted up and gawked at by the Jewish and Roman powers-that-be. In Bethlehem He was born and so entered into earthly life from the immaculate womb of Mary of Nazareth; on Golgotha He was killed and so departed from earthly life into the unused tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Thus, since the end lies hidden in the beginning and the beginning becomes clear at the end, it is not actually out of place for us, the Church, to speak of the Cross and the Resurrection on Christmas, nor for that matter to speak of the Incarnation and the Nativity during Holy Week and Passiontide.

And thirdly, the “House of Bread,” for that is what “Bethlehem” means. The Lord Himself says, “I am the living Bread that came down from Heaven.” The Son came down from Heaven and was born in Bethlehem; thus, the City of David can be said to be the birthplace of the Eucharist; the Venerable Saint Bede (priest of medieval England and Doctor of the Church) tells us that “the place He was born is rightly called the ‘House of Bread’ because He came down from Heaven to Earth to

give us the food of heavenly life and to satisfy us with the flavor of eternal sweetness.” And so, just as the Church contains within her the Bread of Life (the Eucharist), she can be regarded a Perpetual Bethlehem; through the Eucharist, every Catholic cathedral, church, and chapel becomes, as it were, a little City of David. In the manger, the Son hid His Divinity beneath the humble form of infancy; on the altar, it is hidden (waiting to be discovered and embraced) beneath the lowly form of bread.

The Eucharist – the Bread of Life – offers us a clue then with regard to what we are told in the *kerygma* Chapter Four. But *this* Chapter, the fourth and final...is as yet incomplete. Whereas all of the other Chapters (One, Two, and Three) end with a period...Chapter *Four* ends inconclusively with an ellipsis...a “dot-dot-dot,” a “to be continued.” Why is that? It is because Chapter Four is *our* response...to *God’s* response...to *our* rejection of God’s love for us. The *kerygma* Chapter Four basically is this: “God loves me and made me *by* love, *for* love, *to* love...and yet, by sinning, I reject that love...and yet by speaking the Word, and that Word taking flesh and given the Name of Jesus Christ, I am redeemed and thus am invited now to love again where I chose *not* to love before.

And so, my response to all of this will be...” Dot-dot-dot. What *will* our response be – our response to God’s Word spoken to us in the Person of Jesus Christ? What is *my* response? What is *your* response?

And so we have the dot-dot-dot – but hopefully we will choose to fill in that blank with the correct answer, the *only* answer (...the only *good* answer, anyway): faith...hope...love...trust.... Or, as Jesus would have it (because this is how He wanted to have it with His Apostles), we respond to His call to *discipleship*, His urgent call to us to be “fishers of men,” the “salt of the earth,” the “light of the world.” And answering His call often begins (and *always* is *renewed*) when, in our humility of heart and with joy in our soul, we come forward to receive Him in the Eucharist – He, Who is the Bread of Life, born in the House of Bread and placed in a manger as on an altar.

May it be, then, that our glad rejoicing of Christmas bliss would be centered on Jesus Christ, on Him alone, Who gave Himself to us a Child in the manger...Christ on the cross...and the Bread of Life in the Eucharist...so that, at the end of days, just as we received Him here on Earth, He will receive us in halls of heavenly realms.