YOU MATTER
A RETREAT GUIDE FOR ADVENT

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

God has something to say to you today. He is with you right now. In fact, he never stops thinking about you: You *really* matter to him.

Savor that truth, that reality: God, the Creator of the universe, the Redeemer of the human family, is thinking about me *right now,* wanting to hear the thoughts of my heart, and he has something to say to me.

Take a moment to let that sink in…

To reinforce your faith in God's presence, listen once again to the very first sentences of the Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church:

> *God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength.*
>
> – CCC 1

If God is "drawing close" to us "at every time and in every place," then that includes now, here. He is right now drawing close to you.

If God is always calling us "to seek him, to know him, to love him with all our strength," then that includes *right now* — right now he is moving within your heart, stirring you to want to know him better.

And that is what this Retreat Guide will focus on: getting to know God better, especially getting to know better his personal love for you, as proven so gloriously in the great mystery of Christmas.

Advent is about preparing our souls to celebrate Christmas worthily, as it should be celebrated.

Christmas is one of the two days in the liturgical year when every priest is permitted to celebrate three Masses: at night, at sunrise, and during the day.

Unfortunately, Christmas is such a busy time that we often don't get the chance to ponder the beautiful prayers and readings that the liturgy assigns to each one of those Masses.

This Retreat Guide will do just that — the three meditations are dedicated to the prayers and readings of the three Masses.

And in the conference we will take a walk through the history of this liturgical celebration, going all the way back to the very first centuries of Christianity.

Before we start, take a few moments to thank God, in the silence of your heart, for the opportunity to spend this time with him. And ask him to grant you the grace during this retreat to believe more deeply than ever that, in his eyes, you really, *really* matter.

FIRST MEDITATION

Time and Eternity Touch

One powerful feeling animates the ancient prayers and readings for the Christmas Mass at Midnight: *joyful amazement.*

- *The Angels*
  The angels are so amazed that they fill the midnight sky with their heavenly glory — they can't hold back their celebration as they announce their "good news of great joy"!
- *The Shepherds*
  The shepherds are frozen with amazement as the sky erupts with angelic celebration.
- *The Prophet Isaiah*
  The prophet Isaiah, who foresees this amazing moment centuries before in the First Reading, is so amazed that he pours out a super-abundant litany of joyful praise to describe the promised Savior: "Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace."

What is the cause of this joyful amazement that floods Christmas night? What would you say the cause is? How would you describe it? We need to ask ourselves this question, especially if we find that our own amazement has become dulled over the years.

The amazement comes from something that is quintessentially Christian.

It comes from one of the things that make Christianity absolutely unique in the vast menagerie of world religions. It comes from the shocking realization that:

- God chose to come to our rescue,
- God didn't give up on us,
- God didn't stay aloof from us in our foolishness, our sinful rebellion, and our miserable pettiness,
- God himself decided to invade this "land of gloom" (Isaiah 9:1), just for our sake,
- God has not only come into our lives, but, as St. Paul puts it in the Second Reading, he actually "gave himself for us, to deliver us" (Titus 2:14).

You see, we can't save ourselves.

If there's one thing the history of the world, and the history of each of our individual lives, tells us, it's that. Salvation — the deep, existential fulfillment we yearn for now and forever — doesn't come from us, from our efforts to be good enough, from our clever discovery of some kind of secret knowledge or technique, or from our lucky encounter with a whimsical divinity or a winning lottery ticket. No. Salvation comes from God. It happened on God's initiative. We didn't deserve it; we had no right to it; but he did it. That's what's so amazing.

The birth of Jesus Christ is the entrance of eternity into time, of the divine into the human; it is God bursting through all the barriers that we put up to keep him out, sneaking back into our shattered world by becoming one of us. It is God proving that he really does love us, that we really do matter to him after all — each one of us, because this is what love does: it finds a way.

That's what the opening antiphon of the Christmas Mass during the night — the first of the three Christmas Masses — celebrates when it says:

Let us all rejoice in the Lord, for our Savior has been born in the world. Today true peace has come down to us from heaven.

FIRST MEDITATION

From Throne to Cradle

This amazing initiative of God is illustrated beautifully in the mosaic above the high altar of one of the first churches dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome, built in the fifth century.

The center of the mosaic decorating the triumphal arch directly above the altar depicts a royal, imperial throne. Obviously, it's the throne of the King of Heaven. But there's something funny about this throne: it's empty. The King of Heaven has left his heavenly throne; he has traded it in for a much different seat — a little manger jerry-rigged into a cradle.

The symbolic meaning of the mosaic takes on special weight inside the Church of St. Mary Major, because of the special relic kept there.

A pious tradition holds that pieces of the manger Mary used as a cradle for the baby Jesus were preserved and venerated by the early Christians, and that eventually some of them made their way to Rome and are still kept reverently in this very church, under the high altar, under the image of the empty throne.

From glorious heavenly throne to humble, dirty, earthly manger.

Only God could have done that, and only a God who loves us sinful humans so much that he will never, *never* give up on us. We could never have reached up to heaven's throne from our earthly mangers in order to snatch salvation for ourselves. God had to do it; he had to take the initiative. He did, he still does, and he always will — it's undeniable proof that, to him, we matter.

FIRST MEDITATION

You Search Me and You Know Me

Everything Jesus did in his earthly life was done for all of humanity, and for each individual person. Everything Jesus did in his earthly life reveals the pattern of how he acts in the lives of each of his followers. The Catechism assures us of this:

All Christ's riches 'are for every individual and are everybody's property.'

– CCC 519

Christmas is no exception. Jesus came for each of us on that cold night in Bethlehem. And every day, Jesus *still* comes down from his heavenly throne in order to enter into the Bethlehems of our hearts — through the Eucharist.

Take a few minutes to let yourself be amazed once again by the staggering reality of Christmas, present at every Mass.

Savor this unchangeable truth: that God didn't give up on you, that he came with his glorious grace, to be your Savior, your Wonder-Counselor, your God-Hero, your Father-forever.

To give expression to your own joyful amazement, you may want to include Psalm 96 in your prayer — the Psalm proclaimed during this Midnight Mass.

If for some reason you find it hard to let that truth sink in, you may want to turn to Psalm 139 and read it over slowly, prayerfully, letting the Holy Spirit convince you more than ever that God is always thinking of you, always with you, always loving you.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. In my relationship with God, have I ever felt the "joyful amazement" that characterizes this First Mass? What triggered it and what was it like? What did I learn from it?

2. How deeply do I feel the need for Jesus to be my Savior? How do I express that felt need? What elements in my life tend to dampen that feeling?

3. If I were with Mary and Joseph in the stable-cave at Bethlehem, what would I say to them? What would I say to Jesus? What would they say to me?

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his marvelous deeds.

For great is the LORD and highly to be praised,
to be feared above all gods.
For the gods of the nations are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
Splendor and power go before him;
power and grandeur are in his holy place.

Give to the LORD, you families of nations,
give to the LORD glory and might;
give to the LORD the glory due his name!
Bring gifts and enter his courts;
bow down to the LORD, splendid in holiness.
Tremble before him, all the earth;
declare among the nations: The LORD is king.
The world will surely stand fast, never to be shaken.
He rules the peoples with fairness.

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
let the sea and what fills it resound;
let the plains be joyful and all that is in them.
Then let all the trees of the forest rejoice
before the LORD who comes,
who comes to govern the earth,
To govern the world with justice
and the peoples with faithfulness.

– Psalm 96

(For the leader. A psalm of David.)
LORD, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.
You sift through my travels and my rest; with all my ways you are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue, LORD, you know it all.

Behind and before you encircle me and rest your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, far too lofty for me to reach.
Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, there you are. If I take the wings of dawn and dwell beyond the sea, even there your hand guides me, your right hand holds me fast.

If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light"—
Darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as the day. Darkness and light are but one.

You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb.
I praise you, because I am wonderfully made; wonderful are your works!
My very self you know. My bones are not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret, fashioned in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw me unformed; in your book all are written down;
my days were shaped, before one came to be.

How precious to me are your designs, O God; how vast the sum of them!
Were I to count them, they would outnumber the sands; when I complete them, still you are with me. When you would destroy the wicked, O God,
the bloodthirsty depart from me! Your foes who conspire a plot against you are exalted in vain.

Do I not hate, LORD, those who hate you?
Those who rise against you, do I not loathe?
With fierce hatred I hate them, enemies I count as my own.
Probe me, God, know my heart; try me, know my thoughts.
See if there is a wicked path in me; lead me along an ancient path.

– Psalm 139

SECOND MEDITATION

Life Without Light

The second Mass that every priest is permitted to celebrate on Christmas is the Sunrise Mass. But we can only celebrate it if we get up early enough to do so around dawn. And that's significant, because the ancient prayers and readings of this Mass share one common theme: *Christ is our light.*

The opening prayer of this Mass describes our experience of Christmas as one of being suffused with light. Here is what the priest prays:

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word, the light of faith, which illumines our minds, may also shine through in our deeds.

Years after Christ's birth, in his public life, he will return to this theme of light and claims it as one of his unique and revelatory titles: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

We are so used to this image and this symbolism that we kind of take it for granted. But have you ever thought deeply about light, what it is, what it does, what it brings?

Imagine a world without light. Pitch blackness, all the time. No beautiful sunsets, no beautiful views, no colors, no images, no photographs of loved ones, no conversations looking into a friend's eyes, no smiles to warm our hearts… How different our lives would be without light! What an impact light has on every aspect of our lives!

When Jesus comes into the world to be the light of the world, he is claiming to make that much of a difference — but spiritually.

Until Jesus came, we didn't know God. Even the Israelites had a limited understanding of God. And the ancient religions had a vague notion that there must be a divine realm, but that's about it.

Their pantheons and their myths were sincere but blind efforts to enter into a relationship with an unknown God.

As St. Paul described it, they were people who could not see God and so ended up simply, and at best, "feeling their way towards him" (Acts 17:27).

But now Jesus has come to us, and he reveals God, just as turning on a light in a darkened room reveals everything in the room.

And yet, light, in the ancient world and in the Bible, was never only a visual thing.

Before electricity, the only way you could get light was with fire of some kind. And fire is always warm. Light always brought illumination, but it also always brought warmth, and life.

The first thing God created, in fact, was light, and with it, the conditions for life itself, the warmth of existence. Imagine what life would be like without warmth — there would be no life, no movement, no exchange, no building, no growing…

Spiritually, Jesus, our Light, not only shows us who God is, like a professor explaining something on a chalkboard, but he brings God into our lives, and our hearts quicken with new life, new hope, new energy, new fire.

Jesus tells us that God is love, that God is mercy, that God is interested in us — and he brings that love, that mercy, that interest into our lives, into our experience.

This is why St. Paul can describe Christmas, in the Second Reading for this Mass, as the day "when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared" (Titus 3:4).

This is why the shepherds leave the little stable-cave at Bethlehem "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

They had heard and seen, they had experienced, a new creation, a new revelation, a wholly new and unimagined manifestation of God's commitment to them, of God's desire to be with them: Emmanuel.

Mass at Dawn celebrates this. It celebrates the Dawn of a new period in the history of the universe — as the Responsorial Psalm puts it: "A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us."

SECOND MEDITATION

God's Lamps

Our faith, our acceptance of Jesus and all he reveals, is what opens up our lives to receive this new light, with its brightness and its life-giving warmth. Through the centuries, one of the favorite symbols in Christian art for the virtue of faith was a woman holding a lit oil lamp.

In our churches today, we often still use oil lights as sanctuary lamps.

This same symbolism is used during the Easter Vigil Mass, with the lighting of the Paschal Candle and the passing of that light from person to person throughout the Church.

When we celebrate Mass, we are required by Church law to have living flames, candles or oil lamps, on the altar — electric light bulbs don't count.

The living flame, giving off its illumination and its warmth, burning itself out in order to give light to those all around it, is still a powerful symbol of Jesus.

And it is also a powerful symbol of what each Christian is called to be. The prayer over the offerings for this Mass at Dawn expresses it beautifully:

May our offerings be worthy, we pray, O Lord, of the mysteries of the Nativity this day, that, just as Christ was born a man and also shone forth as God, so these earthly gifts may confer on us what is divine.

- When we were baptized, the light of Christ was lit in our souls.
- At confirmation, the lamp was enlarged and strengthened.
- Whenever we receive the Eucharist, the light is increased — our lamp is refilled with oil.
- If we happen to expose the flame to the harsh winds of sin, we come to confession to light it up again.

We have this light: it burns in our souls; it is ours. Jesus is our light, we have him in our hearts, in our minds, in the very core of our being. The only thing that can put it out is sin — and even sin doesn't have to have the last word.

This is why St. Paul was able to write to the Romans:

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?. . . No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:35-39

We matter to God — *you matter* to God, so much, in fact, that he has come to be *your light*, and nothing can ever change that.

SECOND MEDITATION

The Lord Is My Light

When did you first see the light of Christ? When did you first feel the warmth of his presence? Do you remember? When was the darkest moment of your life so far, and how did Christ invade it with his love? When was the coldest time of your life, and how did Jesus warm it up? Do you remember?

We need to remember and reflect on our experience of God's light. We need to think about the times when he has guided us through our deserts with a pillar of fire, just as he did for his Chosen People during the Exodus.

If we don't use our memory to keep our faith bright and strong, we will become vulnerable to cynicism, discouragement, rationalism, and frustration — we will forget that we really, really, *really* matter to God.

The Gospel passage for this Mass at Sunrise shows Mary responding to the visit of the shepherds by keeping "all these things and reflecting on them in her heart." She was savoring the amazing depth and breadth of God's love for her. Take some time now to do the same.

- ○ Think about your experience — your own, personal, unique experience — of Christ your light.
- ○ Talk to him about it, thank him for it, renew your confidence in the power of his unquenchable truth and life to guide, sustain, and inspire you, always and everywhere.

The following questions and biblical passage may help you in your conversation with the Lord.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. When have I experienced most dramatically the light of Christ? When did I most recently experience it? Thank God for that; savor the memories.

2. If I could see my faith in the form of a candle or an oil lamp, how bright would it be? What elements/activities/relationships in my life tend to fill up my lamp and make it burn more brightly? What elements tend to drain it? Talk to God about it.

3. Follow Mary's example and reflect in your heart about past Christmases — their joys, their sorrows, their graces. Do this in the company of Mary and conversing with her about those memories.

A Biblical Passage to Help Your Meditation

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom should I fear?
The LORD is my life's refuge;
of whom should I be afraid?

When evildoers come at me
to devour my flesh,
These my enemies and foes
themselves stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart does not fear;
Though war be waged against me,
even then do I trust.

One thing I ask of the LORD;
this I seek:
To dwell in the LORD's house
all the days of my life,
To gaze on the LORD's beauty,
to visit his temple.

For God will hide me in his shelter
in time of trouble,
He will conceal me in the cover of his tent;
and set me high upon a rock.

Even now my head is held high
above my enemies on every side!
I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and chant praise to the LORD.

Hear my voice, LORD, when I call;
have mercy on me and answer me.
"Come," says my heart, "seek his face";
your face, LORD, do I seek!

Do not hide your face from me;
do not repel your servant in anger.
You are my salvation; do not cast me off;
do not forsake me, God my savior!

Even if my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me in.

LORD, show me your way;
lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

Do not abandon me to the desire of my foes;
malicious and lying witnesses have risen against me.

I believe I shall see the LORD's goodness
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD, take courage;
be stouthearted, wait for the LORD

– Psalm 27

THIRD MEDITATION

Proclaim to All the Nations!

The third Mass of Christmas, the Mass during the day, changes gears a little bit. The first two Masses brought us into the intimacy of the stable-cave at Bethlehem. This third Mass expands the horizon of Christmas to every corner of time and space.

"All the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God," proclaims the First Reading and the Responsorial Psalm.

And then the Second Reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, explains that in times past God spoke partially, in bits and pieces, through the prophets, but from now own, he has spoken fully, by the Incarnation of his Son.

And in the Gospel, the high point of the entire three-Mass liturgy, St. John picks up the theme of Christ as the light, and extends it far beyond the borders of Israel: "The true light," he writes, "which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:9).

Christmas is for everyone. Because Jesus is for everyone: he is the universal Savior. In the end, there is only one joy that will last for ever, only one light that will never go out: Christ's. Only Jesus is the bridge that leads us into the joy of communion with the Blessed Trinity and into the indescribable light of God's glory in heaven. As Jesus explained during his public ministry: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

But how is the message of Bethlehem going to reach every human heart? How is God's Word in Christ going to be spread to every corner of time and space? Through Christians, through us. We are not just recipients and beneficiaries of the light of Christ; we are bearers of that light. Our faith transforms us into living lamps.

St. John makes this clear in the Gospel for this Mass: "But to those who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12).

We are children of God; we share in God's own life; Christ dwells within us.

Unless we extinguish the light of Christ through sin, we are living flames of grace extending God's love and salvation into the world.

Through our words, our actions, and our example, we bring light, warmth, hope, and life to those around us who are stuck in the cold, dark night of sin and secularism.

This is why Christ, who called himself the light of the world, also called his disciples the light of the world:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

– Matthew 5:14-16

This is the essence of our mission as Christians. It is another proof that we really matter to God — so much that he has made us his partners and co-workers in the salvation of the world!

THIRD MEDITATION

Blessed Mother Teresa Lights a Lamp

There is a beautiful story about how Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta spread this light of Christ – you may have heard of it.

Once she was staying with her community of sisters who were working with the Aborigines in Australia.

While she was there, she visited an elderly man who lived in total isolation, ignored by everyone. His home was disordered and dirty.

She told him, "Please let me clean your house, wash your clothes and make your bed." He answered, "I'm OK like this. Let it be."

She said, "You will be still better if you allow me to do it."

He finally agreed. So she was able to clean his house and wash his clothes.

While she was cleaning, she discovered a beautiful lamp, covered with dust. It looked like it hadn't been used in years.

She said to the man, "Don't you light that lamp? Don't you ever use it?"

He answered, "No. No one comes to see me. I have no need to light it. Who would I do it for?"

Mother Teresa asked, "Would you light it every night if the sisters came?" He replied, "Of course."

From that day on, the sisters committed themselves to visiting him every evening.

Mother Teresa left Australia. Two years passed. She had completely forgotten about that man. Then she received a message from him: "Tell my friend that the light she lit in my life still continues to shine."

– Story adapted from Voices of the Saints by Bert Ghezzi

That's what it means to be a true Christian: to give, to bless, to reach out, to simply share with others what we have received from our Lord, to light lamps in the dark and dusty corners of this fallen world — just as Christ did on that cold night in Bethlehem.

THIRD MEDITATION

Keep the Fire Burning

But we can't be true Christians if Christ's light isn't burning strong in our own hearts. And it's so easy to let the flame burn low, to lose our spiritual energy, to get tired, frazzled, frustrated. It's easy to become weighed down by the cares of the world. When that happens, we stop responding to God's action in our lives. We become like those mentioned in the Gospel for this Mass, those who belonged to Christ, but didn't receive him: "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11).

God is always coming into our lives, to strengthen our hope, to inspire us, to guide us – because we matter to him! But we are not always as open and docile to him as we could be. What can we do to keep the fire burning in our own hearts?

This is a beautiful question to ask ourselves during Advent, when we are called to "prepare a way for the Lord" (Mark 1:3). To help reflect on this, you may want to look ahead a little bit to Epiphany and think about the three gifts that the Magi brought to the baby Jesus.

These gifts expressed the wise men's love and faith. And they can symbolize three doors that we should always try to keep open to God, so that his grace can keep nourishing our hearts.

- *Gold*
  The first gift. Material things, wealth, possessions, good looks, success. . .

  In our world, it is so easy to put too much emphasis on these, to lean too much on them, to idolize them. If we have a lot of them, we can become overly attached to them. If we don't have enough of them, we can become obsessed with worry or with envy. Either way, how we deal with material things can end up being a closed door that keeps out God's grace.

- *Incense*
  The second gift was incense, the sweet-smelling symbol of prayer – the second door. Incense rises towards the sky, just as prayer lifts our minds and hearts to God. Daily prayer keeps us tuned into God's wavelength. But a healthy prayer life requires commitment.

  - We have to fight to make and follow-through on that commitment.
  - We have to fight to make the time.
  - We have to fight to live in such a way that our prayer time can be a real heart-to-heart meeting with the Lord.

  As St. Faustina Kowalksa said, "In order to hear the voice of God, one has to have silence in one's soul and to keep silence; not a gloomy silence but an interior silence; that is to say, recollection in God."

- *Myrrh*
  The third gift was myrrh, the valuable spice used to embalm the dead, a symbol of death and suffering — a preview of the Cross — the third door.

  - When we flee our crosses, we flee God.
  - When we try to carry them on our own, they crush us.

  God permits suffering in our lives in order to draw us closer to himself — but we have to let him do so; we have to exercise our faith; we have to unite our crosses to Christ's cross.

You matter to God; by giving you another Christmas he is reminding you of that — powerfully.

God wants to be your light, and he wants you to have the joy that comes from sharing that light.

Advent is a season to savor that truth, and to allow God's grace extra room to purify, revitalize, and renew your faith.

Take some time now to do some savoring, and to ask God what he wants you to do to get ready for Christmas.

When your retreat time is over, you may want to finish by offering your heart once more to God through praying the original "Christmas Carol" — The Gloria, reproduced at the end of this meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How deeply do I feel the Christian call to spread Christ's light, to be a messenger of Christ's light?

2. Who has been a messenger of Christ's light for me, and how did they do it? Thank God for those influences, and learn from them.

3. How would God like me to give better attention to the "gold, incense, and myrrh" in my life during this Advent?

The Gloria — To Help Your Meditation

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

– The Gloria

CONFERENCE

Introduction

So far we have been meditating on the truths about Christmas. Now we are going to shift gears and talk about the origin of the liturgy, what we can learn from it, and reflect a little bit on the history of the Church.

The conference is directed more towards the mind and not so much towards the heart, but in the end it will have repercussions on our hearts.

The conference covers three different topics.

- Firstly, we will talk about where the date for Christmas came from.
- Secondly, we are going to talk about the heart of the liturgical celebration itself. Why do we celebrate three Masses? When did that start? How did that get going?
- And then, thirdly, we will finish up by briefly showing where the Season of Advent came from, where it came out of history, and how it entered into the tradition of the Church.

CONFERENCE

Winter Solstice... Transfigured

When we talk about the date for Christmas we have to ask two questions.

- Why did the date for Christmas get settled so late in history?
- Why was December 25th chosen?

Why did it take 300 years to settle the date?

In the 300s, the liturgy began to formalize: the details of the liturgy became solid, became fixed, and became universal throughout the Church.

Persecutions

For the first two-and-a-half to three centuries of Christianity, the Church was persecuted; it wasn't permitted to worship in public. Bishops and communities throughout the Roman Empire followed a very basic liturgical schedule. The basic liturgical year was built around Easter and Passion Week, but the rest of the memorials of the saints, the rest of the feasts, and the rest of the traditions developed in different ways and in different parts of the Empire.

This resulted in different liturgical traditions developing, all built around the same core. In the east, you had the Syro-Antiochene tradition, and in Eygpt the Alexandrian tradition which led to the Coptic Church and the Ethiopian liturgy. Then up in Constantinople, present-day Istanbul, you had the Byzantine liturgy develop. In Italy you had the Roman liturgy. In northern Italy you had the Ambrosian liturgy, you had the Gallican liturgy in France, and the Mozarabic liturgy in Spain. So, all throughout the Roman Empire you had different liturgical traditions developing, changing and adapting to local customs, but all with the same core of the Mass and the core of the liturgical year — Easter and the Passion.

Once the period of persecution ended after A.D. 313, Christians were finally allowed to worship publicly, to worship freely, and no longer had to worry about a wave of new persecutions. Due to this time of peace, these liturgical traditions began to be formalized. The Church could start putting together liturgical books and liturgical vestments, as they didn't have to worry about the Roman police coming to apprehend them at any moment. This enabled the liturgy to take on a formal appearance, and the traditions to begin to solidify.

Heresies

Another factor in the formalization of the liturgy was heresies.

There were heresies regarding the nature of Christ: was he truly God and truly man, or just a demi-god? There were even heresies regarding the Trinity itself: was the Holy Spirit fully divine? These types of questions started to be asked and dealt with by theologians in this period.

As a result of this, different groups of priests would adjust the prayers of the liturgy in order to support their particular viewpoint on a given doctrinal question.

This caused the Church to formalize the prayers of the liturgy so that they were universally orthodox.

Conclusion

Why did we get the dates only in the 300s? Because the liturgical year and the liturgical forms were being developed and solidified during that period.

Why December 25th?

Two different traditions emerged during the first few centuries of the Church about which day to celebrate the Birth of Our Lord. In the east, near the Eastern Churches, there was a strong pagan tradition of celebrating the winter solstice on January 6th. In the west, ever since the days of Emperor Aurelian, there was an emphasis on the worship of the sun and the sun god throughout the whole empire, and as a result, they celebrated the winter solstice on December 25th. Their solstice celebration celebrated the rebirth of the invincible sun, the unconquerable sun — the sun god itself. The commonality here between these two dates in east and west was the pagan recognition or celebration of the winter solstice. Later, more elaborate theological interpretations became associated with these dates.

The solstice is the shortest day in the northern hemisphere, after which the days begin to get longer. So the winter solstice is really a festival of light, a recognition of this natural rhythm of the light of the sun increasing again in the middle of the winter.

When the Church was spreading in these centuries, it had to meet people where they were. The Church wanted to celebrate the birth of the true Son of God, the true light of the world, the true son of justice — which are all biblical terms for Jesus — so, the Church began to celebrate the birth of our Lord as our light and our sun. They did this on the very same days when pagans used to celebrate the winter solstice; this was a way to evangelize the pagan peoples. Celebrating the solstice was only a shadow of the truth, but Christmas was the Truth: the true Son of Justice, the True Light of the World. So, the Church began to celebrate Christ's birth on these traditional days. In the east, January 6th became a day to celebrate what they called *Epiphane*, or "the manifestation," and December 25th, in the west, became the day when they celebrated the Birth of the Lord: the *Natalis*.

In the 4th century, when Christianity was free to worship in public, there also began to be more communication between the churches in the east and the churches in the west. So the feasts of the Birth of Our Lord on the 25th, and the Manifestation of Our Lord on January 6th started to become related and the Christmas season started forming.

Now I want to pause for a minute, because this is something that some critics of the Church say shows that Christianity was just an outgrowth of pagan religion. Not true! This actually teaches us that the Church reached out and met people where they were. Christians could relate to the truths of the Catholic Faith, of Christian Revelation, to the shadows of religious intuition that were present in the pagan religions.

For instance, *Epiphane*, was a religious term of the pagan religions which meant a manifestation of a god, or a king, or a ruler. It meant the day when that king or ruler was born, or exalted, or the day a king or ruler came to visit a particular city with all his royal pomp and circumstance. This was also a word that was used for the annual feast of particular pagan gods when it was believed that a god would enter into the temple where the people were. *Epiphane* was the entering in, the making present, the being present of this important divine figure.

In the Second Reading for the night Mass, the reading from the Letter of St. Paul to Titus, this word *epiphane* is used in the Greek of the New Testament in two places. In Titus chapter 2:11-14, Paul tells us that the grace of God has appeared — the Greek word: *epiphane*; the Latin: *aparuit*. The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age, as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our Great God and of our Saviour Jesus Christ (for "appearance" St. Paul uses *epiphaneia! Adventus* in Latin).

Here we have the wisdom of the Church, taking a term and a reality that the pagans understood, and baptizing it: transforming it into a word that can help reveal the truth of Christ himself.

Conclusion

The dates of December 25th and January 6th were chosen because they were in some ways related to the pagan celebrations of the winter solstice and to the concept of the coming of the light and the manifestation of the great royal and divine figure of the gods.

CONFERENCE

The Three Masses

Jerusalem

We have records of a pilgrim who traveled to Jerusalem in the 4th century. She writes how on Christmas they celebrated three different prayer services.

The bishop and all the people would go first of all to Bethlehem to celebrate Mass during the night, and then from Bethlehem they would make their way back to Jerusalem, and as they entered the city they had a prayer service while the sun was coming up; as dawn was approaching they would gather in prayer. They then continued in procession, and then as full daylight dawned they would celebrate another Mass right over the empty tomb at the Church of the Resurrection.

They would start in the place where Jesus was born, follow to the place where Jesus offered his life for the world, and finish with a glorious celebration of the Mass in the place where Christ rose from the dead.

So there were three services in Jerusalem already well-established in the 300s, possibly going back to the times of the Apostles or soon thereafter.

Rome

In Rome, what we find in the 4th century is a celebration of the *Die Natalis* of Christ, the birthday of Christ. We find it being celebrated during the day in St. Peter's Basilica. But in the 5th century, some relics of the crib from Bethlehem were brought to Rome and were housed in one of the first churches in the west that was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the church of St. Mary Major. Popular piety encouraged the celebration of the Mass at night, right over those relics, in St. Mary Major. There was also a tradition in honor of the Byzantine officials who lived in Rome, the Byzantines who had a different liturgical tradition, whose parish church was the church of St. Anastasia. This church was located in the midst of the city, so the Pope himself, in order to honor these men, would go to St. Anastasia and celebrate another Mass there. So, the sequence of Christmas celebrations would begin at night at the church of St. Mary Major, followed by a procession to the church of St. Anastasia to celebrate Mass for the Byzantine officials, culminating in a grand procession to St. Peter's Basilica itself for the celebration of the Mass during the day.

Conclusion

So here we have a liturgical tradition emerging out of history. The tradition of having three Masses on Christmas comes out of practical considerations and the living faith of the people. That's the lesson: the liturgy is an expression of the Church's love and worship of Christ, it develops under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but it's something alive. We contribute to it, we live it, it's active, it's not just a textbook thing. So the tradition of all priests being able to celebrate three Masses on Christmas comes out of the living faith in Jerusalem and then throughout the ancient world in Rome, and it stayed with us.

We know the liturgy developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so there's meaning to these three Masses, and I would say most especially there's a theological meaning and a spiritual meaning. Let's look at the theological meaning first.

CONFERENCE

The Meaning of the Three Christmas Masses

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, there are three Masses on Christmas because, in a theological sense, there are three births of Christ.

- *Birth into Eternity*
  The first birth of Christ is his birth in eternity. Jesus is the Son of God the Father from all eternity. So in a certain sense, his birth in eternity is imitated or celebrated by the first Mass at night.

- *Birth into Time*
  The second birth of Jesus was into time in Bethlehem, into the Roman Empire: into the history of the world as we know it.

- *Birth into Individual Souls*
  Then there is the third Mass, the third birth, the birth of Jesus in every individual soul at baptism. This birth is also symbolized by baptismal candles being lit from the Paschal Candle at baptisms.

So the three births of Christ are symbolized and reflected by the ancient tradition of having three Masses on Christmas.

That's the theological meaning, but there's also a spiritual meaning for each one of us as we live our spiritual lives. There is kind of a parallel, as we're born in a certain sense three times as well. Before time began God was already thinking of us, loving us, and knowing us. He actually says this in the scriptures. *Before you were born I knew you, before you were formed in your mother's womb I knew you* (cf. Jer 1:5). This is the first birth, the birth outside of time. And then God himself governs the circumstances of our birth in time, he's the one who decides what country I'm going to be born in, what culture, what period, what situation. So we have our birth in time, our second birth, the second Mass. And then at the end of our life, when we die, if we die in friendship with Christ, we are born into eternal life, and so we're born back into eternity. In a sense, the full light of day symbolizes when we see God face to face, this is somewhat reflected in the third Mass of Christmas.

Conclusion

This is the heart of the liturgical ceremony: these three Masses, emerging from the reality of living the liturgy, the gritty reality of faith, as it grew under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the first Christian centuries. This tradition has taken on a meaning, a theological meaning and a spiritual meaning that we can all reflect on and benefit from.

CONFERENCE

The Emergence of Advent

We've looked at the establishment of the date for Christmas, and the elements that went into that. We looked at the establishment of the heart of the liturgical celebration, which is the three Masses, the meanings, where they came from, and what it means for us. Now we are ready to take a brief look at where the Season of Advent came from, how it emerged. This evolution happened in six steps.

First in the 300s we had the emergence of the dates for Christmas and for Epiphany. This created the framework of the Christmas season, which then began to take on this twelve-day shape. Soon thereafter, there developed the Octave day, the eighth day after Christmas, which would be January 1st. The Octave day became a celebration of the Motherhood of Mary, which is the oldest Marian Feast in the Roman Liturgy. This feast also commemorated the circumcision of Jesus, because of carry-over from the Jewish tradition that on the eighth day after being born a boy was circumcised. So you had the Motherhood of Mary celebrated and exalted on the feast of our Lord's circumcision. Following this there developed in Spain and in Gaul (modern day France) in the 400s a tradition of preparing for this Christmas season through a series of ascetical practices starting on December 17th.

The early Christians began to prepare for a little more than a week for these great feasts. Then in the 500s in Rome and in Italy you had a development of a liturgical period of preparation. In Spain and Gaul it was ascetical preparation: sacrifice, self-sacrifice, doing penance, preparing to celebrate these great feasts, and then in the 500s in Rome and in Italy it was a question of developing liturgical preparation for these feasts — at first it was a six-week period and then it became a four-week period right around the year 600.

By the year 600 we have four weeks for Advent, we have the feast of Christmas, we have the feast of Epiphany, we have the Octave, the feast of the Motherhood of Mary, so we have the whole season kind of taking shape. Advent became the second most intense liturgical season of the year following Lent and Easter. This development of the Advent season, didn't occur in the east, which again shows us that the liturgy is a living thing, the heart and the core is from God, it's unchangeable, it's our worship of God as God wants us to, as the Holy Spirit developed. But it can change according to the needs and experiences of faith of the different people and different localities, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and approval of the Church.

One of the things that developed pretty early on, was what became a favorite symbol for this season — what is called the Etimasia, something you're already familiar with: the empty throne. The Etimasia is the empty throne of Our Lord, the emperor from heaven who left his throne and came down to earth. This symbol had a double meaning from very early times. The throne is empty because Our Lord is coming again. He's gone to heaven, but here on earth it's his vicar who reigns.

So, you had this period of the first four weeks of Advent becoming a period of ascetical preparation for the coming of Our Lord, the Second Coming of Our Lord — "Lord, Come Again!". We're looking forward to that because the throne is empty and he's going to come again. The second meaning of the throne symbolized the emptying of the throne of heaven when Jesus became incarnate. The second half of Advent focuses more and more on the joy of anticipation that Our Lord is going to come to earth again through the celebration of Christmas and be born into the Bethlehem of our hearts.

Conclusion

That's the development of the liturgy of Advent and Christmas, and the biggest lesson that we've seen is that the liturgy really is a living thing. The liturgy is the living worship of the Church, it's tied into the lives of the faithful and we're meant to participate in the liturgy in an active way, in a living way.

- Is "active participation" how you would describe your participation in the liturgy?
- Are you allowing God, who has sanctified all of time, through the liturgy, to sanctify the time of your life — the days, the weeks, the months?
- Are you living it actively, are you engaging in it, and how could you live it better?
- How could you allow the power of the liturgy to transform your own use of time?

These are questions that I invite you to reflect on as you go through the personal questionnaire, which will help you reflect on how you live the liturgy.

The liturgy is a living expression of the Church's love, reverence, and need for God. "How alive is my liturgical life?" The following questions may help you reflect on how you are living the liturgy.

Personal Questionnaire

1. When I think about the pace of my life, which aspects would I consider healthy, and which would I consider unhealthy, and why?

2. What are the three most influential factors in determining how I use my time? If I could change one of them, which would I change and why?

3. Liturgy involves the sanctification of time: to what extent do I allow the liturgical seasons and feasts (including Sundays) to sanctify my time?

4. Which describes me better and why?
"I fit the Church's liturgy into my schedule."
"I build my schedule around the liturgical year."

5. How would my daily life (attitudes, actions, moods) be different if I were living the liturgical year more actively and profoundly?

6. In the past, what has helped me most in trying to live the liturgy?

7. What adjustment can I make today in order to live the liturgical year better?

NOTES

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