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"Christmas is the feast of Love incarnate"

In his 23 December general audience, Pope Francis offered some reflections on how to celebrate Christmas in a spiritually meaningful way.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In this catechesis, as we approach Christmas, I would like to offer some food for thought in preparation for

the celebration of Christmas. In the Midnight Mass liturgy the Angel's proclamation to the Shepherds: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (*Lk* 2:10-12).

In imitation of the shepherds, we too move spiritually towards Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth to the Child in a stable, "because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7).

Christmas has become a universal feast, and even those who do not believe perceive the appeal of this occasion. The Christian, however, knows that Christmas is a decisive event, an eternal fire that God has kindled in the world, and must not be confused with ephemeral things. It is important that it should not be reduced to a merely sentimental or consumerist festival. Last Sunday I

drew attention to this problem, underscoring that consumerism has hijacked Christmas. No: Christmas must not be reduced to a merely sentimental or consumerist feast, full of gifts and good wishes but poor in Christian faith, and also poor in humanity. Therefore, it is necessary to curb a certain worldly mentality, incapable of grasping the incandescent core of our faith, which is this: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (*Jn* 1:14). And this is the kernel of Christmas; rather, it is the truth of Christmas, there is no other.

Christmas invites us to reflect, on the one hand, on the drama of history, in which men and women, wounded by sin, ceaselessly search for truth, the search for mercy, and the search for redemption; and, on the other hand, on the goodness of God, who has

come towards us to communicate to us the Truth that saves and to make us sharers in His friendship and His life. And this gift of life: this is pure grace, not by any merit of our own. There is a Holy Father who says: “But look there, over there, there: seek your merit and you will find nothing other than grace”. Everything is grace, a gift of grace. And this gift of grace, we receive it through the simplicity and humanity of Christmas, and it can remove from our hearts and minds the pessimism that has spread even more nowadays as a result of the pandemic. We can overcome that sense of disquieting bewilderment, not letting ourselves be overwhelmed by defeats and failures, in the rediscovered awareness that that humble and poor Child, hidden away and helpless, is God Himself, made man for us. The Second Vatican Council, in a famous passage from the Constitution on the Church in the

Modern World, tells us that this event concerns every one of us: “For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human heart, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin” (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). But Jesus was born two thousand years ago, what does this have to do with me? It affects you, and me, each one of us. Jesus is one of us: God, in Jesus, is one of us.

This reality gives us much joy and courage. God did not look down on us, from afar, He did not pass us by, He was not repulsed by our misery, He did not clothe Himself only superficially in a body, but rather He fully assumed our nature and our human condition. He left nothing out

except sin: the only thing He does not have. All humanity is in Him. He took all that we are, just as we are. This is essential for understanding the Christian faith. St. Augustine, reflecting on his journey of conversion, writes in his Confessions: “For I did not hold to my Lord Jesus Christ, I, humbled, to the Humble; nor knew I yet whereto His infirmity would guide us” (Confessions VII, 8). And what is Jesus’ “infirmity”? The “infirmity” of Jesus is a “teaching”! Because it reveals to us the love of God. Christmas is the feast of Love incarnate, of love born for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the light of mankind shining in the darkness, giving meaning to human existence and to the whole of history.

Dear brothers and sisters, may these brief reflections help us to celebrate Christmas with greater awareness. But there is another way to prepare, which I want to remind you and me,

and which is within everyone's reach: to contemplate a little, in silence, before the crib. The Nativity display is a catechesis of this reality, of what was done that year, that day, that we have heard in the Gospel. Therefore last year I wrote a Letter, which it would be good for us to pick up again. It is entitled "Admirabile signum", "Enchanting image". In the school of St. Francis of Assisi, we can become a little childlike by pausing to contemplate the scene of the Nativity, and by letting the wonder of the "marvellous" way in which God wanted to come into the world be reborn in us. Let us ask for the grace of wonder: before this mystery, a reality so tender, so beautiful, so close to our hearts, that the Lord may give us the grace of wonder, to encounter Him, to draw closer to Him, to draw closer to us all. This will revive tenderness in us. The other day, while I was speaking with some scientists, we spoke about

artificial intelligence and robots... there are robots programmed for everyone and everything, and this continues to advance. And I said to them, "But what will robots never be able to do?" They thought about it, they made suggestions, but in the end they were all in agreement about one thing: tenderness. Robots will never be capable of this. And this is what God brings us, today: a wonderful man in which God wanted to come into the world, and this revives tenderness in us, the human tenderness close to that of God. And today we are in great need of tenderness, we are in great need of a human touch, in the face of so much misery! If the pandemic has forced us to be more distant, Jesus, in the crib, shows us the way of tenderness to be close to each other, to be human. Let us follow this path. Merry Christmas!

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