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**Homily for Christmas Mass at Night
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help**

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“The grace of God has appeared.” [Titus 2:11]

What is the grace of Christmas? Perhaps it is time with family which may not happen very often. Perhaps it is watching the excitement and joy of children on Christmas morning or Christmas Eve, whatever your tradition is for opening gifts. Perhaps it's seeing someone whom you have not seen for a long time. Perhaps it is sharing with others by giving generously.

I won't be spending Christmas with my family because they all live too far from here. I won't be watching the excitement and joy of children on Christmas morning. I most likely will not be seeing someone that I haven't seen in a long time. So the grace of Christmas isn't any of these things for me. And even though all of these experiences have been an important part of my life experience, and beautiful experiences they have been, they haven't fulfilled the deepest longing of my heart. Though all of these experiences were precious gifts to me, for which I am very grateful, they haven't satisfied the deepest desire and longing of my heart.

For me, the grace of Christmas is a deep knowing in my heart just how much God loves me. It is a deep knowing how much God loves the world. It is knowing deeply just how much God loves all that He has created. For me the grace of Christmas is about love, but it means that I never have to ask God how much He loves us. This is the profound gift of Christmas; a gift to be opened year after year, month after month, day after day, and even hour after hour. It is a gift which needs to be unwrapped over and over and over again.

This grace of Christmas is almost unbelievable, and for some it is unbelievable and rejected all together. But for people of great faith and who desire more than what this world can offer; for people who know the need for a redeemer, it is a living reality that has changed our lives and will continue to change our lives forever.

God chose to enter into the world, not in some extravagant way, but through a child wrapped in swaddling clothes in a hay trough surrounded by a few of the most unassuming people that you would ever meet. In great humility, God spoke and the Word became flesh and came to dwell among us, ... not just 2000 years ago, but is here and now... today... in this moment. Christmas is not just an historical event, but a living reality, a timeless story without end, a story to be lived each day.

The real grace of Christmas is an encounter with Jesus. Throughout salvation history, God continuously had made overtures toward the people of Israel and invited them into an intimate relationship. They continuously chose the things and ways of the world, which led them away from God. God knew that things would not satisfy the deepest desires of their hearts so He decided to come among his people in human form to save us from our sinfulness and our sinful ways. He

came to give us something far better than things to make us happy and fulfilled. He came to share with us the gift of His life.

“For today a Savior is born for YOU, Christ the Lord,” we heard. [Luke 2:12] Will we let Him be born anew tonight in our hearts? Christmas is God’s gift to each and every one of us – again a gift to be opened every day of our lives; a gift to be cherished knowing the care and the love in which it has been given. We have done absolutely nothing to earn it or deserve it. IT IS FREE.

Many children were taken to the malls throughout the country and they sat on Santa’s lap. I don’t know this for a fact, but I am going to speculate that Santa asked the question to many of them, “Have you been naughty or nice? Good or bad?” Or perhaps parents over the last few weeks perhaps have said to their children, “If you are not good, Santa is not going to bring you any toys or presents.”

The real grace of Christmas has nothing to do with the question of being naughty or nice, or good or bad. The real grace of Christmas has little to do with the extravagant way it is celebrated today. This real grace of Christmas has given us a whole new identity. Our identity is bound up in this gift of Christmas. In this grace, we “share in the [very] divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” No one is excluded from this message. No one is excluded from this gift. It is especially for the addicted, the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the migrants, those suffering physically, emotionally or spiritually.

But this birth is only a moment in the unfolding of God’s plan for both Christ and for us. For Christ, God’s plan was taking on your sins and my sins, and the sins of all humanity in an ultimate act of love. The manger became the cross where eternal love was born into the world.

For each of us God’s plan will continue to unfold as we continue to accept the grace and the gift of Christmas.

Have you ever received a Christmas gift that you really didn’t care for; that you really didn’t know what to do with? What did you do with it? How did you experience that gift?

The gifts we receive from others are not nearly as important as the love in which those gifts are given. When I give a gift to someone, the gift may be useful or not very useful. But the gift itself pales to the meaning behind the gift. The love in which the gift is given is what should be received the most. When I give a gift to someone, it is really my love that I am sharing, and that love is a part of myself that I am giving to them.

When we receive this gift from God, His Only Begotten Son, the gift itself speaks to His deep love. When God gave us the gift of His Son 2000 years ago, it was really His love that He was sharing. It was Himself that He was giving. This love is a living and perpetual love. You and I must accept the gift daily – unwrap the package daily in order to receive this love.

Our reception of His gift acknowledges the love given in the gift. Our gratitude for this love is what brings us back to the Eucharist every single week; it is what brings us to our knees in prayer every single day. It is what gets us through the pain and suffering of our lives. It is what liberates us from our sins and sinfulness. It is what brings us true freedom. It is what enables us to love in return.

Have we truly accepted the gift and are we grateful for it? We cannot love in return unless we are grateful. Gratitude is at the root of all love or charity.

Friends, when all the packages are unwrapped, and we have received the love behind those gifts, don't let the celebration of Christmas end. Continue to reflect upon the true meaning of Christmas. I would encourage, or even challenge you to spend time tomorrow on Christmas Day reflecting and sharing with each other in your families, what the grace of Christmas is for each of you.

What does this wonderful feast mean for each of you in light of God coming into this world desiring to enter into this relationship with you?

If we can do this, then the true meaning of this Christmas story will be a living story and not a historical event. It will then be a living reality whereby God's love is accepted and given away, the gift of Christmas, opened and shared.

“For our sakes, God has chosen to come among us and became man. We would have suffered eternal death, had God not been born in time. We would have never been freed from sinful flesh, had God not taken on himself the likeness of sinful flesh. We would have suffered everlasting unhappiness, had it not been for this mercy. We would have never returned to life, had he not shared our death. We would have been lost forever if he had not hastened to our aid. We would perish had he not come to us.” [Paraphrased from a sermon by St. Augustine]

As we find ourselves enjoying the company of family and friends this Christmas day and this Christmas season, let us celebrate, not because we have time off work, not because we have a school vacation; not because we have gotten a bunch of nice presents.

But let us celebrate because of the incredible love that God has for you and me, a love which has been born into the world in those humble surroundings and culminated through a death on a tree.

The grace of Christmas is that deep and profound mystery of God's love which unites all of us to Him for all eternity.

My dear friends, may God bless you all and Merry Christmas!