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

December 24, 2012

There is a story told in the Netherlands, perhaps more mythical than true. There was an old church in a little town. For many years, upon entering the church, everyone would stop to bow in the direction of a whitewashed wall. Nobody knew why, but everyone had been doing it for so long that no one questioned it. It was tradition. Besides, there was something fitting about doing it. It felt right to them.

One day, the parish decided to renovate the church. They began to strip the paint and whitewash off the old walls. They discovered traces of a painting on the wall which everyone always bowed to. They gently peeled off the paint, careful not to damage what was beneath it. Slowly there emerged a beautiful, centuries-old painting of Christ. No one was old enough to have ever seen it. It had been whitewashed over for at least a century or two. Everyone had been bowing to it, not knowing why, but sensing that there was a good reason for the reverence. Immediately after recovering the painting, everyone became interested in its origin. Who painted it? Slowly its story was recovered. Eventually everyone came to know how the painting got there and why it was so special. At some level, because of tradition that had been handed down to them, there had been a sense of something special in that wall that required some act of reverence. But the painting itself had been lost. Now when they turned to bow to it, they knew why they were doing so. It was now more than just a tradition. The real meaning of bowing before that wall had emerged.

As we all know, **THE** symbol of Christmas is the nativity scene. It is this scene, that as a child, we first came to know about the Christmas mystery. It is kneeling or standing in front of this scene that children first come to know the story. Arranging and re-arranging the figurines occupies the time of many a young child. They become very good at knowing where all the pieces go. And it can be ok if some of the pieces are missing. We can do without a cow or a sheep and somehow the meaning will still be there. But we can't do without some of the other characters.

A number of years ago, a friend buried the statue of St. Joseph from his nativity set thinking that it would help him sell the house, and then he forgot where he buried it. So his nativity set is without St. Joseph. You can't have a nativity set without St. Joseph, or Mary, or the Wise Men, or the shepherds. If they are not there then perhaps the mystery of Christmas is diminished in some way as well.

All the cast of characters were very important to the story, each playing an important role in the mystery of the birth and life of Jesus, the Messiah.

Imagine if St. Luke had left out the shepherds and the heavenly hosts in the nativity story that we heard about in tonight's Gospel. He couldn't have a nativity story without the shepherds because some of the meaning would be lost. The shepherds, the lowest class of people in that society, were the first to hear about this birth, showing us that God took flesh among a suffering and insignificant people.

St. Luke couldn't have a nativity story without the heavenly hosts. The heavenly hosts of angels were the first to praise God and sing, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to those on whom his favor rests." The heavenly hosts are a sign that this is an extraordinary event for all people for all eternity.

The manger is very important as well. The manger was a feeding trough for animals. The child wrapped in swaddling clothes placed in the manger – symbolizing this child Jesus would be the food for us weary travelers, for those who struggle in life, and for those who hunger for God's peace and love in their lives. A nativity scene could not be without a manger. All the details in the nativity story speak plainly and clearly of the life that this child Jesus would experience as he grew up.

The nativity scene speaks of the greatest mystery ever known to humankind....the love of God being born into the world, the Word of God becoming flesh and coming to dwell among us, His children. In 1223, when Saint Francis of Assisi first celebrated Christmas in Greccio, Italy, with an ox and a donkey and a manger full of hay, a new dimension of the mystery of Christmas came to light – God taking on human flesh as a little child, and the great mystery of faith being revealed. In this manger, God's humility shone forth. As our Holy Father stated, *"God became poor. His Son Jesus was born in the poverty of the stable. In the child Jesus, God made himself dependent, in need of human love; he put himself in the position of asking for human love – our love."*

All of us have seen many nativity sets. Because we see them in various shapes, sizes, colors, pictures, there can be the temptation to see these as scenes of art, or as a picturesque display. We can also be lulled by the quaint sights and sounds that we see and hear all around us at Christmas. The story in the nativity scene that we look at is far different than what we may experience in our own lives, and therefore it may not speak to us much beyond a nice little display.

But it is no accident that the nativity scene looks the way it does; it is no accident that Jesus took on our human flesh in the way He did; it is no accident that God was born into this human world in the way He did and where He did.

Our personal Christmas scene will not look like those we see on the Christmas cards taped to our doors and window frames. Our own Christmas environments seem to portray beauty and colors, and brightness and excitement. Look around the Church. Look around town. Look all around us.

But as we come to this wonderful celebration, I want you to use your imagination and place yourselves in the nativity scene as one of the characters who were there. Put yourselves around that manger, that feeding trough; put yourselves around the Christ child and allow yourself to experience the mystery. The message of Christmas, the message of this nativity cannot leave us indifferent. If the message is true, then it changes everything. If it is true, it also affects you and me in a very personal way. *"In the child Jesus, God made himself dependent, in need of human love; he put himself in the position of asking for human love – our love."*

Just as all the characters in the original nativity scene were important, so too are we important in making the story of Christmas come alive today. The story of Christmas doesn't have to remain hidden behind the whitewash walls of commercialism and consumerism.

It is timeless story... a story without end... a story to be carried **and lived** through the ages. All people who have been baptized into the life of Jesus share in this story. We share His story... and we can make it come alive in our world.

When we work for peace and justice and dignity for all people, the born and unborn alike, then the Christmas story comes alive.

When we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, attend to the suffering, visit and comfort the sick and dying, and the imprisoned, the Christmas story comes alive.

When we share our faith and love of God with others, telling them how much Jesus loves them and came into the world for them, the Christmas story comes alive.

When we turn away from materialism and consumerism, and choose a simple way of life, the Christmas story comes alive.

When we make sacrifices for the good of others, the Christmas story comes alive.

When we mend the hurts and divisions in our families and other relationships through forgiveness, the Christmas story comes alive.

When we turn to the Lord in our own suffering and need, in our own poverty and sinfulness, in humility and with honesty, the Christmas story comes alive.

Such a privilege we have been given to bring to life the story of Christmas.

As we begin this celebration of this Christmas season, let us be mindful that **“THE GRACE OF GOD HAS APPEARED...”A CHILD IS BORN TO US, A SON IS GIVEN TO US.” HOLINESS HAS COME AMONG US. We are privileged people.**

So again, the nativity scene is not just a nice picturesque display for us to admire. The true meaning of Christmas is not just an annual tradition that gets lost amidst the bright lights and colorful bows.

No, it is a celebration of the beginning of our salvation and redemption – our eternity.

So in this Christmas season let us celebrate, not just because we can enjoy the company of family and friends, not just because we have time off from work, not because we have a school vacation; not because it is a national holiday...

Let us celebrate because of the tremendous love that God has for you and me... a love which has been born into the world in those humble surroundings, and culminated through death on a tree, and which will soon be made present here on this altar of sacrifice.

Today and in the days ahead, let us celebrate, because God has come among us, and you and I have been privileged to now be the ones to “Proclaim good news of great joy” and thus bring the story of Christmas to life.

May God bless you all and Merry Christmas.

