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2022 Christmas Message

*“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give
knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will
break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and
in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

(Luke 1: 76-79)

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This New Testament passage from St. Luke continues to inspire and encourage me. It is known as the Canticle of Zechariah, or “The Benedictus” – the great prayer of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke this great prophecy about the coming of the Messiah for the world. However, the Messiah would not only provide ‘blessing’ and ‘deliverance’ in ways that merely satisfied people’s sense and longing for what it meant to be safe, secure, and prosperous – but would call for a fundamental change that would affect our very being: our mind, heart, and human condition. With the coming of this Messiah, we would move from merely being blessed and cared for, to being called to **share in the life and way of God!**

This conversion is so fundamental and so essential, that I find that no Christmas is the same. Each year we are called deeper into the meaning of this mystery, into such a salvific transformation. Christmas is a time when we recall God’s intervention into the state of affairs of all humanity. Despite the challenges and crises that the world experiences ... **God comes to us! And God comes not only to us, but in us and with us.** As St. Irenaeus reflects, “*God is man’s glory. Man is the vessel which receives God’s action and all His wisdom and power.*”



I continue to be amazed, comforted, and challenged by how God deals with us – all of us. God invites us to respond in some small, faithful way to the absolute plentitude we receive from Him, the Absolute Giver. Although we can ‘give back’ or ‘pay forward’ a very small fraction of what God gives to us and the world – God does not measure or give back according to our limited desire or capacity. God is the Absolute Lover and Giver. As St. John says, “*God is Love, and those who abide in Love, abide in God, and God in them.*” (1 John 4:16)

During these past few years and persisting into our current time, there is much fear and anxiety in the world. The Covid 19 pandemic, economic uncertainties, and the terrible war in Ukraine are among the major events that are so affecting us today.

As we struggle to make sense of such disappointment and crises for our communities and world, we can wonder, “Where is our Saviour? Why do good and innocent people continue to struggle with such things?”

Pope Francis recently reflected on John the Baptist’s imprisonment near the end of his life as he announced the coming of the Lord Jesus. As Pope Francis states, “*John is in prison, and this, as well as being a physical place, makes us think of the inner situation he is experiencing: in prison there is darkness, there is no possibility of seeing clearly and seeing beyond it.*” The Pope notes that in John’s case, it is as if he is no longer able to see in Jesus the awaited Messiah, and out of doubt sends his disciples to verify it. Pope Francis continues:



“It surprises us that this should happen to John, the one who had baptized Jesus in the Jordan and had indicated him to his disciples as the Lamb of God (cf. Jn 1:29). But this means that even the greatest believer goes through the tunnel of doubt. And this is not a bad thing; on the contrary, sometimes it is essential for spiritual growth: it helps us understand that God is always greater than we imagine Him to be.”

(Pope Francis, Angelus, December 11, 2022)

Ah, the lingering plague of doubt and fear! These sneak up on us, and take their toll on our trust and abandonment to the providence of God.

Let us remember that the first letter of John mentioned above goes on to contrast fear versus love: “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because He first loved us.*” (1 John 4:18-19)

The realization of the meaning of Christmas must challenge and stretch us in new and greater ways – including our awareness of the care of our brother and sister – let alone the many who are “the stranger.” In Jesus Christ, our previously limited notions of what constitutes community and brotherhood are changed, because of what follows upon the birth of Christ the Saviour – namely the Paschal Mystery, which features an epic and unprecedented personal sacrifice for all men and women of every creed, language, and nation by the One who draws all humanity to a new heaven and a new earth: the Kingdom of God.

So, amidst our frustrations, regrets, and disappointments, **CHRISTMAS COMES!** Thank God, Christmas just... comes! *O come, O Come, Emmanuel.*



Nativity pageant at Holy Spirit Parish, Saskatoon.

Whether we are ready or not... whether we can celebrate as usual or not... whether we can gather with many or with only a very few... whether we come off a year feeling profoundly blessed or really broken... Christmas comes! GOD IS with us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. GOD IS loving us, caring for us, holding us.

I recall last year Pope Francis warned against the “senseless notion” that the world can go back to what it was, relying on “...*false securities, habits and projects that aim exclusively at pursuing wealth and personal interests, while failing to respond to global injustice, the cry of the poor and the precarious health of our planet.*” ([Pope Francis address to ecumenical delegation, June 28, 2021](#))

One way in which we have all been challenged this past year is regarding the approach we take – and our Church takes – to evangelization and spreading the faith. This past summer during Pope Francis’s visit to Canada, at Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton he reflected on two contrasting approaches to evangelization, with very different ways of expressing power and authority.

Pope Francis pointed to the lasting pain created when Christians and religious institutions are not careful about how they represent the faith of Christ to others – in particular, imposing our version of the faith through our own limited cultural models. *Imposing versus proposing* the Gospel can have terrible repercussions. This is not God’s way. By contrast, God loves, liberates, and leaves us free:



Pope Francis at Lac Ste. Anne, AB. (Photo by M. Swan, CCN).

“One cannot proclaim God in a way contrary to God himself. And yet, how many times has this happened in history! While God presents himself simply and quietly, we always have the temptation to impose him, and to impose ourselves in his name. It is the worldly temptation to make him come down from the cross and show himself with power.... Brothers and sisters, in the name of Jesus, may this never happen again in the Church. May Jesus be preached as he desires, in freedom and charity. In every crucified person whom we meet, may we see not a problem to be solved, but a brother or sister to be loved, the flesh of Christ to be loved.”

([Pope Francis at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples, July 25, 2022](#))

I pray that we will always proclaim by our life and words – the true God because we are striving to know Him and to be created in Christ’s image.

Thus, as we approach another Christmas, we need to be open to ongoing growth and healing. There are many things that do need to change in our lives. The need for change and ongoing conversion – first and foremost in terms of our own minds and hearts – is absolutely crucial. As Pope Francis states:

“Everything depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles ... (and watch for) ...human weakness, the proclivity to selfishness that is part of what the Christian tradition refers to as concupiscence”: the human inclination to be concerned only with myself, my group, my own petty interests.”

(Fratelli Tutti #166)

I very much appreciate the Holy Father’s emphasis **on the priority of forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation**. The mercy and forgiving love of God for the world is why Jesus comes at Christmas. As the Pope states: *“...Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering.”* (*Fratelli Tutti* #252) There may be much to be angry about, however, left alone, our anger will consume and destroy us.

O how the world needs to choose another way – the way demonstrated in the life and way of Jesus Christ. Taking the path of Christ also means that we must continue to grow in our commitment and ability to *listen, communicate and seek healthy relationship with one another* – key themes as the Church continues to engage in the Synod on Synodality in the coming New Year.

May our celebration of Christmas seek Christ’s merciful and redeeming way. Let us ask ourselves:

- How is God calling me to be **more fully human, fully alive** in my life right now?
- Do I give the Christ permission to take my **heart of stone** and make it a **heart of flesh**?
- In what way is **this Christmas** different for me, in terms of what God wants me to see, to change, to heal and forgive, to live and do differently?
- AND ...with whom am I called to **forgiveness, reconciliation and healing**?

Let us be awake and watchful at this Christmas time when God comes to us!

Have a blessed and joy-filled Christmas season!



Sincerely in Christ,

+ Mark A. Hagemoen

Most Rev. Mark A. Hagemoen
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