

My dear friends in Christ:

In his Gospel, St. Luke proclaims that Jesus is Lord. According to St. Luke's story of Jesus' birth, when the Child is presented to God in the temple of Jerusalem, two prophetic figures—Anna and Simeon—witness to Jesus and say he is "...a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel." It is this light, this glory, that we celebrate again at Christmas time 1976.

St. Luke's Christmas story is the narrative of a Christian looking back to tell us who Jesus showed himself to be, "...a Savior for the whole people." So St. Luke tells us about shepherds and about angels and about a virgin girl giving birth—miraculous moments. But St. Luke's account of Jesus' birth is more than a series of miraculous facts. His story is the story of a Christian who looks with faith on the birth of Jesus, and with that faith finds hope for his life. We should be like St. Luke. We should look on the story of the birth of Jesus with faith and find hope for our lives today.

My faith tells me that the birth of Jesus calls us to reaffirm the meaning and value of human life. My faith tells me that the dignity of all human life is ultimately made manifest in the birth of this child. My faith tells me that you and I participate in God's life because God has taken on our human life in Jesus. That God would share our lives is a mystery of God's love. Even though we cannot fully understand this love relationship, with the gift of faith we understand that Jesus' birth gives meaning to every decision and every act of our lives.

His birth brings a joy in our initial understanding of the relationship of the infinite and transcendent God with each of us, moving through time in an imperfect world. The dignity of each person ultimately is manifested in the birth of this child. The human person shares in the Divine life because the Divine Person takes as His own our human life.

Each one of us knows that we are fragile and mortal, living lives that are controlled by circumstances and accidents of history. To a person without faith, life would appear to be meaningless—a mere succession of days—some lived in pain, some lived in joy; but inevitably moving toward death and extinction. Faced with this concept of life, yet possessed with a spirit and a mind that seeks to give meaning to life, a person either despairs before a meaningless existence or seeks to find satisfaction in temporal goods, power, or personal pleasure.

To a person of faith, however, life is exciting, full of expectancy, and sustained by hope. Christians recognize that they are created by God's love; destined for union with God; redeemed by God-made-man. Each stage of human life helps us to a new realization of dignity as a result of the Incarnation. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, says that nothing will separate us "... from the love of God that comes to us in Jesus, Our Lord." In the Gospels, John the Evangelist says that "... to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God."

Because of this gift of life and the potential of becoming children of God, we must have a deep reverence for human life from the womb to the grave. We must recognize the rights and dignity of every person. At Christmas we again advert to the humanity of Christ. We must not forget that Christ by becoming one with us accepts all that goes with being human, including growth, change, learning, disappointments, suffering, and joy. The Spirit tells us that "He grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and man."

This skeletal history of the early years of the Savior, his maturing through childhood and adolescence, has been idealized by poet and philosopher to the extent that reality is often confused with myth. We should not permit poetic license to obscure the true person of Christ and thus keep us from identifying with Him. For young people, Jesus' human maturing experience should be a source of encouragement. Every young person experiences inner struggles, times of doubt, painful adjustments, and even a tyranny of moods. Amid uncertainties, the surge and tossing of emotion, the hope and promise of Christmas should awaken in young people a conscious awareness of a future that has meaning and purpose. But Christ's offer of love and life is valid not only for young people. Christ's offer of love and life embraces all our lives.

Through history the common bond of humanity that holds us together has become fragile. Selfishness, pride, status-seeking power, fear and pleasure have almost made trust and confidence a dream. By assuming our nature, Jesus, the God-made-man, tells us that intimacy is possible; that trust and confidence can happen even in a tortured world. When Jesus came to us, He forged a link with all people, a link so persistent and so deep that vestiges of Jesus' gift of loving life remain in a secular society too often cut off from God. As members of society we seek happiness, life, peace, joy, a wholeness and wholesomeness of being. But the happiness we seek and for which we were fashioned is given to us in Jesus, God's supreme gift of love. Jesus taught us by example and word that every human being has the right to be loved, to have a home where he or she can put down roots and grow. The Christian family is the ideal community where this need is met. The family has a special vocation to serve as a place where people are loved not for what they do or for what they have, but simply because they are.

Jesus lived in a family. But He came not to that family alone. He came in the Father's name to bring fulfillment promised to the Hebrew people, and through them to all people everywhere. He is himself our happiness and peace, our joy and beatitude. The Pastoral on Moral Values recently issued by the Bishops of the United States tells us that "God reveals to us in Jesus who we are and how we are to live. Yet He has made us free and able and obliged to decide how we shall respond to our calling. We must make concrete in the circumstances of our lives the call to holiness and the Commandment that love requires." The family is the ideal environment in which this calling can be recognized.

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The family obviously is not limited to the young or adults in the prime of life. The mystery of human life, of family life, transcends various age levels, moves from conception, youth, maturity, to the twilight years and death. In the mystery of the Incarnation there exists a most eloquent message to the aging and aged. This is experienced in the love relationship of family life, and continues because the elderly have so much to offer. For them, Christmas speaks of eternity, fulfillment, and final destiny. As one grows older, the reality of the mystery of salvation and of God's love moves into time. The elderly sense the value of God's eternal love. They have a tolerance for the compulsive. They enable other generations to measure human values by eternal standards.

In the mystery of the Incarnation, we recognize that the time, circumstances, and place where we live are but signs pointing to eternity in which God is. God, for Whom there is no past or future; God, Who eternally exists, became man. In union with God-made-man, eternity can be ours. In the Incarnation, faith gives meaning to life. Because you and I accept this reality through faith, eternity also gives meaning to time.

God bless you!

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