

Talk on the Incarnation of Christ

Christmas 2021

Merry Christmas everyone!

You might be wondering why I am wishing you a Merry Christmas on December 29th. Aren't I a little late? Actually, I am right on time, which brings me to the first part of talk to you today on Christmas. In the Catholic Church, Christmas is not just a day, it is a liturgical season that starts Christmas Eve and goes until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which this year is on January 9th. So, what is Christmas all about and why is Christmas such a big deal? We all know that Christmas is Baby Jesus's birthday, but why is that so important?

I am going to use the Christmas Candy Cane to help explain why. The tradition of having Candy Canes at Christmas dates back Christmas Eve of 1670 when a Choirmaster the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany had Candy Canes made to give to members of his Children's choir. There is much symbolism in this cherished Christmas candy which can help us to understand the meaning and importance of the Incarnation of Christ which we celebrate on Christmas.

First let's look at the shape of the candy cane, if you hold it one way, it is in the shape of a "J" for Jesus. On Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus. If you flip the candy cane around, it is the shape of a shepherd's staff. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who seeks us out when we are lost in sin and brings us back to the safety of being with our Father. But Christmas is not just about Jesus, if you look closely, the Candy Cane has three stripes. This symbolizes the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, Jesus and God the Holy Spirit; one God in three persons. The white color on the Candy Cane represents the Jesus's purity, that Jesus was free from sin and the red color reminds us that Jesus shed his blood to make reparation for our sins. Finally, the peppermint flavor symbolizes the hyssop that Jesus was given to drink on the cross. Hyssop is an herb that is a mint. When Jesus said he was thirsty on the Cross, instead of giving him water to drink the soaked a sponge with hyssop mint and had him drink that instead. Doesn't any of this symbolism seem a little strange to you? After all we are talking about Christmas not Easter. Why isn't there any symbolism of a baby or a manger or even the Star of Bethlehem? The answer is that everything about Christmas points to Easter. Which is the fulfillment of the mission of Christ. Who is the savor of the world.

I would like to break all of this open a little more for you. Let's start by looking at the Incarnation of Christ. Incarnation, what does that mean? It means that God, the God of the whole universe came down to earth to become a man. Wow! If you think about it, that is amazing! God is God, He can do anything He wants, so why would God ever want to become a mere human and why is this so important? In a General Audience that Pope Saint John Paul II gave on May 27th, 1998, titled, *The Holy Spirit's role in the Incarnation*, John Paul II stated that, "The glory of God is revealed in the Incarnation more than in any other work."¹ This is why at Christmas Mass when we recite the part of the Creed which states that "Jesus was conceived of the virgin Mary and became man," we kneel.

So why the Incarnation God's most important work? Pope Saint John Paul II asked this very question in his General Audience and found the answer in Scripture. John Paul II said, "if we ask ourselves what the Holy Spirit's purpose was in bringing about the Incarnation event, the word of God gives us a reply in the Second

¹ John Paul II, General Audience *The Holy Spirit's role in the Incarnation* (27 May 1998) §3. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_27051998.html

Letter of Peter, telling us that it happened so that we might become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pt 1:4).² In this act, God elevated our human dignity. Humans have always been dignified, different in nature from other creatures because humans are the only creation of God that was made in the image and likeness of God. (Gen 1:26-27) However, humans were not living in that dignified state because of the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. Through this Original sin we were separated from God, not able to participate in the divine nature as God had intended for us. “The word became flesh,” (Jn 1:14) to restore our human dignity by elevating our fallen nature back to the Divine. Vatican II Council explains this by saying that, “to the sons of Adam He (Jesus) restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He (Jesus) assumed it... has been raised up to a divine dignity...by His incarnation, the Son of God has united Himself...with every (human).”³ Jesus came to restore our human nature, to make our fallen human world more humane, that is to make it more human! Human, as God had always intended; a human nature united with the Divine.

So, what is this Divine nature? It is rooted in love. God is love. (1 Jn 4:8) I did not say that God loves, what I said is that God is love. One of theological virtues of God is love. What does this mean? What is a theological virtue? A theological virtue is not something that God does; it is what God is. It is what comprises God. God is love. Love does not exist outside of God. All love comes from God because God is love. Therefore, it is our human nature to love. It is this divine nature of love that Jesus came to restore and to establish the Kingdom of God, the Kingdome of love.

Let’s unpack this a little more. What does this divine love look like? To discover this, we need first to discover what the Divine is. God is the Trinity, The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, one God in three persons. Each equal in stature and equally revered by the others. God is not a loner! The three persons of God are in perfect relationship with each other. A relationship of perfect love and respect. Humans are created in the image and likeness of God. We had fallen into sin but Jesus came to redeem us and restore that image and likeness of God. Therefore, since God is in perfect relationship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We humans are made to be in relationship with each other. A relationship rooted in love and respect for each other and for God. That is why the Vatican II council stated that, “For this reason, love of God and neighbor is the first and greatest commandment. Sacred Scripture teaches us that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbor.”⁴

So, who is our neighbor? Is it just the people we choose to like or is it also those that we find unlikeable? Is it those that look like us or is it also those that look and act differently than us? Can we choose who our neighbor is and forget about all the rest? No, our Neighbor is the whole human family. Vatican II states, “God who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. For having been created in the image of God who ‘from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth’ (Acts 17:26) All humans are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself.”⁵ To establish the Kingdom of God by loving God and neighbor.

How do you start to establish this Kingdom? You start first by acknowledging that God is real and that this real God loves you immensely. It is not possible for any of us to spread the love of God until we have allowed ourselves be immersed in God’s love for us. Once we truly allow ourselves to be filled with God’s love, that love will naturally flow out of us to others. I invite all of you to join me in this journey to discover God love for us. Throughout the month of January, I will be posting daily reflections on God’s immense love for each of us. To allow that love to fill us and then to flow out to others, to our families, to those in our

² Ibid

³ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on The Church in The Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965) §22. at The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes* §24.

⁵ Ibid

workplaces and schools, to our neighborhoods, our towns, to all we encounter; so that together we can start the work of building the Kingdom of God, The Kingdom of Love.

So Why is the Incarnation of Christ such a big deal? The Incarnation is the best gift of Christmas because through the Incarnation, Christ became one of us so the we may become one with God and each other! Merry Christmas everyone and God Bless you!