

Midnight Mass Christmas Homily 2020

Bishop John Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

December 25, 2020

When he was elected as a Successor of St. Peter on March 13, 2013, our Holy Father chose the name *Francis*. It was an important decision with a prophetic message that has unfolded before our eyes.

Especially now, almost eight years later and with the publication of his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* from the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi on October 3, 2020, the significance of the choice is clear: Pope Francis connects his papacy and his fire for global mission and universal charity and fraternity to St. Francis.

Through the ministry of our Holy Father, St. Francis of Assisi is close to the Church in these times. Therefore, as we draw near to Bethlehem at the end of this difficult year where so many of us are physically separated from family members, I wish to recall two points Pope Francis highlights from the life of St. Francis. One will help us celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord; the other indicates a grace for which to pray during this holy season.

First, in his 2019 Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum: On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene*, Pope Francis emphasizes St. Francis of Assisi's foundational role in our celebration of Christmas.

St. Francis has had such a profound and lasting impact historically on how we celebrate Christmas that I believe that a figurine of St. Francis worshipping the Christ Child should be set behind the shepherds and the three Kings in every creche set in every part of the world.

The Holy Father recalls the origins of the crèche and the first nativity scene inspired by the holy friar in the year 1223, by which the saint sought “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem.”

Importantly, the remembrance of Christ's birth that St. Francis desired to convey was brought alive in Greccio, a small village in Italy, not by statues but by people from the surrounding towns and countryside.

Pope Francis describes the scene: "On December 25, friars came to Greccio from various parts, together with people from the farmsteads in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist."(2)

That Christmas night in Greccio, almost 800 years ago, Pope Francis reminds us, "the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present." That night, there was "no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery." (2) It is also the Nativity scene and the Prince of Peace that bridges the physical distance many of us are experiencing this Christmas with our families.

And Pope Francis states: "With the simplicity of that sign, Saint Francis carried out a great work of evangelization. His teaching touched the hearts of Christians and continues today to offer a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith. Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments...from the time of its Franciscan origins, the nativity scene has invited us to 'feel' and 'touch' the poverty that God's Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly, it summons us to follow him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross. It asks us to meet him and serve him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in great need (cf. Matthew 25:31-46)." (3)

This Christmas, in our world laden with the Crosses of COVID-19, political and economic turmoil and transition, racism, financial hardship, and so many other societal ills and challenges, let us remember this lesson from Greccio, Italy: Christmas is an event to be lived.

It demands our participation. Like the women and men who embodied that first crèche, we must be present to Christ who is born for us. We must behold and receive Him.

Second, in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis shows St. Francis as an icon of Christ-centered listening. With great humility and charity, the saint reverently listened to

others and by listening so deeply allowed the Holy Spirit to inflame the Gift of Wisdom in his life.

So many artists, musicians, actors, playwrights, graphic designers and film directors make their own creative contributions because they are refined and exquisite listeners of humanity.

For instance, the film director Stephen Spielberg was once asked in an interview what he hoped God would say to him at the moment of his death.

Spielberg's response was simple, brief and profound. He hoped that God would say to him: "Thanks for listening."¹

St. Francis of Assisi was present to the various voices in his life – the voice of God, the voice of his neighbor, the voice of the poor, the voice of the sick, the voice of nature – and by truly hearing them, he was an instrument of peace, healing, and understanding. How different it can be for us!

The Holy Father says well what we know: "Today's world is largely a deaf world...At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying." Aware of this fact, the Pope encourages us, in the midst of our hectic and polarized world, to be like St. Francis and "not lose our ability to listen." (48)

This Christmas, when we approach the crib, let us ask for the grace to be attentive listeners – listeners who hear the cry of the poor, the sick, the unborn, the elderly and the refugee. Let us ask for the grace to be like St. Francis, so that we may hear the voice of God and the voice of our neighbor and respond with a charity that transforms the world and history.²

St. Francis of Assisi, with his spiritual son the recently beatified Blessed Carlo Acutis (1991-2006) who died at the age of 15 in 2006, beckon to the children, teenagers, University students and young adults of the world.

Together Francis and Carlo ask our young people and all of us to really listen to God and to be guided by God as our lives unfold.

As Blessed Carlo says to the young people of the world, be a baptismal original committed to holiness and lighting the world with the Light of Christ!

¹ Cf. Sean Cardinal O'Malley's Christmas 2013 homily.

² Cf. Bishop John O. Barres October 8, 2020 Statement, "The Compelling Figure of St. Francis of Assisi in the Pontificate of Pope Francis and his New Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*."

Don't be a bland photocopy that pretends to be original but really conforms to the well trodden self-destructively addictive and boredom- driven paths of pride, anger, lust, envy, gluttony, avarice and sloth.

The Christmas manger scene invites us to give thanks for our families and to meditate with Charles Dickens and Ebenezer Scrooge on the Christmas past of our families, the Christmas Covid-19 present of our families and the Christmas future of our families.

In the December 2020 *Magnificat*, Mary Beth Newkumet did this in a profound and thought-provoking way as she pondered in her heart a family photograph. She writes: “There is a picture frame in our living room where I used to display the annual Christmas photograph of our four children while they were growing up. But for almost a decade now, I have kept the image of one particular year in place. That photograph shows our smiling kids on the cusp of young adulthood. At the time, it was easy for my husband and me to say that we trusted Christ with their hunger for happiness, love and fulfillment. And then their winding pathways commenced! We knew that during the next few years, our young adults would experience a future that moved from endless possibilities to specific realities. Some choices would be made by them...other choices would be made for them! Not this job but that one. Not this home, but that one. Not this love, but that one. How would they respond to the mystery of who or what was being proposed? As parents, all we could do was witness to how often surprising circumstances had become the specific realities of Christ's ‘narrow way’ for our own happiness. Today, we recognize his presence and action in the same winnowing events during the past few years that have moved each young adult toward his or her vocation and destiny. Now when I walk by that photograph, I hold fast to the memory of what has happened. Whether in joy or in sorrow, Christ knows our hearts’ desires and remains with us – intimately – along the winding pathways of human life.”³

Each one of us can recall family photographs that capture a similar profound moment in our family histories and that prompt this kind of meditation on how God's providence works through the lives of our families.

The arc of our family history including every labyrinthian turn in our genealogies moves through and is illumined by the humble power of the Incarnation and the scene of a poor infant in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes.

³ Mary Beth Newkumet, December 2020 *Magnificat*, 408.

Pope Francis says: “By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness. From the manger, Jesus proclaims in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.”
(Admirabile Signum 6)

Like Pope Francis, may we be moved by the example of St. Francis, and may St. Francis of Assisi’s love for the Mystery of the Nativity, his ecstatic mysticism, his love for the poor, and his spirit of universal fraternity animate our celebration of Christmas this year.

Thank you for following the path of both St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis in living this “revolution of love” expressed in the joyful way you and your families live and proclaim the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the entire human family!

Merry Christmas to you all and “Thanks for listening!”