

Christmas Day 11:00am Mass 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.

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, Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, 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

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

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

In his *Urbi et Orbi Message* in St. Peter’s Square earlier today, Pope Francis encouraged us all to listen to the cries of a suffering world. He said: “On this day, when the word of God became a child, let us turn our gaze to the many, all too many, children worldwide, especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, who still pay the high price of war. May their faces touch the consciences of all men and women of good will, so that the causes of conflicts can be addressed and courageous efforts can be made to build a future of peace.

May this be a favorable time to ease tensions throughout the Middle East and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

May the Infant Jesus heal the wounds of the beloved Syrian people, who for a decade have been devastated by war and its consequences, now aggravated by the pandemic. May he bring comfort to the Iraqi people and to all those involved in the work of reconciliation, and particularly to the Yazidis, sorely tried by these last years of war. May he bring peace to Libya and enable the new phase of the negotiations in course to end all forms of hostility in the country.

May the Babe of Bethlehem grant the gift of fraternity to the land that witnessed his birth. May Israelis and Palestinians regain mutual trust and seek a just and lasting peace through a direct dialogue capable of ending violence and overcoming endemic grievances, and thus bear witness before the world to the beauty of fraternity.

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*.”

May the star that shone brightly on Christmas night offer guidance and encouragement to the Lebanese people, so that, with the support of the international community, they may not lose hope amid the difficulties they currently face. May the Prince of Peace help the country's leaders to lay aside partial interests and commit themselves with seriousness, honesty and transparency to enabling Lebanon to undertake a process of reform and to persevere in its vocation of freedom and peaceful coexistence.

May the Son of the Most High sustain the commitment of the international community and the countries involved to continue the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as in the eastern regions of Ukraine, and to foster dialogue as the sole path to peace and reconciliation.

May the Divine Child alleviate the suffering of the peoples of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, affected by a grave humanitarian crisis caused by extremism and armed conflicts, but also by the pandemic and other natural disasters. May he end the violence in Ethiopia, where many people have been forced to flee because of the fighting; comfort the inhabitants of the Cabo Delgado region in northern Mozambique, victims of the violence of international terrorism; and encourage the leaders of South Sudan, Nigeria and Cameroon to pursue the path of fraternity and dialogue they have undertaken.

May the Eternal Word of the Father be a source of hope for the American continent, particularly affected by the coronavirus, which has intensified its many sufferings, frequently aggravated by the effects of corruption and drug trafficking. May he help to ease the recent social tensions in Chile and end the sufferings of the people of Venezuela.”

With our Holy Father, we celebrate this Christmas Mass on the Altar of the World and these global intentions for peace, justice, religious freedom and respect for human life.

We also remember the young people of the world at this Christmas Mass.

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!

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.

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

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.

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!”