

Most beloved in the Lord, this night we proclaim with the angels and all believers down through the long course of time that Christ, Who is the glory of His people, is born. Christ, our redeemer, Emanuel, God-Is-With-Us, has come to us in this dark world from the inaccessible realm of the Father's uncreated glory.

The texts of tonight's Mass liturgy convey the great and illuminating truth that Christ, the lowly Child born of Mary, is God's true Son, begotten from before time began. The introit in today's Mass 'Dominus dixit ad me,' taken from Psalm 2 sang out, "The Lord hath said to me, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee." This has a parallel in Luke's Gospel. The introit is to be understood that "The Lord – that is to say, God the Father – said to Me, (Christ): "Thou art My Son; on this day (the day of all eternity) have I begotten Thee (begotten Thee of My very being)." Luke's Gospel tells us that Mary "brought forth her firstborn Son," speaking of Jesus' origin in our human flesh and in the passage of time. Thus with the whole Christian world we confess that this Child is truly God and truly Man, sent from the father for the redemption of mankind.

The *Gloria in Excelsis* with which the Mass opened is particularly apt on this night since it is the Christmas hymn, *par excellence*; it is a prose account penned by holy Church and originates in the angelic songs which surrounded the shepherds on the first Christmas in Bethlehem, more than 2,000 years ago. The Mass collect acknowledges God as the source for the light of our faith, and prays for its full enjoyment in the vision of Him in heaven. The bright glory of the angels and the enlightenment given to and through the Church are figures of that infinite sea of divine light in which our Christian hope rests: that we may, by the grace of this divine Child, come to gaze upon God in the glory of heaven when our earthly sojourn has come to its end.

The epistle lesson by Saint Paul illustrates the power of this Christmas light: it was the incarnate Redeemer Himself Who appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus in persecution of the first Christians. From that free gift of conversion, Paul was enlightened and led – his soul veritably compelled him – to a life of service to this same Lord and God.

In that reading we encountered the theme of grace – grace as it comes to us through the Per-son of Christ, the source of salvation for all mankind; grace, as it acts in the role of divine teacher in bringing us to lives of sobriety, justice, and godliness. And it is grace which floods us with the supernatural hope and desire for the Lord's return in the consummation of the ages according to the divine plan of God.

Both Epistle and Gospel speak of Christ as man. Placed between these major readings of the Mass liturgy, the Gradual chant sings of the heavenly origin of the child while leading us to the incomparably beautiful Gospel account of the human birth of our Blessed Redeemer. The shepherds were keeping watch that night even as we are ourselves are doing right now. A divine splendor overwhelmed them – and us, by faith – with a theophany of angels from glory whose radiance and song extolled the birth of Him Who is the light of all the world.

The Offertory chant will soon echo the Gospel; angels from heaven stand around that crib in solemn jubilation. And so too my beloved, this wandering world, ever addicted to the darkness within which it so willingly sits, may be freed from its slavery if it would but accept this Child Who has been born for our salvation. Here we gaze upon Him by Whom we have been made citizens for glory.

With all these thoughts we will soon be led to the Christmas altar. In the offering of our gifts – our souls and bodies, our means and our wills – there occurs an ineffable exchange between God and Man. We are reminded that God became Man so that we might be deified by His grace. And so the Mass flows on – and very soon the mystery we are

commemorating will become, instead, the divine reality itself: Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, born in time of Mary, here, at this time and in this place will be born to us in Sacrifice and Sacrament. Here, upon this altar the Lord Jesus, that gracious child of Bethlehem, will be born to us once more. And wonder of wonder, to the degree that we give our hearts to Him in sincerity and truth, we are reborn in Him.

Most beloved in Christ, this festival of light and grace is a preeminent feast of our redemption: “He has sent salvation to His people; He has established His covenant forever . . . with the Lord there is mercy and plentiful redemption.” This Child, this God, even now, in heaven, is raising His voice from the depths of our world into which He once descended – as we profess, “for us men and our salvation” – for in heaven He cries out as the little Child from the crib, He calls from the abyss of pain on the cross, He enters into the depth of every human suffering to the end that we, who are lost, might be found, and led by Him to God in glory.

And so it is, on this night of nights, we should listen with hearts of faith and joy to the riches of our worship which places these words upon our lips and into our hearts:

*Hodie Christus natus est hodie, Salvator apparuit.* On this day Christ was born, on this day the Savior has appeared. On this day the angels are singing on earth, the archangels are rejoicing; on this day the just exult and sing: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, to men of good will. Christ the Savior is born unto us. Alleluia.