

Nativity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ – December 25, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – Midnight and 10:00am Masses – 750 words

One of the most beautiful paintings of the nativity is to be found in our own National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC: it is from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by the Venetian artist, Lorenzo Lotto. And what distinguishes it from so many others is that, in addition to the usual image of Mary and Joseph kneeling humbly beside the crib with the angels hovering above, there is a crucifix displayed in the shadows behind. This painting thus depicts what many spiritual commentators have said: Christ was born to die; the wood of the crib foreshadowed the wood of the cross. I've wondered if perhaps it wouldn't be a fitting thing to add a crucifix to our nice new nativity here!



Christ's birth took place in an atmosphere of quiet, of stillness; God does his greatest works in very silent and humble ways. Most nativity paintings – and scenes in our churches – succeed in capturing this sense of peaceful quiet. Yet, at the same time, with their beauty and symmetry, they easily lead us to forget that our Lord was born into poverty and squalor. Our nicely curated crèche fails to depict the sort of filth that one finds in stables with animals. We certainly miss out on the smells! Christ was born to die; but leading up to that death, he was to share in our human condition entirely – even that of the most impoverished.

The whole world awaited our Lord's birth – whether it knew it or not. And now, ever since his death, resurrection, and ascension, the whole world awaits his return. But while we wait, and while we prepare for that moment, we must not miss the fact that his presence among us continues through time. What happens on our altars at Holy Mass is something analogous to that first Christmas. When the priest pronounces Christ's own words over the bread and wine, Christ enters into our midst anew. The nativity looked ahead: it prefigured the cross; the Mass starts from the cross and looks to Christ's glorious return. The commonality between the two is the presence of our Lord.

But there is more. Jesus entered into our world then amidst poverty and squalor, as I said – as well as cold and discomfort. In other words, it was hardly a reception fitting for the King of kings. But he still comes to us in this way! When we receive him worthily in Holy Communion, he enters into the messiness of our lives. Who of us has it all together? We are hardly prepared to give a fitting reception for a king either! But again, if we receive him worthily – that is, in the state of grace – then we are at least on the way. And he comes always with the help of his grace, helping to bring greater order and peace to our lives.

The Holy Eucharist, then, continues the incarnation through time, through history, until our Lord returns in glory. Just as his birth some 2,000 years ago took place in relative quiet and stillness, in an almost unnoticeable way, so now, under the humble appearances of bread and wine – with no visible miracle to grab our attention – our Lord comes into our midst at every single Mass. It may sound cliché, but it bears repeating: at his birth he was placed in the manger,

the trough from which the animals ate; now, he becomes present on our altars and gives himself to us as food.

My prayer this Christmas is that each of us may come to a deeper appreciation of what happens on our altars at Holy Mass – and that we might strive always to receive the Lord worthily in Holy Communion. When our souls are in the state of mortal sin – in need of Confession – there is no room for Christ in the inn, so to speak: we are not a worthy place for him to come and rest. But when we are in the state of grace and ready to receive him, he does find a fitting place of repose – even if our lives are, as it were, kind of messy. So while we contemplate his birth this Christmas, with visual aids like our nativity here or our favorite painting, let us strive to imagine that divine scene taking place in our souls. It is meant to happen not only at Christmas, but on every Sunday, every Holy Day – until the Lord comes again in glory.

A very merry Christmas to one and all!