

**Homily for Christmas – Mass at Midnight  
St. Benedict’s Church - Amherst, New York  
25 December 2009**

Who are you?<sup>1</sup>  
Who gets up in the middle of the night,  
in the bleakness of winter,  
to step into the silence of night?

You’re in a class of your own.  
You are Midnight Mass people!

You Midnight Mass people understand something others do not.  
You understand the gentle power of tradition<sup>2</sup> –  
the power of handing on something special from one generation to the next.

So, once again, you are here with your families.  
In fact, it is almost unthinkable for you *not* to be here –  
so strong is your family Midnight Mass tradition.  
Your family has been coming to Midnight Mass for years  
and you want your children and children’s children to do the same.

You understand the power of Jesus’ words:  
“where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus IS with you now! He is Emmanuel – God with us!

You, Midnight Mass people, understand life fully.  
not just the garish day<sup>4</sup>, but the quiet stillness of night.

You know what it is like to wait in the dark.  
You’ve experienced pain, sorrow, disease and disappointment in life.  
You’re a people who have walked in darkness.<sup>5</sup>

Everyone does at some point, but you are different –  
you are with me here at Christ’s Mass<sup>6</sup> tonight.

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<sup>1</sup> This section – from the opening question through “He is Emmanuel – God with us” – is taken from a Midnight Mass homily preached at Holy Spirit Church in North Buffalo. I do not recall the year, perhaps 2001 or 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The homily deliberately grows in appreciation for the power of tradition, moving from family Christmas traditions to Sacred Tradition. The homily is structured on the *Solemn Blessing for Christmas*. See Supplements.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:20.

<sup>4</sup> Venerable John Henry Newman’s “The Pillar of the Cloud” was in mind for this description of day and for the poem’s passage from darkness to light. Though I turn to both Newman and G.M. Hopkins often, this time particularly because of the trip my wife and I would make on Christmas Day to Dublin. See Supplements.

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 9:1. The beginning of tonight’s first reading.

<sup>6</sup> Referencing my previous homily preached on Gaudete Sunday, 2009. See its footnote.

You're different because –  
You have seen a great light<sup>7</sup>  
You refuse to be mastered by darkness and sin<sup>8</sup>  
You have left your gloom behind<sup>9</sup>  
You saw a star and followed it here  
You hear angel voices still  
You are *shepherds* tonight!<sup>10</sup>

Listen Shepherds!  
You can still hear angels in the silence of this night.  
In fact, some angel probably brought you here tonight –  
some messenger of God (that's what the words "angel" means after all)  
whispered to you and asked you to come to Christ's Mass.

Listen!  
As surely as the first shepherds found Jesus some 2,000 years ago,  
you too will find the Savior in the Crib [pointing to the crèche].  
He is Emmanuel and He IS God with us!

Listen more shepherds! Listen as you've never listened before!  
Listen to God's Word [pointing to the ambo where I was standing] – see it become our Eucharist  
here at Christ's Mass -  
there where the Word becomes Flesh and dwells among us.<sup>11</sup> [pointing to the altar]

Remember what Scripture and Tradition reveal to us:  
Jesus was born in Bethlehem – the word "Bethlehem" means House of Bread<sup>12</sup>  
Jesus was placed in a manger – a feeding trough  
Jesus is our Bread of Life!<sup>13</sup>  
Be nourished by Him tonight for He is really and truly<sup>14</sup> with us here at Christ's Mass.  
Approach Him with awe and reverence like the first shepherds did.

Listen Shepherds. He IS with us.  
He is with us tonight in Word and Eucharist, not just in the crib.

But Shepherds, see Him everywhere now!  
For now "The *world* is charged with the grandeur of God [and] it will flame out like shining from shook foil!"<sup>15</sup>

He IS with us!

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 9:1.

<sup>8</sup> I was thinking of the Rite of Baptism's "Renunciation of Sin" option A, questions two and three.

<sup>9</sup> See Isaiah 9:1.

<sup>10</sup> See Luke 2:1-14. Tonight's Gospel pericope.

<sup>11</sup> See John 1:14.

<sup>12</sup> I recall first learning the literal meaning of 'Bethlehem' via the "Adoration of Christ" tondo by Lorenzo di Credi and Studio, c. 1510 in *Albright-Knox Art Gallery: Painting and Sculpture from Antiquity to 1942*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., NY, 1979, page 160. This tondo was on display at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo NY, when I was quite young. I do not know if they retain this work. See Supplements.

<sup>13</sup> See John 6:35 "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life...'"

<sup>14</sup> See Council of Trent, Session 13, canon 1: *If anyone denies that in the sacrament of the most Holy Eucharist are contained truly, really and substantially the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consequently the whole Christ, but says that He is in it only as in a sign, or figure or force, let him be anathema.*

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.'s *God's Grandeur*. Hopkins has had a great influence on me since my high school days. See Supplements.

Christ is here!

See Him...

In your baby's first Christmas  
And in grandma's last.

See Him...

In the pregnant teenager on your block  
In the lonely man in your pew  
In the homeless woman downtown  
In the young soldier in Iraq  
In the college kid yearning for world peace.

See Him! Christ is here!

And your world is now "charged with the grandeur of God!"

Christ is here! See Him..

In the shackled slaves in Sudan  
In the nursing homes of Amherst  
In the uninsured people of America  
In the mourning families of Mexico  
In the divorced couple you know in Snyder  
In the alcoholic in your family.

See Him! Christ is here!

See Him for once..

In the wrinkled hands of your father!  
In the tearful eyes of your wife!  
In the laughter of your sons and daughters!

Shepherds, listen!

Christ is here and you are His hands, His eyes, His words, His Church!  
Now bring Christ back to His wounded world!<sup>16</sup>

There is a traditional prayer<sup>17</sup> from the East that asks:

*What shall we bring You, O Christ,  
when you are born on earth as Man for our sake?*

*Every creature you have ever made brings thanks to you this night...*

*The angels bring their songs  
The heavens bring their star  
The wise men bring their gifts  
The shepherds bring their wonder  
The earth brings a cave  
The wilderness brings a manger  
The human race brings the Virgin Mother.*

And you?

Midnight Mass people?, what ought you bring?

**Bring *yourself* to Christ this year!**

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<sup>16</sup> I hoped to make Midnight Mass people "eager to do good" because of the appearance of Christ – thinking of Titus 2:11-14, tonight's second reading.

<sup>17</sup> Stichiron in Christmas Vespers, in *The Meaning of Icons*, Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, St. Vladimir's Press, NY 1989, page 157. I modernized the English translation they give. I turned to our brothers & sisters in Tradition, the Orthodox, to complete this Christmas homily.

## SUPPLEMENTS

Footnote 2 Solemn Blessing for Christmas:

*When he came to us as man,  
the Son of God scattered the darkness of this world,  
and filled this holy night (day) with his glory.  
May the God of infinite goodness  
scatter the darkness of sin  
and brighten your hearts with holiness. Amen.*

*God sent his angels to the shepherds  
to herald the great joy of our Savior's birth.  
May he fill you with joy  
and make you heralds of his gospel. Amen.*

*When the Word became man,  
earth was joined to heaven.  
May he give you his peace and good will,  
and fellowship with all the heavenly host. Amen.*

*May almighty God bless you,  
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Footnote 4

Plaque and Marian Chapel of University Church photographed December 2009 at St. Stephen's Green South, Dublin.



Venerable John Henry Newman's "The Pillar of the Cloud" composed at sea, 16 June 1833.

Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom  
Lead Thou me on!  
The night is dark, and I am far from home –  
Lead Thou me on!  
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
The distant scene -- one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor pray'd that Thou  
Shouldst lead me on.  
I loved to choose and see my path, but now  
Lead Thou me on!  
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,  
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long Thy power hath blessed me, sure it still  
Will lead me on,  
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till  
The night is gone;  
And with the morn those angel faces smile  
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

Footnote 12

"Adoration of Christ" tondo by Lorenzo di Credi and Studio, c. 1510. Viewed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.



