

December 25, 2015 - Christmas Mass

The coming of the Son of God into the world seems to be so small, so little. This is not how God had to come into the world to save humanity, but how God chose to come. The Son of God is born as an infant like any other infant, a baby boy born into a world so rough and so cruel, a child utterly dependent up his parents for care and sustenance. He was so small, so little.

No wonder a people who had long awaited his coming, who had kept their hope alive over centuries awaiting the coming of the promised Messiah, did not even notice him when he came. There is not even room for him, no one will make room for him. Only those living on the margins of society, shepherds sleeping with their sheep in the field, shepherds who smell like their sheep, are tipped off by angels that the Savior of the world has been born. The sign given them is hardly a sign of greatness—you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. A manger of all places, an animal's feeding trough.

From the human point of view, the Incarnation, the Son of God taking our flesh, is a crazy plan, choosing people too little and too vulnerable. But the result, in God's wisdom, is what is best for us: being born among us, being raised among us, he came as one of us, as our brother. As God with us, Jesus shone a light on our **true dignity** and God's might in humility.

The Savior of the world was entrusted to the natural processes of human life, in the most vulnerable of hands, in the most vulnerable of ways, so that God's glory and salvation would not overwhelm us, but accompany us. So that God's glory would accompany us in solidarity with the suffering of all of us small and little people, in order to teach us the value of human life and the greatness of each life. No one is too little, too small, too insignificant to share in God's plan.

As the Savior's birth teaches us, God is often closer and smaller than we think. So God uses people who are not in the spotlight, who hardly anyone sees, seemingly insignificant people, to bring the greatness of his Son's life and love into the darkest corners of the world.

A number of years ago when I was stationed at another parish, one of the daily Mass attendees, a local baker, would weekly bring me a box of cookies. She was shocked when I told her one day to stop bringing me cookies, that I was giving them up for a while.

I told her that the daughter of some long-time friends of mine had been stationed in Afghanistan, thru her work with the Department of Defense, and that her parents were very concerned about her safety. I told the parents of this young woman that I would pray for her, and to make sure I would remember to pray for her on a regular basis, I would give up all sweets during her 6-month tour of duty in Afghanistan. Each time I felt a craving for something sweet, I would automatically be reminded to pray for her.

When I told the baker of the cookies this story, she thoughtfully replied: *"Then I should send the cookies I usually bring to you to this young service woman in Afghanistan."* And so she did, and thus began something truly remarkable. The gift of homemade cookies, still delicious even after a couple of weeks travel by mail, would arrive at a remote outpost in Afghanistan, and my friends' daughter would then share them with everyone else in her company. Soldiers and Department of Defense workers would feast on treats from halfway round the world and feel connected with their homeland. In doing so, they came to know in a very real way they **were not alone nor were they forgotten**. My friends' daughter shared with me upon her safe return from Afghanistan that those monthly boxes of cookies were a powerful sign of God's presence in a place where God seemed to be absent.

Such are the small yet powerful ways that God chooses to communicate God's bottomless love to us. My parishioner the baker with her cookies wanted to show my friends' daughter and those stationed with her what God wanted them to know in those anxious days—*You are loved. You are not forgotten. Feast on the sweet tenderness of my love*. God did not use a thunderbolt from heaven to tell them that, but a far subtler, sweeter means of communication that could risk being overlooked altogether as something as ordinary as, well, some extraordinarily delicious cookies.

St. Ignatius of Loyola has a memorable phrase for thinking about God's presence all around us. Ignatius said: **"God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth."** His point was that one of the most common ways God comes to us is **through other people**.

Because the Son of God left the safety and security of his heavenly home to forever make his home with humanity on this earth, we know this to be true: One of the most common ways God comes to us is through other people. Ignatius invites us to see how our daily experiences of receiving love, even in the smallest acts

of human kindness, **reveal God's deep, abiding care for us**. For like a *secret admirer*, God employs incredible creativity in filling our lives with seemingly unsigned love notes.

God not only comes to us in the smallest of ways but also in the smallest of people. For Jesus teaches us that he comes to visit us through the most vulnerable ones, the ones who go unseen by many because they live on the fringes of society—the most marginalized of our sisters and brothers, the least ones. Our eyes are not well trained to see the Son of God coming to us in those around us, especially those people the world pushes to the margins, those people the world chooses to not even see nor acknowledge that they exist.

Jesus clearly teaches in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel that whatever we do for the least of our sisters and brothers—those who are hungry or thirsty or naked or a stranger or sick or in prison—we do for him. When we welcome and love them, we are welcoming and loving and serving him. It is no small thing to recognize Jesus coming to us through the most vulnerable people on this planet, for Jesus assures us that our salvation depends upon it.

During this Extraordinary Jubilee Year, which will last until the end of November next year, Pope Francis challenges us to practice the Corporal works of Mercy. Not just to do these good deeds, but to "*encounter Christ living in the poor*." Knowing things about Christ is different from knowing Christ.

The same holds true for Christ living in those who are the least of our brothers and sisters. Knowing things about them, statistics about hunger, or statistics stating that there are more people in prison per capita in Oklahoma than almost any other State, is very different from coming to know the people behind the statistics.

In other words, get to know the person who is hungry, or get to know the family who are refugees on the run from terror, or hear the life story of a prisoner behind bars. And in coming to know them, to encounter Christ in his littleness, in his smallness, coming to us through them.

We come to this table to be nourished by the Real Presence of Christ, the greatest gift Jesus gave us—his body and his blood. His presence to us here gives us the grace to be present to Him coming to us in our daily lives in the most ordinary of ways, in hidden, small ways.

What looks like something so small here—a little bread, a cup of wine—is transformed by the power of God into a divine gift—the Gift of God's Son being born in us once again, coming to life in and through us.

So that strengthened by such a gift, we can welcome him coming to us each day in the most surprising of ways, longing to find room in our lives to welcome Him.

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