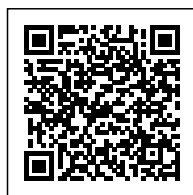


POPE SAINT LEO THE GREAT: A CHRISTMAS SERMON

Posted on December 1, 2021 by Pope Saint Leo the Great



This sermon, by Pope Saint Leo the Great, was delivered on Christmas Day, 450 AD. It is here translated by Jane Patricia Freeland, C.S.B.J., and Agnes Josephine Conway, S.S.J. and extracted from [Leo The Great: Sermons](#).

When the faithful meditate about divine things, dearly beloved, the Birth of our Lord and Savior from his Mother comes to mind every day and all the time. For, a mind that is poised to acknowledge its Maker—whether occupied in the sighs of entreaty, or the exultation of praise, or the offering of sacrifice—such a mind touches upon nothing more frequently in its spiritual insights, touches upon nothing more confidently, than the fact that God the Son of God, begotten by his co-eternal Father, was also born through a human birth.

But no day suggests to us more than today that this Nativity should be worshipped in heaven and on earth. With a new light radiating even in the atoms themselves, no day more than today impresses the entire splendor of this amazing mystery upon our senses. We recall not only to mind, but even—in a way—to sight, the conversation of Gabriel with the astonished Mary, the Conception by the Holy Spirit (as marvelous in being promised as it was in being actually granted), the Maker of the world brought forth from a virginal womb, and the one who established all natures made the Son of her whom he had created.

On this day, the Word of God appeared clothed in flesh, and, what could not even have been seen by human eyes before, "could" now "be touched with the hands." On this day, the shepherds learned from angelic voices that a Savior had been born in the substance of our body and soul. On this day, a new archetype for proclaiming the Gospel was deposited with those who preside over the Lord's flock, so that we too might say with the celestial host: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good Will."

That infancy, which the majesty of God's Son did not scorn, was eventually brought to perfect manhood with the increase of age. When the triumph of his Passion and Resurrection had been brought to completion, all the activities of the lowliness he had undertaken for our sake passed away. Today's feast, nevertheless, renews for us the sacred beginnings of Jesus' Birth from the Virgin Mary. As we worship the Birth of our Savior, we find ourselves celebrating our own origin as well. For the Conception

of Christ is the origin of the Christian people, and the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the body.

All of the elect have their own special place, and the Church's children are set off from one another by the passage of time. Yet all of us, the whole sum of believers who have sprung from the baptismal font, just as we have been crucified with Christ in his Passion, been raised with him in his Resurrection, and been set at the right hand of the Father in his Ascension, so too have we been born along with him in his Nativity.

Whenever believers in any part of the world undergo regeneration in Christ, they become transformed into "new human beings," through a rebirth—once the path of their original "former selves" has been cut off. They are no longer considered to be in the lineage of their carnal father, but are counted among the descendants of their Savior. It was precisely so that we might be able to become children of God that he was made the child of a human being. Had he not come down to us in this humility, none could come to him by any merits of their own.

May earthly wisdom not bring murkiness here into hearts of the elect. May this dust, possessed of earthly thoughts and destined to go back soon into the depths, not raise itself up against the sublimity of God's grace. Now, "at the end of ages" what had been arranged "before time began" has been accomplished. Now that the symbolism of figures has given way to the actual presence of reality, the law and prophecy have been turned into truth.

Abraham has indeed become "the father of all nations," and "the promised blessing" has been given to the world "in his seed." No, it is not only those whom flesh and blood has begotten that are Israelites. Rather, the whole adopted group have entered into that inheritance prepared for the children of faith. Let the deceitful insolence of foolish questions not cause an uproar. Let human reasoning not dilute the effects of God's work. We "with Abraham put our faith in God, nor do we hesitate in reservation." "Instead, we know full well that God has the power to bring about what he has promised."

Our Savior, dearly beloved, was born not from the seed of flesh, but from the Holy Spirit. As a result, the condemnation of that first transgression did not have a hold on him. Hence, the very magnitude of the gift that was bestowed demands of us a reverence worthy of its splendor. As the blessed Apostle teaches, therefore, "we have not received the spirit of this world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we might know what things have been given to us by God." He cannot be duly worshipped except by offering back to him what he himself has given.

What can we find in the treasure of the Lord's generosity so appropriate to the honor of this celebration as peace? Peace was the first thing proclaimed by the angelic choir at the Lord's Nativity. It is peace which gives birth to "children of God." Peace nurses love, engenders unity, gives repose to the blessed, and provides a home to eternity. It has for its own particular work and special benefit the joining to God of those whom it separates from the world. Wherefore, the Apostle urges us to this good when he says, "Justified then by faith, we are at peace with God." In this brief sentence is contained the force of almost all the commandments. Where the truth of peace has been, no virtue can be lacking.

Indeed, what is it, dearly beloved, to be at peace with God except to will what he bids and to refuse what he forbids? If like minds and similar wills seek one another out in human friendships, and differences in lifestyle can never attain to a stable concord, how will someone have a share in peace with God if that someone takes pleasure in things that displease God and purposely takes delight in things by which he knows God to be offended?

Children of God do not take that kind of attitude. No, adopted nobility does not admit of such wisdom. Let the "chosen and royal race" respond to the dignity of its regeneration, let it love what its Father loves, and let it not rebel from its Creator in anything—so that the Lord might not say once again: "I have given birth to children and raised them, but they have repudiated me. Oxen recognize their owner, while an ass knows its master's stall; but Israel does not realize who I am, and my people have not understood me."

This favor involves a great mystery, dearly beloved, and this gift surpasses all gifts—that God should call a human being his child and that human beings should refer to God as their Father. From these titles, we perceive and we learn who it is that can rise up to so great a height of affection. If, in human offspring and earthly lineage, the vices of an evil life draw a cloud over the children of illustrious parents, if unworthy descendants are put to shame by the very reputation of their ancestors, how badly will they finish up who for love of this world are not afraid to be disowned from the lineage of Christ. But, if it wins praise among men for the honor of fathers to be reflected in their progeny, how much more glorious is it for those born of God to mirror brightly the image of their Creator and to show in themselves the one who created them? As the Lord said, "So must your light shine before human beings, that upon seeing your good works they may extol your Father who is in heaven."

We know too well that, as the Apostle John says, "the whole world rests under the sway of the evil one." Laying down traps, the devil and his angels strive through innumerable temptations either to scare off

human beings (with obstacles) from their struggle toward the things above or to corrupt them (with success). But "greater is the one with us than the one" against us. No battles can overpower us, no conflicts harm us if "we are at peace with God," and continually say to the Father with all our heart, "Thy will be done."

When we accuse ourselves by our own confession and deny a consent of the heart to carnal appetites, we of course rile up against us the enmity of the one who gave rise to sin, but we build up an invincible peace with God. In rendering service to the grace of God, we are not only made subject to our King through obedience, but are even joined to him through the will. If we are of one mind with him (willing what he wills, disapproving of what he disapproves), he himself will bring us victory in all our battles. He who has given the "will" will bestow also the ability. In this way can we "cooperate," with his works, speaking that prophetic utterance in the exultation of faith: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?"

Let those then "who were born not from blood, nor from the will of flesh, but from God" offer concord to God as peace-loving children. Let all the adopted members join together into that "firstborn" of new "creation" who came "not to do his own will, but that of the one who sent him." For the Father's grace has not adopted as heirs those who disagree or differ, but, rather, those who "think the same thing" and love the same thing. Those who have been "re-fashioned" according to one and the same image ought all to have the same kind of heart.

The birthday of the Lord is the birthday of peace, for, as the Apostle says, "He is our peace who made both things one." Whether Jew or Gentile, "we have access to the Father through him, in a single Spirit." On the day before his Passion (a day chosen beforehand according to a voluntary arrangement), it was this doctrine especially in which he instructed his disciples, so as to say: "My peace I give you, my peace I leave you." So that the particular characteristics of his peace would not lie hidden beneath a generic word, he added: "Not as the world gives do I give to you." He was saying that the world has its own kinds of friendship, joining many hearts together with a distorted love. There are even some who are like-minded in vices, and the similarity of their desire engenders an equivalence in their affection.

If perhaps some should be found who take no pleasure in perverse and dishonorable things, who exclude unlawful concords from the bond of their mutual affection, they do so—if they be Jews or heretics or infidels—not out of a friendship with God, but from the peace of this world. When it comes to those who belong to the Spirit and who have kept the universal faith, peace comes down from above

and leads right back up. It does not wish to mingle in communion with lovers of this world, but, rather, to resist all obstacles and to fly away from destructive pleasures to true joys—as the Lord says, "Where your treasure has been, there also will be your heart," that is to say, if the things which you have affection for are down below, you will go down to the depths; if the things which you love "are up above," you will go up to the heights.

May the Spirit of peace guide us and lead us there, with us willing the same thing and "thinking the same thing," with our hearts joined in faith, hope, and love. For, "whoever are guided by the Spirit of God, they are children of God," who lives and reigns with the Son and with the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

The [featured image](#) shows the adoration of the Magi. Panel from a Roman sarcophagus, 4th century AD. From the cemetery of St. Agnes in Rome.

