

CELEBRATING CHRIST'S BIRTH, REVELATION AND MISSION

Throughout the Christmas season the Church rejoices as it beholds God's glory; Christ, the Son of God, is born into the world. God's gracious gift of love, Jesus Christ, is the Father's visible image. He is the Messiah, the long awaited one, as foretold by the prophets. In him we recognise our own humanity and the need for the world to be made new. This act of God becoming human is the beginning point of our redemption. The tiny babe, Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, will eventually suffer, die and rise again for the salvation of the world. The season celebrates the mystery of the incarnation and encourages us to reflect on the significance of Christ's becoming like one of us to redeem all peoples for all time. During the Christmas festival we also celebrate our own incorporation into Christ and his divinity. Christ came among us and remains with us so that we too can be drawn to the Father. This 'divine exchange', as it is sometimes called, enables us to be one with Christ and cooperate with the Spirit to renew the world. Many of the prayers express this more fully. We are not passive bystanders pondering the mystery of Christ's birth but, rather, active bearers of the message of good news that Christ brings. The season unfolds with the celebration of Christ's birth and early manifestations and concludes with the announcement of Christ's earthly mission. It begins at the Vigil of Christmas and extends to the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The Octave of Christmas, the first eight days of the season, incorporates a number of feasts and concludes with the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. The feast of the Epiphany is celebrated on the Sunday after the Octave. These key aspects of birth, revelation and mission anchor our contemplation of the mystery of Christ's coming among us for the salvation of the world.

The Vigil Mass

The readings of the Vigil Mass look forward to Christ coming among us. They begin with a hymn-like praise of Jerusalem, the new name given by God to his people (Is 62:1-5). Psalm 89 (88) sings of the goodness of the Lord throughout the ages, emphasising David's line and the covenant. In the Second Reading Paul speaks of Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies (Acts 13:16-17, 22-25). Matthew's Gospel proclaims the genealogy of Christ from Abraham to Mary. Joseph's faith is also acknowledged (Mt 1:1-25).

Mass During the Night

The natural symbolism of darkness is a powerful backdrop for this liturgy. The Gospel announces the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem. In Luke's account, the first to receive the news from the heavenly throng are the lowly shepherds (Lk 2:1-14). The First and Second readings frame the nativity. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled; a child is born for us, the Prince of Peace (Is 9:1-7). Paul professes that God's grace is revealed in Christ and this makes salvation possible for all (Ti 2:11-14). Psalm 96 (95) joyfully acclaim with all creation that today is born the Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Mass At Dawn

The rising sun of dawn evokes the radiant light of the Christ-child. The Gospel continues Luke's account of Jesus' birth. The shepherds make haste. They glorify God and spread the good news after seeing the child (Lk 2:15-20). The Second Reading describes God's love, the gift of the incarnation, and the promise of eternal life (Ti 3:4-7). Isaiah predicts the coming of the Saviour and the people's redemption (Is 62:11-12) and Psalm 97 (96) sings of our joy and gratitude at the coming of Christ, the light that shines on us this dawn.

Mass During the Day

The prologue of John's Gospel stands at the centre of the Word (Jn 1:1-18). It proclaims the mystery of the incarnation, the Word made flesh, which was part of God's plan from the beginning. Christ dwells in and among us, enabling us to share in his divinity. In the First Reading Isaiah prophesies the salvation of Jerusalem; God heralds peace and assures the future (Is 52:7-10). Paul reminds the Hebrews that God has spoken in many ways in the past but he has now appointed his Son who is seated with God in glory (Heb 1:1-6). Psalm 98 (97) joyfully acclaim the wondrous deeds of the Lord which have brought salvation. This psalm is also the common Christmas psalm which may be sung throughout the season.

THE OCTAVE FESTIVAL

The Christmas Octave begins with the Solemnity of Christmas and concludes with the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God on January 1. The Church celebrates the festival of Christmas (and Easter) by highlighting the first eight days of each season as principal days in the calendar. Proclaiming the significance of these days is a way of elevating and prolonging the celebrations associated with the initial feast. The Octave of Christmas enables us to contemplate more deeply the mystery of the Nativity of Christ. The octave, or number eight, is significant for Christians; it denotes the dawning of the new and perfect day when Christ rose triumphant from the dead and redeemed the world. Continuous festivals which lasted for eight days can be found in the Old Testament. There are a number of octaves recorded in Church history, including those associated with Pentecost, Epiphany and Corpus Christi. Some saints' days also had octave festivals. These were especially prominent in the Middle Ages. Only two Octaves remain in the Roman Calendar: Easter and Christmas.

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