

HOMILY
BY ADAM CARDINAL MAIDA
CHRISTMAS EVE MIDNIGHT MASS
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL
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My brother Bishops and Priests, Deacons and Religious, Parishioners of the Cathedral Cluster, and Friends All:

“Jesu, joy of Man’s desiring, holy wisdom, love most bright, drawn by you, our soul’s aspiring, soar to uncreated light. Word of God, our flesh that fashioned, with the fire of life impassioned, striving still to truth unknown, soaring, dying ‘round your throne” (Johann Sebastian Bach).

Christmas is all about desire. How many times in the last few days and weeks have people asked you: “What do you want for Christmas?” As little children, we had very specific desires – a particular toy or piece of clothing, a new bicycle, or some special treat. As we have matured in life, the question takes on a different significance and our answers become more profound. What do any of us want or need for Christmas? If we scratched through the surface responses that any of us in the Cathedral tonight might give to this question, ultimately, our answers would probably be the same: we want and need the gift of God and that peace which will come only from a relationship with Him.

Christmas is about our desire for God and God's desire for us. When two people want the same thing, we call it love. When God and His intentions for us resonate with our own deepest hopes and dreams, we are truly at peace and know a comfort that nothing of this world can offer us. Christmas celebrates the way God's desires and our desires come together in the Word made flesh, the gift of Jesus Christ. For in Jesus, we see God's love made concrete and visible, and we begin to understand the depth of God's plan of love for us. Even when we were sinners, He was willing to give us His only Son.

Let us consider tonight's Gospel from St. Luke, reflecting on it from the perspective of desire. Mary and Joseph desired something very simple – a quiet place to rest, an appropriate setting of warmth and peace for the delivery of a child. In one sense, their desire went unfulfilled because there was no room available for them, but yet, in another sense, the stable and the manger were more than adequate. On a deeper level, they were actually desiring to fulfill the will of God, mysterious as it was. They were also seeking to comply with the laws of their religious faith in registering for the census, and in the providence of God, their desires were being used for a higher purpose as the shepherds were able to meet the Lord Jesus in the stable.

In the case of the shepherds, did they have any particular desire to know or experience God? Very likely, they were just fulfilling their menial task, trying to

stay awake and be attentive to the well-being of their flock when the angel of the Lord startled them with his message. Sometimes God works that way in our hearts too. Even when we have not yet come to terms with our deepest desires, God intervenes and helps us begin to clarify what really counts as we deal with a particular loss, suffering, or disappointment.

God has implanted deep in the heart of every person a desire for Him. That desire for God expresses itself in many different ways. We seek after beauty because every beautiful thing of nature or art, and every beautiful person somehow manifests God, the source of all beauty. Our hearts desire and resonate with goodness and we feel at peace when we are in the presence of good people. Obviously, God is the source of all goodness. We desire to know the truth and to understand the complexities of our own hearts and minds and the mysteries of the universe. With God, we know the origin and goal of all truth. Beauty, goodness, and truth are so many windows to God, so many ways that our innate human desires naturally draw us to our Creator and Savior.

Contemplating the Christ Child in the manger, like the shepherds and with the shepherds, we recognize a new kind of beauty, a challenging and startling goodness, and a truth that cannot be put into words. In the gift of the Christ Child, we are confounded with a mystery which is completely overwhelming – that God

would want to take on human form and be vulnerable and dependent, entrusting Himself to our care, waiting for our response.

The cry of this baby in the manger – like the cry of millions of children throughout the world – naturally and spontaneously calls forth from us a response of loving concern. We can hardly resist or avoid a crying child desperate for food or a healing touch and embrace. Such is the mystery of God and His desire for us. He has become the tiny child waiting for our response.

We, for our part, as we cry in adult pain, are ultimately expressing our own desire and desperate need for a connection with God and other people. Our tears – like our laughter as well – take us out of ourselves and express our deepest desire for acceptance, healing, and hope. Like the children of Israel described in tonight’s first reading from Isaiah the prophet, we discover God's surprising gifts of light, joy, victory, and peace as we admit our need for Him and choose to live according to His call of love. St. Paul builds on this same insight in tonight’s second reading from his Letter to Titus; he explains that when we truly believe in the gift of Christ, all our earthly desires become purified and cleansed, and we seek with all our heart only that which God desires for us and for our world.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his beautiful encyclical, God Is Love, has also written on this same theme of love as purified desire. He contrasts the “searching love” of human beings that has a certain selfish character to it with a

purified love which is committed and focused. In his own words he explains that genuine love is an ongoing journey or process, *“Love is indeed a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward looking self toward its liberation through self-giving, and thus, towards authentic self-discovery, and indeed, the discovery of God”* (article 6).

A purified love of God within our hearts allows God to love others through us. The person of Jesus Christ represents God's way of loving humankind and shows us how we, as human beings, can indeed love God and neighbor as Christ taught us. In the person of Jesus Christ, we see perfect self gift expressed in the Holy Eucharist we are about to share.

No one of us wants to be alone at Christmas. We need to come together to celebrate and share this mystery. We have a natural urge or desire to give to others of our talents and treasure, and we enjoy the surprising charity and generosity of others. The gift of the Christ Child not only calls us out of ourselves toward God, but also brings us closer to one another in the family of faith. From the example of God's self-giving in Christ, we have new and deeper reasons for wanting to give of ourselves to others in need.

Christmas brings the whole world community together in a strange and powerful way. Despite centuries of rivalry and warfare, in every culture and in every place, this feast calls us to purify our desires and to seek what God wants –

our full communion with Him and one another in harmony and peace. The heavenly host that first Christmas put it all in perspective in their time-honored words: *“Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of good will.”*

In the middle of this night, we have left the comfort of our homes and disrupted our normal patterns of sleep that we might share together this extraordinary gift of God – the Word made flesh, the child in the manger. We come out of hunger of body and spirit, and know we will soon be nourished at the Lord’s Table. We remember that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a name which means “house of bread.” He came to satisfy our hunger as the Bread of life and the Word of life. As Pope Benedict XVI has beautifully summarized this mystery: *“In the grotto of Bethlehem we adore the same Lord who wanted to make Himself our spiritual nourishment in the Eucharistic sacrament, in order to transform the world from within beginning from the human heart.”*

In tonight’s Holy Eucharist and throughout the coming year 2007, may we recognize how our desire for God and God’s desire for us come together right here – at the manger, at the pulpit, and at the altar. Each day, may we all follow our deepest hungers and desires and so be drawn closer together and closer to the Lord. Like the shepherds, let us hasten together to greet our Infant King.

May the Lord bless you and your families on this holy day and throughout the coming year and fulfill your deepest and truest desires. Amen.