

**HOMILY**  
**BY ADAM CARDINAL MAIDA**  
**CHRISTMAS EVE MIDNIGHT MASS**  
**BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL**  
**DECEMBER 25, 2003**

Monsignor LeFevre and Monsignor Robinson, Friends and Parishioners of Blessed Sacrament Cathedral, and my Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

On this holy night, we gather here in the Mother Church of the Archdiocese of Detroit to celebrate the mystery of God with us. Of all the festivities we share during these hours, and of all the gifts that we exchange, this Holy Eucharist is the most powerful way that we can enter into the true meaning of Christmas.

For Christmas is not just a memory but an enduring reality, an abiding mystery which calls for our response of love, wonder and joy. Just as our gifts of bread and wine are transformed, so, too, we ourselves are changed and drawn into greater communion with God and each other—the very reason for Christmas! From many different circumstances and with many different needs and hopes, fears and dreams, we gather here to share one common gift, the only gift that truly lasts, the presence of the Lord Jesus, the Word of Life and the Bread of Life.

Looking back over 2003, it struck me how much upheaval and uncertainty we have endured this year. The year began with anxious concern about the very real prospect of war with Iraq, something that eventually happened and continues

to unfold with ongoing violence and terrorism. In the middle of the summer, we struggled through the trauma of the power outage with all of its inconveniences. And on Washington Boulevard, right in front of the Chancery, on a daily basis, we hear the sound of jackhammers tearing apart the structures of an urban park for the sake of restoring the former boulevard. Things come and things go... and all very quickly. Nothings seems very permanent, predictable, stable or secure.

On a happier note, we can appreciate the transformation of this Cathedral; you may recall its rededication exactly nine months ago today. I also remember with joy the recent 25th Jubilee of our Holy Father Pope John Paul II as Vicar of Christ and Bishop of Rome, the deeply moving experience of the beatification of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a humble little woman who has left a positive legacy of love far greater than most other twentieth century world figures.

Everything about us is constantly changing. Who knows where the future will head—in the Middle East and the land of Christ's birth, or even here in Metro Detroit? We worry and fret about every little sign of the economy going up or down and pray fervently for the well-being and health of our families as we anxiously steel ourselves against an epidemic of the deadly flu virus. We long for permanency and stability, calm and peace, but yet, everything seems to be in commotion.

What have we learned about ourselves and about God this past year? Among the many lessons, we have certainly been forced to recognize the limits of human powers and abilities; we have been challenged to see in ever new ways how vulnerable and dependent we really are and how very much our lives are interconnected. We need the Lord and we need each other.

Tonight we proclaim that there is one, true source of lasting peace—Jesus Christ—the one joy which alone can satisfy our restless human hearts. We celebrate that we share one family home where we will always be welcomed, valued and respected.

In tonight's familiar Gospel story from St. Luke, we hear of God choosing to make His home with us. And we hear of the shepherds, homeless on the hillside, going to investigate this mystery, finding peace and rest at long last at the manger. Tonight, we are the shepherds wandering, restless and anxious, swept about by forces of nature, driven by internal fears, and yet, carrying a flame of hope in our hearts. And like the shepherds, we gather here because we have heard the story of this new birth. We believe and hope that in this child, we will find the peace and unity for which we yearn, the rest that our souls seek.

About 400 years ago, the German painter, Albrecht Altdorfer, painted a strange, but well-known nativity scene. The skies are dark, even ominous, and in the foreground of the painting are the crumbling walls of a ruined house. The

shepherd's star and angels are relegated to a distant corner in the dark background. Only on very close inspection does the Holy Family become visible, huddled against the scraps of tattered and broken walls. Joseph stands guard with a candle in his hand and Mary kneels on the ground adoring her child.

The famous 20th century Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, meditated on this very scene on Christmas 1943, seventy years ago, and spoke of it as “God’s love in the midst of the ruins.” Even as he celebrated his last Christmas on this earth, under the austere conditions of the German concentration camp, he still believed and hoped in the message of Christmas. No matter how dark the night, the light of Christ still shines. No matter how violent we may be, Christ's peace still reigns.

This depiction of the nativity is not the usual sentimental, cheerful presentation that we have come to expect. But nonetheless, it does proclaim very powerfully the presence of God in the midst of brokenness, powerlessness, and poverty. It reminds us of the way God chooses to dwell in our world—in all those people and places that are most dependent—the very young, the mentally and physically challenged, the homeless, the ill and the dying.

Even the detail of Jesus being placed in a manger has a message—not so much the lack of hospitality on the part the people of Bethlehem, but rather, a reminder that Jesus came to nourish us, and so, he was born in a place where

animals feed. Secondly, the image reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah that we can learn something from humble animals: they instinctively know where to turn for their life's nourishment. But we, for our part, smug and sophisticated, often rebel and refuse to depend on the Lord. Jesus being born in a manger challenges us to let go of our false pretensions, and confess our dependence on Him and one another.

At Christmas, we consider how God has chosen to enter into one place and one time in human history—something that one theologian has called “the scandal of particularity.” We marvel at the apparent contradiction of it all: God the transcendent and all powerful making Himself completely dependent and vulnerable, localized and limited. How and why did God do this? He did so as a sign of His love and of His desire to make His home with us. Since He has so loved us, therefore, the question for us is clear and challenging: are we willing to accept such a love? Are we willing to let Him make His home in our own hearts, in our families, and in our world? Can we be humble enough to hand over more space in our lives to God and give up any false claims of control?

In tonight's Holy Eucharist, we, though many, become one. Though we have different needs and desires, one same bread nourishes us and we drink of one same cup of salvation. No matter what other differences there may be among us, we recognize that ultimately, we are all homeless people searching for a dwelling

place that will last—not just a roof over our heads or place to sit and rest for the night. Ultimately, we are looking for a family, a communion where we can truly be ourselves without fear or pride. And so it is that we come to the heart of the Christmas mystery: the *Church is our home*.

Imperfect though it may be, it is here that Christ dwells among us in the midst of our community of faith. “*The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.*” Yes, it is here in this celebration of the Holy Eucharist that we experience the living mystery of Christmas, the Body of Christ blessed and broken for us; dwelling among us once more, reconciling our brokenness and fulfilling all our desires. As the angels promised, peace has come to earth and God’s glory has been made known.

May God bless you and your families with a Christmas gift of peace and may we all feel welcome, loved and treasured in one common home, Christ's Body, the Church. Amen.