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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we draw ever closer to Christmas, I am glad to have this opportunity to express my prayerful best wishes for your celebration of this great Feast. I ask the Lord to give you and those you love abounding joy in this season when we remember the birth of Our Savior Jesus Christ, God the Son Incarnate.

In formulating this wish I am inspired to consider what I can do to foster the joy I wish for you. As gratifying as it would be, I can't send each of you something to add to your Christmas meal or an ornament to brighten your tree. What I can do, however, is offer some thoughts here with a view to deepening your understanding of Christmas, and such an increased understanding will, I hope, bear fruit in an increase of joy.

This year I'd like to help us try to understand Christmas better by our thinking together about "glory." The word appears all through the Scripture readings and prayers during Liturgy for this solemn holy day.

The Gospel for Midnight Mass tells us that when the angelic host appeared to the shepherds to announce to them the birth of Christ they proclaimed, "*Glory to God in the highest*" (Lk 2:14). And already when the angels made their appearance St. Luke says "the glory of the Lord" shone around the shepherds (Lk 2: 9). In the Gospel reading for the Mid-Day Mass of Christmas, we hear from St. John that when the "Word become flesh," we then came "to see his *glory*, the glory as of the Father's only Son..." (Jn 1: 14). In an Epistle reading chosen from the Letter to Titus we hear St. Paul speak of "the appearance of the *glory* of our great God and savior Jesus Christ" (Tit 2:13). And the Solemn Blessing which closes the Christmas Masses affirms that at Jesus' birth the Father "filled [the] holy day with his *glory*."

Just what is this *glory* which the angels sang of on the first Christmas and which the Church proclaims when we celebrate that event every year? If we grasp what glory is, we will, I think, better grasp what Christmas is, and the result should be a more joyful celebration of the feast.

A good place to start in trying to understand “what glory is” seems to be with some examples. I’ll limit myself to three: a glorious structure, something glorious in nature, and a glorious performance.

A glorious structure. My nominee for an example in this category is the Mackinac Bridge. Not only is the bridge mammoth in its size and daring in what it accomplishes (connecting both peninsulas across the Straits), it is a thing of grace and beauty. It is one of contemporary technology’s “glories.”

Something glorious in nature. My example for this sort of thing is a rose, a perfect rose, one without any touch of blight, in full-bloom, full of delicate but unmistakable fragrance, with a color so intense it could almost hurt your eyes when you view the flower in bright sunlight. This rose is one of nature’s “glories.”

A glorious performance. For this example of glory, while we could turn to music or drama, let’s look to athletics, namely to a perfect game in baseball. The pitcher performs flawlessly, allows no hits and no runs, and his team supports him throughout. There is about such a game an excellence that fans find unforgettable, and which is a “glory” of the sport.

These examples get us on our way to understanding what glory is by helping us see what it is not. Glory is not a thing itself; it is not something like a mineral (even a “glorious” mineral, such as a jewel); it is not something like a plant (even a “glorious” plant, like an orchid); and it is not something like an animal (even a “glorious” animal, like a lion). Things can be glorious, but glory is not a thing. Glory is, rather, a quality that belongs to things.

The glory that belongs to something, like a bridge or a rose or a no-hitter, is a particular sort of quality. It's not like weight, or color, or sweetness or sharpness. Glory isn't the sort of quality that matches exactly with any one of our five senses.

In fact, glory is a quality that clings to the appearance of something good which exists at a level of excellence far beyond the ordinary. The Mackinac Bridge is glorious because it comes close to doing with perfection what bridges are supposed to do. The rose I have described is glorious because it comes close to perfection in being a rose. The perfect baseball game is glorious because it defines what fans mean when they think about the best that could happen in playing the game.

Because glory is neither a thing nor a sense experience, we might be tempted to imagine that glory is only something "inside" of our minds or hearts, like pain or joy or enthusiasm or sleepiness. No, glory is not that personal, not that "subjective." It is not something any person or group of people, no matter how large, projects onto a thing or adds to it. No matter how much we cheer or shout or rhapsodize about something, we do not make it glorious if it is not already that. We do not cause glory, we take note of it.

Glory is something in the world outside of me. It is something I recognize. It is the real property of things themselves. Glory is pre-eminent excellence acknowledged as excellent.

So, the glory of Christmas is the manifest and almost indescribable excellence of God being God and acting like himself.

This is the way the Scriptural authors use the term throughout the Bible. For just one example, think of the canticle of the Israelites after their safe passage out of Egypt through the Red Sea. They sing that the Lord has "covered himself in glory" (Ex 15:1, see also 15: 2-18). On that night God so fully and powerfully acted like God, to keep his promise and save his people, that the night was filled with his glory.

When the Eternal, Only-begotten Son of the Father was born as a man, God was being God in a marvelous and incomparably powerful way. He did not just enter history to alter events for the earthly benefit of his chosen people; he became part of the human race without ceasing to be God, in order to make of us human beings sharers in God's own life. The manifest excellence of this "performance" is the "glory" which the angelic host sang about when they appeared in the night sky over the fields near Bethlehem.

There is, of course, a certain paradox about God's glory on Christmas night. It is only recognized by those who have faith. To men and women who do not believe that the infant born of Mary, the wife of Joseph, is God the Son, there is nothing glorious about that night. Just one more little tike come into the world from which it would eventually depart in death, and all the more pathetic, for his being poor, so very poor that his mother had to give birth in a stable not even in a proper inn, let alone a home of his own.

However, to those who see with the eyes of faith, what would seem to others to veil God's glory intensifies it all the more. The poverty and lowliness of the infant Jesus, while hiding God's face from unbelievers, show his true face with blinding clarity to those who believe. How immeasurably glorious is God in putting aside his power and majesty out of love for us. How supremely like God to will to be so close to us that he would become one of us. Here, in the crib, is God showing us what he is really like: that he is complete and self-forgetting self-giving.

May your recognition once again this year of God's glory – your recognition that he whose birth we celebrate is God-with-us, and that he will never go away, no matter how bad the times or heavy the burden; your recognition that God loves you – give you great joy, boundless joy, joy for you and all you love. This is my Christmas wish, my Christmas prayer for all of you.

Merry Christmas.

Archbishop Vigneron

