

**Christmas Day Mass**  
**(Venice, St Mark's Basilica - December 25, 2018)**  
**Homily of the Patriarch Francesco Moraglia**

Dearly beloved,

The Gospel according to Luke tells how Joseph - who belonged to the family of David - went up from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea for the census, as requested by the decree of Caesar Augustus. Mary, his bride, was pregnant and was about to give birth. Mary is the very personification of Christmas, the example we should look up to.

Today, for the Christian, it is possible to experience Christmas only if we go beyond the "distortions" that affect this festival more and more and of which frantic purchases and consumerism are just one aspect, like the tip of the iceberg. Through the Gospel, this Christian feast can be lived as a radical contrast. In fact, Christmas is the heart of the Christian faith: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory ..."* (John 1, 14).

There are also those who work so that - as happened a few years ago, in the English-speaking world - this festival changes its name and becomes the festival of the "winter lights"! More recently some have tried to remove the name of Jesus from the little Christmas carols sung by our children but, fortunately, the good sense of the little ones and their sensible parents prevailed.

The uncritical assumption of this dominant single thought - as Pope Francis recalled - was the tragedy of the 20th century, and it ended up eliminating facts and history. *"Even today - the Holy Father has said - there is the idolatry of individual thought. Today you have to think thus, and if you do not think so you're not modern, you're not open ."* (Pope Francis, *Homily of Santa Marta*, 10th April 2014).

The Christmas festival can not conform to the criteria of a de-Christianized society and become subject to the rites of consumerism. For decades, there have been present within this feast, which is the heart of the Christian faith, strong signs of de-Christianization so as to make it lose its roots and original meaning for many people. Rediscovering the road that leads to Christmas - to the Gospel - has the name and the face of a woman: Mary of Nazareth, who is the only direct collaborator of the mystery of the Incarnation!

If you look closely, the words of the angel - the Annunciation - are fitted into the daily life of Mary, a life which expresses a faith that can grasp God's plan. We will return to this point: knowing how to read the signs of God. So at Christmas we are not introduced to the theologian, the pastoral worker or the communications expert but her, Mary, the maiden of Nazareth. And after her, those who have followed in the obedience of faith.

Yes, the obedience of faith, because faith is such only if joined with a humility that is no mere recitation of humility from those who live by bullying and yet also know how to play the victim. Mary - the maiden of Nazareth, little more than an adolescent - carries that name which, after her, will be borne by an infinite number of people until, as faith begins to languish, other names will take priority.

Nazareth was a village in Palestine which was - as the Gospel reminds us - unknown and insignificant at the time of Jesus. *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* (John 1, 46): are the words of the future apostle Bartholomew. And in that little insignificant village, not far from the Sea of Galilee, the greatest event in history took place: in Nazareth, in the virginal womb of a maiden, God became man!

According to the logic of the world, what is rich, visible and powerful is worthy, while what is small, humble and non-showy brings only a smile to the faces of those who think they know everything about life, history, the world and ... even God, having already decided and established everything. For them, Christmas is a story, a legend or just one of many parties with friends.

Faced with prescriptions, people generally turn up their noses and yet ... if we go to the doctor with a cardiac arrhythmia or back pain we want a prescription to heal us, and do not expect to hear a

scholarly conference about cardiology or orthopaedics. Let us reflect, then, on a brief thought of the philosopher Blaise Pascal. It might seem like a prescription but it reminds us that, in life, we should avoid two extremes: the exclusion of reason or the admittance only of reason.

Instead, let us take our example from Mary of Nazareth who, called by God, knew how to grasp the mystery. Mary perceived what others were not able to perceive. For the faithful, the symbol has a fundamental value that allows us to become aware of God, to perceive something that refers to another reality, leaving freedom to those whose task is to decipher the symbol.

God has placed so much light in the world - it is once again a thought of Pascal - to the point that he who wants to see can do so, yet together with so much darkness to the point that those who do not want to see can continue not to do so. Mary, the maiden of Nazareth, moved in this light and shade that characterizes faith and, in which, every person is free to decide. Faith cannot be separated from freedom; faith is an act that must be worthy of humanity.

Pascal expressed it in these terms: *"Just as Jesus Christ remained unknown among men, so his truth remains, among everyday opinions, without external difference. Thus the Eucharist remains among the daily bread"* (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 789, Brunschvicg edition). Similarly, Mary, at the time of the Annunciation, grasps something of what God wants from Her, her full belonging to God; Mary will be the beloved daughter, bride and mother of the Son of God.

In the great sign of the Annunciation - which is the beginning of Christmas - God offers Mary many signs and, together with her, calls those who will be called to live the fulfilment of the history of salvation; the apostle Paul thus speaks of the fullness of time. This is also true of the maternity of her cousin Elizabeth (elderly and sterile); in fact, the little life that throbs within her bosom validates what was announced by the angel and will also be the sign given to the shepherds and the wise men who had responded to that sign of God (the star) who led them to where they would find the child.

The holy night, the star, the sky populated by a multitude of angels: they are signs that touch us intimately, push us to a choice, indicate a challenging path which commits us; it is the path of faith, which arrives through a call that enters an individual's everyday life and which they know how to discern.

They enter once again the powerful symbol of Christmas which the aged Simeon and the prophetess Anna saw in that poor family - who went to the temple to redeem, according to the law, their firstborn son - the Son who would save us all. Finally, Mary grasped in the words pronounced by the twelve-year-old Jesus at the temple the sign that would confirm what the angel had foretold: "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2, 49).

They echo those other words that the angel had spoken at the Annunciation: "...You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1,31-35).

Faith is humble, simple and trusting but also industrious, motivated and, therefore, able to account for its own hope (see 1 Peter 3:15). This is the faith of Mary which makes Christmas possible. Mary is the personification of Christmas and she testifies to us how this celebration requires knowing how to read, in a free and intelligent way, the signs that God does not allow anyone to miss on the path towards Him.

Thus we are all called to discernment; every one of us, from time to time, are the shepherds, the wise men, Herod, the chief priests and scribes called to recognise the signs of God in our lives. We ask the Virgin Mother to give us also the agile and firm steps that supported her while she went to her cousin Elizabeth, who, in turn, perceived in Her the sign of the presence of God. Christmas tells us that those who accept the signs of God become, in turn, a sign of God for others. Mary is the sign of Jesus who is the salvation of God!