

Holy Mass on Christmas Day

(Venice / Cathedral Basilica of St. Mark, December 25th, 2021)

Homily of the Patriarch Francesco Moraglia

Dear,

we can all hear the good news of salvation which, once again, resounds on this Christmas Day at when our Church, together with the others, is committed to the synodal journey.

The Synod, as the Holy Father Francis reminded us, "is not an investigation of opinions; the Synod is an ecclesial moment, and the protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit "(Pope Francis, Speech on the occasion of the moment of reflection for the beginning of the synodal journey, 9 October 2021). Together we can all walk according to this spirit.

The liturgy highlights that "a child was born for us, a son was given to us" (Is 9: 5). And Jesus, born as child, then born as a man in Bethlehem, is the Son of God who - the letter to the Hebrews just proclaimed - is "the irradiation of His glory and the imprint of His substance, and He sustains everything with His powerful Word "(Heb 1: 3).

The first reading - by the so-called "Deutero Isaiah" - contains the prophecies of the time of the exile in Babylon, where the beauty and joy of the announcement of this day and to those who bear it are sung: "How beautiful they are on the mountains the feet of the messenger who announces peace, of the messenger of good news who announces salvation, who says to Zion: "Your God reigns" "(Is 52,7).

The prologue of John's Gospel then led us to the "core" of Christmas event, which is the "light" that "shines in the darkness" (Jn 1,5), "the true light, that which enlightens every man" (Jn 1.9). And in the central verses resounds the content - not recognized by all - of salvation, of this proclamation of good: "He came among his own, and his own did not accept him. But to those who welcomed him, he gave power to become sons of God: to those who believe in his name, who, not by blood or by the will of flesh or by the will of man, but by God were

generated. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... "(Jn 1,11-14).

At Christmas, God enters the world according to the measure of man, through our human measure, but not in the meaning that God is the projection of the human soul, of the desires, expectations and needs of men. The reality, rather, is that God - at Christmas - condescends to man, reaching him even in his carnality and thus God dialogues with him in a human way, through the flesh.

In the Scriptures, and we see it in particular in Paul's letters, the word "flesh" stands for two meanings. In the first, "flesh" is connected to sin and, therefore, needs salvation: "... what was impossible for the Law, rendered powerless by the flesh, God made it possible - says the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans - : by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh of sin and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit "(Rom 8 , 3-4).

Immediately after we find the other meaning of the word "flesh", that is human reality that unites us and it characterizes us: "I would like (..) to be anathema of myself, separated from Christ for the benefit of my brothers, my blood relatives according to the flesh. They are Israelites and have adoption as children, glory, covenants, legislation, worship, promises; the patriarchs belong to them and from them comes Jesus Christ according to the flesh, He who is above all things, God blessed for ever "(Rm 9,3-5).

We know that man is not an angel. Even in the most spiritual act (prayer) or in the most intellectual act (philosophical abstraction), man is carnally involved; what was not previously in the senses is not given to the mind.

Prayer itself is not an endless thought about God and, as matter of fact, one always prays starting from one's own history, from one's own personal life; we pray with the our own body, individually and with the community which is the result of a meeting that takes place between individual persons in corporeality, through and thanks to one's own body.

The flesh, therefore, is not only the flesh of sin and it is not even mere inanimate materiality but, with the spirit, it is reality - this is the meaning of the word "carnality" - which humanly characterizes us and which enters our relationality, as it happens for Jesus who is born "according to the flesh" and thus He enters history through human flesh.

Man is "other" than God, but he is not the "totally other"; it is certainly "other" than God in his spiritual (soul) and carnal (corporeality) life, yet both the soul and the body of man derive from God.

Yes, the spirit and the flesh come from God and man is exactly this reality. Thus, Christmas is a response to man understood in the totality of his being. For this reason, at Christmas, God became flesh: "... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ..." (Jn 1, 14). At Christmas we speak in spiritual and bodily terms - soul and body - in a context of unity.

Tertullian, a Christian author of the third century, states: "Caro salutis est cardo" (Tertullian, De carnis resurrectione, 8,3: PL 2,806); the flesh becomes the hinge, the instrument of salvation. And this happens precisely starting from the incarnation which represents the great element that stands out – among three monotheistic religions - Christianity from Judaism and Islam; it is not the existence of God or the longing for salvation that makes the difference, but the Incarnation.

Indeed, it is proper to all great religions to affirm the existence of God and indicate a way of salvation for man, but what makes the Christian Faith unique is exactly Christmas.

Christmas, then, is also the right "approach" to get close to the deep feelings of people and communities, especially when we are still living a time of suffering and pain that we thought was written only on historical books. The pandemic has also awakened us from this illusion.

Astonishment enters the scene on Christmas Day. There is a singular character that, in some traditions, was placed in the crib in front of the hut of Jesus, the Savior: it is the "shepherd of wonder", a shepherd with wide open eyes and outstretched arms, who carries nothing with himself, neither the fruits of the field nor a lamb, not even a garment to warm the child who was born for us... Nothing at all, he just brings

his astonishment with his gaze fixed on the hut; it is the figurine in the crib that says what Christmas means.

At the same time, always at Christmas, we experience the presence of sin that abounds and seems to grow more and more in the world. It is the same liturgy on December 26th and 28th that highlights this, proposing the martyrdom of St. Stephen (proto-martyr) and of the Holy Innocent Children.

Yes, we sin more and more and what worries the most in certain historical periods - and ours, perhaps, is one of them - is that once you had a sense of sin – you did it ,knowing you were sinning - but now it is no longer the same . . If you lose the meaning of sin, when you try to deny the existence of God and therefore no longer consider the moral evil of man, the consequences will be tragical.

The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky - whose 200th anniversary has just been mentioned - described those consequences very well, especially by novels such as "Crime and Punishment" and "The Karamazov Brothers".

Sometimes the aim is not only to exclude God from social life but also from the very thought of man, as if to certify and confirm that "God is dead"as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche stated.

Faced with the growing evil and the many sufferings endured even today by humanity, we say that all this is not the result of a punishment or a whim of God but it is the fruit of sin and the denial of God.

God is never the author and creator of death – He, who "created man for incorruption, made man as image of his own nature. But through the devil's envy death entered the world and those, who belong to it, experience it "(Wis 2: 23-24), says the book of Wisdom - and the evils in the world are rather the consequence of a departure from God. and of having built a humanity regardless of or in opposition, open or hidden, to God's plan and to the creation designed and willed by Him.

Christian revelation is clear: when one turns away from God - the author of Life – and if one rebels, then one builds man and the city of men against and without God; the whole world and all mankind fall into the void (see chapter 3 of Genesis / original sin).

The lesson that comes to us from the history of salvation and today from Christmas leads us to say that God created man as a "good reality", "very good indeed" (Gen 1:31). And God, having accomplished the creative act, "withdrew" from the world and He took a step back from it, entrusting everything to man so that the man-image of Him was its guardian and the one who should have made the whole world grow.

In some way, therefore, the good progress, the salvation and the death of the world depend on man and then - at Christmas - God becomes man because only through man, to whom He had given the world, can find fulfillment of his creation and the world could be saved.

Here the perennial intertwining between freedom and responsibility of man re-emerges, called by vocation to protect and make the world grow which therefore, through man, can fall into the abyss of death or can be saved and brought back to God.

In "The mystery of the innocent saints", written by Charles Péguy in 1912, it is God the Father who speaks and remembers the prayer most pleasing to Him, the one that Jesus - the Incarnate Word - taught and wanted to leave to his disciples.

The text reads: "Our Father who art in heaven. Of course - it is God who speaks - when a man begins this way he can continue to speak to me as he pleases. You see too, I am unarmed. My Son knew it well ... My son who loved them so much, who loves them eternally in heaven. He knew well what He was doing that day, my son who loves them so much. When He put this barrier between them and Me. Our Father who art in heaven, these three or four words. This barrier that my anger and perhaps my justice will never cross. Be blessed who falls asleep under the protection of the ramparts of these three or four words ... These three or four words that conquer Me, the Invincible "(Charles Péguy," The mystery of the innocent saints ").

Let us make our own this prayer and let discover again the beauty and strength of the Prayer of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man; Our Father is the prayer that this Christmas we want to place at the center of our life, at the beginning and till the end of our days and in every moment, when we feel the need to recover the holy covenant with God.

Merry Christmas to all!