

Extraordinary Form – Sunday within the Octave of Christmas

Ave Maria Catholic Church, Sunday, December 31, 2023

Gal. 4: 1-7

Brethren, as long as the heir is not of age, he is no different from a servant; although he is the owner of everything, but he is under the supervision of guardians and administrators until the date set by his father. In the same way, we also, when we were not of age, were enslaved to the elemental powers of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.

Lk 2:33-40

At that time Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. The Return to Nazareth. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Jesus, a Sign of Contradiction

Ave Maria Catholic Church, Sunday, Dec. 31st, 2023. Fr. David M Vidal

Why is it difficult for some to say or accept the greeting “*Merry Christmas*”? Some people accept the lights, the sweets, the food, and the gifts of a happy holiday, but are not willing to be part of a “*Merry Christmas*.”

Years ago, reflecting on this phenomenon, Father James V. Schall, SJ, wrote: “*When we wish someone ‘Merry Christmas,’ we cannot avoid reminding ourselves and those we greet that the very possibility of such a wish is itself a grace. We imply things that are given to us which we must freely accept or reject, but in so doing, we live by a different spirit.*” “*Christmas: Sign of Contradiction, Season of Redemption,*” December 20, 2005.

Father Schall’s reflection touches the heart of our festivity. When we wish someone a “*Merry Christmas,*” we wish a grace that must be freely accepted. This is the grace of Jesus Christ. This gift is described by the prophet Simeon in the passage of the Gospel we just read: “*Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted . . . so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*” (Lk 2: 34-35).

This is the true gift of Christmas! The Son of God took flesh and was born as the Son of Mary. This gift changed the history of humanity. We cannot remain indifferent to this gift. It is impossible to stay neutral: either we accept Jesus or reject Him. In this way, Jesus stands as a Sign of Contradiction, which is also a revealing Sign.

What does Jesus come to reveal? Jesus comes to reveal what is present in our hearts. Jesus comes to question our hearts and reveal what we love. Is Jesus God with us? Yes, He is. Then, do we want God with us? Yes, we do! But we must know that having God with us also means loving Him. Do we love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul? This law stands firm in the Old Testament (Det. 6:5) and in the New Testament (Mt. 22:37, Lk.10:27, Mk 12:30).

Unfortunately, it often happens that our hearts are not completely determined to love God as we should. There are so many conflicting desires! Loving God also means to love goodness, justice, honesty, prudence, fortitude, temperance, modesty, patience, humility, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Jesus stands before our hearts as a sign of contradiction. Loving God calls for completeness: You either love Him or you do not. These are Jesus’s words: “*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters,*” (Mt. 12:30).

Jesus did not come to promote a “pick and choose” religion. Jesus does not say, take whatever you like from me, and take whatever you like from others, and do not worry if those things contradict themselves. That is not the sign of contradiction Jesus brought to

us. The “pick and choose” religion is not a sign of contradiction but only a question mark. Now, with all honesty, who will give his life for a question mark? Who will spend his life for a question mark? Who will follow a question mark? The “pick and choose” religion is not a sign of contradiction, but a sign of confusion.

Jesus’s sign of contradiction is different.

Jesus is a sign of contradiction because He opposes our wrongdoings. He says: “*Do not sin anymore,*” (John 5:14), and He truly means it. Jesus knows what sin is and the consequences it has: “*Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may happen to you.*” Jesus comes to put an end to the offenses against God and the eternal separation from God that is the consequence of those offenses.

Jesus is a sign of contradiction because He opposes the spirit of the world that continually claims: “*Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die,*” (1 Cor. 15:32). But Jesus proclaims: “*I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*” (John 11:25-26) Jesus proclaims a life beyond this world. A life that is worth living (or dying) for.

Jesus is a sign of contradiction because He opposes the devil, who constantly tempts us by pointing out all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence: “*All these I shall give to you if you will prostrate yourselves and worship me.*” (Mt. 4:9). But Jesus responds: “*The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*”

Accepting Jesus as a sign of contradiction has personal consequences.

Accepting Jesus means to welcome his grace, desiring the life of grace as the most precious gift, above and beyond any other. It is because grace means friendship with God and true happiness.

Accepting Jesus means looking for eternal life that is beyond and above the life we have on earth. Knowing that here on earth, we live in a tent, looking for our permanent, final, and infinitely better place.

Accepting Jesus means to beg for his kingdom as part of our daily prayer. Asking for the restoration of truth, goodness, and peace that only God can give.

But accepting Jesus cannot be reduced to a personal dimension.

Accepting Jesus as a sign of contradiction has universal consequences.

This is the message of Christmas: The Savior of the world was born! Therefore, conversion is possible! Salvation is possible! Eternal Happiness is possible! Is there any greater

message? This message is not just for our own personal benefit; this is a message for the entire world!

When the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the Shepherds, they proclaimed, “*Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth.*” (Lk. 2:14). This is the message of Christmas: Jesus comes to restore the true worship and the glory that we must give to God, and Jesus also comes to restore that peace and friendship that we lost after original sin.

With conviction, the Church proclaims that apart from Christ, “there is no salvation.” This is the message that Peter declared before the Sanhedrin at the very beginning of the apostolic preaching: “*There is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved,*” (Acts 4:12).

This is the message of Christmas that we must proclaim together with Saint Paul: “*God our Savior . . . wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth. And the truth is this: God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all,*” (1 Tim 2:3-6).

Accepting a *Merry Christmas* means much more than accepting a simple “happy holiday.” Because Christmas demands faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ, and faith in Jesus has personal and universal consequences. Let us live out our faith in Christ, a sign of peace and joy and, at the same time, a sign of contradiction.