

CHRISTMAS – 2022

For those of us hoping for a white Christmas, we certainly got our wish...not to mention blizzard conditions and bitter cold temps as well (how 'bout that--three for the price of one!). In any event, we are blessed to be here together to celebrate once again the most important birth in history: that of Jesus who is Son of God and Son of Mary. I wish all of you and all your loved ones all the blessings, peace and joy that come to us in this holy season from that holy birth in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago.

We all know the original Christmas story—the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world, in a humble manger. We also know that that story is not only about a specific event that happened long time ago; it is also an ongoing story in which we all have a part to play. What do I mean by that? Let me illustrate by sharing with you another story, one that I read about recently in a book by a Canadian priest named Fr. Harrison Ayres. He tells of his time working with the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order founded by St. Teresa of Calcutta, to serve the poorest of the poor. I'll let Fr. Ayres take it from here:

"I first met Christopher when he came into Gift of Love Hospice in San Francisco. He was dying of kidney failure. Christopher wasn't homeless but he lived in public housing and had a lifelong drinking problem and no friends or family. I was asked to clean Christopher when he arrived at the hospice from the hospital. Before I began, we chatted for a while...After I finished cleaning him up, I asked him if he wanted to pray. He said, 'No thanks. I don't believe in any of that God stuff.' I replied, 'No problem, have a good night's sleep,' turned off his light, and went to pray for him myself.

'Over the next couple weeks our relationship grew. Christopher's stomach had been terribly bloated but it was finally shrinking so we were able to get him into the shower. He needed help, so another care worker and I would help him. He was so happy in there. By the second day he simply grabbed the shower nozzle from our hands and just enjoyed the shower. Sometimes a shower would take an hour, because he was just so happy. One day, while another care worker and I were drying him off, he looked down at both of us intensely. He asked, 'Why are you doing this?' I simply replied, 'Because I love you and Jesus loves you' and continued to dry him off.

'Two nights later, after I helped him get ready for bed, I noticed a change in his demeanor. He was happier and more peaceful. So, I asked him again, 'Christopher, do you want to pray with me?' 'Yes,' he replied, 'I'd like that very much.' We then prayed the Divine Mercy chaplet together. While we were praying, I got an overwhelming inspiration from the Holy Spirit that was too powerful to ignore. The inspiration was clear; to ask him if he wanted to be baptized. And so I did. Then I

explained to him what Baptism is. 'Oh!' he replied. "I would love to have that. I want God's love.' We quickly called Deacon Ben over and he performed the Baptism right away with me as the godfather. The look of peace on Christopher's face was unforgettable. Christopher died two days later."

Fr. Ayres concludes: "Loving Christopher with a smile, participating spiritually in his sufferings, and proposing the Gospel in all I said and did with him was not my own work...ultimately, it's Christ himself who brings others to his love and salvation." He's absolutely right. St. John Paul II often referred to Christian love—that revealed by Jesus—as 'the law of the gift'. We are most completely ourselves when we give ourselves away, when we offer ourselves so that others can live and with a genuine desire for their good, not ours. That kind of love is revealed most powerfully, of course, through Jesus on the cross where he made the gift of himself for the sake of the entire human race.

And in order for Jesus to give himself for us on the cross, he first had to be born into this world—he had to have a human body like ours in order to make that supreme offering. That is what Christmas is: the first chapter in the book of love that Jesus is and that Jesus gives. It's fun, of course, to receive Christmas gifts...and it's even more fun to give them—to make the gift of ourselves to those we love. God the Son became one of us, taking on our flesh-and-blood human nature to show what giving is really all about. Fr. Ayres showed love to the dying Christopher—a love that was rooted in Jesus the Christ, born for us in that Bethlehem manger.

Who are the 'Christophers' that God brings into our lives for us to love, to whom he wants us to make the gift of ourselves? Maybe your 'Christopher' or mine is a family member, or someone at work, or a next-door neighbor, or a stranger at the checkout line in the store or on the highway, or someone that you learn about halfway around the world in desperate need of your prayers or other assistance.

Because Jesus became one of us and was born into our world, he teaches and shows by his example how to make the gift of ourselves to those in need in the specific, 'get-our-hands-dirty' circumstances of life. We can do so, and we are called by Jesus to do so. Let's not be afraid to ask him to help us see who those 'Christophers' are that he has arranged for us to love and to serve as Jesus came to love and serve (and save) each one of us.

[in Creed: we will kneel and pause at "...and became man."]