

## The Word Became Flesh

Every year on Christmas Day, the Mass during the day includes these words from John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Christmas is the great mystery of the Incarnation and Birth of our Lord, the coming of the Son of God as our Savior. And how did he choose to save us? He took our human nature to himself, so that in his own person, humanity would be forever redeemed.

When I was named the Bishop of Fargo, one immediate task was to adopt a coat of arms and episcopal motto, the heraldic seal that you often see on my letters and other documents. I chose this exact verse, "The Word Became Flesh" (in Latin, *Verbum Caro Factum Est*), because the mystery of Christ's presence among us is so essential to our faith and life as Catholics. Everything in our Catholic faith somehow circles back to this great event when the Son of God, the Word of the Father, became flesh and was born for us in Bethlehem. At the center of my coat of arms I placed the "chi-rho," the symbol of the person of Christ that we see in many of our churches, to represent this central mystery of our faith: the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Christmas reminds us that the Son of God was born as a man for our salvation in a particular place on this earth and at a specific moment in time. His coming wasn't mythical or ambiguous. It was a real event, a fact. He was born in Bethlehem, the City of David, a real place with real people, to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't stand aloof from us; he enters right into the grittiness of our history and makes himself a true member of our human family. This is one of the most incredible aspects of our Catholic faith, that God chose out of love to descend from his heavenly dwelling and took our human flesh in order to redeem us, to save us from sin and death. No other religion makes such a claim. He came in the most humble circumstances, born in a stable of Bethlehem, taking to himself all the hardships and challenges of our human condition.

Last year I had the privilege of leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and one of the principal stops of our journey was a visit to Bethlehem. We visited the Shepherds' Field and Chapel, where the humble shepherds heard the amazing news of our Savior's birth. We also visited the Church of the Nativity, which has marked the place of the birth of Jesus since the earliest days of the Church. There on the floor of the grotto is a silver star with the words of John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." This is the very site of the stable where Jesus was born, where he forever sanctified our world by his presence, where he began his earthly journey that would open for us the way to heaven.

The name Bethlehem literally means "house of bread." How fitting it is that the One who would call himself the "living bread come down from heaven" and would give himself to us as the "Bread of Life" should be born in a place called "house of bread." During the Eucharistic Revival that we celebrate now in our diocese and throughout the nation, we can all look to Bethlehem as the "house of bread" where Jesus first offers himself to us as our Savior, where he gives his "flesh for the life of the world." When we celebrate Mass on Christmas this year, let's remember the stable of Bethlehem, the first altar where God made himself one of us and gave himself as a sacrifice of love. In fact, every Mass, every Holy Communion, every prayer before the Eucharist, takes us to that humble town, that holy place where Jesus was born, the One who is indeed the "living bread come down from heaven."

It is heartbreaking this year to see the land of our Lord's birth torn by warfare and violence once again. For the last few months, we have seen and heard reports of murder and kidnapping, and tragically the innocent are again the victims of terrorism. It is especially disturbing to see a rise in antisemitism, not only in the Middle East, but in our own country as well. The Church condemns this hatred of the Jewish people in no uncertain terms. Any kind of racial hatred is sinful, and how much more so must this be true when directed against the children of Abraham, from whom was born the Savior of the world in the City of David. During the Nazi persecution of the Jews, Pope Pius XI declared in 1938: "Through Christ and in Christ, we are the spiritual progeny of Abraham. Spiritually we are all Semites."

As we approach Christmas this year, when we celebrate the coming of the Word Made Flesh and Prince of Peace, let us pray in a special way for peace in the Holy Land. Let us pray for the Jewish people and the Palestinian people, that all may live in peace and be delivered from the shadow of death and

destruction. And let us do everything we can to live in peace with one another, the peace that Jesus offers to all who receive him into their hearts. I pray that the birth of the Christ child of Bethlehem will be a source of peace, hope, and joy for us all.