

Christmas - December 25, 2016

I recently read a reflection about Christmas that was written by Pope Francis. He says, "When we hear the story of the birth of Christ, let us be silent and let the Child speak. Let us take his words to heart as we contemplate his face."

And Pope Francis says, "If we take him in our arms and let ourselves be embraced by him, he will bring us unending peace of heart, because the Christ Child teaches us what is truly essential in our lives."

Those words of Pope Francis remind me of an experience I had this past summer. I had the great pleasure of baptizing the 3rd child of a young husband and wife.

Following the baptism there was a picnic dinner. We spent the afternoon outside where there was a barn and all sorts of animals. They live on a farm.

Lots of extended family members were there, including the two older children whom I had previously baptized when they were born. At one point one of the other children needed their Mom's assistance.

As she heard her daughter say, "Mom!" the young mother made eye contact with me. Without saying anything I held out my arms and she handed me the newborn child who was the guest of honor that day.

The mother was not gone very long as she attended to her daughter and some of her nieces and nephews. When she returned, I heard one of the other adults ask why she left me holding the baby.

A few minutes later, cake was served. It was a layer cake. In between the two layers was a custard which contained slices of banana.

Sitting next to me at that time was the middle child of this family; he's 3 years old. His eyes lit up when his mother put a piece of cake in front of him.

There were several young children eagerly waiting for cake, so it was a few minutes until I received mine.

Next to me the 3 year old was busy with his cake. Both hands were engaged; a spoon in one hand took care of the icing and two fingers on the other hand were picking up pieces of the cake.

I asked him the obvious question, "Do you like the cake?" Without saying a word he took a piece of banana with his two fingers that were dripping with custard, and lifted it to my mouth.

I knew that the best response was to go along with his gesture. After every couple of bites, he lifted his fingers and shared a little more with me until I was served a piece of the cake.

Of course, he attentively watched to see if I would extend the same gesture to him.

I know there were photos taken by the adults with me holding the baby I had baptized, as well me sharing cake with her 3 year old brother.

And there were apologies when they noticed that I was wearing some of the cake; although not nearly as much as the 3 year old!

Just to be clear, that was not a first of a kind experience. I have 7 siblings and almost 40 nieces and nephews.

That experience remind me of the words of Pope Francis who says, "When we hear the story of the birth of Christ, let us be silent and let the Child speak. Let us take his words to heart as we contemplate his face."

"If we take him in our arms and let ourselves be embraced by him, he will bring us unending peace of heart, because the Christ Child teaches us what is truly essential in our lives."

In the Christmas story told by St. Luke in the Gospel reading, it is obvious that the baby Jesus did not stand up in the manger and start speaking!

But it is clear that the Christ Child did speak to the Virgin Mary and Joseph and the shepherds who came to the stable where they contemplated his face.

Mary, the Mother of God, is the person in the Christmas story who literally took the child in her arms and embraced him as she wrapped him in swaddling clothes.

That's where the teaching begins as Pope Francis reminds us that the Christ Child teaches us what is truly essential in our lives.

What does that really mean? Let me go back to the baptism celebration and sharing cake with a 3 year old. I asked Charlie if he liked the cake, and began to teach me what is truly essential.

Without any concern or hesitation, he reached up and started to share his cake with me. He started to feed me.

But Charlie was not simply feeding with me a messy, but very delicious dessert. He was feeding me the joy and peace that is at the heart of the Christmas story.

Every time he offered me a piece of his cake, Charlie did it with a smile.

But the Lord Jesus who is the baby in Bethlehem and also the Son of God, can feed us with so much more.

As Pope Francis said in his Christmas reflection, he feeds us especially with his Word, the eternal word of God which is more satisfying than anything else, because it is filled with words of truth, light, forgiveness, mercy and peace.

And as Pope Francis said in that Christmas reflection, the Lord Jesus feeds us with his Body and Blood which he offered as a sacrifice to our Father in Heaven so that you and I may receive God's mercy and his gift of eternal life.

The message of Christmas is that there is no doubt that God loves us and continues to come to us through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

So many people are afraid to contemplate the mystery of that love or graciously accept that love. And so many people are afraid that even if they received that love, it might be taken away in a moment and never return.

The truth is, through the mystery of God sending his Son into our world is all about God continuing to fulfill the promise that he will never abandon us or withdraw his love. It is forever.

The only thing we have to do is to contemplate it; like looking at the smiling face of a baby. I don't know about you, but that's a look that truly brings joy and gladness.

And the only thing that we have to do is to receive that love. I know some people who would not know what to do if a 3 year old lifted up his sticky fingers with the intention of putting a piece of cake in their mouth.

There is something even more precious available to us because the Lord Jesus Christ was born into the world. From this altar he extends his hand to feed us with his own Body and Blood.

After he mentions contemplating and receiving what we see in the Christmas story, in our own encounter with Christ, Pope Francis urges us to respond by acting in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, capable of seeing and doing what is essential.

In a world which all too often is merciless to the sinner and lenient to the sin, we need to cultivate a strong sense of justice, to discern and to do God's will. We can only be obedient to the Lord God if we first listen.

And in an age and a culture of indifference which not infrequently turns ruthless, our style of life should instead be devout, filled with empathy, compassion and mercy, drawn daily from the wellspring of prayer.

Logic would tell us that it is the adult who is to feed the baby; the young child. But faith tells us that the child can feed us very well.

If you don't believe me, I can introduce you to a 3 year old boy who fed me cake and neither one of us were bothered by his sticky fingers.

If you don't believe me, I can introduce you to his mother who knew how to act in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, and capable of seeing and doing what is essential, as she handed me her newborn daughter to hold while she attended to the other children who needed her at that moment.

A lot of what happened in that experience was lost on the adults who didn't know what to make of the Bishop holding the infant or being fed cake by a 3 year old.

On this holy night/day, and every day, the Lord God has placed his only begotten Son Jesus Christ in your arms with the simple request; that you watch him for a while.

On this holy night/day, and every day, the Lord God wants to sit down with you to feed you with his Word which is truth and with his Body and Blood as food that is more satisfying than anything else you can imagine.

On this holy night/day, and every day, the Lord God asks you, and me, to look, listen, and respond to this holy mystery by being people who live and act in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, and capable of seeing and doing what is essential.

If you think about it, that is really something that we can do. And if you need something to help place you in that kind of encounter with Christ, pause over there at the manger scene and take a good look.

It will help you recognize how blessed we really are on this holy Christmas night/day.