

*Therefore, the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore, he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.
He will surely have pity on you; at the sound of your cry, as soon as he hears it, he will answer you.
And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction,
yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher.*

Dearly Beloved,

Before the coming of Christ, there were two tendencies in the human race. The one was towards pride: many people thought they could live upright, even happy lives by relying upon the power of their own minds and wills. If one thinks rightly about human life, they said, and then applies one's will to the carrying out of what one knows, then life can be good. I can overcome my weakness; not only that, I will overcome my weakness. It is based upon my approach; the success or failure rests wholly on my efforts. This is pride.

The other tendency was towards despair: many more people thought human life was awful. Overwhelmed by the daily need to provide food, clothing, and shelter, and feeling as if they were mere gears in a machine, they gave up on the possibility of a happy life. In its place, they focused on providing comfort and pleasure for themselves, attempting to dull the pain of an existence that seemed to make no sense. They knew something was wrong but thought nothing could be done about it. Since the good human life depends wholly on my efforts, there is no point, they said; I am too weak and broken to do anything approaching happiness, so I should focus on the here and now, making as pleasant a life as circumstances allow. This is despair.

Tonight, the Son of God is born of the Virgin Mary to heal these two tendencies, each of which we find within ourselves. For there is also a third option, the joining of the two, which has prevailed in many societies, including our own, and in many hearts of individuals. This tendency is to labor to appear strong on the outside, as if all is within our control and we are infallibly striding towards self-possession, while in private we know that we feel no more at peace than we ever have, and so we sometimes, perhaps often, give ourselves over to sensuality and worldliness, or at least entertain thoughts of doing so: it is the deadly combination of exterior pride and interior despair.

But the Son of God has entered our world, in His great love for the human race and for each individual which makes up that race, in order to heal us. Tonight the angels tell the shepherds that a Savior has been born, who shall be for all the peoples, and a Savior necessarily saves: this is the identity of Jesus Christ and His purpose—to save us from pride and from despair, to save us from our unwillingness to admit that these two forces war within us, to save us from using means other than His grace, for they only disappoint and destroy us.

He comes from heaven, from His eternal throne, to break our pride: His descent teaches us that we can only ascend to heaven with His help. Our endeavors to reach blessedness without Him will go nowhere. And He also comes to earth to raise us up: His resurrection and ascension into heaven teach us that we cannot wallow in despair, comfort and pleasure—we are called to rise above this world and seek the things of heaven.

If there is one image of the way the Savior works prominent in the Gospels and the Fathers, it is that of a physician. Christ says that he came to heal the sick, not those who think they are well. And so there is a further aspect to the fact that He comes to us tonight as a baby, rather than as a fully-grown man. He descended into the womb of the Blessed Virgin to heal our pride, to teach us that God must come to earth if man is to go to heaven, if man is to know true blessedness, to have his heart's desire. In order to heal our despair, though, he grew in that womb, he was born, he matured in body and mind as any human does: slowly, by stages.

He desires to mature in us also, slowly, by stages. He comes to heal us, but in His own time, in the way proper to each of us, in accordance with the wounds life has given us. Just as no baby comes out of the womb fully grown, no one who surrenders his or her life to Christ is healed immediately. St. Augustine puts it well in his *De Trinitate*, "It is one thing to throw off a fever, another to recover from the weakness which the fever leaves

behind it; it is one thing to remove shrapnel or a bullet from the body, another to heal with a complete cure the wound it made. The first stage of the cure is to remove the cause of the debility, and this is done by pardoning all sins in baptism; the second stage is curing the debility itself, and this is done gradually by making steady progress in the renewal of the image” through receiving the sacraments and perseverance in prayer. This is the paradox of the Christian life: we are healed deep down, in the center of our being, by baptism; but the disease of sin is so powerful that it takes us a lifetime to fully feel this profound healing. Thus the world looks at us and says that we are no better off than they are; even we are tempted to think that surrender to Christ is not the way to strength, but to weakness, that somehow we can save ourselves by knowing all the right ways of human life and then acting upon them.

But we know better: the Saints tell us so; our own experience tells us so. We know that by giving our life to Christ He has cured us of the principal affliction of mankind, which is pride, and if we persevere in the humility He has taught us and lived out, we will be healed. Jesus will come to full maturity in our souls, in His own way, in His own time, but He will do so, just as the infant in the manger grew into the man who changed the world.

So tonight, as we approach the crib, as we receive the Body and Blood of this child who comes to save and heal us, let each of us ask Him for something profound. Beg Him for something which you desire deep in your heart and which you know that only He can grant: for the removal of guilt over past sin; for the healing of self-hatred; for assurance that He loves you; for the conversion of loved ones; for grace to overcome habitual sin; for the strength to keep going. Ask it with faith, believing that only He can take away our interior pain and fear and loneliness and give in its place true peace. He will begin to save you and to heal you tonight, but keep asking, day after day, minute by minute, as often as the desire overwhelms you or the fear and pain seize you, beg Him to grant your petition. This begging is the ultimate sign of humility and is the rejection of the pride that is the cause of so much of our sorrow. Our Lord has already answered us by coming in the flesh on this night; in persevering in prayer we will know the fullness of the words of the prophet Isaiah with which I began:

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He will surely have pity on you; at the sound of your cry, as soon as he hears it, he will answer you.

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yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher.*

Tonight, we recall and relive the Son of God’s surrender to mankind, His coming in the flesh, which resulted in the ultimate surrender of His life on the Cross. May our surrender of our lives to the Savior, renewed tonight in this Mass, be a source of joy and peace for us, such that we may have the humility and courage to let Him live in us, to save us and to heal us, such that our eyes will see our Teacher and look upon His face for all eternity, in the world to come, in the New Jerusalem.