

LATIN PATRIARCH'S HOMILY

Jesus, the true hope of the Holy Land and of the whole world

ECCLESIA

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We publish below the text of the homily prepared by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, for the Christmas Eve Mass 2024 (Is 9, 1-16; Tit 2, 11-14; Lk 2, 1-14), in Bethlehem.

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

I frankly admit that it is hard for me this year to announce the joy of Christ's birth to you here and to all those who look to Bethlehem from all over the world.

The Angels' song of glory, joy and peace seems to be out of tune after a tiring year full of tears, bloodshed, suffering, in addition to shattered hopes and crushed plans for peace and justice. A sad cry seems to choke the song, and powerless anger seems to paralyze every path of hope.

Over the past few weeks, I have asked myself several times how to live with this burden and even more so how to leave it behind. I have struggled with the unpleasant feeling that words, even faith-based ones, are useless when faced with the harshness of reality and a suffering that plainly seems to have no end in sight.

The figure of the Shepherds (of the Christmas story) came to my rescue as the inspiration for me to follow together with the bishops and priests of this land. We are to keep vigil in the night watching over the flock. On that night, which is this very night, they listened to the angels and believed them.

That is why I too chose once again to listen to the Christmas story, within the suffering in which we find ourselves, a context not so very different from the one of that time.

As we have just heard, *"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." (Luke 2:1-5).*

I was struck by this aspect: Joseph and Mary experienced the grace of Christmas, the true birth of Christ, not in a way nor at a time or under circumstances chosen by them, or particularly favorable to them. At that time, an overpowering empire ruled the world

and decided its social and economic destinies. At that time, this Holy Land of ours was equally subject to the game of international interests, no less than today. Poor people had to be registered. Their labor and their toil served other people's quality of life... Yet, without complaint, without refusal, without rebellion, Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem and **here**, they were open to receiving the birth of Christ in that way. Was their choice driven by resignation? By doubt, powerlessness, or incompetence? Certainly not! It was driven by faith! And faith, when genuine and deeply rooted, brings a fresh and enlightened perspective on history, for "believing is seeing!"

And what did Joseph and Mary see? They saw, through the word of the Angel, God in history, the Word made flesh, the Eternal in time, the Son of God made Man! And that is what we also see here, tonight, enlightened by the Word of the Gospel.

This Child shows us the unprecedented and unheard-of gesture, of God who does not flee from history, does not look at it indifferently from afar. He does not reject it with indignation as if it were too painful and evil, but embraces it, loves it, enters it with the delicate and strong pace of a newborn Child. Thus eternal Life finds a place in the harshness of time, through hearts and minds willing to welcome it.

The nativity of the Lord is all about this: in His Son, the Father personally gets involved in our history and bears its burdens, He shares our sufferings and tears to the point of bloodshed and offers us a way out filled with life and hope.

However, He is not in competition with the powers of this world. The power of divine love is not simply stronger than the world, but it has a different kind of power. This Child, having lived a life like ours to the fullest shall reveal it with luminous clarity: "*My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants (would) be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But as it is, my kingdom is not here*" (Jn. 18:36). The pace with which God enters history is the pace of the Lamb. Only the Lamb is worthy to receive power and strength; to Him alone belongs salvation (cf. Rev. 5:12). The Caesars of this world are entrapped inside the vicious circle of strength, which eliminates enemies in turn only to create new ones (we must bitterly note this every day).

The Lamb of God instead, sacrificed and at once victorious, truly wins by healing the violent heart of man at the root through a love that is willing to serve and die and thus generate new life.

Mary and Joseph only seem to passively obey to history that overshadows them

but in fact they have walked through it and and mastered it with the pace of he who looks to God and to His plan. It is thus that they have allowed glory and peace to enter history.

We too can and must dwell in this earth and in this our history. We should not be forced to, or resigned to do so, or be ready to flee as soon as possible. We are called by tonight's Angels to live in faith and hope. We too, like Joseph and Mary, like the shepherds, must choose and decide whether to welcome the angel's announcement with faith or to go our own way: believe or leave. We either decide to side with Christ and make the style of Bethlehem our own. This is the style of people who are willing to serve with love and to write a history of brotherhood. Alternatively, we can choose to adopt the style of Caesar Augustus, Herod, and many others, and thus be akin to those who write history through power and overpowering others.

The Child of Bethlehem takes us by the hand tonight and leads us with Him into history. He accompanies us so that we make history our own to the very end and so that we walk through it with the pace of trust and hope in Him.

He was not afraid to be born into this world or die for it (*non horruisti Virginis uterum*). He asks us not to fear the powers of this world, but to persevere in the path of justice and peace. We can and must, like Joseph and Mary, like the shepherds and the magi, walk on the alternative ways that the Lord shows us. We must find adequate spaces where new styles of reconciliation and brotherhood may be born and grown. We must make our families and our communities cradles for a future of justice and peace, which has begun already with the coming of the Prince of Peace. It is true: we are few and perhaps even insignificant in relation to the constellations of power and the chessboard where the games of economic and political interests are played out. Yet like the shepherds, we are the people to whom the joy of Christmas is destined. We are sharers in the Paschal victory of the Lamb.

For this very reason, we feel that the Holy Father's invitation, that resounded for the entire Church just a few hours ago, is especially for us. By crossing the Holy Door, he inaugurated the Jubilee of 2025, we are now pilgrims of hope.

We, Christians, in fact do not walk through history as careless and unconcerned tourists nor as wanderers without a destination, thrown here and there by the events of the world. We are pilgrims, and though we know and share in joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of our fellow wayfarers, we walk towards the goal that is Christ, the true holy door flung wide open to God's future (cf. Jn. 10:9). We dare to believe that

since the Word became flesh here, He continues in every flesh and in every time, to make history fruitful, and to orient it to the fullness of glory.

And so dear friends, it is in this year, it is here that it makes even more sense to hear the song of the angels who announce the joy of Christ's birth! It is precisely now that it makes sense, and it is beautiful to live the Holy Year of the Lord, indeed, the Holy Year that is the Lord! That song in fact, is not out of tune; quite the opposite, it shows how out of tune the noise of war and the empty rhetoric of the powerful are! That song's voice is not too feeble but resounds with strength through the tears of those who suffer, it encourages us to make vengeance powerless through forgiveness. We can be pilgrims of hope on the roads and between the destroyed homes of our land, because the Lamb walks with us towards the throne of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Jubilee year, according to biblical tradition, is a special year in which prisoners are set free, debts are forgiven, property is returned and even the earth rests. It is a year in which we experience reconciliation with our neighbor. It is a year in which we live in peace we promote justice. It is a year of spiritual renewal, of both people and communities. This happens because, with the Jubilee, God is the first who forgives our debts. It is the year of reconciliation between God and man, where everything is renewed. God desires this reconciliation to be fulfilled in the renewal of life and the relationships between human beings. This is my prayer for our Holy Land, which has the utmost need for a true Jubilee. We need a new beginning in all spheres of life, a new vision, the courage to look to the future with hope, without surrendering to the language of violence and hatred, which instead closes off any possibility of a future. May our communities experience a true spiritual renewal. May there also be this new beginning for us in the Holy Land. May debts be forgiven, prisoners be freed, property be returned, and may serious and credible paths of reconciliation and forgiveness, without which there will never be true peace, sincerely begin with courage and determination.

I want to thank our dear brothers and sisters in Gaza, who I recently visited again. I renew our prayers, our closeness and our solidarity with you. You are not alone. You are truly a visible sign of hope in the midst of the disaster of total destruction that surrounds you. But you are not broken, you are still united, steadfast in hope. Thank you for your wonderful testimony of strength and peace!

My thoughts also go out to you dear brothers and sisters in Bethlehem. This year too has been a sad Christmas for you, marked by insecurity, poverty and violence. The most important day for you is once again under the banner of weariness and the

expectation of better days. To you too I say: take courage! We must not lose hope. Let us renew our trust in God. He never leaves us alone. And **here** in Bethlehem, we celebrate the God-with-us and the place where He made Himself known. Take heart! We want the same proclamation of peace that resounded from **here** two thousand years ago to resound again to the whole world!

Together with the shepherds let us go and behold again and again this unfolding event that the Lord has made known to us.

Let us also celebrate Christmas with outward signs of celebration, for a Child has been born for us and has filled history and the whole world with hope. He has transformed sorrows into labor pains and has given us all the opportunity to anticipate the dawn of a new world.

****Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem***