

Christmas Pastoral

Christ is the Heart of Christmas



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2020 has been a tough year. For months on end we have been listening out for the figures: how many new cases today? How many in ICU? How many deaths? Every one of those figures stands for lives frustrated, threatened perhaps changed definitively. As we approach Christmas we pray for those who have died in the past year and our hearts go out to the bereaved. One of the ancient philosophers wrote: ‘be kind with everyone you meet today; you do not know what battles they are fighting’. So many of us are dealing with heightened levels of anxiety stemming from loneliness or other hardships made worse by the effects of lockdown. There are those among us whose livelihoods have been seriously threatened by the pandemic. Family gatherings will be different this Christmas and many people will be missing loved ones from the celebration.

I am very conscious of the many Donegal people who have made their homes in other parts of the world and send special greetings to them. This year is especially hard for those who can't come home for Christmas.

Christ in our Hearts

Even as we acknowledge all of this sadness we Christians remember that the heart of Christmas is Emmanuel. God with us. God is with us. Before he was born in her body the Christ was born in Mary's heart. He can be, he will be and he is born again in the heart of every Christian even in the midst of sadness and sorrow. That is the heart of Christmas. No matter what, our God is with us and that is the source of our joy.

Christ in our Churches

I acknowledge all of the great work done by priests and parish groups and teams of cleaners and stewards to ensure that Mass can be celebrated joyfully and safely in this most unusual year. Their task, as Christmas approaches, will not be easy, and we appeal to all the faithful to cooperate fully with them.

It will be impossible for our usual large congregations to attend Mass on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and I remind Catholics that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days remains suspended during the pandemic.

Please remember, Christmas is about more than just one day. Mass on any of the days from Christmas Day to the Epiphany is a fitting celebration of Christmas. Christmas Masses will also be widely available over webcam and social media; we strongly encourage families to join with those who are gathering in their local parishes in welcoming the birth of the Christ child. This might be more suitable for people who are elderly or vulnerable.

We are blessed in the Diocese of Raphoe to have so many beautiful Churches. Your ancestors dedicated their skills in stonework and carpentry and their finances to build Churches for the glory of God. In the days of rest ahead I encourage you to visit a Church, perhaps a time of quiet for yourself or a time with family. Allow yourself to be captivated by the beauty of the Church and most importantly take time before Christ present in the Tabernacle. Kneel before the crib and share your hopes and fears with Jesus. Ask for his continued presence in your life and allow him to speak directly to your heart.

Christ in our homes

For generations Irish families have put a light in the window to invite Jesus, Mary and Joseph into their homes for Christmas. I invite everybody to bring Christ into their home with family prayer. Light a candle near your crib and gather round it for a moment of prayer. Somebody could read the Gospel from Luke chapter 2 and sing a carol or you could simply say the Hail Mary together asking God's blessing on everyone in the house and for those who feel isolated, vulnerable or particularly impacted by the pandemic.

Gathering around the Dinner table this Christmas I encourage you to remember all the people who have ensured that throughout this pandemic that we have had access to food. The farmers, food producers, delivery drivers and the staff who have worked in all of our local shops and stores. I include a Christmas family Grace before meals for the Christmas season.ⁱ

No room at the Inn

When God first appeared in human form it was as part of a family who were out of home, at least temporarily. They were on the brink of being driven from their homeland by political persecution and forced to seek refuge in a foreign country. In the Christmas story we meet a Jesus, Mary and Joseph who were homeless, refugees and asylum seekers.

It was not by accident that God identified with the marginalised. At the end of all our lives he will remind us of this when he will say to us: 'in so far as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me.'

Christmas brings out the best in us.

One of the blessings of the Covid times has been that we've seen so many people step forward and give of their time and energy to help the community, neighbours and strangers alike. And now with Christmas coming so many people are thinking of others more than themselves; people are planning to cook dinners for their neighbours and are seeking ways to be with people who are alone. St Vincent de Paul and other community groups are working very hard to reach out to people in need. Trócaire, as well as many other agencies supported by you, are reaching out to help people in regions still ravaged by war and famine. In this past year their fundraising campaigns have been frustrated by the Covid pandemic. It is important that we remember them, if we can, at Christmas.

This Christmas take time to notice the acts of generosity and kindness in your community. There are a multitude of people engaged in this generosity – they are the messengers of hope and like the host of heavenly angels on the first Christmas night they proclaim that Christ is among us.

Act of Perfect Contrition

For many of us Advent is a time to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It may not be possible for all who wish to go to Confession to safely avail of the sacrament this year. Still this is a perfect time of year to review our lives, acknowledge what needs to be acknowledged and bring it to the Lord. When we can't go immediately to the sacrament it is a very worthwhile thing to prayerfully acknowledge our sins and our need for mercy and make an Act of Perfect Contrition. 'Perfect' contrition is a prayer from our whole heart, expressing sorrow for sin for the simple reason that God is so good.ⁱⁱ

I am the Light of the World

When the Word became flesh two thousand years ago it was God's outrageous effort to be born among us and in our hearts. Jesus longs to be a light in the heart of each one of us. He knows about our darkness and wants to shine in our lives. My prayer is that we will let him into our hearts in a new way this Christmas. When we do he will shine in our own darkness and be a light for the world around us.

Christmas 2020

i

<i>Prayer at Christmas Dinner</i>	<i>Urnaí ag dinnéar na Nollag</i>
God Our Father we thank you for the many ways you have cared for us in the past year. We are grateful for each person gathered around this table. Bless us, our food and our company today. Bless those we love who are not with us. Be close to our brothers and sisters who are poor and hungry today. We invite Jesus. Mary and Joseph into our hearts and we join with the Angels in their Christmas song: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will'. Amen.	A Athair, gabhaimid buíochas leat as ucht do chineáltais linn sa bhliain atá thart. Táimid buíoch ar son gach aon duine atá ag an tabla inniu. Beannaigh muidne, ár mbia agus ár gcuideachta. Beannaigh ár gcairde atá ar shiúl uainn. Bí taobh lenár mbráithre agus ár ndeirfiúrachta uilig atá bocht agus gan bia inniu. Iarraimid ar Íosa, ar Mhuire agus ar Sheosamh teacht isteach inár gcroí agus canaimid le lúcháir mar aon leis na hAingil: 'Glóir do Dhia sna harda agus ar talamh síocháin do lucht dea thola'. Amen

Christmas is a Season and you could use the resource provided by the NPN to have a moment of prayer for each of the 12 days of Christmas.

<https://www.northernpastoral.network/news--resources/12-days-of-christmas>

<i>Achainí don Nollaig</i>	<i>Christmas Request</i>
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<p>Is beannaithe an bomaite a rugadh Mac na hÓighe i meán oíche i mBeithil i lár an gheimhridh ghairbh.</p> <p>Deonaigh dúinn, a Íosa, trí bhrí agus onóir do Mháthar rónaofa, ár saol, ár sláinte agus ár neart a chaitheamh i do sheirbhís bheannaithe, tríd an tSlánaitheoir naofa agus a Mháthair Bheannaithe ár dtreisiú go glóir na bhFlaitheas.</p> <p>A Naíonáin uasail bheannaithe, déan trócaire orainn. <i>[Paidir le rá gach lá de Dhá Lá Déag na Nollag].</i></p>	<p>Blessed is the moment the Son of the Virgin was born in the middle of the night in Bethlehem during the rough winter.</p> <p>Be pleased to grant us, Jesus, through the influence and honour of your most holy Mother, to spend our lives, our health and our strength in blessed service to you, through the holy Saviour and his blessed Mother strengthening us until the glory of Heaven.</p> <p>Noble and blessed Infant, have mercy on us. <i>[Ancient Irish Prayer said on each of the Twelve Days of Christmas].</i></p>
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ii

<i>Act of Contrition</i>	<i>Gníomh Dóláis</i>
<p>O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because of your just punishments, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love.</p> <p>I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.</p>	<p>O, Dhia! Is ró-mhór a ghoilleas sé orm fearg a chur ort, de bhrí go bhfuil tú ró-mhaith agus ró-gheanamhail agus nach bhfuil an peacadh taitneamhach i do láthair; tá rún agam le cúnamh do naomh-ghrásta mo bheatha a leasú ó seo suas agus gan fearg a chur ort arís go bráthach. Amen.</p>