



Homily for the Mass of Christmas Eve 2022

Dear brothers and sisters,

Dear Mr. President Mahmoud Abbas, and representatives of the State of Palestine,

Dear Representative of His Majesty, King Abdallah II of Jordan,

Your Excellencies, Consuls General and members of the diplomatic corps,

May the Lord give you peace!

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy.” (Is. 9,2-3).

Once again we meet each other here in Bethlehem, in this Holy Place, to thank, praise and celebrate the wonderful event of the Savior’s birth. Once again, with the prophet Isaiah, we proclaim to the whole world that a great light has appeared before our eyes and that a great joy has filled our hearts, “for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” (Titus 2:11): Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

Today we are invited, as every year, to bow before this great mystery, which is also a proclamation of salvation and mercy. Christmas, in fact, is not only a time, perhaps a bit childish, of joy, celebration and lights, or of happy children and gifts shared with those in need. First and foremost, it is a celebration of God's revelation in history; it is the manifestation of divine intention towards mankind, which reaches its climax during Christmas. Christmas is God’s gaze and judgment on the world. And it is a judgment of salvation and mercy, of compassion and not condemnation.

“The people who walked in darkness ...” (Is 9:1). The life of the world was marked by sin. Back then the world was torn, divided and violent – no less than today, as we know. Yet, with the Christmas of Christ, something began to change. In fact, the birth of the Child of Bethlehem, also marks the birth of a new opportunity for relationships between people. True, there were no sudden changes in the life of that violent world. However, that divine intention, that compassion-filled desire of God, which, during Christmas, became flesh and was made visible in a Child, began, little by little, to expand from that Place to the entire world. It brought a new way of life, based on the dignity of every man and woman, on a justice that is never separated from mercy, on the desire for all to be saved. Since then, that divine intention continues to radiate, bringing its light to those who dwell in the land of darkness.

Yet, that judgment and that look of mercy and salvation also await a response: they are an invitation addressed to every man and woman to enter that new way of life, based on that same desire of God. It is a powerful and solemn call to live in that new light. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all" (Jn. 1:4-5). Celebrating Christmas, then, also involves a decision. One can choose, in fact, not to respond to that invitation: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1,11).

From then until now, that gaze and judgment of God are made present in the world through the Church. For Christianity is first and foremost the way of life of those who have decided to accept the invitation to be credible witnesses of the plan of salvation that God has for all. Being Church means making concrete that divine desire for mercy, a desire that Christ's Christmas made possible and tangible. The Christian community is called to make the compassionate Heart of God alive and present in this world of ours, and to look at humanity with eyes illuminated by His radiant light. One gains a truer view of world events if one also sees with the heart and not only with the eyes.

And what do we see today, here in this world of ours? What is our Jerusalem Church contemplating? What is God's light bringing to the eyes of our minds and hearts, here in this Holy Land?

With our eyes, we see that violence seems to have become our main language, our main way of communicating. Violence is increasing, first of all in the language of politics. We have already expressed our concerns about the direction politics is taking in Israel, where there is a risk of breaking the already fragile balance between the different religious and ethnic communities that make up our society. Politics has the task of serving the country and its inhabitants, working to achieve harmony among the country's different social and religious communities, translating this work into concrete and positive actions, and not fomenting instead divisions or, worse, hatred and discrimination.

This year, moreover, we have seen a terrible increase in violence in Palestinian streets, with a death toll that takes us back decades. It is a sign of the worrying increase in political tension and the growing unease, especially among our youth, regarding the increasingly distant resolution of the ongoing conflict. The Palestinian issue, unfortunately, no longer seems to be the focus of the world's attention. This, too, is a form of violence, which hurts the conscience of millions of Palestinians, left increasingly alone and who, for too many generations, have been waiting for an answer to their legitimate desire for dignity and freedom.

Unfortunately, violence is not only in politics. We see it in social relations, in the media, in games, in schools, in families, and sometimes even in our own community. It all stems from the deepening lack of trust that marks our time. We do not trust that change is possible; we no longer trust each other. And so violence becomes the only

way to talk to one another. Lack of trust is what lies at the root of every conflict here in the Holy Land, or in Ukraine and in so many other parts of the world.

In such torn and wounded contexts, then, the first and most important vocation of our Church is to help people see the world with the heart as well, and to remember that life has meaning only if it is open to love. Celebrating Christmas for us, who are a community of believers in Christ, means creating, promoting and being an occasion of mercy, compassion, forgiveness. It means bringing into the lives of our deeply wounded reality that desire so full of compassion that God manifested to us with the birth of Jesus. It means having the courage of making these gestures that build trust. Indeed, faith in God must sustain our trust in mankind, give foundation to our hope and translate into gestures of free and sincere love.

Peace, which we all desire, does not come from itself. It awaits men and women who know how to translate God's way into concrete and tangible actions, in the small and large things of every day. People, that is, who are not afraid to incarnate themselves in the life of the world, and who, with gestures of gratuitous love, know how to awaken the desire for goodness that dwells in the heart of every man, which is only waiting to be freed from the bonds of selfishness. Jesus, the Savior born here in Bethlehem, said *Blessed are the peacemakers*; He Himself gave His life on the cross, and with His love conquered death, teaching us that love is stronger than death.

It is not impossible. The testimony of so many men and women here, in our Holy Land and in so many other parts of the world, tells us that that way of life, that way of celebrating Christmas, is still possible today, despite everything.

My wish, then, is that the Child Jesus will awaken in us too, once again, the desire for good for each person, strengthen our trust in all, and sustain our action for peace, mercy and justice in the Holy Land and in the World.

Merry Christmas!

Bethlehem, December 24th, 2022

†Pierbattista Pizzaballa
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem