

**Homily for the Closing Mass of the *Simbang Gabi* Christmas Novena
December 22, 2015**

**Saint Katherine Drexel Parish - Sacred Heart Church
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this closing Mass of the *Simbang Gabi* Novena in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Our gathering here is a demonstration of our desire to ensure that, amidst all of the hustle and bustle of this time of year, we keep our attention fixed on the true meaning of Christmas, that God takes on flesh in the form of a humble child in order to offer us the greatest gift possible, our salvation.

The *Simbang Gabi* Novena is, above all, an expression of our devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. We seek to “join and accompany her, so to speak, as she awaits the birth of her Son.”¹ It is very fitting, therefore, that the Gospel for this Mass is that of the beautiful hymn of praise voiced by our Blessed Mother upon her arrival at the house of her cousin Elizabeth.

The *Magnificat*, as this hymn is traditionally called, is more than just an individual expression of gratitude for God’s favor shown to her in making her the Mother of God. Instead, her words speak on our behalf in

praise and thanksgiving for what God has done throughout the history of salvation.² His plan to reconcile sinful humanity back to Himself literally takes flesh in the womb of Mary. Seeing that Mary is the means by which God has chosen to make our salvation possible, it is very appropriate that she serves as our spokesperson in giving voice to the gratefulness that floods our hearts for this great gift.

After opening the hymn with words of praise for how the Lord has “done great things” (Luke 1:49), Mary goes through a sort of litany of how the Lord has chosen to act in showing favor to His people, showing favor to the lowly, the poor, and the humble. Mary herself embodies all of those characteristics, and in doing so, shows us how we must act in order to welcome Christ into our lives as well, especially as we prepare to welcome Him at Christmas.

I would like to reflect briefly on the first of these characteristics, which is expressed in the following way: “He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation” (Luke 1:50). The mention of the word ‘fear’ may initially catch us off guard. We tend to associate fear as a negative thing, as something to be avoided. When we apply this to the celebration of Christmas, it seems even more out of place. After all, how could the birth

of a little child create fear within us? Most of us, when we look upon the image of the Nativity in crèche scenes have just the opposite feeling, that of peace and joy. How could anybody be afraid of such a humble and innocent scene?

In the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we hear the account of King Herod's reaction when he heard from the magi that the long-awaited Messiah had been born. The evangelist writes that Herod "was greatly troubled" (Matthew 2:3) at the news. He was very much afraid of this newborn baby because it meant the potential loss of his power and authority. The truth was beginning to arise, and he didn't like what that might mean for his comfortable way of life, so he preferred to remain in darkness and sought to extinguish the light before it had a chance to expose him for the fraud that he was.

As we know, his plan to snuff out the light of truth was unsuccessful and that light has continued to spread. All of us are confronted with this light in our lives, being shown the error of our ways and the invitation to conversion. In the face of that invitation, many choose to react in a similar way to King Herod. Fear enters our hearts as the risk of having our actions exposed as being misdirected and opposed to righteousness and holiness.

The thought of having to give up a certain way of living can be frightening because it means uncertainty and the prospect of the loss of happiness. When faced with that fear, we can very easily turn our backs and run, doing everything we can to avoid conversion, preferring to stay in the darkness.

But this is not the type of fear that Mary speaks about in her hymn of praise. The fear of which she speaks is the fear of the Lord, which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The fear of the Lord is not about being afraid of God, what He might take from us or what He might do to us. Rather fear of the Lord invites us to see just how small we are in comparison to God. This should arouse within us a sense of reverence and awe at how good God is to us and how profound His love is for us.

As we look at the infant Jesus in the crib at Christmas, these are the feelings that we should have, wonder at how God comes to us in such an unexpected way, but in a way that has changed the world and will lead to His offering of His life to restore us to the relationship that had been lost through the sin of our first parents.

One might ask whether it is even really appropriate still to use the word 'fear' to describe this experience? In fact, many modern catechetical

resources prefer to list this gift of the Holy Spirit as “wonder and awe” or “reverence”, making little if any mention to the word ‘fear.’ Yet, I would say that it is still very appropriate to use the word ‘fear’ as a characteristic to be found among the disciples of Jesus.

In his catechesis on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis concluded his reflections by looking at the gift of the fear of the Lord. After speaking about fear in the true sense of being aware of God’s fatherly love for us, His beloved children, he adds the following words of caution:

Yet, we should take care, for the gift of God, the gift of fear of the Lord is also an “alarm” against the obstinacy of sin. When a person lives in evil, when one blasphemes against God, when one exploits others, when he tyrannizes them, when he lives only for money, for vanity, or power, or pride, then the holy fear of God sends us a warning: be careful!³

The fear of the Lord serves to keep us attentive to those ways in which we can stray from the awe-filled experience of resting in the loving embrace of God, our Father. Sin holds us back from experiencing the fullness of the joy and peace that the Lord wants to give to us, and so we must fear committing it in all circumstances. Even when we sin, however,

we are not out of the game, so to speak. The Father is still there, waiting to welcome us back through the great gift of His mercy.

We can see then, that mercy is at the heart of our understanding of the fear of the Lord. It is due to His mercy toward us that He has set in motion this remarkable plan to save us, a plan which we contemplate with wonder and awe, especially at Christmas. We fear being deprived of this experience of love through our sinfulness, but we also know that when we do fall into sin, His mercy is available to bring us back into that joy of being His beloved children. We need not fall into the fear of King Herod, for the experience of God's mercy and the invitation to conversion does not deprive us of anything, but gives us everything we need in order to be truly happy.

During this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Holy Father desires for the Church throughout the world to "rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them."⁴ A privileged way in which we experience this mercy is through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Many people have a great fear of this sacrament, but not the good type of fear that I have just described. The Holy Father addressed this very point two weeks ago when

he spoke about the Door of Mercy. He said the following:

In passing through the Holy Door, then, may we feel that we ourselves are part of this mystery of love, of tenderness. Let us set aside all fear and dread, for these do not befit men and women who are loved. Instead, let us experience the joy of encountering that grace which transforms all things.⁵

May we never be afraid to approach the Lord and His mercy in confession, but hasten to meet Him there and be freed from the burden of our sins.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ in just a few days, let us pray that we might more fully experience the fear of the Lord in all of its wonder and awe as we contemplate the gift of God's love and mercy for us in the Incarnation. May the Lord "find a dwelling place in our own souls and lives [and so] bring him to the world"⁶ through lives saturated with mercy.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cardinal Antonio Tagle, *Guidelines on the Celebration of Simbang Gabi in the Archdiocese of Manila*, 25 November 2013, §1.

² Pope Francis, *Homily for Marian Day*, 13 October 2013.

³ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 11 June 2014.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Homily for Holy Mass and Opening of the Holy Door*, 8 December 2015

⁵ Pope Francis, *Homily for Holy Mass and Opening of the Holy Door*, 8 December 2015.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 15 February 2006.