

**HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD -
CHRISTMAS MASS DURING THE DAY
Villa West, Sherman, Illinois
December 25, 2011**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I was a young boy growing up in the city of Chicago, a special day trip during summer vacation was when Mom and Dad drove my brothers and sisters and me to visit the farm of a family friend who lived “downstate,” as we called it. In reality it was only about 100 miles from Chicago, but it seemed like a far distant place. Driving home at night, I was amazed to see the clear sky filled with hundreds of thousands of stars, a sight which street lighting in the city obscured from our vision. With basic telescopes we can see hundreds of thousands more. In 2010, astronomers discovered a new solar system over 127 light years away. The distant sun, called HD 10180, is encircled by five or more planets.

There are a number of astounding facts here. Light travels at over 670 million miles per hour; a light year is how far light travels in one year. The distance concerned is mind-boggling, and way beyond our

everyday experience. Modern technology enables scientists to chart suns, stars and planets over this distance.

It is difficult even to begin to imagine the scale of our universe. Yet it is the belief of Christians (and other believers in God) that God made heaven and Earth, the whole universe. If the universe is this big, how big must God be? Faith concerns itself not with the physical origins of everything, the scientific theory, but with the spiritual truth that God is the creator of everything.

Today we hear the beginning of John's Gospel, in which the evangelist ponders the beginning of all things from the spiritual perspective. He begins on the grandest of scales: in the beginning, there was only God, and the Word was with God. Through this Word, everything came into being. Everything that had life, had life in God's Word. Like the science, the religious reality is hard for us to grasp.

Then John narrows his focus and comes down to Earth, writing about John the Baptist, the one who was to prepare the way for the Lord. Something of immense significance is about to happen. The same Word, through whom everything was made, was coming into the world. Even though the Word was there at the creation of the world, the world didn't recognize him.

Suddenly, we understand what John is describing. The Word was made flesh, he lived among us; John is writing about the incarnation of Jesus – the eternal, unknowable Word of God becomes flesh, and we can know him. John the Baptist then gives his testimony, confirming that Jesus is that eternal Word. Jesus, God’s only Son, nearest to the Father’s heart, has made God known to us.

This is a mystery of such magnitude that the discovery of vastly distant solar systems pales into insignificance beside it. This is the mystery we celebrate today – the unknowable God has made his dwelling in our midst, as one of us.

John is saying that Jesus is so much more than a wise man, a healer, a prophet or a worker of miracles: Jesus is God made man. We may not be able to grasp the science of the universe, but through the gift of faith we can grasp this amazing truth: from the simplest of us to the wisest, we can know that God has come very close, and we can know God, and we are destined, by responding to God’s grace, to share God’s eternity. We are caught somewhere between the greatness of the almighty, unknowable God, and the baby in the manger, who became human that we might know him.

The prophecies of Isaiah have set the scene for the incarnation of God's Word. Creation rejoices because the Lord is coming; the watchmen, those waiting for God, shout for joy together, for they see God face to face. All the ends of the Earth shall see the salvation of God. How does this fit in with John's observation that the world did not recognize the Lord when he came? The truth is that the story is not yet complete. The Lord whose birth we celebrate at Christmas will return.

This is why we celebrate Christmas, the feast of the incarnation of the Son of God. We recognize the Lord; we welcome the Lord into our hearts; we seek to live by his Spirit; we follow his law; we honor him - and, in so doing, we prepare ourselves and our world for the time he will come again, this time in glory. A practical Christmas prayer is to treat the Lord as the most welcome, honored guest we could imagine. We welcome him, wait on him, listen to him, talk freely with him, ask him for what we need, seek to do what he wants. And then we beg him to come again, and we will watch and wait for that day.

May God give us this grace. Amen.