

**Homily for the Closing Mass of the *Simbang Gabi* Christmas Novena
December 23, 2014**

**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. Just as we may have many last minute details to attend to in order to be ready for our various Christmas celebrations with our families, we have the opportunity to do some last minute spiritual preparations for this great feast that is almost upon us.

At first glance, the Gospel for today's Mass may seem a little out of place, as there is no mention of Jesus or His birth. Instead, we have the story of the birth and naming of John the Baptist. This Gospel passage, however, has much to say to us regarding our final preparations for celebrating the birth of the Messiah.

One of the early Fathers of the Church commented on the naming of the child as John instead of being named after his father, Zechariah. The author offers the following way of reading this passage:

Zachariah is by interpretation "remembering God," but John signifies

“pointing to.” Now “memory” relates to something absent, “pointing to,” to something present. But John was not about to set forth the memory of God as absent, but with his finger to point him out as present, saying, Behold the Lamb of God.¹

John the Baptist comes on the scene to shift the attention of the people of Israel from the anticipation of something yet to come to something that was now in their midst. No longer were the people to dwell simply on what God had done in the past and what He would do in the future, but to realize that He was acting in a very special and unique way here and now.

This is a helpful reminder to us as we celebrate Christmas each year. There can be a tendency to have Christmas be more about “remembering God” and what happened in the past by focusing only on the historical birth of Jesus over two-thousand years ago. When December 25th has passed, many people put their Christmas decorations away and shift their attention to something else, all but forgetting the significant event that just took place. This approach signifies an attitude towards Christmas that is largely focused on “remembering God” in the past and thus paying little, if any, attention to His presence among us here and now.

The Church proposes for us another way of approaching Christmas. Our celebration does not *end* on December 25th. Instead, Christmas Day marks the very *beginning* of our celebration. The message of the Incarnation remains ever before our eyes in the days that follow as an invitation to see how the birth of the Savior is not just something to be remembered and then packed up until next year.

Christmas should be a time to renew our awareness that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). His dwelling among us continues to this day and will continue “until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). As with John the Baptist, the Church is ever “pointing to” this fact that He is present among us, inviting us to welcome Him more completely into our lives so that we can enjoy the gift of His love and support at every stage of our journey throughout life.

Your presence here for this novena is a sign that hopefully you are already living with this awareness that Christ continues to dwell among us and that Christmas is more than just a happy memory to recall. It is helpful, nevertheless, to be reminded of this as we feel the increasing pressures of our culture to put an end to our celebration of Christmas as soon as it has begun.

We are also encouraged to imitate the example of John the Baptist in pointing out to those around us that God is indeed dwelling among us. We can do this in various ways, but one of the most effective and important ways of doing it is to bring Christ to those around us by being instruments of His love. Every encounter that we have with other people is an opportunity to share that love and so invite them to come to encounter Christ as one who is present and active, as opposed to being simply a nice memory of a good man who lived a long time ago.

We must constantly be aware that we also have the potential of being obstacles to His love in our interactions with others. We can very easily fall into the trap of being uncharitable with people that do not agree with us or who bother us in some way. It can be tempting to gossip about others or to make judgments about them. There are so many ways in which we can turn people away from God's love and we must make a concerted effort to avoid those ways of acting. Our gathering with our family and friends during the Christmas season is a perfect opportunity for us to witness to the joy of the Incarnation by giving the gift of His love to everybody we encounter, especially those with whom we find it hard to get along and those whom society so easily overlooks.

As we enter this final day of preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord, Christ prepares to come among us now in a remarkable way in the Eucharist. May we be thankful for this gift which we are about to receive from His love for us. May that love enflame our hearts to be more aware of His constant presence among us at every stage of our journey and how we are encouraged to share His love with each and every person that we encounter along that path.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Thomas Aquinas. (1843). *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke*. (J. H. Newman, Ed.) (Vol. 3, p. 52). Oxford: John Henry Parker.