

## 4th Sunday of Advent

Among the readings that bring Advent to a close are the final verses of Paul's Letter to the Romans. This monumental epistle surveys sin and grace, and the coming of Christ to save Jews and Gentiles alike. Today's few verses give glory forever and ever to the one whom Paul calls "the only wise God." God had a "mystery kept secret for long ages, but now manifested." To unveil that mystery Paul proclaims Jesus Christ and invites us to give glory to God for what we celebrate tomorrow: the mystery made manifest in human flesh.

Giving God glory is appropriate in all circumstances. This week the Vatican explained the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings in its declaration *Fiducia supplicans*. It says blessings "are ordered to the praise of God and the spiritual benefit of his people" (10). Some blessings ascend from earth to heaven: "Blessing in this sense amounts to praising, celebrating, and thanking God for his mercy and his faithfulness, for the wonders he has created, and for all that has come about by his will" (15). Other blessings descend from heaven to earth. The Book of Numbers gives a classic example of this: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (15). In the verses we heard in today's second reading, St. Paul concludes Romans with the first kind of blessing, from earth to heaven: To God be glory forever and ever. The Vatican's new declaration establishes two kinds of blessings invoked from heaven to earth: those within a formal liturgy and those that are more spontaneous.

Specifically it permits this more spontaneous blessing of heterosexual couples in irregular situations and of couples of the same sex (31). Our church holds that the sacrament of marriage only exists between a man and a woman committing to a lifelong partnership open to the gift of children. But Catholics in relationships that do not meet that standard are capable of receiving a blessing. That blessing is not to be confused with the blessing of matrimony. The Vatican explains, "God never turns away anyone who approaches him! Ultimately, a blessing offers people a means to increase their trust in God. The request for a blessing, thus, expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy, and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life, which is no small thing in the world in which we live" (33). Priests and deacons may therefore improvise words of blessing for couples in these categories on occasions such as "a visit to a shrine, a meeting with a priest, a prayer recited in a group, or during a pilgrimage" (40)—just not in a formal liturgy like a wedding. Bishop Johnston has noted, "The declaration makes allowance for ministers to bless people in these difficult situations that they may be assisted by God's grace along the path of conversion and salvation."

The Son of God came among us as a human being. The birth of Jesus revealed a mystery God had kept hidden so we might marvel at God's power. No one fully understands the mystery of human love or why it manifests itself wherever it does. But the presence of love gives us reasons for praising God, who showed his love when he bestowed on us the marvelous gift of human life, and honored it further by sending his Son as one like us. The only wise God deserves our blessing and praise.

Saturday, December 23, 2023