

December 25, 2006  
Midnight Mass  
Fr. Larry Richards

Good Morning! And it is morning! We heard in the gospel tonight “Glory to God in the Highest, and Peace to His People on Earth...” and we say it every week, except for Lent and Advent, and it begins with giving God glory! And then it comes and says to us “Peace to His People on Earth...” And the question that I have to ask you this Christmas season, is – do you have peace? Do you have real peace in your heart? You know, at the last Mass at 5:15 we were a packed house – some of the people I have known, some of my old kids – you know, the only time they go to Mass is Christmas Eve. And you know, one of the kids – it is a group of them, I am their Confirmation Sponsor, and I tried to get them to go to confession – and they didn’t – and we encouraged them to come up for a blessing and they did. But I looked into their eyes, and there was such sadness, and so un-peace – because of their struggles – because of their trying to do it their way. And so often, we come to Christ, so not at peace and the first thing that the God of the Universe wants to give you this Christmas is peace in your heart, and the example of this peace would be St. Joseph. I don’t know if I did, but I talked about it the other day a little bit – but I went and saw with Fr. Nick the movie “The Nativity.” And the movie focuses a lot on St. Joseph, and I think Joseph is the one who will lead us in peace this Christmas, about how to receive peace. And to do this, I think we have to do three things. The first thing we have to do is believe, the second thing we have to do is receive, and the third thing we have to do is give. We have to believe, we have to receive and we have to give. What do we have to do? We have to believe, we have to receive and we have to give. The first thing we have to do is believe. Good St. Joseph, as he was sitting there dealing with Mary and you know Mary is 14 years old, and she comes to Joseph, who she is supposed to be engaged to, they are already married, if you will, but it takes a year before it happens, and she come to him and she comes to her family – even good St. Anne is not prepared for what is to happen. Mary comes to them and she says “I’m going to have a baby and it is by God – I am still a virgin.” Now, think of that if your daughter comes to you and says “I’m going to have a baby – I am still a virgin – God is the dad.” You’re not going to be very happy! And neither would your fiancé! And here is Joseph, who has to struggle with this! We don’t deal with this! We just sit there and think of Christmas! But you know what a struggle it was for Joseph and the struggle we have every day of our life! I love Joseph – not only because he is the head of this Church – but because Joseph was like us in all things – including sin. He was like us in all things – he doubted, he struggled, he sinned. And yet, good Joseph came to believe – the way they do it in the movie is he says “the angel came to me and we will call Him Jesus, because He will save us from our sin.” Isn’t that glorious? That the first thing that Jesus wants to do for you and me tonight is save us from our sins! And anyone that sins – like we talked about in the beginning, is a slave to sin! And you can continue sin – hey, it’s your life! Or you can let your slavery end tonight – this Christmas and truly walk in freedom. But what you have to do is that you have to believe that the reason that Jesus Christ was born was to save you from your sin. You have to believe that!

You can't just sit there and say "oh, that's nice" you have to believe it! You have to believe that what He did – He did for you! Or this Christmas and you being here is a complete waste of time! If you don't believe that what Christmas is about is about the God of the universe becoming one with us, to free you and me from our sin. It's about freedom this Christmas. It's about freedom. But the second thing that has to happen is that we just can't believe it – we have to receive it! So what, Christ was born 2,000 years ago! So what! The question is was he born in your life and was he born in my life? That is the question! As I was saying tonight at the 5:15 Mass – my first experience, a conversion if you will – came at a Midnight Mass about 36 years ago – and my family wasn't very Christian, you know – not very Catholic – my father wasn't Catholic – my mother was Catholic but wasn't practicing – we weren't even Christmas and Easter Catholics! We didn't even go to church – I did, because I had the guilt of the nuns in me – but the reality was that one Midnight Mass I wanted to go and my mother let me – and I left my family – and my family – it was always interesting because this is when all the friends came around and they would drink...you know, no one does this anymore, but when I was a kid – you know, I would wake up Christmas morning and Santa put up the tree, and all the presents were under the tree – now we have everything up weeks and weeks ahead of time – but the most magical time was waking up on Christmas morning was to see the tree and all the decorations and everything happened in one night! But it was interesting in my family because when all of the friends and family were over – they would drink a little – so sometimes we would wake up Christmas morning and the tree would be sideways, huh? It would be like "boy, Santa, what happened?" But one night, Christmas Eve, my parents were around, and I asked if I could go to midnight Mass – and they let me. And I walked into the church of St. Ambrose on the north side of Pittsburgh, and it was a packed church. In those days, Midnight Mass was the only Mass you went to – they loved to go to Midnight Mass. And so, you couldn't move in the church. And I remember sneaking into the back vestibule, and it was so crowded – people were standing. And I snuck inside the door and they were singing Silent Night. And I remember that I was so touched by that reality! And I remember looking over at the crib and I said "Jesus, if you are real, I want you to be born in my life!" You see, if it was just something that happened 2,000 years ago for the world, it doesn't mean anything if He isn't born into your life and my life! So the second thing we have to do is we have to receive Him. We have to let Him be born in our lives tonight. And I will give you the opportunity today after Communion to do that! To really let this Christmas be a different type Christmas for you! That Christmas Eve Midnight Mass was the day my life was changed because I came to invite the God child Jesus into my heart and into my life! And so that Christmas was a life-changing Christmas! And throughout the years I asked Him to come in more and deeper, but it was that Midnight Mass where everything began for me, because it became real for me. One of the greatest scenes in the movie Nativity is Joseph is kneeling next to Mary as she is giving birth – and I'm sitting there thinking "how is this going to happen?" Because the tradition of the Church of course, says there was no pain, you know – there was pain in the movie, I'm here to tell you! Sorry!

And so, here is young Joseph, a young boy of 20 and he is petrified because there is Mary, in the midst of the cave and she is screaming a little bit – and as this 14 year old girl is pushing out the God of the Universe, Joseph is there, who believed in Mary, who believed this child would be God – received Jesus and it is so wonderful! I always like to say that Joseph was the first one to receive Communion – because he received the God of the Universe in his hands! And as he held Him – he didn't keep Him – he gave Him to Mary. What we have to do is give – that is what Christmas is all about. We focus on Christmas, and we give gifts and we do all these things because it is about giving – why? Because he is the first one that gave! And then he teaches us to give! And what we have to do is tonight is Jesus Christ's birthday – this is His birthday party – have you brought Him a gift? What is the gift you bring to Jesus Christ tonight? Did you bring Him anything? Oh, you bought for everybody else – I bought four single space pages of gifts – boy I bought all kinds of gifts for people this year. What will you give to Jesus this year? That is the true question at Mass this year. What have you brought Him? It's His birthday. Wouldn't it be sad if you came to celebrate His birthday at His party and didn't bring Him anything? You'd feel pretty bad. What have you brought Jesus tonight? What He wants tonight is you life! He wants you to hold nothing back from Him. After you receive Him - He wants you and me to look at Him and say “Jesus, the only thing I have tonight is my life, and Jesus, this Midnight, in the darkness – I give you all that I have – I give you my life.” And if you give back to Christ tonight, the gift of your life – you will receive eternal life – you are going to life forever! I hope you believe that because that is what this is all about – that in the midst of all the darkness we are going to live forever – in the midst of all the pain – we are going to live forever! In the midst of all the crap – sorry – we are going to live forever! And see, that should bring you and me great peace! Peace – that I can deal with anything, because I am going to live forever! Because Jesus Christ died for me – He was born for me – He took away my sin – I took Him into my life and I've given Him my life, and because of that – I don't have to be afraid. The angels said to the shepherds “be not afraid...” You and I don't have to be afraid if tonight before you and I leave here – we give Christ our life. So tonight – three things – you have to believe, you have to receive and you have to give. Please don't leave until you've done all three. May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen.