



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### Homily for Christmas 2003

**Paul Kidner, O.S.B.**

On this Christmas Day we rejoice that the period of waiting is over and the long-expected one is with us. That is the joyful message of Christmas. During the four weeks of the season of Advent we have been anxiously awaiting the coming of Christ our savior. The note of expectancy has been heightened each succeeding week. You may ask, "How can we expect something that has already happened?" Christ came once; he became incarnate and was born almost two thousand years ago; he will not be born a second time. It is certainly true that his physical birth as the son of Mary occurred once and will not be repeated in the same physical manner. Nevertheless, he is reborn in our hearts. Whenever you conceive in your heart a desire to cooperate with God's saving plan for yourself and for the world, whenever you carry out what you have conceived and resolved to do, you give birth to Christ. But this can happen every day. So what's special about Christmas? I find the example used by St. Athanasius in the fourth century helpful. He wrote: "When the figure of someone has been painted on wood, for example, and then effaced by external elements, we need the presence of the one whose portrait it was if we wish to restore his image on the same material. ... The most holy son of the Father has come into our land to renew man who had been made similar to him and to seek him out when he had been lost, pardoning his sins, as Scripture states: 'I have come to search out and save what was lost.'" We prayed at the beginning of this Mass: "Lord God, we praise you for creating man, and still more for restoring him in Christ." Athanasius sees God the Father as a portrait painter who, when the image has become faint, wishes to restore it to its full perfection and glory. God made us in his own likeness and impressed on us the image of his Son. A portrait painter needs a model to make a true image, or better still, the presence of the one whose portrait is being painted. That is why we celebrate the incarnation each year and relive the coming of God the Son into our world. We sinners need Christ to come again into our world each year so that his image on us, which has become tarnished by sin, may be touched up. For that restoration we need the presence of the one whose portrait we are. God took on our human nature in Jesus Christ so that we might share in his divine nature. We need to allow God to restore us to his likeness, to make us what we are intended to be. Christmas is not just the end of Advent, the end of the period of waiting; it's a new beginning. And since we are sinners who are weak and who fall, we need to start afresh each year.

This theme of our restoration in Christ is apparent in our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews as well. God sent his Son into the world and that Son is "the very imprint of his Father's being." The Son has made us children of God, heirs of the hope of eternal life, by his imprint on us.



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I suggested at the beginning of this Mass that besides receiving the gift of Christ our savior at Christmas, we offer ourselves as a gift to God. We would prefer to offer him a new and clean gift rather than a tarnished and dirty one.

St. John, in the gospel passage chosen for this day, uses the image of darkness and light to express this mysterious transformation. "The darkness that covered the earth has given way to the bright dawn of your Word made flesh." We are asking God to "make us a people of this light ... so that we may bring your life to a waiting world."

John proclaims: "In the beginning was the Word ... He was present to God in the beginning. ... Whatever came to be in him found life, life for the light of men. The light shines on in darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it." The astonishing claim of the Christian faith is that the enlightening Word of God has become one with us in the person of Jesus. We have become children of the light, sent out to bring God's life to a waiting world. That is our mission. That is the Christmas message, "the good news of great joy." Let us allow God to restore the image of his Son on us, and make a new beginning of the mission that he has entrusted to us this Christmas Day. +