



Advent Reflections 2011

Wednesday 21st December 2011

Why did Jesus, the Son of God, come and what happens from here?

A reflection on the Incarnation and the Parousia

Introduction

Advent from the Latin word *adventus* means "coming".

The first coming, namely the birth of Jesus in a stable at Bethlehem, has already taken place. This is the Incarnation – God becoming Man. This is what we celebrate at Christmas.

We await the second Advent, the second coming of Jesus Christ, which will also signal the end of the world. This is what we call the Parousia.

This talk will reflect on both events in the light of the salvation of mankind.

The Fall of Man

In order to explain the Incarnation and to understand the Parousia we have to start with the fall of man.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us this:

386 Sin is present in human history; any attempt to ignore it or to give this dark reality other names would be futile.

390 The account of the fall in *Genesis 3* uses **figurative language**, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man*.²⁶⁴ Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents.²⁶⁵ [this is what we call original sin]

Man's First Sin

397 Man, **tempted by the devil**, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of.²⁷⁸ All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.

398 In that sin man *preferred* himself to God and by that very act scorned him. He chose himself over and against God.

399 Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness.²⁸⁰ They become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image.

400 The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination.²⁸² Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man.²⁸³ Because of man, creation is now subject "to its bondage to decay".²⁸⁴ Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will "return to the ground",²⁸⁵ for out of it he was taken. *Death makes its entrance into human history.*²⁸⁶

401 After that first sin, the world is virtually inundated by sin.....

The consequences of Adam's sin for humanity

402 All men are implicated in Adam's sin, as St. Paul affirms: "By one man's disobedience many (that is, all men) were made sinners": "sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."²⁸⁹

403 Following St. Paul, the Church has always taught that the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination towards evil and death cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam's sin and the fact that he has transmitted to us a sin with which we are all born afflicted, a sin which is the "death of the soul".²⁹¹ Because of this certainty of faith, the Church baptizes for the remission of sins even tiny infants who have not committed personal sin.²⁹²

404 How did the sin of Adam become the sin of all his descendants? The whole human race is in Adam "as one body of one man".²⁹³ By this "unity of the human race" all men are implicated in Adam's sin, as all are implicated in Christ's justice. Still, **the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand.** But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a *personal sin*, but this sin affected the *human nature* that they would then transmit *in a fallen state*.²⁹⁴ It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. And that is why original sin is called "sin" only in an analogical sense: **it is a sin "contracted" and not "committed" - a state and not an act.**

405 Although it is proper to each individual,²⁹⁵ original sin **DOES NOT have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants.** It is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it, subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin - an inclination to evil that is called "concupiscence". **Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin and turns a man back towards God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle.**

In relation to Baptism the Catechism says this:

VI. THE NECESSITY OF BAPTISM

1257 The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation.⁶⁰ He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them.⁶¹ Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament.⁶² **The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude;** this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are "reborn of water and the Spirit." God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.

A hard battle. . .

407 ...By our first parents' sin, the devil has acquired a certain domination over man, even though man remains free. Original sin entails "captivity under the power of him who thenceforth had the power of death, that is, the devil".²⁹⁸ Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action²⁹⁹ and morals.

408 The consequences of original sin and of all men's personal sins put the world as a whole in the sinful condition aptly described in St. John's expression, "the sin of the world".³⁰⁰ This expression can also refer to the negative influence exerted on people by communal situations and social structures that are the fruit of men's sins.³⁰¹

The Revelation of Salvation

IV. "YOU DID NOT ABANDON HIM TO THE POWER OF DEATH"

However...

410 After his fall, man was not abandoned by God. On the contrary, God calls him and in a mysterious way heralds the coming victory over evil and his restoration from his fall.³⁰⁴

"After the unity of the human race was shattered by sin God at once sought to save humanity part by part." (CCC 56)

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The following prayer outlines how God did this, using his Chosen People the Jews:

Prayer: Thank you God...

So, God gradually revealed himself through his Chosen People. Part of this revelation is the promise of a Messiah, one who would come to save us all. This gradual revelation we find in the books of the Old Testament starting with what is called the Protoevangelium in Genesis.

Genesis 3:14-15:

14 So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.

15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring[a] and hers; he will crush[b] your head, and you will strike his heel."

This Saviour as we know and believe was the **Incarnation** of the Word made flesh - Jesus of Nazareth - which we can read about in the New Testament.

During a General Audience in December 1986 Pope John Paul II gave a talk on the Protoevangelium (which means before the Gospel):

In the fourth Eucharistic Prayer (Canon IV) the Church addresses God in the following words: *"Father, we proclaim your greatness: all your actions show your wisdom and love. You formed man in your own likeness and set him over the whole world to serve you, his creator, and to rule over all creatures. Even when in disobedience he rejected your friendship you did not abandon him to the power of death...."*

In harmony with the truth expressed in this prayer of the Church, we [note] the complex content of the words of Genesis 3, which contain God's response to the first human sin. That text speaks of the combat against "the powers of evil" in which humanity has been involved from the beginning of its history. At the same time, however, it assures us that God does not abandon man to himself, he does not leave him "in the power of death," reduced to a "slave of sin" (cf. Rom 6:17). Accordingly,

God tells the serpent who has tempted the woman: "I will make you enemies of each other; you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel" (Gen 3:15).

These words of Genesis are called the Protoevangelium or the first announcement of the Messiah Redeemer. They reveal God's salvific plan in regard to the human race which after original sin is found in the fallen state which we know. They indicate especially the central event in God's plan of salvation. It is the same event referred to in the fourth Eucharistic Prayer, already quoted, when we turn to God with this profession of faith: *"Father, you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. He was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, a man like us in all things but sin."*

The statement of Genesis 3 is called the "Protoevangelium" because it has received its confirmation and fulfillment only in the revelation of the new covenant which is the Gospel of Christ. In the old covenant this announcement was constantly re-evoked in different ways, in the rites, symbolisms, prayers, prophecies, and in the history of Israel as the "people of God" reaching out toward a messianic goal. But it was always under the veil of the imperfect and provisional faith of the Old Testament. When the announcement will be fulfilled in Christ there will be the full revelation of the messianic and trinitarian content implicit in the monotheism of Israel. The New Testament will then lead to the discovery of the full meaning of the writings of the Old Testament, according to the famous saying of St. Augustine: "In the Old Testament the New lies hidden, and in the New the Old lies open" [1] .

The analysis of the "protoevangelium" informs us, by means of the announcement and promise contained in it, that God has not abandoned the human race to the power of sin and death. He wished to rescue and save it. **He did so in his own way**, according to the measure of his transcendent holiness, and at the same time according to a self-effacement such as only a God of love could display.

The words of the "protoevangelium" express this saving self-effacement when they announce the struggle ("I will put enmity") between him who represents "the powers of evil" and the other whom Genesis calls "the offspring of the woman." It is a struggle which will end with the victory of Christ! ("He shall bruise your head.") However, this will be the victory bought at the price of the sacrifice of the cross ("and you shall bruise his heel.") The mystery of iniquity is dispelled by the "mystery of mercy." It is precisely the sacrifice of the cross that helps us to penetrate into the essence of sin, enabling us to understand something of its dark mystery. In a particular way St. Paul is our guide when he wrote in the Letter to the Romans: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:18). "One man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Rom 5:18).

In the "protoevangelium," in a certain sense, the Christ is announced for the first time as "the new Adam" (cf. 1 Cor 15:45). Indeed, his victory over sin obtained through "obedience unto the death of the cross" (cf. Phil 2:8), will imply such an abundance of pardon and of saving grace as to overcome immeasurably the evil of the first sin and of all the sins of the human race. St. Paul again writes: "If many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many" (Rom 5:15).

Moreover, solely on the basis of the "protoevangelium," it can be deduced that in regard to the destiny of fallen man (*status naturae lapsae*) there is already introduced the prospect of future redemption (*status naturae redemptae*).

The first response of the Lord God to man's sin, contained in Genesis 3, provides us from the beginning with a knowledge of God as infinitely just and at the same time infinitely merciful. From

that first announcement he is manifested as that God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16); who "sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10); who "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Rom 8:32).

Thus we have the certainty that God, who in his transcendent holiness abhors sin, justly punishes the sinner. But at the same time in his ineffable mercy he embraces him in his saving love. The "protoevangelium" already announced this saving victory of good over evil, which will be manifested in the Gospel through the paschal mystery of Christ crucified and risen.

It is to be noted that in the words of Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity," the woman is placed in the first place in a certain sense: "I will put enmity between you and the woman." Not: "between you and the man," but precisely "between you and the woman." Commentators from the earliest times emphasize that we have here an important parallelism. The tempter "the ancient serpent" according to Genesis 3:4, first addressed the woman, and through her obtained his victory. In his turn the Lord God, in announcing the Redeemer, makes the woman the first "enemy" of the prince of darkness. In a certain sense, she should be the first beneficiary of the definitive covenant, in which the powers of evil will be overcome by the Messiah, her Son ("her offspring").

This I repeat is an extremely significant detail, if we bear in mind that in the history of the covenant God first of all addresses men (Noah, Abraham, Moses). In this case the precedence appears to belong to the woman, naturally in consideration of her descendant, Christ. Many Fathers and Doctors of the Church see in the woman announced in the "protoevangelium" the Mother of Christ, Mary. She is also the one who first shares in that victory over sin won by Christ. She is free from original sin and from every other sin, as emphasized by the Council of Trent in line with tradition (cf. DS 1516; 1572). As regards original sin in particular, Pius IX solemnly defined it by proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (cf. DS 2803).

Not a few ancient Fathers, as the Second Vatican Council says (cf. LG 56), in their preaching present Mary, the Mother of Christ, as the new Eve (just as Christ is the new Adam, according to St. Paul). Mary takes the place and is the opposite of Eve, who is "the mother of all the living" (Gen 3:20), but also the cause, along with Adam, of the universal fall into sin. Mary is for all the "cause of salvation" by her obedience in cooperating with Christ in our redemption [2].

The Holy Father concludes by quoting *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church):

"The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by the acceptance of her who was predestined to be the mother of his Son, so that just as a woman contributed to death, so also a woman should contribute to life. That is true in outstanding fashion of the mother of Jesus, who gave to the world him who is Life itself and who renews all things, and who was enriched by God with the gifts which befit such a role. It is no wonder therefore that the usage prevailed among the Fathers whereby they called the mother of God entirely holy and free from all stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature. Adorned from the first instant of her conception with the radiance of an entirely unique holiness, the Virgin of Nazareth is greeted, on God's command, by an angel messenger as 'full of grace,' and to the heavenly messenger she replies: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word.' Thus Mary, a daughter of Adam, consenting to the divine Word, became the mother of Jesus, the one and only Mediator. Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under him and with him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption" (LG 56).

Thus in Mary and through Mary the situation of humanity and of the world has been reversed, and they have in some way re-entered the splendor of the morning of creation.

[1] Â cf. *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, II, 73

[2] Â cf. Irenaeus, Adv. Haereses, II, 22, 4

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The Catechism says: "Christ the Son of God made man, is the Father's one perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything..." (CCC 65)

Jesus then is the fulfilment of God's revelation of himself. There will be no further public revelation until the end of the World.

We know, however, private revelation will continue from time to time, such as the appearance of Jesus' Mother Mary at Lourdes and to the children of Fatima.

So why did Jesus, the Son of God, come?

Could God have saved us in another way? Of course he could. However, the Incarnation is the mechanism he chose.

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The Catechism outlines reasons why the Word became flesh:

457 The Word became flesh for us **in order to save us by reconciling us with God**, who "loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation [to atone, reparation] for our sins": "the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world", and "he was revealed to take away sins".⁷⁰

458 The Word became flesh **so that thus we might know God's love**: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him."⁷² "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁷³

459 The Word became flesh **to be our model of holiness**: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."⁷⁴ On the mountain of the Transfiguration, the Father commands: "Listen to him!"⁷⁵ Jesus is the model for the Beatitudes and the norm of the new law: "Love one another as I have loved you."⁷⁶ This love implies an effective offering of oneself, after his example.⁷⁷

460 The Word became flesh to make us **"partakers of the divine nature"**:⁷⁸ "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God."⁷⁹ "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God."⁸⁰ "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."⁸¹

463 Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God."⁸⁵ Such is the joyous conviction of the Church from her beginning whenever she sings "the mystery of our religion": "He was manifested in the flesh."⁸⁶

III. TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN

464 The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused

mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man.

Thus, Christ has a divine and human nature united in His one Person — this union is called the *Hypostatic Union*. This union will never be dissolved, and remains so today.

Closing the Chasm

One of the reasons God became man was in order to save us by reconciling us with God. **The way in which this was achieved was by his dying** on a cross and rising to new life (what we call the Resurrection) 3 days later. By his birth, death, and resurrection the rift between God and Man was healed.

How was the rift healed by these events? Again we do not fully know. They can only be matters of theological conjecture and speculation. All we can say is - it was.

By his life and teaching Jesus showed us how we can fully live our lives in the likeness and image of God, and thereby attain Eternal Life after the death of our mortal bodies.

As quoted in the Catechism, in 360AD St Athanasius said: “God became human so that humans could become more like God.” (On the Incarnation 54:3, PG 25:192B). A favourite metaphor of Eastern Catholicism is that Jesus Christ restores in us the divine image that was tarnished by Original Sin, enabling people to live into their divine potential.

So what happens next?

So, here we are in 20011. What happen from here? In short, what happens next is the end of the world, what we refer to as the Parousia.

Parousia is an ancient Greek word meaning presence, arrival, or official visit. Catholic Christians have always believed that Jesus Christ would come back to close the current period of human history in earth. The time when Jesus will return is given many names:

- the Day of the Lord
- the Parousia
- the End Times
- the Second Coming (Advent) of Christ
- the Epiphany

The Bible describes the events of Jesus' return in apocalyptic images:

Mark 13:26-27

And then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather (his) elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky.

Matthew 16:27

For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.

Acts 1:11

They (two men dressed in white) said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words.

The Parousia will be unmistakable because it will be accompanied by unprecedented signs:

Matthew 24:27

For just as lightning comes from the east and is seen as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Some signs are general events concerning the evangelization of the world:

Matthew 24:14

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come.

Other signs are more proximate. Mark (Chapter 13), Matthew (Chapter 24), and Luke (Chapter 21) all describe the unmistakable signs with apocalyptic images:

2 Timothy 4:1-2

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word ...

2 Timothy 3:1-5

But understand this: there will be terrifying times in the last days. People will be self-centred and lovers of money, proud, haughty, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, irreligious, callous, implacable, slanderous, licentious, brutal, hating what is good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, as they make a pretence of religion but deny its power. Reject them.

No one knows exactly when this will occur:

Mark 13:32

(Jesus began his discourse ...) "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

1 Thessalonians 5:2

For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night.

2 Peter 3:10

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.

The Catholic Church teaches that we should avoid pointless speculations about the time, the details of the signs, the nature of the difficulties, etc. The Church focuses instead on the need for living the Gospel so as to be prepared for the Parousia whenever it happens:

Mark 13:33,35-37

(Jesus began his discourse ...) "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. ... Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

1 Peter 1:13-16

Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, live soberly, and set your hopes completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Like obedient children, do not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance but, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, "Be holy because I (am) holy."

Timetable

A general Parousia timetable has been determined, which is the subject of one of my other talks.

The Catechism provides us with a general order of events at the End [CCC 673-677]. Chronologically they are:

- i. the full number of the Gentiles come into the Church
- ii. the "full inclusion of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of the full number of the Gentiles" (#ii will follow quickly on in the wake of #i)
- iii. a final trial of the Church "in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth." The supreme deception is that of the Antichrist.
- iv. Christ's victory over this final unleashing of evil through a cosmic upheaval of this passing world and the Last Judgment.

As Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Gregory XVI) once pointed out (in the context of the message of Fátima), we are not at the end of the world. In fact, the Second Coming (understood as the physical return of Christ) cannot occur until the full number of the Gentiles are converted, followed by "all Israel."

In his book *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1988), Cardinal Ratzinger also says: "Instead of trying to predict the future, we should live the reality of the presence of Christ in the Church and in the Eucharist, "until that time when the Lord himself gives to it that final reality which meanwhile can be sought only in image." (pg. 204)

Our Mission Today

The Christians of the Early Church were known as the Easter people, and today we share and are proud to share the same title.

Our post-resurrection mission is three fold:

1. To preach the Good News of Salvation to the ends of the world and to see that all who can be baptised are “reborn of water and the spirit”..
2. To live good and holy lives; living in the expectation of and preparation for the Parousia. Let us remember, however, our Salvation is not guaranteed just because we have been Baptised. In fact ours is the greater burden and responsibility as we are in possession of the truth.
3. To continue to study and interpret the Revelation of and about God handed down to us in Holy Scripture, taking into account the “...living tradition of the whole Church”, “...along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.” (Dei Verbum, Ch. 12)

In his Message for Lent in 2007 Benedict XVI wrote about our responsibility to communicate this message to others: Jesus said: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12: 32). The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome his love and allow ourselves to be drawn to him. Accepting his love, however, is not enough. We need to respond to such love and devote ourselves to communicating it to others. Christ "draws me to himself" in order to unite himself to me, so that I learn to love the brothers with his own love.

This Advent & Christmastide let us make a renewed effort to pass on this extraordinary message of hope and salvation for the world, to the world.

Concluding Prayer

Let us conclude with a prayer as we acknowledge the Blessed Sacrament in our presence – God truly present with us in the accidental form of bread. This is a most wonderful legacy of the Incarnation given to us by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper.

Our prayer was written by John Henry Newman, who was declared Blessed by Benedict XVI during his visit to England & Scotland in 2010:

I adore Thee, O my Saviour, present here as God and man, in soul and body, in true flesh and blood.

I acknowledge and confess that I kneel before that Sacred Humanity, which was conceived in Mary's womb and lay in Mary's bosom; which grew up to man's estate, and by the Sea of Galilee called the Twelve, wrought miracles, and spoke words of wisdom and peace; which in due season hung on the cross, lay in the tomb, rose from the dead, and now reigns in heaven.

I praise, and bless, and give myself wholly to Him, Who is the true Bread of my soul, and my everlasting joy.

We ask this through Christ Our Lord. AMEN

Have a joyful, peaceful, and holy Christmas.

Blessing by Fr Roy.