

My Brothers and Sisters,

The parish staff and I want to wish all of you a most blessed and happy Christmas. In a special way, we want to welcome all of our visitors, especially those who are returning home to Little Flower to celebrate this Christmas Liturgy with us.

Most of us have spent a great deal of time looking for just the right gifts for family and friends, which we then wrapped with care. The gifts we give and the gifts we receive mean so much to us not because of the wrapping and, most of the time, not even because of the gift contained inside. What means so much to us is the love or friendship they symbolize and embody.

Tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago. Jesus was and is God's greatest gift to us. When we see tiny babies, most of us are in awe at their beauty and their perfection. The infant Jesus was the wrapping. The gift, however, was much greater than the wrapping. The gift was God's own Son. This gift was the embodiment of God's love for us. As Jesus said in John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....*" God not only loved us. He loved us superabundantly: "*For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.*" "*Of his fullness we have all had a share—love following upon love*" [Jn. 1:16; NAB, 1970].

Some of our best Christmas gifts are surprises. In October Pope Francis gave a homily titled the "The God of Surprises."¹ The whole of salvation history is filled with God's surprises to his people. According to Pope Francis, Jesus himself often did surprising things like visiting the homes of tax collectors and sinners and eating with them. We can only imagine Mary's surprise when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and her even greater surprise when the angel Gabriel told her that she was to be the mother of God's own Son.

What could be more surprising than God sending his Son to become one of us, to live among us, and then to die for us. Jesus was not only God's greatest gift, but also God's biggest surprise! Imagine the shepherds' surprise when the angel of the Lord appeared to them in the night and the glory of the Lord appeared around them. Imagine their surprise at the message of the angel, "*Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.*" Imagine their surprise when "*suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*"

My brothers and sisters, at his first press conference in Indianapolis, Archbishop Tobin defined faith as the capacity to be surprised by God.² As we celebrate Christmas 2014, are we still able and willing to be surprised by God?

Oh, what a gift,
What a wonderful gift;
Who can tell the wonders of the Lord?
Let us open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts;
It is Christ the Lord; it is he!³

¹Pope Francis, "The God of Surprises," morning meditation in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Monday, 13 October 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2014/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20141013_the-god-of-surprises.html.

²Archbishop Joseph Tobin, Press Conference, October 18, 2012, Sts. Peter & Paul Cathedral, 11:00-11:08 minutes, <http://www.archindy.org/archbishop/conference.html>.

³Pat Uhl & Michael Gilligan, "Canticle of the Gift," *The Johannine Hymnal*, (Oak Park, Illinois: American Catholic Press, 1970).