"Welcome"

Christmas Homily - December 25, 2002
by Fr. Michael Dibble

I've been told that most of the people who live in the parish come to the masses on Christmas Eve, so, that most of you will be visitors. So, I say "Welcome.... welcome.... welcome...." Also, the people who come here every Sunday have heard many of the things that I am about to say. So, welcome to you who have to listen for the first time.

"Welcome" is the key word, and I want you to pretend with me that I have spread out here on this lectern seven Christmas cards. At first, I had twelve, then cut it down to ten, but .... only seven today. And there were actually such seven cards. I have them at home. I am going to give you the jist of each of these Christmas cards that came to me over a period of forty years, because I want to say "Welcome" to the people who wrote them. They might not be THE seven best Christmas cards I ever got, but on Christmas, I always think of these seven people. And so, I would like to say "Welcome" to you as I say "Welcome" to them.

The first Christmas card is from a student (As people here know, and are sick of hearing, I used to be a teacher, in high school and college, for thirty years.) And, in high school, there was often a student who would come up at home room, on Monday morning, because I had homeroom and then first period. This or that student would say, (over a period of thirty years, now and then) "I got to Mass yesterday," (This, I'll never forget was Christmas 1969, and this guy came up, a senior.) "...I went to Mass yesterday, same old thing. I don't get nothing out of it." (Oh! The number of times I have heard that... from an adolescent... "I don't get anything out of it.") Well, then he wandered away from the Church, as many of your kids do... for awhile... twenty years, not because he was mad at the Church or had doubts about the infallability of the Pope or.... as he said in the Christmas card that I got one Christmas, "I was just lazy and indifferent and I was away about twenty years and I went to Confession before Christmas and the only thing the priest said to me (This was the old days, the dark box...) was "Welcome back!" And he underlined that in the Christmas card to me. "And then I went to Mass with my parents on Christmas, same old thing.... Jesus talking in the Gospels, Holy Communion, surrounded by other believers.... same old thing... Thank God!" Love that Christmas card, still have it.... "Same old thing... Thank God!" And the priest said, "Welcome home!" So, that is a card I treasure.

Number two - This is from a student who went on to an Ivy League College, and, even though he had a good Catholic education, he told me once that he wondered if the Gospels were all, and he said this, "I wonder if the Gospels are all just kind of made up, you know, made up, beautiful stories by these four guys, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but basically made up!"

We kept teaching him that they were not made up, that the historicity and validity of the gospels are based.... (I mean no life has been researched more than Jesus'. That he did exist, historians agree. Nobody disputes it any more.) But when he got to this Ivy League College, he felt he was hearing it new. And I will never forget this Christmas card. I am rushing this because it was four pages, but "I found out that there was somebody else who talked about Jesus Christ, Josephus in his book 'Testamonium Flaviano.' " There is such a book. It was written by a man named Josephus, who lived in Rome at the time that Jesus lived in Jerusalem, and Josephus exchanged letters. He was a super bright Jewish scholar, who taught Roman patrician children, brilliant Jewish scholar who lived at the same time, but in Rome. And he wrote a couple of books and he mentioned, this boy from the Ivy League College, "I was delighted to find out that someone else, also Tacitus and Switonius, talk about Jesus. And this man Josephus never met Jesus, but we have his records, his books and his letters, back and forth, that Jesus did startling deeds," (what we call miracles) "that he was a great teacher, he had a large following, and then he was betrayed and died. And then, towards the end of Josephus'es life, he got annoyed because some of the Pharisees who had condemned Jesus to death, were mad at Him, later became followers of Jesus because they say they'd seen Him, alive!!!" I'll never forget the guy. He had three exclamation points. "So, I suppose," he said in the letter, "it wasn't just made up. JOSEPHUS talks about Jesus...." Oh.... good! Welcome back from doubt. We are not cows in Kansas, contentedly chewing cud. We have brains past the level of a pancake. Of course we have doubt. And the more educated we are, the more research we want to do. Anyhow, for this one particular boy, Josephus has convinced him it's true! Then he wrote, "P.S. Merry Christmas."

The third is from a boy, young man, who was once a student of mine, but at Christmas time, this particular year, he was in boot camp, Marine boot camp. And some nun in the Catholic High School where he had studied had given him a little card, before he went to boot camp. And the card had the words, "This too shall pass." And she gave him what is called St. Theresa's book mark. This was written by St. Theresa of Avila in the sixteenth century. And he tacked the two things on the locker at boot camp. He re-wrote them for me at Christmas. He sent me a Christmas card from boot camp, Marines. You probably know this beautiful passage of Theresa of Avila. She wrote it in jail. (Some of our best people have been, great saints, such as St. Paul, St. Theresa, incarcerated!) St. Theresa wrote, and he put it on the locker:

> Let nothing disturb thee.
> Let nothing afright thee.
> All things are passing,
> God alone lasting.
> Let nothing disturb thee.
> Let nothing afright thee.

Even this shall pass.... Now he is married and has a couple of kids and I am sure his kids that are now teenagers are saying to him, "Oh, do I have to go to church?"

The fourth, from an old priest.... And people of this parish have heard me talk about this man a lot. He was a businessman who had children. The children grew up, got married. His wife died. And in his late middle age, he became a priest. Used to be a big executive, and he was on the Upper East Side when I was stationed in New York City. And I would go see him for spiritual direction. He sent me Christmas cards addressed, "Dear Ebenezer." He felt my attitude toward Christmas was not buoyant enough, and he was right! Before he died, and he died just before I came out here to California to work, thank God, in this parish.... he wrote, "Dear Ebenezer" and it was a gift. I opened it (This was several years ago really.).... The New American Bible. I remember calling him up, "New American Bible? I want a Catholic Bible." He said, "It IS a Catholic Bible, It is the best translation... " I love acronyms. As a teacher, I used to have acronyms so I could remember the lecture, so I wouldn't just read at kids. And he said the acronym is "nab, N-A-B, New American Bible." I have it on my desk. I left it on the desk when I came here this morning. The best translation, Catholic scholars of the Bible, nab, New American Bible. And then, when he was dying, (He was able to die at home, in the rectory.) and I would sit by his bed and talk. I said, "What are some of the things that you regret..." He said, "Two things. I wish I had concentrated more on the four Gospels in the New American Bible, reading about Jesus. And I wish I hadn't spent so much spiritual energy worrying about what people thought about me." And then, just before he died, he gave me this formula, which perhaps you have all heard, but it was the first time I had heard it. "When you pray," he said, "God always answers. God says 'yes' or 'not yet' or 'If you wait and trust me, I have something better.' " Now, I am sixty-eight years old. I have been a priest forty-two years. It's absolutely true. Every prayer is answered. It's either "yes" or "not yet" or "If you wait and trust me, I have something better planned than what you are asking for." He is one of the first people I want to see in my first Christmas in Paradise.

Number five, is a young woman whom I had as a senior in high school. And she was in New York at Christmas time for massive surgery, painful massive breast surgery. When I went to see her in the hospital, she was sitting bolt upright, and that was painful for her. I walked in. (It wasn't Christmas Day, but the Christmas season.) Her name is Cara. (I have checked with these people. I can use their names.) She sat bolt upright. She said, "I am so glaaad" ("Glad" had like six a's in it.) "that we have a God who had flesh and bone and blood and knew what hurts. That's Christmas." Wow! What a definition. I am so glad that we (Catholics, Christians, believers) have a God with flesh and bone and blood and knows what it is to hurt. That's the Incarnation. If we were still looking up at some kind of a Greek god with a long beard and a grouchy expression, I mean let's go home and have spiked eggnog! But then He decided to become a human being, and knows what hurts. That's Christmas, a definition from a young lady in physical pain but

great, great spirit.

Number six.... This is from a convert on the Upper East Side. (I love boasting that I was stationed on the Upper East Side after I left teaching, very posh, movie stars and athletes at Mass.) This fellow was British, and he is a new convert. He sent me a little picture.... He's a new convert so his intensity, his focus, like a lot of converts, is so much on things that I began to take for granted, like Christmas. And this is a picture.... His description in the letter of this statue of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which only costs $525: "And Joseph," as he writes in his Christmas card, "has a haircut by Vidal Sassoon. He has been dressed by Armani. The Blessed Mother has been dressed by Givenchy, and is floating in on a cloud of Chanel #5. You cannot quite see the Baby Jesus..." (But that makes sense in this statue!) ....You cannot quite see the Baby Jesus!! When I was instructing him to become a Catholic, he said, "Oh, I love priestcraft!" Don't you love it? You know, like arts and crafts, "I love priestcraft!" Meaning talking about Jesus; that is "priestcraft" to this British convert. And in his last Christmas card, he said, "I cahn't ever quite understand Holy Communion, that Jesus Christ is present in the wafer. But I know that it's not just a cracker, that Jesus Himself is there." .... He is even hammy-er than I am.

And number 7, and the last one is, out here on the West Coast, we have what is called "vigils." On the East Coast, it is called a "wake," you know, when you go the night before the funeral mass for someone who has died. Well, here, they call it a "vigil." And I have had a few vigils. One woman said to me quite recently, "I am so glad that there is a re-birth in heaven, that that is one of Jesus' basic promises. One of the reasons he came as a baby on Christmas was to grow up and say "We shall live forever," that we shall see each other in the face, not some sort of cosmic bubble in some vast consciousness. We shall see each other in the face. That is one of the things Jesus came to teach. And I thought (My mom died when I was six.) I will see her in the face. We will see people you loved, people who died this year. We will see them in the face. Christ based His entire teaching and the preaching about it was the Resurrection of the Body. And what will you say when you meet people? "Hello!" or "At last!" And I will say to my own father, "I didn't take you for granted. Please know I should have said a lot of things I didn't. I can say them now. I didn't take your love for granted." We shall see each other in the face. I'll run into a few of you and you will say, "Do you know how long you went on that morning.... "

Anyhow, the kid who is now grown up, came back to Confession and the priest said, "Welcome back!" And the guy writes in the Christmas card, "I went to Mass, same old thing, Jesus talking in the Gospels, and Holy Communion, and surrounded by other believers... the same old thing. Thank God!"