

**HOMILY BY ADAM CARDINAL MAIDA  
CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS  
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL  
DECEMBER 25, 2007**

My brother Bishops and Clergy, Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

In keeping with a beautiful tradition of the Church, we gather here at this midnight hour, a time between yesterday and tomorrow, to celebrate the joyful memory of Christ's first coming and to affirm our belief that one day He will come again in glory.

Why midnight? There are at least two scriptural and theological reasons. First, the Book of Wisdom, chapter 18, verses 14-15, proclaims: *"When peaceful stillness compassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word leapt down from heaven's royal throne ..."* Secondly, in one of His parables, when Jesus described His return in glory, He identified Himself as a bridegroom arriving at midnight: those who are alert and ready will go in with Him to the banquet of eternal life while those who have fallen asleep remain outside. Midnight is the hour we would ordinarily least expect to receive a visitor, much less the Lord Himself!

Whatever brought us here – whether spiritual reasons or merely family custom – we can certainly identify with the Holy Family, the shepherds and the angels. It is in the middle of the night, in times of darkness, that we best appreciate the splendor of God's light. On our way here, undoubtedly many of us were conscious of the poor and the homeless wandering the streets this very hour, hungry and lost, similar to the Holy Family looking for a warm resting place for the birth of Jesus. In some sense, no matter how financially secure we may be, we are all homeless and searching, pilgrims on our way to another kingdom, God's people watching and waiting for the dawn of life eternal.

In this year of 2007, we cannot help but be conscious of the thousands of people in our metro area and millions throughout the world who are struggling just to keep a roof over their heads. So many homes are in foreclosure and people worry about their jobs, the well-being of their families, and whether they will still enjoy retirement income. We live in times overshadowed by anxieties of all kinds, many things about which we have little control. We feel very vulnerable to the power of nature, the decisions of corporations, and the financial jitters of a global economy.

It is important for us to remember that the first Christmas was far from idyllic. The Jewish people were under the control of a repressive Roman regime and had little freedom. They found hope and consolation in their faith, in the memory of how the Lord had cared for them as individuals and as His people throughout the centuries. Like ourselves, based on that faith, they continued to move forward into an uncertain future, watching and waiting for the promised Messiah.

As St. Luke tells the story of the Messiah's birth in tonight's Gospel, he alludes to the political powers of the day – the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, and Quirinius, the governor of Syria. St. Luke sets the birth of the Lord against the given historical context, but yet, he also wants us to appreciate the fact that Christ's birth was to have a universal significance. While the people of that time often referred to the emperor as having brought "Roman peace" to the whole world, as the angels attested in their message, the newborn Jesus was the one who would bring genuine, lasting peace.

St. Luke highlights the fact that the Roman census was underway, a census or enrollment in which many were obliged to participate. This year, especially given the plight of millions of migrants throughout the world and the homelessness that touches all of our hearts and lives, I would like to focus especially on the census. In the Jewish tradition, taking a census was always a negative thing because it lead to a false sense of pride. Earthly governments and businesses are careful to count, monitor, and measure everything, but when it comes to the realm of faith, who would dare count God's people? Who can parcel out gifts of love? In a certain sense, St. Luke presents us with a contrast: at the beginning of

tonight's Gospel, we hear about the census or enrollment, and at the end, we hear about the multitude of heavenly host, a vast number beyond counting.

We know that every earthly census is always incomplete and never fully accurate. No matter how hard people try, someone always is lost or forgotten, or as we say, "*falls through the cracks*." We think of our own metro area, and certainly many other parts of our nation, where countless migrants have no identity or number; the government simply estimates their existence. In this context, I would like to share with you a quote from Primo Levi, a famous Jewish philosopher, once a prisoner at Auschwitz in 1944. He wrote: "*We have been baptized and we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die*." It is very ironic that Primo Levi speaks of the tattoo mark of his prison number as a mark of "baptism." He had been given a number – 174517 – which he never forgot, but in the process, he had lost his identity. The experience of the Holocaust sixty years ago, as well as our own ongoing struggle to defend the unborn and unnamed children in the womb, both remind us of the foolishness of trying to play God and determine who counts.

God, by contrast, is all about extravagance. There are more angels than anyone could possibly count. The shepherds to whom the angels appeared, the first recipients of the Good News of salvation, were people who literally did not matter to the Jewish establishment of the day. They were considered outlaws and shiftless people who could not find any gainful employment; literally, they did not count and their witness would never have held up in court. And yet, it was to such as these the Good News was first proclaimed – to people who lived in darkness.

Only God can really count or measure us. The Christmas story reminds us of the power of God's love which is stronger and more mysterious than any human effort to control or comprehend. While soldiers and census takers were busy doing their thing, quietly on the edge of the little town of Bethlehem, in a manger among beasts of burden, the Lord of all creation was born in human flesh. God's imagination far exceeds our own narrow fears and perspectives.

Tonight's celebration challenges us to have the wide open eyes of wonder which characterize little children. The Lord comes to us as a child precisely so that we ourselves might appreciate that the best part of us is also our child-like spirit. Children enjoy being with other children. The Lord calls us to such humility and simplicity, letting go of all the numbers and the fears, the plans and expectations, the hurts and worries. He wants to relate to us: child-to-child, lover-to-lover, friend-to-friend.

I recently heard Jack Lousma, one of our astronauts, as he described his experience of being in outer space. He said that he could not help but be moved to deep faith as he contemplated the enormous expanse of our galaxy and the universe beyond. He noted that even with more than six billion people on this planet, each one of us could still have 15 stars all for us, and each of those stars would be the equivalent of our sun, that is, the center of a whole galaxy. Certainly, God is extravagant and His love beyond counting or measuring. And yet, He chooses to be with us in a way that is humble and hidden – lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Pope Benedict XVI offers some insights on Christmas that complement what I have been saying. He notes that we do not celebrate the birthdays of other great men or women in the same way we honor Christ because what interests us about these other people is their work, the things they wrote, the art they created, or what they left behind. He writes, "*Christ counts for us not only through His work, through what He did, but above all, through what He was and what He is, in the entirety of His person. He counts for us differently from any other man because He is not merely man. He counts because in Him, earth and heaven touch, and thus, in Him, God for us is tangible as man*" (Images of Hope: Meditations on Major Feasts, page 20).

Meditating on the mystery of what brings us here tonight also provides a certain degree of challenge. We find peace in knowing that God will do the counting and that His way of measuring is far different than ours; He understands the sufferings and love we try to express, even when we fail. But we also experience a certain challenge because of the humble and hidden way the Lord has come to us. He seems to be asking us to imitate His own extravagance, patience, and gentle kindness in our relations

with each other. Instead of worrying about whether we ourselves have all the comforts we want or deserve, we need to be more conscious of the forgotten and the lost, the homeless, the hungry, and all God's "little ones."

In keeping with our theme of "counting," the French poet, Charles Péguy, offers a startling question for us to keep in mind throughout the New Year. He says that when we meet the Lord in heaven, He will ask us: "*Where are all the others? Who have you brought with you?*" The Lord Jesus came to Earth to gather the nations into the peace of His kingdom.

We gather here at this midnight hour in response to His love, grateful for the mystery of His presence, hoping that one day we will be gathered with all the saints in the fullness of what we celebrate in a partial way here tonight. While we still have breath and continue our earthly journey, we need to be conscious of the question, "*Where are the others?*" We will not be able to fully rest in the Lord until everyone is home, until everyone finds his or her rightful place.

What counts? Who counts? We all count to God. That is why He sent His Son. And so it is that He wants us to bring to others the same love and mercy He continually shows to us. Such is my hope and prayer for each of us and for our world as we end the calendar year 2007 and look with hope to the dawn of 2008 and wait for the fullness of life eternal.

For now, Merry Christmas! May you know the peace and joy of the Lord's saving mercy in you and through you, even as we watch and wait for His second coming, His return in glory. Amen.