



## DIOCESE OF PATERSON

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THE BISHOP

### PASTORAL LETTER

# BETHLEHEM: RECEIVING THE BREAD OF LIFE

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

*Grace and peace be yours in abundance through  
knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*

(2 Pt 1:2)

[1] Giza built pyramids fit for a king. Athens gloried in the Acropolis envied by the wise. Rome boasted of her Colosseum and her military might. Jerusalem took pride in her Temple, the place of the worship of the true God. Yet, not one of these receive as much praise in songs and hymns as the little town of Bethlehem.

[2] David was born in Bethlehem. Here Samuel anointed him king in place of Saul. And, from the well of Bethlehem, three of David's bravest soldiers at the risk of their own lives brought him water to refresh him in the midst of battle.

[3] Micah, eight centuries before the coming of Christ, predicted that an honor greater than David's fame would crown this tiny hamlet. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Micah prophesied, "But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, least among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth...one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2). The birth of Jesus bathes Bethlehem with the splendor of heaven's glory.

[4] Forty-five times, the Old Testament names Jerusalem, the capital of King David's reign, as "the city of David." But, once Christ is born, Luke gives that title of honor to Bethlehem. Just six miles southwest of Jerusalem in the Judean hills, Bethlehem, rising 100 feet higher than Jerusalem, now has a new and lasting dignity. It is the birthplace of the Son of God.

[5] The fields surrounding Bethlehem produced an abundance of grain, figs, vines, almonds and olives. It was here that Naomi and her daughter-in-law returned at a time of famine in Moab. Ruth went to glean the grain in the fields of Boaz, whom she married and then became the great-grandmother of David. Because of its rich fertility, the whole region was called "Ephrathah." The



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name means “fruitfulness” or “abundance.” How fitting that such a place would be the birthplace of Jesus who brings the abundance of grace to the world.

**[6]** “Bethlehem” literally means “House of Bread.” It has this name because of its location in the grain producing region of Old Testament times. How appropriate that Jesus is born here. After the multiplication of the loaves and fish, Jesus identified himself as “the bread that came down from heaven,” (Jn 6:41). As bread satisfies our hunger and strengthens us physically, Jesus fills our empty hearts with the love and wisdom of God. We feast on his every word. As Scripture says, “Not by bread alone does man live but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord” (Dt 8:3).

**[7]** In his great discourse in chapter six of John’s gospel, Jesus goes even farther in identifying himself as the bread of life. He says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51). With these words, he promised the Eucharist, his very body and blood as our food and drink.

**[8]** Jesus did not mean his words to be taken merely symbolically or spiritually. He meant us to take them literally. Many objected to this literal meaning of his words and walked away. But, Jesus did not change what he said. He did not accommodate his words to their lack of belief. He meant exactly what he said. How blessed we are that the Church has always held true to the reality of the Eucharist as the very Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus. Famished by the world, we can be nourished and satisfied by Christ himself.

**[9]** Bethlehem is not an event lost in the faded light of the distant past. Its glory still shines bright upon us. In every Eucharist, Jesus offers himself to us as the Bread of Life. Thus, every Eucharist is Bethlehem for us. As the shepherds said to each other on the night Jesus was born, we say to one another each time we go to Mass, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us” (Lk 2:15). We go to receive the Bread of Life.

**[10]** Jesus’ own invitation “Take and eat, this is my body” (Mt 26:26) requires a worthy response on our part. As St. Paul tells us, we should examine ourselves before receiving Holy Communion. His words are strong: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the Body and Blood of the Lord. ... For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:27 and 29).

**[11]** When St. Paul speaks about “discerning the body,” he is telling us two very important conditions for the worthy reception of the Eucharist. First, we must recognize the Eucharist for what it is. We must hold firm that this is no ordinary bread, no blessed bread, no sacred sign. We must believe that the Eucharist is truly the Bread of Life. It is Jesus, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, whole and entire, before whom the angels bow in adoration. Without such Catholic faith, no one should dare receive the Eucharist.

**[12]** Secondly, we need to recognize the holiness of Christ who comes to be our food and drink. Thus, we should approach Holy Communion in the state of grace. As the Catechism of the Council

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of Trent beautifully expresses, “Before [Jesus] gave to His Apostles the Sacrament of His precious Body and Blood, although they were already clean, He washed their feet to show that we must use extreme diligence before Holy Communion in order to approach it with the greatest purity and innocence of soul.”

**[13]** Therefore, anyone whose life objectively stands in serious, public contradiction to any one of the Ten Commandments needs first to repent with a firm purpose to sin no more before receiving Holy Communion. Anyone who has committed a mortal sin needs to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation, make a good confession and be absolved before receiving. As St. Paul solemnly warns us, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). The Sacrament of Reconciliation cleanses us of our sins, whether mortal or venial, thus disposing us for the proper reception of Holy Communion.

**[14]** We are all sinners. Thus, we need the humility of the shepherds to whom the angel brought the glad tidings of our Savior’s birth. When the angel announced to them that “In the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord” (Lk 2:11), they rejoiced. They knew that they were sinners. They recognized that Jesus had come to save them from their sins. And so they hastened to the manger. We, too, need to acknowledge our sins, seek forgiveness and hasten to Bethlehem.

**[15]** Jesus, the Bread of Life, longs to be our food and drink. He comes to the weakest and the strongest among us. The repentant sinner and the struggling saint find in him, “the true bread come down from heaven” (Jn 6:32). Before so great a sacrament, we humbly echo with ardent faith the words of the Centurion ... “Lord, I am not worthy.” Repenting of our sins and receiving the Eucharist, we come to Bethlehem and Jesus makes our soul his manger and our home his dwelling place.

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