



WE MAKE OUR CHOICES, AND OUR CHOICES MAKE US- Very Rev. Father Anthony Akinwale, OP

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IBADAN, OYO STATE -

We make our choices, and our choices make us. As part of the recent celebration of the birth of Christ for the year 2020, and in the midst of our celebration, we turn our attention to the Holy Family of Nazareth, the family of Mary and Joseph, a family that allowed Jesus in. On this feast of the Holy Family, the words of the Second Reading admonish us to make a choice. We are to make a choice of the kind of family life we wish to live, and our choice will make or mar us.

That Second Reading says to us: “Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you.” Those words are an invitation to make a choice to welcome Christ into our homes, into our families. And that choice is made when each member of the family chooses to welcome Christ into his or her heart. For the state of a family is a reflection of the hearts of its members. If members of a family welcome Christ into their hearts, they

welcome Christ into the family.

The story of the birth of Christ is the story of God and of two sets of human beings. It is the story of a God who, Jesus his Son, chose to become a member of our human family.

The first set of human beings in the story are those who made a choice to welcome Jesus. The second set of human beings in the story are those who made a choice not to welcome him.

To that first set belong, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds in Luke's account of his birth. Mary made a choice to consent to the message of the angel to conceive him, and, by consenting to the message of the angel, she chose to conceive Jesus out of wedlock despite the danger of shame and death that could come with being a single mother at that time. Such was Joseph who chose to take care of Mary and Jesus even though he was not the biological father of Jesus. Such were the shepherds who, upon receiving the good news from the angel, hurried to the manger to pay him homage. The Magi too, of whom we read on the feast of the Epiphany, from the Gospel according to Matthew. They received the news and travelled from a distant land to pay him homage.

But the story of the birth of Jesus Christ is also the story of another set of human beings—those who chose not to receive the good news that in the child born in Bethlehem, the Saviour of the world has been born. Such was the case of King Herod

who felt that his power was threatened by the birth of a child. As most tyrants would do, he made a choice to kill innocent and defenceless infants to keep himself in power. Tyrants do not hesitate to kill the innocent if that would keep them in power. It happened in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, at Tiananmen Square in China in 1979, at Lekki Tollgate in Lagos, Nigeria in 2020

The Holy Family of Nazareth, the family of Mary and Joseph, chose to have Jesus as a member of that family. And what a beautiful thing it is to have the Son of God as a member of our family.

“Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you.” The message of Christ is Christ himself. We are therefore being admonished to make a choice to allow Christ to have a home in our families. The presence of Christ within a family makes a lot of positive difference. His presence is his closeness. By his birth, the Son of God who is God himself came to dwell within the human family. By his birth, God became human so as to become a member of the human family. Salvation has come to us because God has brought our human nature into union with himself. We needed salvation because the first man chose not to unite his will to the will of God, which is what disobedience is. Now, in the coming of the Son of God as man, salvation has come to us because in Jesus the Son of God, the human will is united to the will of God in obedience. We cannot be

saved if we chose not to unite our will to the will of God. We cannot be saved if we chose to do things our own way and not God's way. Salvation comes when we chose to cooperate with God. For, as St Augustine puts it, the God who created us without our consent will not save us without our consent.

Quite often, we hear people say: "only God can save this country." It is true that only God can save us, but not without our cooperation with God, not without allowing his message to find a home in our hearts. We cannot be saved if we do not give God our consent. Our country cannot be saved if we refuse to allow Christ into our hearts and our homes. But a family that has room for Jesus is a blessed household, a household of honour, of mutual respect, of mutual support, of mutual obedience. All these virtues are present because members of such a family imitate each other as they walk in the ways of the Lord

The presence of Christ in our families is the closeness of God to our families. To allow him into our families is to allow his message to live in our hearts. It is to choose to be close to God who has willed to be close to us. Yes, God has willed to be close to us. But we too need to consent to the will of God by making a choice to be close to God in all that we do. As members of a family, we need to be close to Christ so as to be close to one another, and we need to be close to one another so as to be close to Christ. Such is

the case when Christ is allowed to find a home in our hearts and in our families.

What kills family life is not the harsh economic conditions of our time but the failure to stand together and support each other in these harsh economic conditions. The most potent danger to family life is when members of the family are distant from each other. They may be living under the same roof, eating from the same pot, from the same plate, at the same table. But they may be distant from each other. Husband and wife may share the same bed while they are distant from each other. And the distance is not the number of metres or centimetres that separate them in bed, the distance is in their hearts, in their attitude towards each other. A man and a woman may be having sex with each other while they are still distant from each other. They are having sex, but they are not making love. There is a distance when one person is manipulating the other, and there is a distance when the husband and wife do not give way to each other. There is a distance where there is selfishness, where my interest and my interest alone is what counts.

When a husband is distant from his wife, he is distant from Christ, and when he is distant from Christ, he is distant from his wife. In the same way, when a wife is distant from her husband, she is distant from Christ, and when she is distant from her husband, she is distant from Christ. If we are really close to Christ then we will be close to each other.

Together, as a family, if we allow Christ in, we will keep our focus on Christ, and we will see Christ in each other.

The life of our society and of our world depends on what we make of family life. Family matters, and allowing Christ into our homes matters most. The home of Mary and Joseph became a holy family because of the presence of Jesus. To use the words of Pope Saint Paul VI, because of the presence of Jesus, the home of Mary and Joseph serves as “a model of what family should be”, showing us “the family’s holy and enduring character and exemplifying its basic function in a society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problem it poses and the rewards it brings; in sum, the perfect setting for rearing children—and for this there is no replacement” (Office of Readings, Feast of the Holy Family).

The celebration of the birth of the Son of God reminds us that we need to allow him into our lives—he who comes close to us in the manger, he who comes close to us in his word proclaimed to us at every Mass, he who comes close to us, really present to us, in the sacrament of his abiding presence—the holy Eucharist.

We shall soon receive him into our hearts when we come to the altar at the time of communion. May our hearts be ready to receive him, and may the presence of the Son of God in our hearts enable us to make him present in our homes, in our families, in our

country and in our world.

(Excerpts from the text of the homily on the Feast of the Holy Family by Very Rev. Father Anthony Akinwale, OP; Vice-Chancellor, Dominican University, Ibadan)