



Diocese of Worcester
Office of the Bishop
49 Elm Street
Worcester, Massachusetts 01609

December 2018

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem stands as an ancient witness to the birth of Jesus Christ. Originally constructed in 327 A.D. over a cave venerated as the birthplace of Jesus, most of the original church was destroyed in a sixth century Samaritan revolt. Rebuilt in 565, the second church still stands today.

Through the centuries, the Church of the Nativity has been battered by time and weather. It has suffered fires, earthquakes, desecrations and even gun battles. The interior, too, suffers neglect as squabbles among Armenian, Greek and Catholic caretakers have delayed needed renovations to the roof, walls and paintings.

For some on the outside, the Church of the Nativity, battered, fortress-like and unattractive to the eye, is disappointing. Even to some on the inside, the neglect is disheartening.

But then, descending a staircase to the cave below, one sees on the floor a silver star and the words, "Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary." Those words and that realization give one profound pause. Here, on this very spot, salvation came, hope was born. Here, Mary laid God's Son in a manger. To this very place, angels directed shepherds who hastened and worshiped. In this very place, like Mary and Joseph, pilgrims for centuries knelt in awe and wonder. From this spot, they have returned home, closer to God, renewed in faith, convinced anew of the great love of God who created us and draws us on. Realizing all that, pilgrims are glad that they did not let the visible defects deter them from entering the Church and staying in it to reach the sacred spot.

In some ways, the Church of the Nativity might be a metaphor for today's Church. Scandals, desecration, and the neglect of some priests and bishops in past years have caused tremendous suffering and sullied the image of the Church. Looking around from outside, some don't want to enter. Being discouraged on the inside, others have left. This, too, is tragic because it is only in the heart of the Church in the liturgy, sacraments, communion of the saints, the Scriptures and Tradition authentically handed on that one can regularly encounter the ordinary means of God's saving graces. Our world, our society and culture need those graces. We must continue to remain vigilant in order to protect our children but we must also never forget the treasures that have been entrusted to the Church and offered to us in the sacraments. The same Jesus, born at Bethlehem, and laid in the manger by Mary comes to us to nourish our souls, to bring us His love, healing and peace. Like Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds and the Magi, may that encounter give you and your loved ones joy and peace on Christmas and each week at Mass.

With every prayerful best wish for a Blessed and Merry Christmas, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Robert J. McManus
Bishop of Worcester