

- In 1646 Rembrandt painted his famous *Nativity* that hangs in the Alte Pinakothek Museum in Munich. The focus on the Holy Family shows the Christ Child swaddled in white garments and bathed in a light that enlightens the faces of the other characters.
- Our Lady, glowing in the light of her Son, has her attention rapt upon her infant son, while good St. Joseph extends his arm to the Christ Child's side in a gesture that both beckons the gathered shepherds to behold the infant, yet is prepared to defend the child if necessary.
- Alongside the manger are two older men, their weathered faces glowing with the light of the Christ Child. They look like beggars, like men who have known well the darkness of this world, but who very much want our Lord's mercy.
- Even more captivating, though, is the general interplay of light and darkness in this painting, with those characters closest to Christ the most visible and enlightened, while those most distant from Christ are the most shadowy and obscure.
- In this painted interplay of light and darkness, we are given a little lesson on the spiritual interplay of the light of grace and the darkness of sin: of the necessity of staying close to Christ, lest we fall away into the darkness of sin.
- Rembrandt's painting – considered his most important of the 1640s – bids us to ask how close we stay to light of God's grace, or whether we allow ourselves to slip into the shadows and obscurity of iniquity that lead to eternal death.
- My brothers and sisters, do you comprehend the profundity of the darkness that fell upon the human race when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden so long ago?
- While the sun the Lord created to give man light continued to rise with each new morning after the serpent's seduction, dispelling the darkness of night, a new and sinister form of darkness descended upon us: the darkness of sin – which blackens not the cosmos, but our souls.
- This new darkness distorted the vision of our first parents, such that the beauty and goodness of their nakedness was now, to them, a cause of shame. Innocence was lost, and concupiscence began its sad reign in our human flesh.
- Pride, anger, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, and sloth – hitherto unknown to Adam and Eve – began to rear their ugly heads in temptation within them and their progeny. And it has been going on ever since.
- But do we *really* notice it? Do we *really* see sin for the horror that it is? Do we realize how far from the Christ Child we are at times?
- Born in the blackness of original sin and reared in a world of sin, we are – sadly – quite accustomed to the darkness of sin. Like men raised in caves, whose eyes have adjusted to their obscure and dim surroundings, we have become comfortable living in shadow.
- Sure, we lament the terrible and notorious crimes we hear about in the news, and we can be awfully quick to note the motes in the eyes of our neighbors. Yet how many of us fail to contend with the beams hanging out of our own eyes?
- How many of us ever really confront and measure the darkness in ourselves?
- How many of us are willing to step out of the dim comforts of our caves into the full light of day, where we can see not only our sins for what they truly are in God's eyes, but where we can see God for Who He is?

- How many of us are willing to look upon Him Whom we know as the Light of the World: *the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages: God from God, light from light, true God from true God?*
- And behold Him we must if we wish to be healed.
- 2000 years ago, in an act that revealed both His utter omnipotence and His burning love, our Lord assumed our human flesh.
- *For us men and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.*
- In that moment, the dignity so tragically forfeited by Adam and Eve in the fall was marvelously restored as God Himself took on our humanity!
- And the darkness of sin, brought on by the disobedience of our first parents, was dispelled by the Light that shines in the darkness, the Light that the darkness cannot overcome!
- And every year, this magnificent feast of Christmas bids us to approach the manger, like the two old men in Rembrandt's *Nativity*, conscious of our sinfulness and the darkness within us, and yet so very hopeful of God's grace and mercy.
- Yet, this requires that we understand just how dark sin really is, of how it separates us from the light of Christ, and of how it leads to eternal death.
- Meditating on the absolute necessity of Christ's birth to free us from our sins, St. Augustine once wrote: "You would have suffered eternal death, had He not been born in time. Never would you have been freed from sinful flesh, had He not taken on Himself the likeness of sinful flesh. You would have suffered everlasting unhappiness, had it not been for this mercy."
- Indeed, our Lord's birth in a dingy stable, on a cold night in Bethlehem, surrounded by ox and ass, and adored by simple shepherds, is a mercy that – like the darkness of sin – we will not fully comprehend in this life, only in the next.
- Yet, even without a complete grasp of this marvelous mystery, we can still step out of the shadows to draw near to the manger. We can still take in the *light from light, the true God from true God*, Who is humble enough to become one of us.
- Conscious of our sinfulness, let us adore Him, Who is born the King of Angels. Come, let us adore the Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.
- And let us trust that, no matter the darkness in our souls, we can know the light of His grace if we are sorry for our sins and humbly confess them. So let us all draw near the manger.
- May the light of the Christ Child shine upon and dispel the darkness of each and every one of us this holy night.