Just a couple *days* ago, we marked the *Winter Solstice* –

The *shortest* day of the year – and the *darkest.*

But the *good* news is that the light begins to gain *ground* against the dark.

How *fitting* – on this most *holy night* –

We celebrate the birth of Christ *Jesus* – the *Light of the World*.

He came under the light of that great *Star* – in *Bethlehem* –

More than 2,000 years ago.

Our almighty *God*,

Out of a *deep* love for us –

Became *like* us –

Entering *into* human flesh –

As a *poor*, *vulnerable*, *little babe* in a *manger*.

He desires to *connect* to us –

In *all* our *own* vulnerabilities –

And to give us the *greatest* gift of Christmas –

The gift of *Himself* –

First in the wood of the *manger* –

Humanity's *light* that *scatters* the darkness.

And *again*, from the wood of the *cross* –

Bearing the *weight* of human struggles –

And lifting us *up* in an abiding *hope*.

This *Sunday*,

On the Feast of the Holy *Family* –

Pope Leo will conclude the Jubilee *Year* of Hope –

But for the *Christian* –

Hope *continues* until our last *breath*.

Hope *defies* our fears of the *dark* –

Hope *pierces* the darkness and shines a great *light*.

May we *open* our hearts to this enduring light of Christ's *love*.

May we *dare* to let our defenses *down* –

And *welcome* Him into the *manger* of our *own* hearts.

I've *shared* this story on *several* Christmases –

Because it's so *encouraging.*

The *young* are signs of hope in our future –

Like little stars of *light* chasing the shadows *away.*

In my *first* or *second* year as a *priest* –

The *kindergarteners* and 1st *graders* acted out the story of that *first* Christmas in *Bethlehem*.

The kids playing Mary and Joseph asked the *Innkeeper*:

"*Do you have any **room** at the **inn***?"

To which the little boy answered:

"***No** – but you can have **my** room*!"

*You can have **my** room!*

Well, doesn't *that* encapsulate the Christmas *spirit*!?

God loves us so *personally,*

That He *gives* Himself *completely* to us: in the *flesh*.

And how *blessed* are *we* –

To be able to *receive* Jesus into the mangers of our *hearts*!

I saw a *news* report about Bethlehem on the West *Bank*,

Just a couple *hours* before *our* 4:00 Christmas *Eve* Mass today (yesterday).

They're several hours *ahead* of us there.

Today (yesterday) was the *first* time the Church has been able to *celebrate*

The Christmas Eve Mass in the last three years,

Largely due to the *unrest* and *upheaval* in *Gaza*.

But *thousands* were able to gather now.

And *rather* than curse the *darkness* amidst their struggle,

They cast a great *light* –

Reminiscent of that *glorious* night long, long *ago*.

The *cardinal* who *shepherds* Bethlehem and the Church of *Jerusalem* –

Holy Mother Church's *first* diocese – if you will –

Well before *Rome* –

The cardinal proclaimed to the thousands:

"*We, all **together**, … **we** decide to be the **light**,*

*And the light of **Bethlehem** is the light of the **World**."*

He goes *on* to say:

"*From the **heart** of Bethlehem, the **birthplace** of Christ,*

*The city of **peace** –*

*Once **again**, we ignite the **flame** of **hope**."*

My friends,

Let us *rejoice* in the coming of the Christ Child –

Our great *light* – our *enduring **hope**.*

And *look* to the *young* among us as little *incarnations* of that hope.

While Christianity seems to be on the *ebbtide* over the last couple decades,

Our *young* are *increasingly* converting amidst the *upheaval*

Of the *roots* of our culture.

Flying in the *face* of the inundation of *synthetic* digital culture;

And the *isolation* from a sense of *community*;

And the *disorder* government institutions and their

Disruption of the *family* as the institution of the *ages*.

Gen Z Catholics are on the *rise* –

They attend *Mass,*

They go to *confession*,

They *engage* in prayer,

They light a *candle* rather than curse the *darkness.*

Because all the tearing down *around* them has gained *nothing*.

As *sure* as the sun *rises,*

It also *sets*.

There will *always* be darkness to *contend* with.

But on this *Holy Night* –

Above *all* other nights –

May we come *together* –

And *live* in the light of Christ –

And *carry* that light *out* from here –

And let it *shine.*

Let it *shine* for those who *need* a little *hope* in human *kindness* –

For those who need a little *stability* in a world seeming to *spin* off its *axis*.

There will *always* be *tumult* in the world –

But *Christ* has entered the world –

To *be* our light – our *hope* – our *peace*.

The sands of time *shift incessantly* –

But the *rock* of God's love endures –

As *Scripture* says:

Do not be carried ***away…***

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

As our Pope Leo quotes St. Augustine this Christmas:

The mighty Lord and Savior became flesh in that little babe in the manger,

Revealing how,

"human pride weighed [us] down so heavily

That only divine humility could raise us up again."

Awake, O Christian, O Child of the *Light* – the light of the *Christ* Child,

Our *God* – *gifting* His very *self* to us –

A little *Child* who *leads* us *out* of the darkness into a most *glorious* light –

'because with *Him,* joy *flourishes*;

With *Him*, life *changes*;

With *Him*, hope does *not* disappoint.'