Christmas Eve 1992
A VERY PERSONAL GIFT

One way to describe what happened in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus is to say it was the ultimate in God's self-disclosure. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews put it this way: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our ancestors ... but in these last days God has spoken to us by a son." Or as John's gospel puts it: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

Christmas is God's self-disclosure. It is God's most personal gift to us, the gift of God's self. It is also a gift each one of us can give to another.

A man who was married to a very loving wife for thirty-seven years came home from work to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke that day. She was rushed to the hospital, but in spite of the best medical care possible, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband, in shock and grief, told his best friend, "Do you know what the worst thing is of all about her death? I loved her more than anyone in this whole world, and I was never able to tell her. I was never one to disclose my feelings very much."

It's an all-too-familiar story. We tend to withhold one of the most precious personal gifts that we can give to another: the gift of self-disclosure. Love is most often given and received through the self-disclosure of one person to another. It's a very personal gift because to disclose oneself to another is to give that person a part of yourself.

The gift of self-disclosure also meets one of the deepest human needs. Our deepest and most basic human need is not sex, pleasure, or any of the other things we often think — although they may be related to our most basic need.

What is the one thing we need most in life? The sense that someone, somewhere remembers and loves us. Even better if we love them in return. Anything in life can be endured if that need is met.

This most basic human need is met through loving human relationships. To put it another way, the only true, lasting, and satisfying meaning and purpose in life come from our loving relationships with other human beings and from our relationship with God, and these are connected with each other. "If we say we love God and hate other human beings, we are a liar," says the Bible. We best express our love of God by loving and caring for one another. So it is that a person's life begins to lose meaning, purpose, and direction most often and most rapidly when he or she becomes estranged from other human beings, when we no longer have the sense that someone, somewhere remembers and loves us. On the other hand, we are happiest and most secure when we have healthy, loving relationships with others. Even our physical health is better.

Yet another way of saying it is that the deepest desire of each one of us is to be at one with someone, to have someone be at one with us, and through such relationships to be at one with God.

The gift of self-disclosure goes a long way in helping us to have growing and loving relationships with others and with God. As we disclose ourselves to others, we invite them into

our lives. As we disclose ourselves to God, we invite God into our lives. To give the gift of self-disclosure is to be open to other human beings and to be open to God.

The central message of the Christmas story is that it all begins with God's self-disclosure to us, with God's very personal gift.

Since Christmas is about God's self-disclosure, what are some of the things it discloses to us about God?

First, God's self-disclosure in the birth of the baby at Bethlehem tells us that God frequently enters our world unobtrusively, gently, quietly, and in places and times when we least expect it. What could be more gentle than God entering the world as a baby born in an out-of-the-way place? The story says there was no room in the inn, in the usual place. God didn't use force to get into the inn. That's what God is like. If we don't make room for God in our lives, God doesn't use force but goes where there is room, whether it be the stable or somewhere else.

And that's the way love is. Love doesn't force its way into a person's life. It's always a gift and needs to be given and accepted as a gift.

The Christmas carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" expresses God's self-disclosure very well: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of God's heaven. No ear may hear God's coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive God still, the dear Christ enters in." The gift of our self-disclosure is also best given when done gently and unobtrusively. We can't force ourselves into anyone's life.

Secondly, God's self-disclosure to us comes most often in the common events of life and not in the sensational. In the Old Testament story of Elijah, God's self-disclosure to Elijah was not in the windstorm, or in the fire, or in the earthquake, but in a still small voice. The Bethlehem birth was no great event as far as the world knew. The birth of babies takes place every day in all parts of the world. The only announcement was to the shepherds in the field.
Too often, we are only impressed by bigness, by an outward show of power, by the noisy and the sensational, by movie or television personalities, or by celebrities, especially celebrity Christians. The birth of the baby in Bethlehem reminds us that God's self-disclosure more frequently comes in the ordinary and the common.

Thirdly, God's self-disclosure is a very personal gift. When something is personal, then we truly begin to understand it. You can write a person you have never met a letter, you can send a photograph, or even a video tape, and that individual will have some idea of who you are and what you are like. But when you are present with someone in person, there's a difference. This is true of all of life. Ideas are only theory until they are incarnate, until we see them and experience them in the flesh. Could you ever fall in love with unselfishness as an idea or concept? Probably not. What we fall in love with is not unselfishness, but unselfish people. When an idea becomes revealed in a person, then we can truly begin to understand and relate to it.

The Christmas story reminds us that God became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Now we know more about what God is, what God's love is, and how it lives and works in us and among us. The gift of God's self-disclosure at Christmas tells us there really is a Divine Presence that enters our world and our individual lives. All we have to do is be open to it and

welcome it. And the more we give the gift of self-disclosure to others, the more we are open to receiving the gift of the self-disclosure of others and of God.

This Christmas, receive with thanksgiving the very personal gift of God's self-disclosing love and then give that very personal gift to others. Then you will experience the great Christmas joy that is here for all people. Amen.