Into the Light: The Gift That Does Not End

Catholic • Catholic Lectionary Homily

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Reading Context

Brothers and sisters, where do we stand today? We stand in that luminous corridor of the liturgical year where Lent — this forty-day sojourn into honest self-examination — places before us the very heart of the deposit of faith. The Church, in her wisdom through the Lectionary, has not chosen this passage from the third chapter of John's Gospel arbitrarily. She places it here, in this season of turning, because we need to hear it when our defenses are lowered, when we are willing, perhaps, to ask hard questions about ourselves.

The readings this Sunday form a unified meditation on divine initiative. God acts first. God gives first. God loves first. Saint Augustine, contemplating this mystery, wrote in his Confessions that our heart is restless until it rests in God. Here is the whole of John 3:16 in a single sentence — the restlessness of the human soul met, unexpectedly, by an immensity of Love. Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture together, as the Magisterium has always taught, form the single deposit of faith. And at the center of that deposit, this evening, is one small, thunderous word: gave.

Can we stay with that word for a moment? Not analyze it — stay with it. What does it mean that God gave? What does it cost to give what is most precious? Let the question open rather than close.

John 3:16, John 3:19-21

> **Illustration: The Weight of One Word**
>
> The Greek verb in John 3:16 — edoken, he gave — is the same verb that appears in the account of the Last Supper. He took bread, and he gave. Something about the grammar of the New Testament insists on connecting the gift of the Son in the Incarnation to the gift of the Son in the Eucharist. The Lectionary, rooted in Sacred Tradition, invites us to hear both gifts simultaneously. The Father who gave his Son at Bethlehem is the same Father whose Son gives himself at every altar in every Mass.
>
> *Source: New Testament Greek, Johannine theology*

Theological Reflection

What does it mean that God so loved the world? There are two temptations we must resist. The first is to sentimentalize these words until they become a kind of religious decoration — warm, pleasant, and ultimately without cost. The second is to make them so theologically dense that the warmth of love disappears into categories and propositions. The truth lives between these dangers.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 457, teaches that the Word became flesh for us in order to save us by reconciling us with God. This is the meaning of so loved — not merely an emotion of divine affection, but the act of sacrifice. The measure of God's love is the Cross. When we hear John 3:16, we must hear it in two registers at once: the tenderness of the Father and the weight of wood and nails. Saint Thomas Aquinas, reflecting on the nature of love in the Summa Theologiae, observed that love is the willing of the good of another. Divine love, then, is not a feeling within God — it is God's eternal will toward the flourishing of every human soul, expressed concretely, historically, in the gift of his only-begotten Son.

And then the text turns, as light always does when it enters a room, revealing what the darkness

had been hiding. The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. Here the quiet question arrives. What is the darkness in which I am comfortable? What corners of my life prefer the shadow? What have I grown accustomed to that I would not wish examined in the light?

Pope Benedict XVI, in Deus Caritas Est, reminds us that love and truth cannot be separated — eros and logos belong together. To flee the light is to flee both Love and Truth simultaneously. Condemnation, the text tells us, is not an arbitrary sentence handed down by a distant and capricious judge. It is the self-chosen consequence of turning from the Light who has come near. Krisis — judgment — is what happens when Love is persistently refused.

And here sanctifying grace becomes precious. The baptismal grace we received — that infusion of divine life into the soul, that interior transformation the Council of Trent distinguished so carefully from mere forensic declaration — that grace is precisely the capacity to live in the light. To have our deeds done in God, as the text says. This is not our achievement. It is gift, pure gift, received through faith and the sacraments, the gift of a God who loved first.

John 3:16, John 3:17-19, John 3:21, 1 John 4:8

Illustration: Augustine in the Garden

In the Confessions, Augustine describes the years before his conversion as a deliberate preference for shadow. He knew the light was there. He could feel its warmth at the edges of his consciousness. But he chose, repeatedly, the familiar comfort of darkness — what he called his beautiful chains. It was not ignorance that kept him from God. It was love of lesser things. The moment of conversion came not through argument but through encounter: he heard a child's voice, he opened the Scripture, and the light entered. This is what John 3:19-21 describes from the inside. The drama of salvation is not always loud. Sometimes it is a child's voice in a garden.

Source: Augustine, Confessions, Book VIII

Eucharistic Connection

Dear brothers and sisters — the faithful — we must now make a journey. Not a long one in distance, only a few steps from the ambo to the altar. But it is the most significant journey any of us will make today.

John 3:16 is a statement about the Father giving his Son. What happens in this Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the Son giving himself — truly, really, and substantially — under the appearances of bread and wine. This is the mystery of transubstantiation, which the Catechism (paragraph 1376) describes as the whole substance of bread and wine being changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, his Soul and Divinity, while the appearances of bread and wine remain. The same self-giving Love that moved God to send his Son into the world moves the Son to remain with us — here, now, on this altar, in the Blessed Sacrament.

The light that John speaks of is not a metaphor that evaporates after the homily. It is a Person. And in a few moments, that Person will be present in the Real Presence upon this altar. Pope Francis, drawing on the tradition of the Church, has written that the Eucharist joins heaven and earth, uniting us with the whole communion of saints — those who have passed through death into the light, those still being purified in purgatory, and those of us gathered here, still learning to choose light over darkness.

This is why the sacrament of Reconciliation matters so deeply. It is not bureaucratic. It is mercy — the mercy that restores us to the light so that we may receive the Light himself. If there is shadow

you are carrying today, shadow you know you have chosen, the Church's gift to you is not judgment but restoration. Come to the confessional. And then come to this altar. Receive the one who is Love and Light in a single gesture of self-giving.

John 3:16, John 6:51, 1 Corinthians 11:28

Illustration: The Sanctuary Lamp

In every Catholic church, a small red lamp burns continuously near the tabernacle — the sanctuary lamp, or eternal light. It is kept burning to indicate the Real Presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Many Catholics walk past it daily without pausing. But what if we let ourselves be stopped by it? Here is a small tongue of fire, saying: he is here. The light has come into the world, and he has chosen to remain. Not as a memory. As a Presence. The sanctuary lamp is not decoration. It is the Church's silent proclamation of John 3:16 in every hour of every day.

Source: Catholic liturgical tradition, Code of Canon Law 940

Faithful Response

So what shall we do with all of this? What does it look like to live John 3:16 on a Tuesday morning, or a Thursday evening when we are tired and irritable and far from the warmth of this gathering?

I commend to you one practice rooted in Sacred Tradition: the daily examination of conscience — what the Jesuit tradition calls the examen. Before you sleep tonight, give five quiet minutes to this. Ask where the light was present in your day. Ask where you turned toward shadow. And if you find shadow — and you will, because we all do — do not despair. The sacrament of Reconciliation is not a last resort. It is the ordinary mercy of the God who gave his Son so that we might not remain in condemnation but walk, imperfectly and gratefully, toward light.

This is how holiness is built — not in grand gestures but in small, recurring choices. To forgive the person who has not asked for it. To speak truth when silence would be easier. To let our deeds be done in God, as the text says — so that even ordinary acts of patience and kindness become luminous, offered in union with the sacrifice now about to be made upon this altar.

Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.

John 3:21, Lamentations 3:22-23, Romans 13:12

Illustration: Five Minutes Before Sleep

Saint Ignatius of Loyola developed the daily examen as a practice of noticing — noticing where God was present, where grace was offered, and where it was refused. He considered it so essential that he instructed his companions to keep the examen even when all other prayer had to be abandoned due to illness or duty. The examination of conscience is not self-punishment. It is the practice of becoming someone who can tell light from darkness — who grows, over years and decades, more sensitive to the presence of grace and more honest about the pull of shadow.

Source: Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises

Applications

- Practice the daily examen: five minutes each evening to review where you moved toward light and where you chose shadow — and bring what you find to the sacrament of Reconciliation
- Before receiving the Eucharist this Mass, pause in a moment of silent gratitude: God so loved the world that he gave — and continues to give, here, in the Real Presence on this altar
- This week, identify one relationship or habit where you have grown comfortable with a kind of darkness — avoidance, resentment, dishonesty — and take one concrete step toward light, however small

• If you have not received the sacrament of Reconciliation recently, consider making an appointment this week — not from fear, but from love of the sanctifying grace it restores
• Teach a child in your family what the sanctuary lamp means — that the light burns because Christ is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, not as symbol but as Person

Prayer Suggestions

• Lord, show me the darkness I have grown comfortable with. Give me the courage to step toward your light, one day at a time, trusting in your mercy more than my own failures.
• Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son — the gift that cost everything and continues to be given at every Mass. Help us receive him worthily, restored by the sacrament of Reconciliation.
• Holy Spirit, guide this assembly in the practice of honest self-examination. Make us sensitive to grace — to notice where love is being offered and where we are turning away.
• We pray for those in our community who are living in darkness and do not know it — for those carrying secret burdens, hidden shame, quiet despair. May the light that has come into the world find them this week.
• Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the communion of saints, may we go from this Mass as people who carry the light of Christ into every ordinary corner of our lives.