

Christmas Day – Year C

What is it about this day that historically brings so many people to church? On this day throughout the world many churches have people standing in the aisles, parking lots are jam packed, and some parishes even add a Mass or two to deal with the crowds. What is it? That is a big question I took to prayer over the last few weeks.

The most basic answer to why there are so many people in church today is that it is a tradition that has become an integral part of our family Christmas celebration. A Christmas without Mass is like a tree without lights or a refrigerator without food. It is incomplete.

But it seems to me that there is more to all of this gathering than the tradition and/or habit.

So, what is it? Perhaps it is the story passed on throughout the ages and depicted in music, art, poetry, and tradition. This is a dramatic story filled with excitement, mystery, romance, and adventure. And God knows that somewhere there had to be some humor.

Legend has it that when he went to the inn looking for a room, Joseph reportedly said, "But you must have a room, for my wife is with child." In response the innkeeper said, "Look, I am really sorry but I have no room. And it's not my fault that your wife is with child." And Joseph replied, "Well it's not my fault either."

And that leads us into the heart of the story – faith. For all practical purposes both Mary and Joseph were innocent bystanders mysteriously chosen to do something beautiful for God in concert with the Holy Spirit. Both Mary and Joseph not only embraced this incredible mission, but also, they did not allow fear to overwhelm them. They both heeded the message, "Do not be afraid," that was spoken to them and therein allowed their faith in God and one another to triumph.

Because of their deep faith, light breaks into a dark world. All of the Masses for the celebration of Christmas capture this sense of light. In the vigil Mass celebrated at 5:00 PM the psalmist states, "Blessed the people who know the joyful shout; in the light of your countenance, O Lord, they walk." During the midnight Mass which is celebrated at 10:00 PM the prophet Isaiah says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone." At the Mass of dawn celebrated at 8:00 AM the psalmist states, "A light will shine on us this day. The Lord is born for us." Finally in the Mass during the day, celebrated at 10:30 AM, John the Evangelist states, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Obviously, light is synonymous with Christmas and that reality of light in the person of Jesus draws us to church. Today we momentarily leave the dark seas and empty valleys of our life to be with the light called Emmanuel – God with us. This light evokes warmth as hearts soften among us. It offers hope for an often hopeless world. And this light yields peace. The angels identify this peace when they say, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

What an awesome story! What a beautiful light. That is what it is. The story of a light that shines through the darkness. That is Christmas! And this faith-filled story of light, interestingly enough, originates in the context of family, as evidenced by the manger scene before us. The light of Jesus illumines the family. And today is but one chapter of the story. There is still more to be told every Sunday at Mass and more light to be shared in the Eucharist and more peace to be extended to the world and our families.

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And as this amazing story unfolds, something emerges that eclipses the shining light. What is it? None other than an overwhelming love that is powerfully expressed on a cross. It is the ultimate gift which is available to all. And every time we celebrate the Eucharist we receive this gift. “This is my body given for you. This is my blood poured out for you.” There is no greater love. And this reality likewise is presented in the context of family, a parish family. What a story! Cover to cover is written not on paper but in human hearts and the reality of family.

As we behold the glow of the light and anticipate the depth of such love, may we also behold the sacred vessel of this light and love, our individual family and parish family.

So, what is it? Well it is the tradition, the story, the light, and the love. Above all it is family. Even with its history of hurts, pain of disappointments and unsightly appearance of warts and idiosyncrasies, it remains so sacred and special because it is not only the place where the story is told but also the very dwelling place for the light of Christ to shine and his love to be shared.

With Sr. Dorothy, our parish and school staff, and in my own name, I wish you and your family a Merry Christmas with an abundance of Christ’s light and love, which deserves to be celebrated not just on Christmas, but every day of our lives.