I think it’s good if we stop and reflect on what kind of world Christ is reborn in again this Christmas. When I was young, the whole United States celebrated Christmas. The streets were decorated. As kids, we rode the amusement park rides set up on the roof of The Emporium department store in San Francisco. In every store we visited we greeted the staff and each other with “Merry Christmas.” Christmas Masses were absolutely packed. Now it’s more generic “Happy Holidays,” and the memory of the reason we celebrate Christmas as the birth of Jesus Christ is being lost.

What’s worse, I get letters from parents lamenting that their children do not go to church, or do not even believe in God. What’s going on?

We used to live in the Age of Christendom. Society as a whole in the USA and Europe supported our Judeo-Christian values, supported families, and supported marriage. The vast majority of Americans believed in God and went to church or synagogue weekly.

As kids, when we were home sick from school, we used to watch the TV game show “Password.” Every Friday afternoon before signing off, the host Allen Ludden would say, “Don’t forget, this weekend, worship at the church or synagogue of your choice … but worship!” Have you ever heard a TV host say something like this with the week-end approaching? That was during the “Age of Christendom”— which lasted from the baptism of Constantine as the first Christian Emperor in 337... up until recently.

Now we live in a “post-Christian” era. Society as a whole is either not interested in Judeo-Christian values — or is downright hostile to believers.

This is nothing new for the Church. When Christ was born, grew up and started his ministry, there were only 11 Apostles, a few hundred believers, no money, no church buildings, no Catholic schools or universities, no religious orders, no seminaries. Nothing ... but Faith! The Holy Spirit was alive, active and working. And the Church grew and prospered. The Faith spread mainly by word-of-mouth, by Christians testifying to others about the love Jesus had for them, and the power and effectiveness of his message: the Gospel of love and mercy. And the first Christians were willing to die for this Faith, rather than renounce it in the face of vicious persecution.

They say history is circular. I showed up at a party a few years ago wearing some old clothes I found in my bottom drawer. A friend said to me in front of the guests, “Just keep wearing those trousers, Michael, and they’ll eventually come back into style.” So it is with our Church and our Diocese at this time in history. First there was the Apostolic Age from Christ until 337. Then the Age of Christendom from 337 until 1965 (the year that church attendance was at its peak, and seminaries and convents were full to overflowing).
And now we have returned to the Apostolic Age.

This is a tremendous opportunity. Casual Catholicism, cultural Catholicism or “Catholic-lite” just won’t survive anymore. What will survive are Catholics who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through a divine intimacy of prayer and worship, experience friendship in the church community, live out their relationship through service — and then share their friendship with Christ with those who do not know him.

One movement that has been doing this for years is Cursillo. It is still an excellent example of a weekend retreat experience that helps people have a personal encounter with Jesus.

Another that is growing is FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. We have FOCUS missionaries working in our diocese at the Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish at Cal Berkeley. There they don’t wait for people to come to church. These recent college grads go to the dorms, cafeterias, frat houses and gyms to meet students where they are. They befriend them. They share their experience of Jesus with them. And accompany their peers through a growing process of exposure to the Gospel message. It’s working. In the last 20 years since FOCUS was founded, countless young people have become disciples of Christ and members of the Church. And over 957 young people have entered seminaries and religious communities through involvement with FOCUS. I know of no other modern school of new evangelization that has had such success. These FOCUS missionaries are now being prepared to work in parishes as well as colleges campuses.

One other thing. The people who guide FOCUS have studied the results of their work and found that those young people who were born and raised Catholic and remained practicing Catholics into their adult life were those who had regular spiritual conversations with their parents. Parents’ sharing of their own personal experience of Faith in Jesus goes a long way to handing on that faith effectively to their children. Just dropping off the kids for CCD or Mass and going home without attending Mass as a family just doesn’t work.

Our Faith today needs witnesses. Faith needs to be shared — through authentic friendship — and practicing what we preach.

Please consider this aspect when you worship at the manger of Christ and receive Him in Holy Communion at Christmas. And share that joy — and His name — with others.

A blessed Advent and Christmas to all of you. ♦

CHRISTMAS MASSES AT THE CATHEDRAL OF CHRIST THE LIGHT

Christmas Eve — Friday, Dec. 24
• 5 p.m. Mass in Vietnamese celebrated by Father Bich Nguyen
• 8 p.m. Solemn Mass of Christmas Night celebrated by Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ

Christmas Day — Saturday, Dec. 25
• 8 a.m. Mass in Vietnamese celebrated by Father Bich Nguyen
• 11 a.m. Solemn Mass of Christmas Day celebrated by Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ
• 1:30 p.m. Solemn Mass of Christmas Day (bilingual) celebrated by Father Brandon Macadaeg

Feast of the Holy Family — Sunday, Dec. 26
• 8 a.m. Mass in Vietnamese celebrated by Father Bich Nguyen
• 11 a.m. Solemn Mass celebrated by Father Dennis McManus
• No 1:30 p.m. Mass this day only

New Year’s Day — Saturday, Jan. 1
• 7:30 a.m. Mass in Vietnamese
• 11 a.m. Solemn Mass of Mary, Mother of God (Octave Day of Christmas) celebrated by Father Brandon Macadaeg
• No 5 p.m. Mass this day only

Feast of the Epiphany (Patronal Feast of the Cathedral) — Sun, Jan. 2
• 8 a.m. Mass in Vietnamese
• 11 a.m. Solemn Mass celebrated by Father Brandon Macadaeg
• 1:30 p.m. Mass in Spanish