



DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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Christmas—the sacred dance of life!

This past November, I reached 25 years of service in the Church as a deacon. Yes, I was a priest and later ordained a bishop, but I am still a deacon. As we approach Christmas, I thought about the fact that this will be the 25th year I will be praying, reflecting, and humbly asking the Holy Spirit to guide me in preparing a homily about Christ's birth to encourage God's people.

Like you, I have favorite Gospel scenes that draw me in so deeply I am transported in my imagination to when Jesus interacted with the people. One of my favorite scenes is the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary greeted Elizabeth and the voice of the New Eve sparked a sacred dance of joy in John the Baptist, who leapt in his mother's womb. Church fathers and theologians throughout the centuries have recognized John's dancing *in utero* as paralleling David's dancing before the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Samuel. This is why Mary was referred to as the "Ark of the New Covenant" well before the New Testament books were even officially compiled into the final canon.

John's sacred dance of life began with God sending the angel Gabriel to announce his conception to his father, Zechariah. Then God sent Gabriel on another mission to Nazareth to a virgin named Mary. Should she say "yes" to God's plan, Gabriel informs her that, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (LK 1:36). Mary was invited to partake in this sacred dance of life, and she accepted the invitation and ushered in redemption and salvation for us all when she said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (LK 1:38).

God the Father always makes the first move in the sacred dance, in an unrestrained act of love for humanity. Mary's "yes" sprang from deep within the maternal fabric of her person and through it, she became the New Eve, the Ark of the New Covenant for all peoples. The Holy Spirit joins in the dance and by giving blessing to the "Son of the Most High," renders all human life sacred. Mary carried this divine blueprint in her womb that in the end, redeemed humanity once and for all. As the angel declared to Joseph, "She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:22).

All of this life-giving movement--this sacred dance of joy in which God becomes flesh and saves us from our sins--is still going on today. It lives within us. Do we stop, pause, and reflect on this powerful Christmas message? Do we realize that Christ carries each one of us within him, and that we carry all of him--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--within us? This truth can so easily become eclipsed by the commercialism and busyness of the holidays, but we should try to carve away some quiet time to deeply ponder the great mystery of our Communion with God.

Today, as we have become a more global and transient society, people have become keen on getting their DNA tested to find out about our ancestors, our roots. I recently saw a t-shirt proclaiming, "I had

my DNA tested and God is my Father!” I love the thought, but the truth is, our connection to God runs far deeper than just our DNA. Our bodies and our souls are rooted in Him, as St. Paul tells us: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? You have been purchased at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body” (1 COR). This dance of life moves in every human body and soul, which is reflected in the divine image of our Creator.

I am reminded that we are all connected by a sacred rhythm of life when I travel to our remote villages, where I have been privileged to attend traditional native Alaskan dances. The dancing begins with a drumbeat and is accompanied by chanting in the native language. An elder once shared with me that little children (and sometimes even adults) will fall asleep during the dance because the drumbeats reach to the core of their being, like a mother’s heartbeat in the womb. For native Alaskans, the beat of the drum reflects the beat of life itself--a sacred dance that should honor the Creator who gives in abundance and is wildly present in our lives. It is a joyous dance, like John the Baptist and David, declaring the Good News of Christmas.

As we approach Christmas after spending most of the year dealing with a pandemic, people are sharing with me how isolated, confused, and depressed they are. They are just so tired of being locked down. People long for the joy that will lift their spirits again to feel that sacred dance in their lives.

Sadly, the most steady beat many people hear these days is the constant media coverage that reflects hatred, anger, racism, division, violence, and destruction. None of these feed the soul or help it enjoy the sacred dance of life. St. Paul warns us that, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal. 5:14). Paul goes on to explain that the worldly desires of the flesh that rail against the spirit will lead to sins of impurity, hatred, and “outbursts of fury and acts of selfishness.” We see this clearly manifested in our world, nation, and communities even today.

The response to all of the “bad news” is the Gospel--the “Good News” of Christ! This is the message of Christmas, when the sacred dance of life is guided by the Holy Spirit to save all humanity. When we love our neighbor as ourself, we join the Holy Spirit in producing fruit that is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). These fruits are born from the sacred drumbeat of God, a beat that in us, too, when we reach out to and help one another.

The message of Christmas--that out of love, God came down to share in our humanity--is the greatest gift we can give to a world hungering to experience the sacred dance of life. A savior is born for us and may we dance with joy at this good news!

Sincerely in Christ,



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