

Christmas 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.** Isaiah the prophet wrote those words 700 years before the Birth of Christ. In 1868, the carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem* declares that “in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light”. Darkness has always existed in every human life and in the events of history. Light has always been present, even in the darkest of days. At the center of all human history, just as midnight settles the midpoint of the night, Christ enters; the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity takes on flesh. His light enters the darkness of a world affected by sin. The darkness of sin and death will be forever vanquished by His Passion, Death and Resurrection.

This year has had many public experiences of darkness. Pandemic, politics, racial tensions, and the accompanying plethora of ripple effects these sadnesses bring have had an impact on everyone. Too many people around the world have become sick and have died. Too many people have turned against one another because of their political views and racial attitudes. These twelve months of darkness, hibernation, fear, and suspicion have had an affect on our mental health and societal wellbeing.

Darkness is a funny thing. Many people are afraid of the dark; the unknown. Prolonged darkness can make us forget where things are or question where we placed something. Darkness can make us depressed or hopeless or frustrated. We crave light. We need light to live. But sometimes events make us question whether light is even possible. Is the dark hole we have fallen into too deep for us to get out of? Are we doomed to remain in paralyzing darkness?

Christmas is absolutely essential for the Christian. We need to be reminded annually of the awesomeness of God’s taking on flesh and dwelling among us. We know and profess it as an article of faith, but there is something about Christmas that makes the presence of Christ among us so palpable. It’s like visiting the house you grew up in – the memories become real. Of course, for Catholics, we can experience Christmas each day of the year in the celebration of Holy Mass. Christ is born again on the manger of the altar – that also makes present the Death and Resurrection of the Lord. The Body and Blood of Christ, born at Bethlehem, crucified and risen to bring salvation, is made present on the altar. The Star shines and the angels sing over the altar of every Catholic parish church and chapel announcing the presence of the Savior among us. Light shines in the darkness. God is praised with the Church’s liturgy around the world at every moment of each day, no matter what the circumstances of that day.

Without that first Christmas which radically changed human history and the course of our salvation, there would be no hope. We would remain slaves of sin and death. All the problems that afflict us individually and collectively would overwhelm us. But Christmas isn’t a mere decoration that brightens up the plain, green tree of life. Christmas isn’t just a time of happy thoughts and sentiments that keep us from psychologically going crackers as we drown in our problems. Christmas is so much more!

A person who has lost a loved one during the year needs Christmas. So does the person who lost a job, suffered a divorce, or faces a health crisis. Christmas promises us that God is near us; with us! He will never leave us alone as we carry our crosses and face a world that has been defaced by original sin. Christians can't decide "not to have Christmas this year". It's not an option. While not every Christmas can be merry, every Christmas can be blessed.

Christmas, however, is a way of life. It's our mission in the world. We announce the Birth of Christ, shine the Star, sing the angel chorus each time we enter a dark world and bring the light of Christ's peace, charity, self-sacrifice, joy, beauty, and prayer. We must be living Christmas people! That's our mission. We must radiate Christmas every day of the year and, yes, sometimes we will be as out of place in the world as a Santa Claus at the July 4<sup>th</sup> picnic. But can you imagine how much fun life would be if we were Christmas people? People would light up when we came into the room because they would see Jesus in the manger of our hearts, voices and actions. Take the Charlie Brown trees of life – all those ugly and inadequate things we deal with every day – and gussy them up with light, joy and beauty. That's the task of the Apostle. How often do we read about how the martyrs sang hymns as they faced death? How often have I seen the smile of serenity from a person on their deathbed that comforts family members and renews health care professionals? They were having Christmas in those moments.

No one can promise that 2021 will be any better than 2020. And 2020 wasn't all bad. People got married, got jobs, retired, had babies, raised gardens, and a thousand other undocumented things. At Christmas 2020, I now have responsibility for Saint Peter's and Saint Mary's parishes. What a privilege to be the spiritual father of two families! I have experienced true priestly fraternity in Monsignor McGready and Father Pineda. The minute I learned of this expanded assignment, they treated it like it was their task too. I never felt alone. Real fraternity is not found at a dinner table or social event. It happens when we are there for each other as Priests. I am grateful. At Saint Mary's, I have reconnected with people I knew in high school or from Sacred Heart, La Plata. I've gotten to work with new people and bring together people from both parishes to share projects. At Saint Peter's, I've missed more than half our congregation I haven't seen since last March, but to whom I feel very close in prayer. These are the ties that bind.

I pray that all of you from Waldorf and Newport will have a truly blessed Christmas. Spend time at the manger and before the tabernacle. Treasure all you hold dear. Give glory to God in the highest. And please know that your Priests are so honored and grateful to live our vocation amongst you. We pray for you each day, especially at Mass. May the Christ Child, through the intercession of His Immaculate Mother, abundantly bless you and your family at Christmas and always, and may you have the joy of living Christmas each day of your life. Remember: it's not the things you do at Christmastime, but the Christmas things you do all year through. I remain,

Sincerely in Christ,

Father Keith A. Woods

Pastor, Saint Peter's Church (Waldorf)  
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