

Christmas – 2015: God With Us

Father Joe Nangle, who gave a Parish Retreat here a few years ago, tells the story of a religious sister – a skilled nurse – who went to Lima, Peru to join their pastoral team working among the large number of poor people in the area. At a team meeting a few weeks into her ministry, she told Joe and the team that she was beginning to have serious doubts.

“When I look at that endless line of sick people who show up at the parish clinic each day, I know that *even if I could take* care of all their health problems – which I can’t; the line will never get any shorter. I know that we are immersed in the world of the poorest here, but what is worse is when I look at life through the eyes of all those impoverished people, I see no evidence whatsoever of the loving God who is supposed to care for human beings more than the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Where is God for them? Where is God for us?”

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Sisters and brothers, as we gather on this Christmas 2015, in the midst of global war and terrorism; global inequality – with so few having so much, so many having so little; a world with so much fear and hatred and violence; a world with massive issues of refugees (the largest mass migrations since World War II) and a Mother Earth struggling to survive with pollution of air, soil and water; a world of racism and sexism and all the ‘isms’ that divide and hurt people; anyone who takes life seriously must – in one way or another; at one time or another – ask that question: Where is God in all of this?

How many times have we heard it and asked it when a healthy child dies suddenly, or a heart attack takes the life of young father or a woman comes down with a debilitating chronic disease, we ask why do these things happen and where is God in all this. And, isn’t religion suppose to provide some answers, shed some light, offer some insights on where God is?

Brothers and sisters, the answer that Fr. Joe Nangle and his Pastoral Team came to, the answer that has been the center of my life (in my struggles and my joys) and the reason Churches in every village, town, state and nation across this world are celebrating this holiest of Feasts is:

Where is God? God is with us! Emmanuel – “God is with us” – the Incarnation... not in some disembodied theological formulation that we learned in the Catechism or mechanically recited in the Creed ... “God is with us!”

God is with us as a living, breathing, loving, passionate and compassionate God, who joined the human community and shares all of our brokenness. God has become one with us – God became human, in the person of Jesus the Christ – the Creator became part of Creation; the Divine Word became flesh... and made his/her dwelling among us! This Source-of-All-Life, the Sanctifying Spirit – totally beyond our comprehension – became a person like us, in Jesus of Nazareth!

*God is with us* means that our Creator has undergone everything that human experience contains: all of our joys and sorrows, our hopes, our failures, our agonies and triumphs, our dreams, our frustrations.

Sisters and brothers, on this holiest of Feasts, we proclaim that God became human, to *show us* how we can become as *fully* human as possible; how we can *embrace our humanity and love it* – because: God embraced it and loved it! On this holiest of Feasts, we proclaim that we as humans are called to allow, help, inspire, encourage others to do the same. This is our basic life task. This is what Jesus was and did: Jesus was a complete human person, fully alive and his mission was to help all those around him be the same.

John's Gospel says it so well: "I came that they might have life and have it to the full."

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Sisters and brothers, what Fr. Joe Nangle and the Pastoral Team in Lima, Peru became so aware of in reflecting on that Sister's question: "Where is God?" and what every person and parish and community of the global Christian Church are called to be in touch with is the recognition that:

if every person and all people without exception are called to live fully human lives, then the awful plight of the poor and broken and powerless in our world, in our nation, in our cities and in our neighborhoods and the conditions, structures, systems, institutions that subordinate humanity and produce this blight, is an insult to what Jesus was about – a blasphemy against God "who so loved the world that God gave God's only son."

If Jesus came so that every person could live and develop and become who God intends her or him to be, then all the poverty, violations, violence suffered by those who never get a chance at life make a mockery of God-with-us.

Sisters and brothers, on this holiest of Feasts: the Incarnation – God-With-Us – Emmanuel is challenging *us* to realize this in a deeper and more profound way.

Where is there evidence of God's presence in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

*We ourselves are evidence of God's presence in the world!* Fr. Nangle and that Sister: Christ in the slum clinic...! *We* are the Body of Christ in the world! *We* are called to proclaim and make real the Good News of the Gospel here and now! *We* are salt and light for the world! By joining hands with other people of good-will in doing the right thing, little-by-little the world will become the world God intends!

But, if we – who call ourselves Christian – are not *vitaly concerned* about the worth of *each person*, the consequences of *each relationship* and the effects of *every social system, structure, and institution* on all people, especially the poor, powerless, broken and oppressed, then: to that extent, the incarnate Jesus is absent today... .

Pope Francis warns over and over the harm that a “Culture of Indifference” is doing to our global village; when our hearts become numb and hard and we ignore the sinful and painful realities in our midst.

So sisters and brothers, in this Christmas celebration, I invite us to recommit our lives to the task of becoming fully human and – joining hands with sisters and brothers of good-will – to create the world that God intends, a world where light is overcoming darkness, love is overcoming hatred, courage is overcoming fear, hope is overcoming despair. Alone we can do little, together we can create miracles. Let us just reflect again on what happened at the Paris Climate Summit just a few weeks ago: in the midst of the pain of the terrorist attack, nations from around the globe – large and small; rich and poor; left-leaning and right-leaning; came together with the common goal of preserving and sustaining our Mother Earth – our common home! With the presence of God, the spark of God within and among us, miracles happen! Let us now stand and renew our commitment to God’s dream for each of us and for our world.

[Renewal of Baptismal Vows...]

Amen!