Christmas 2019 All Saints Parish, Syracuse, NY December 24 & 25, 2019 Fr. Frederick D. Daley

Catholic Lite

First of all I’d like to thank everyone who joined us this past weekend for the Pastoral Visit of our new Bishop Douglas Lucia. WOW! What a crowd: the pews were full and actually some folks had to stand for the 11:30 mass! So: Thank You! But I must say I was a bit nervous with his upcoming visit, because the weekend before, a visitor from out of state sent an email to Bishop Lucia – with a copy to me – at 9:09 PM that Sunday evening listing at least 10 liturgical laws that were broken during the mass he attended here earlier in the day!

The letter concluded stating: “I write this letter… to make you aware that visiting Catholics have an expectation that the most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is universal. We expect the traditions of the church to be observed consistently across parishes. The mass appeared to be “Catholic lite” or more akin to a Protestant service. It is no wonder why 70% of Catholics don’t believe in the Real Presence of the Eucharist when pastors foster this type of watering down of our Catholic Faith and Traditions.”

SO: all of our visitors today, fasten your seatbelts!!

I respect the man for sharing his concerns and appreciate that he sent a copy of the email to me; but I’d like to share what upset him the most — because I think it’s a powerful example of how legalization and rigidity can literally block us from Jesus rather than connect us, and often leads to people looking at the Church as irrelevant at best and perhaps is one reason why for every one person who joins the church today, 6.5 leave; and half the kids baptized in the last 30 years have left the church – 79% before the age of 23… .

This is what he was most upset about. He wrote:

*“Although we entered the church with the joy of the Advent season, we were taken aback when viewing the altar to see a 3’ x 4’ poster-board with a picture of a father and son drowned while trying to cross the Rio Grande.*

*This image not only nearly physically obscured the tabernacle, but also diverted our hearts and attention from the focus of the mass.”*

Sisters and brothers, if we recognize the Real Presence of Jesus in the tabernacle; at the altar, and in the Eucharistic Bread in the palm of our hand – but *fail* to recognize the Real Presence of Jesus in that photo, we *fail* in being Christian; we are in essence worshiping a dead Jesus.

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The spiritual giant Thomas Merton put it boldly when he wrote:

*“Our Christian religion often becomes simply the cult of the dead body of Christ. …this is no*

 *joke. This is what actually happens to the Christian religion when it ceases to be a really living*

 *Faith and becomes a mere legalistic and ritualistic formality…, instead of the Living Presence and Light of Christ in our lives. …we set up a structure of pious images and abstract concepts*

 *until Christ becomes a shadow; We must never let our religious ideas, customs, rituals and*

 *conventions become more real to us than the risen Christ.”*

Sisters and brothers, here we are on Christmas 2019, a Celebration filled with wonderful ritual customs, and traditions focusing on the miracle story in the stable in Bethlehem: a miracle conception, announced by an angelic choir an awe-struck, festive greeting to the new born child — a tale of glad tidings and hope-filled joy!

Sisters and brothers, what might this historic event of 2000 years ago say to us as Disciples of Jesus living in a nation in deep crisis as we approach 2020?

*Well, we need to hear the rest of the story…*

First of all, as our Bishop Lucia mentioned in his homily on Sunday, if we look at the Christmas story through the lens of the Gospel we see a manger scene much less amenable to romanticized and comforting embellishment. The circumstances of Jesus’s birth are more chaotic and perilous:

* His conception is greeted with confusion and suspicion over the scandal of an unplanned pregnancy;
* the highest political authorities react to his birth with alarm; and
* with relentless cruelty, they seek to destroy the child along with any other who could possibly be a threat.
* The family flees in terror, leaving all they know in a desperate quest for safety, to seek asylum in a neighboring country.

Sisters and brothers if we prayerfully reflect on the Christmas story in light of today’s headlines, how could we *not* wonder what’s going on in our country today?

* What if Egypt had closed its borders to asylum-seekers fleeing danger and persecution?
* How would the Holy Family have fared if Egypt spent its resources erecting high walls to enhance its security against hordes of “invaders” and “infestations”?
* And, what about the untold thousands of families who undoubtedly ran to safety given the threat to their male children?
* What would have happened to the Holy Family if they had been separated at the Egyptian border… if Mary and Joseph were forced to return to Jerusalem without Jesus?
* What scenes would be on our Christmas cards today if Jesus was forced to live in an Egyptian internment Camp in a cramped cell, crowded with other separated children, enduring the trauma of being in a foreign country without parents, familiar language, or even heat or access to sanitation?

The bottom line of the Gospel story of Christmas: *Jesus, Mary and Joseph would not be the kind of immigrants that would have been considered “desirable” today*. The Gospels are clear: the Holy Family is exactly the kind of refugees rent asunder by our Nation’s policies.

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Sisters and brothers, some may feel that I am hijacking Christmas and robbing the holiday of its cheer… (if you do, don’t write to the Bishop! No, …perhaps you should…!)

But, I would invite us to reflect on the Christmas story as a teaching for how to relate to the present crisis in our country. Not as only Democrats or Republicans, liberal or conservative, but rather *first* as Disciples of Jesus: people who walked in darkness but have seen a great light! Jesus the Prince of Peace has shown us a way out of the darkness!

Whenever Jesus of Nazareth – his actual teachings, his lived example, his loving, liberating and life-giving way takes center stage – a *revolution of love*, *a reformation of life* and *renewal of our relationship with God each other and all creation is birthed in our midst!*

This moment in our Church and Nation, fraught with problems and complexity, is likewise pregnant with a new possibility for the Church and for those called Christians; an opportunity to reclaim our origins and true identity as Christians by reclaiming Jesus of Nazareth and *his way of love;* a Jesus who showed us what love looks like: giving up his own life not for anything he could get, but for the good, the well-being, the welfare, the salvation of others!

Yes, there is a crisis – but this crisis is an opportunity to reclaim Jesus, an opportunity for a way of being Christian *that actually looks something like Jesus of Nazareth and his way of love* to emerge as the face of Christianity in America at this time.

Sisters and brothers, *this* is the Good News of Christmas! As the Christmas Carol: *“O, Little Town of Bethlehem*” sings: Jesus, *“Be born in us today.”* When Christmas happens within and among us, we begin to see, hear and touch with the eyes, ears and hands of Christ…

“Catholic lite”? I don’t think so!

Amen!