

Christmas 2013

You may have heard of a remarkable event that happened on a French hillside on a cold, damp, muddy Christmas Eve in 1914 – at the height of World War I. It stirred little global attention until the French film, “*The Joy of Christmas*” (“*Joyeux Noel*”) was released in 2006.

Three military regiments: one French, one Scottish and one German, had been locked in a bloody battle for weeks in the dirty, dark trenches along a French hillside. Bodies of those torn apart by weapons of war were scattered around the field. These exhausted soldiers, some of them not yet out of their teens, were filled with loneliness and fear that they would never make it home; and, of course filled with “hatred” for the enemy on the other side - who they had been taught to demonize and destroy.

As Christmas Eve approached and night fell, as was custom, a truce was called: the artillery ceased being fired and there was silence.

Breaking the eerie silence, a young German soldier began singing “Silent Night” for his comrades. Then two Scottish bagpipers picked up the accompaniment; and then, the pipers began to play “Adeste Fidelis;” and then, a French tenor started to sing along with them.

Soon soldiers from each side peered over what was called: “no man’s land” and cautiously, approached one another. Slowly, tentatively, the troops lay down their weapons; and little-by-little they all stood together, listening to each other, and despite their different languages they began to truly communicate.

The troops shared photographs of their wives and children and girlfriends and families, and shared precious bits of chocolate and champagne. A priest from the Scottish Regiment offered Mass on the cold field and all three regiments joined in prayer.

On Christmas Day, men from all three armies joyfully skirmished in a soccer game. French, Scot and German soldiers then helped one another bury their dead comrades, whose corpses had been rotting between the lines. After resting, they all celebrated a dinner together, sharing the variety of foods from their different cultures.

But then, something even more miraculous happened: Late on Christmas night, the cease-fire ended and the war resumed throughout Europe, guns were fired and cannonballs released; and once again, the blood began to flow everywhere. ... Everywhere except on that little French hillside! Not one of those soldiers on the three sides could draw their weapons against the others. *They were no longer enemies*: Christmas had transformed them into brothers, who were sons and fathers with families; persons who were farmers and teachers and artists and clerks....

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My sisters and brothers, the spiritual writer and theologian, John Shea imagines the season of Christmas as a big house. The 'Christmas House' is a completely round structure with three rooms, each circling the entire building.

The outside circle is the 'Christmas-Room-of-Culture.' In this room are all the societal expressions of Christmas: shopping, gift-giving, TV specials, choral ensembles, office parties, Santa Claus, family gatherings, decorations, evergreen trees, Christmas cards, etc., etc. One way or another we are all involved in the Christmas-Room-of-Culture, and how beautiful it can be!

The middle circle is the 'Christmas-Room-of-Church' – or we could say – 'of-Religion.' In this room are all of the church activities from liturgies to sermons to music and plays that are meant to honor the birthday of Jesus.

During the Christmas season, we have to live in the 'rooms of culture and church,' there is no escaping them. Unfortunately, these two rooms often don't get along: religion is always accusing the culture of materializing and debasing Christmas. The Church often reduces Christmas to lots of talk of peace, love and joy without any mention of *why*; and at its worst, the culture looks at the Season as appreciated primarily in view of economic indicators, as the real god of Christmas – consumerism – is worship.

But, sisters and brothers, there is that third Christmas room: the inner circle, that we could call the 'Mystical or Spiritual-Room.' In this room, the birth of Christ happens in our hearts, our souls, our spiritual centers, upon which we, here at All Saints, reflected during our Advent journey. This is the room G.K. Chesterton described:

"Christmas is as if a person had found in a room in the very heart of one's own house, which one had never suspected; and seen the light from within. It is as if one found something at the back of one's own heart that betrayed one into good."

This inner, mystical room, that the culture by-and-large does not know exists, and of which the Church – to the degree that it knows it exists – is suspicious, is the very room where those soldiers on that French hillside experienced the birth of Christ in their hearts..., their souls..., their spiritual centers; and miraculously became a community – became the Body of Christ – in touch with the spark of God within them. In the very midst of that unfathomable evil, that literal Hell: the darkness of war – light broke through! As John tells us: *"... the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"*!

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My sisters and brothers, as we gather on this Christmas Eve 2013, in a *world* that still struggles in the darkness, the hopelessness of war and oppression and injustice, in a world where the vast majority live in poverty, desperately seeking the necessities to stay alive, while the minority often live in excess;

In a *Church* which still seems to make the incidentals, essential: who can and who cannot receive Communion? who can and who cannot be ordained? who can and who cannot be forgiven? while *ignoring* the essentials: love, mercy, inclusion and peace;

In a *nation* that is still hung-up on racism (*'Is Santa Claus is white or black...?' !!*), sexism, homophobia and all the other 'isms' that divide and separate people; polarization rather than cooperation; the huge disparity between the 1% and the 99%; and the list goes on...;

In *families and relationships* that sometimes seem empty and confusing... wounded...;

In *hearts* that often seem tired and heavy, barren, and dry...

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My sisters and brothers, in the midst of darkness... Christmas defies darkness, defies hopelessness, defies emptiness, defies the status quo ... and proclaims:

"Yes: I came to make all things new!"

"Yes: Swords can be beaten into plowshares; spears into pruning hooks!"

"Yes: One nation shall not raise the sword against another; nor shall they train for war again!"

"Yes: The wolf shall be the guest of the lamb!"

"Yes: Justice will flourish in our time!"

"Yes: The poor will be rescued and the lowly will be saved!"

"Yes: There will be profound peace till the moon be no more!"

"Yes: God became human – to show us how to become fully human!"

"...Thy Kingdom – Thy Realm – come, on earth, as it is in Heaven"!

Chesterton puts it well: "A religion that defies the world should have a Feast that defies the weather!" and John Shea: "I fantasize about a Christmas Card with a cover picture of light shining in darkness or an evergreen in the midst of a barren forest. Inside, the greeting will be straight-forward: "Have a defiant Christmas."!!

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So my brothers and sisters, on this Christmas, let us get in touch with the mystical, the spiritual room of Christmas, our spiritual centers – our hearts and souls; and let God, let Jesus be re-kindled, re-birthed in our midst. "Let us shed the darkness of night and put on the armor of light...;" let us once again be reborn into the people God created us to be...!

Yet, we might be thinking: can deep change really happen? For those who might be doubtful, I offer this example: Who of us would ever have imagined last Christmas Eve, that we would have a Pope Francis?! A Pope who – by all indicators – is living out of that spiritual center – the heart; a Pope, who in his Exhortation: “*The Joy of the Gospel*,” shares his vision for our Church as preferably:

...bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat.” (Mk 6:37).

Amen!