

EXPLORING A VINCENTIAN CHRISTMAS SEASON

Happily, for some years now, the “Advent Missions” I have been conducting have become more “Christmas Season” missions, as we explore the deeper meaning of not just Advent, but also Christmas and the Epiphany. Officially, Ordinary time begins after the Baptism of Jesus, but traditionally the Christmas season ends with the Presentation of Jesus in the temple, so decorations could (and perhaps should) be kept up until then, to help us truly absorb the full richness of the season.

That richness has largely been lost, as Advent is filled with Christmas celebrations, and commercially, Christmas ends with Boxing Day! Unfortunately, already sated with a month of Christmas activity, far too many faithful also put away their decorations, and their Christmas spirit, when it really should just be starting. The missions are an attempt to bring back the full season of Christmas.

Advent is meant to be a season of joyful preparation for the Incarnation. Not really a penitential season like Lent, the color is crimson, the color of longing and desire. It shares fasting with Lent, but in the spirit of preparation for feasting. It is a time to get in touch with our human restlessness and longing for fulfillment that only Jesus can bring us.

Christmas then celebrates the moment that Jesus took on our humanity through Mary’s humble faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. The Incarnation launches us on a trajectory toward Good Friday and Easter, as the crib is inextricably woven in with the cross on which Jesus revealed the depth of God’s love for our wounded humanity.

The Epiphany fulfills the meaning, themes and purpose of Advent, reveals the infant Messiah as the light of all the nations, and is an affirmation of universal salvation. At his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus took on our sinful humanity and made a commitment to give his life freely on the cross to redeem the whole world. His Presentation in the temple, which fully completes the Christmas season, alludes to the cleansing of the temple which would precipitate the crucifixion, leading to the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, completing his passion and making us temples of the Spirit.

In all of this, one statement from Gaudate Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, stands out – “There is one among you whom you do not know.” The proud and the haughty were unable to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, because of his humble birth and the hiddenness of divinity in his humanity. We who believe and are baptized into him, are challenged to recognize him in the poor and needy among us, and to serve him by responding to their needs. In this way, we also become lights to the world, and signs of hope to those around us.

Fr. Ken Forster OMI, who ministered in Kenya for some years, recounts this story: In the face of racial injustice, people of faith in South Africa began to pray together and, as a sign of their hope that one day the evil of apartheid would be overcome, lit candles and placed them in their windows so that their neighbors, the government, and the whole world would see their belief. And their government did see - they passed a law making it illegal, a politically subversive act, to light a candle and put it in your window. It was seen as a crime, as serious as owning and brandishing a gun. Even the children understood the power of this hope expressed in prayer and action.

At the height of the struggle against apartheid, the children of Soweto had a joke: “Our government,” they said, “is afraid of lit candles!” It had reason to be. Eventually those burning candles, and the prayer and hope behind them, softened hardened hearts. Morally shamed by its own people, the government conceded that apartheid was wrong and dismantled it without a war, defeated by hope, brought down by lit candles backed by prayer. The smallest light conquers darkness and cannot be quenched. To be that light to the needy, in large and small ways, is truly the task given to us Vincentians by the Christmas season.

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