



Office of the Bishop

December 25, 2023

We who are Christian celebrate Christmas because we must. On the one hand, our relationship with Jesus is ongoing—nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:31-39). He is always with us (Matthew 28:20) and has not left us orphans in this world (John 14:18). Moreover, by unceasing prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17), the Apostle Paul invites us to maintain constant, conscious contact with Christ, and even to "rejoice always" (v. 16).

On the other hand, moments come, like our own day, when we feel our hearts freezing over in terror of the present time and anxiety for the future. These are the times when we must, for sanity's sake, carve out a little space in our lives to pay attention to something other than what grips us in fear. We do not do this to distract ourselves, but as an inspired opportunity to go beyond our everyday illusions in order to pay special attention to reality *as it is*.

We honor the birth of Jesus Christ in the celebration of Christmas, then, not because God needs our worship but because *we* do. Worship is the act by which we step out of the ordinary and raise our eyes to a further horizon. When we celebrate Christmas—even in our more everyday, family ways and not just in church—we can say we join with the Magi as "those who worshipped the stars" but "were taught by a star to worship You, the Sun of Justice" (Troparion of the Nativity).

Blessed Cardinal Iuliu Hossu used to proclaim, "our faith is our life." His life in communist incarceration demonstrated his willingness to follow the star of faith that led him to the Sun, Jesus Christ, and gave him the courage to follow Jesus no matter what. If Bl. Iuliu is right, then it is our faith itself that expresses and communicates the reality we must pay attention to like no other aspect of our lives. It is that faith that leads us out of the fatal illusions and toxic distractions that the world constantly puts before us.

It is our faith that tells us the story of Christmas, and on this day, we pay special attention to the One who became one of us to draw us to Him in courage, faith, and hope. The Creator could not find a better way to invite us to relationship with the Source of all existence than to take on our nature, weak as it is, and enter into our tortured history in the most vulnerable way possible: as an infant, shortly to become a homeless migrant along with His mother and Joseph, seeking asylum from the

murderous designs of a jealous and insecure King Herod. And they found safety in Egypt, ironically the historic land of Israel's captivity.

It is our faith that reminds us, however, that this safety lasted for only a brief while. The story of Jesus begins at the manger, but it does not end there. What Jesus said and did as an adult *matters*. Jesus' journey from cradle to cross was short, and it took barely three years of Jesus' teaching and healing for the religious and political authorities of His day to find they could not tolerate Him or His teachings. Thus it is for those who worship the false stars of their own power, prestige, and privilege rather than something—or someone—greater than themselves.

And it is our faith that invites us to pay attention to our personal and individual reality *as it is*. Can we say for certain and with all honesty that it is our faith in Jesus Christ that supplies us with our values, our motivation, our reason for being? that inspires and directs our choices, moment in and moment out? It may be that, practically speaking, we too find Jesus—the real Jesus, the one who ate with tax collectors and sinners, who would not put up with hypocrisy and who died a miserable death as a criminal—perhaps we too find this Jesus intolerable and His teachings impossible to accept, let alone obey. Rather than doing ourselves and the world the honest courtesy of rejecting Him outright, we wrap ourselves in an ersatz faith, a pious disguise, the swaddling clothes of a faith that rejoices in Christmas but rejects the Sermon on the Mount, the cleansing of the temple, and the cross. If you have not yet considered these things and have not yet done a truly honest examination of your conscience, perhaps it is time you did.

Because your faith makes a difference, and not only for yourself. You affect what happens in the world around you. Multiply that by the 2.4 billion Christians in the world and you would expect that the difference we followers of Jesus make would be enormous. Is it? Two-thousand-plus years after the birth of the Savior, though, you would think that the world might look a little more saved, rather than poised among the various political, military, economic, and ecological terrors we humans seem intent on employing to bring the human experiment to an end. One might say that a long history of Christians accepting the person of Jesus Christ but rejecting his teachings may have something to do with the sad state we are in as a planet, as a species.

Can we truly say “our faith is our life” if it is not life-giving?

Permit me to read you a passage by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from a work entitled “The Coming of Jesus in our Midst”:

*We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.*

These words, written by a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was hanged for his opposition to Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist, or Nazi, regime, set in sharp relief what it means to proclaim “our faith is our life.” I pray that not many of us will have our faith put to the test as was the case for Cardinal Hossu and Pastor Bonhoeffer, but their martyrdom reminds us of what can be asked of us—or asked at least of those who “have a conscience.” As much as we would like to think that Nazi Germany and communist Romania are far from our contemporary reality, we do not have to look far to see how, in an instant, our world can be turned upside down, with violence, chaos and destruction brought upon our heads. For instance, I was in Bethlehem this summer. It was a busy place, full of pilgrims and tourists. Consider, then, how quiet it is in Bethlehem this Christmas day. By common agreement among the Christian churches of Bethlehem, today there are no public celebrations of Christ’s birth in his very birthplace. I did see one statue of the infant Jesus in a Lutheran church. Instead of a manger, baby Jesus was to be found in a pile of rubble, as if the place he was in had been bombed.

Bethlehem. There was another time when it was not so quiet there, a time when “glad tidings” were announced, accompanied by a noisy gaggle of angels:

*Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord (Luke 2:8-11 (NABre)).*

The Greek word used in the New Testament for good news, or gospel, normally referred to the arrival of a conquering military hero or a new ruler. In the ancient world it was this person who bore the title “Savior.” The birth of Jesus Christ as the savior is announced as good news for everyone, “tidings of comfort and joy,” as the Christmas carol says. And probably the shepherds interpreted what they heard as the arrival of one who would be the military hero who would throw out the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful freedom and self-government. But it is all too easy to read the headlines and ignore the rest of the story. This was not the savior the angel announced. The Kingdom of God is not about physical safety and “the good life,” still less is it about domination and

worldly power, or even political freedom and national identity. It is about righteousness and peace (Romans 14:17) and overcoming fear with love (1 John 4:18). It is about the consolation and comfort that reach beyond tragedy, about joy in the Holy Spirit that only God can give. That we fall so short of realizing this, or even believing it, is how God's coming to us in Jesus can be, in Bonhoeffer's words, "first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience."

This honest examination of conscience, necessary as it is for our spiritual survival, need not bring us to the point of despair. Indeed, it *must* not, because the Christ we worship is not only Jesus the healer, teacher, and end-of-the-world judge. He is also the naked infant in the manger, the inconvenient migrant for whom there was no room. This is why we Christians *must* celebrate Christmas. In adoring this divine child, we acknowledge God's overwhelming power packaged, as it were, in utter powerlessness and numbing poverty.

It is our faith that enables us to trust the wealth of poverty and the power of vulnerability, the power that God so desperately wanted to give us that He sent His one and only Son to show us how it works (John 3:16). The same power that brought the universe out of nothingness into existence is the power that empties tombs—not only the earthly tomb each of us will one day inhabit as Jesus Himself did, but also the tombs of our self-hatred, of our ego, of our selfishness and sin. It is precisely this power that we find swaddled in our humanity, born in the cave of our anxieties, lying in the feed-trough of our failures.

In a poem entitled "The Nativity of Christ" written by another martyr, the English Jesuit St. Robert Southwell, we read:

O dying souls, behold your living spring;  
O dazzled eyes, behold your sun of grace;  
Dull ears, attend what word this Word doth bring;  
Up, heavy hearts, with joy your joy embrace.  
From death, from dark, from deafness, from despair:  
This life, this light, this Word, this joy repairs.

We Christians *must* celebrate Christmas simply because we are Christians, begotten by God in the water of baptism, born in the Holy Spirit unto eternal life. We *must* celebrate Christmas because, you see, when we celebrate Christmas, we are also celebrating Easter, "for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is *our faith*" 1 John 5:4 (NABre).

Our faith, our little, weak faith, is the rising star that leads us to the Sun of Justice, and *He* is our life. We follow this star so that we might recognize Jesus Christ as the sunrise on the edge of our hopes, the horizon that we know is there even when the darkness makes it hard to see.

And so, a blessed, merry Christmas to you all. I pray for all the best for you in the year to come, and with St. Paul, I say to you: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" Philippians 4:4-7 (NABre).

May God grant you this peace today, now, and always, and forever and ever. Amen.

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Michael". The script is cursive and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline.

(Most Reverend) John Michael Botean, D.D.  
Bishop of the Eparchy of Saint George in Canton