

## HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF CHRISTMAS year A 2019

By the year 350, half of the population of the Roman empire was Christian, believers in a crucified middle eastern peasant preacher. 33 million adults had become followers and believers in a man who was put to death because of his claim to be the Son of God. How did Christianity supplant the powerful religious system of Rome in the first century? This statistic comes from a study of the early growth of Christianity. Our gospel reading today was written about the year 100. The study I just referred to estimates that in the year 100 there were just 7,500 Christians. That figure is a few hundred more than the Catholics who reside in this parish of ours.

The sociologist asks, 'how did this come about?' How could the power structure of an officially recognized pagan religion fail to hold off this tiny seed of a new faith?

The Romans thought of their gods as powerful entities who might come to their aid in need, but they never believed that their god loved them.

John, the beloved disciple, who wrote today's sublime Gospel passage summed up Christianity when he wrote in another letter, 'God is love'. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son'.

The God in whom we believe has revealed himself taking on our human nature in the helpless infant whom we worship on this glorious and joyful feast. 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'.

At Christmas, God doesn't enter the world as some superhero who blows away all that's bad so that all we have to do is watch. Christmas is not the latest in the 'Hunger Games' franchise. The

Incarnation of God's divine Son is a real-life event in which we are meant to be players. 'To all who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God'.

That's clear if we consider that God doesn't enter the world as an adult but as a baby, helpless, needing to be nourished and nurtured to reach adulthood. So that we might love him, God became a being whose only need is love. This infant asks to be loved by us. The vulnerable infant born this night in Bethlehem is a curious manifestation of God's power. Ultimately, though, this kind of power is the greatest of all because it, and it alone, can transform hearts. You don't soften hearts by overpowering them. You transform hearts by another kind of persuasion.<sup>1</sup>

All I know about child birth, I learnt from 'Call the Midwife'. Swiss theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar must binge on the same series: "After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back. She has awakened love in its heart. In the same way, God explains himself before us as love." Once I allow the Christ child's smile to shine on me, love awakes in my heart. Von Balthasar again: "God explains himself before us as love. Love radiates from God and instills the light of love in our hearts!"<sup>2</sup>

But the power of Christmas is not automatic. It has to be given birth, coaxed, and strengthened by acquiring virtue and good sense and every ounce of loving that makes it effective. Our task is to turn the baby Jesus into the adult Christ. We need to do that in our bodies and with our lives. We should strive, ourselves, to become "the body of Christ".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Rolheiser OMI *Awakening the Christ-Child* in Ronrolheiser.com 29 Dec 2012 accessed at <http://www.ronrolheiser.com/columnarchive> on 10 Dec 2013

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, cited by Rolheiser op.cit.

<sup>3</sup> Rolheiser op.cit.

Becoming the body of Christ entails the recognition that Christmas is not only about the baby Jesus, but about those for whom he entered our existence – the poor, the wounded, the broken-hearted, and indeed all of us.

How better can we celebrate Christmas than by being attentive to our family and friends who struggle at this time of year. When the shopping, baking, wrapping, cards are all done, people are waiting not for the presents, but for love, for a smile from the heart.

We can be attentive to those who like St Joseph struggle and doubt; we can write specially to our fellow student whose parent has died; we can phone the lonely uncle who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Around the table, we can ask ourselves who most needs my love? Is it my son who has just broken up with his girl friend? Is it my ageing parent who is increasingly frustrated with the difficulty of doing what once came easily to do? <sup>4</sup> Is it my sibling who has known the rejection and sense of failure that comes with separation or divorce?<sup>5</sup>

Jesus would want us to be the grown Christ who gives the comfort of the infant Christ. He knew rejection and failure, bodily weakness and pain. He is not unconcerned. He is with us – in us! But with us IN us! With us in US!

Let us renew our commitment to our faith in Jesus Christ. Let our 6,000 member parish offer the opportunity of faith simply by the consistency of our selfless love. The force of love in small Christian communities just like ours - remember there were 7,500 Christians at

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<sup>4</sup> George M Smiga *Another Christmas Story. December 19, 2010* in [www.buildingontheword.org/homilies/cycle-a/a-4th-Sunday-of-Advent/](http://www.buildingontheword.org/homilies/cycle-a/a-4th-Sunday-of-Advent/) accessed 20 Dec 2013

<sup>5</sup> George M Smiga *Emmanuel December 18, 2004* in [www.buildingontheword.org/homilies/cycle-a/a-4th-Sunday-of-Advent/](http://www.buildingontheword.org/homilies/cycle-a/a-4th-Sunday-of-Advent/) accessed 20 Dec 2013

the end of the first century - led to the conversion of 33 million adults in less than 300 years.

In the words of Pope Francis, we are the ones who celebrate with grateful hearts today that “God himself has pitched his tent with us. Earth is no longer merely a ‘vale of tears’. .. The great gift of Bethlehem is the spiritual energy that helps us not to collapse under the weight of our labours, our desperation, and our sorrows ... The birth of Jesus is the good news that God loves us immensely and individually.”<sup>6</sup>

It is as if we come back at Christmas to the crib of life to start over again ... full of hope that we can learn what it takes to live well, grow to full stature of soul and spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

Let us pray on this night to Mary the Mother of God “to help us ... recognize in the face of our neighbor the image of the Son of God made man.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis loc.cit.

<sup>7</sup> Sr Joan Chittister OSB cited in Rolheiser loc.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis loc.cit.