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Archbishop Borders' Christmas message

"The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light." (Isaiah 9.1)

We will hear these words of the prophet Isaiah proclaimed in the first reading at Midnight Mass. When the prophets speak out they are often addressing situations that are difficult: the people are in exile or their land is ravaged and overrun by conquering armies. The temple has been desecrated and the prevailing attitude is one of despair. In this situation, the prophet's basic attitude is one of encouragement. In the midst of the darkness, a light is shining. "Don't be overwhelmed by the evil that surrounds you," the prophet cautions. A Savior is coming to set things right.

John the Evangelist faced a similar situation when he wrote his Gospel and spoke of the Word of God as a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.

The world into which Jesus was born nearly two thousand years ago was, in one sense at least, not too terribly different from our own today. The darkness is still with us. The legendary decadence of the Roman empire finds its contemporary counterpart in the violation of human rights so evident everywhere we look, not only in countries run by totalitarian governments of one extreme or the other, but even in our own nation. We have become somewhat indifferent to suffering in all its forms. And little wonder that this is the case when the entertainment and news media serves up daily doses of sex and violence in lavish portions.

The mystery of the Incarnation tells us that our God so loved this world that even with all its shortcomings, with all its sinfulness, with all its failings, He still wanted to be identified with it. He became one of us and entered fully into the human struggle for survival, for growth and for dignity. The child that was born in Bethlehem and grew up to be Jesus of Nazareth knew what it meant to be cold, to be hungry, to be sick and lonely. He experienced our sufferings and he experienced our death. But on the other hand, he knew the warmth of his parents' love, the genuine affection of his followers, the conviviality of meals shared with friends and finally, and most importantly, the new life given by His Father in the Resurrection.

The Paschal mystery, like the mystery of the Incarnation, goes on and

we are continually invited to enter into it. To the extent that we accept what is inevitably a part of our humanity: its weakness, even its sinfulness, its constant struggle to grow greater and to become better, to that extent we also enter into the process that is ever so slowly transforming this world of ours into the Kingdom of God.

I find it encouraging at this Christmas time to look around and see that, in spite of the darkness, there is much light. Jesus did not promise, you know, that the darkness would go away, only that it would never overpower the light. There are many people of the light, sharing their food with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and generally caring for those in need. There is more than one Mother Teresa in this world, and that makes me feel very good.

I am encouraged, too, by the way the American Bishops have been speaking out on social issues, both right-to-life issues like nuclear war, abortion, and the death penalty, and economic issues like poverty (which is also a life issue) and the distribution of the world's goods. It's ironic to think that we were once accused of living in splendid isolation from the practical problems of everyday life, but now, when we raise our concerned voices in protest, like the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel of old, we are told to go back to our pulpits and preach prayer and meek submission to the status quo. Well, they said the same thing to Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel.

Like those prophets, we not only protest what we see as wrong, we also offer hope. We speak of light shining in the darkness: the message of Jesus lived by committed Christians and a challenge to all who seek to understand the meaning of life and the reality of God's love.

My prayer for you this Christmas is that you will feel that love, that you will share it with others and so become a leaven in our society until it grows to the fullness of freedom, justice and peace.

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