

Catholic Review

12.24.86

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Waking up to the spirit of Christmas

"Awake, mankind! For your sake God has become man! Awake you who sleep, rise up from the dead, and Christ will enlighten you. I tell you again, for your sake, God became man."

(from a sermon by St. Augustine)

With these words, St. Augustine called his people to realize what it was they came together to celebrate in the early hours of Christmas. His words are a plea to be alert to the mystery which confronts us this day.

Christmas is a time that focuses on the deepest desires of the human race. It is these desires that account for the special feelings associated with this feast. Christmas evokes our deepest longings for peace, universal human solidarity, the need for wholeness and healing in our personal lives, and for communion with God.

In our experience of these desires, however, there is a painful duality. On the one hand, we know the awesome, heartwrenching force of these desires. On the other hand, we are painfully aware of the extent to which they are unfulfilled or frustrated.

These desires and longings come from such a deep part of ourselves that they constitute a fundamental bond between ourselves and all other people. They are the voice of the collective human heart that comes forth from universal suffering and cries out for universal peace. Yet because of the ways in which sin has frustrated the fulfillment of these longings, when they erupt from within us, it is often as an open sore.

Consequently, we often try to blunt the emergence and experience of these longings — in effect to blunt the impact of Christmas. There are many ways we use to anesthetize ourselves to the spiritual power and depth of this feast, which has become a cultural celebration easily removed from the real meaning of its origins.

We often get lost in a flurry of activity, and immerse ourselves in the commercialization of Christmas. In effect, for so many people, Christmas is often celebrated in a stupor, trying to forget what it calls us to remember about the deepest longings of our hearts.

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it calls us to remember about the deepest longings of our hearts.

But to those who so fall asleep, the words of St. Augustine come to us across the centuries, "Wake up!" For our sakes the One who is the source of our desires has taken on our flesh and life in order that our hearts may find what they seek. This is the hope that the church proclaims in Christmas.

It is a proclamation of a mystery in which God chose to do the most unthinkable thing that God could do — to become a human being, to become one of us. "God so loved the world that he sent his only son

Because of the power of that mystery, we can proclaim to all whose hearts are broken and whose hopes are dashed: "Our tears have also been shed by the Lord; our dreams have also been dreamt by God." Because of that divine miracle of love, God is at work in us now doing what we cannot do for ourselves. He seeks to lead us to where our hearts can find rest in the One who is the source of their longing.

Thus, when we read again this Christmas of the angels' proclamation of God's favor upon our sinful world, what we are called to is not a sentimental remembrance of a baby's birth. Rather, we are called to cherish and work for our dreams of peace and human solidarity, for the Lord has promised that evil shall not triumph. We are called to experience the transcendent presence of God in the ordinary affairs of our lives and relationships, for of such as this the Lord has promised to fashion a kingdom.

For those willing to hear the Christmas gospel in this spirit, the words of Augustine indeed have much meaning and joy: "Wake up!" Let your desires and hopes come forth, because for our sake, God became man!"

May the peace of the Risen Christ fill your hearts this Christmas and throughout the coming year!

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