

The Christmas Spirit

by MARIO J. PAREDES



A characteristic of our time, society, and postmodern culture is the ignorance, loss, and emptying of the original and primary meanings, truths, and essences of everything we live in our daily lives. For example, we listen to folk music from different regions of the world without ever having attended the festivals that give rise to the melodies, without knowing where the traditions were born, and the names of the instruments used, etc. In our metropolises, children and young people consume all kinds of dairy products without ever having approached a living cow, etc. Reality has ceased to be what it was and has become a self-serving virtual reality—one that is biased and manipulated. This happens especially during the Christmas festivities that men and women over much of the planet celebrate every year.

We celebrate Christmas, but it has been drained of its original meaning. In December, we buy, sell, give away, premiere, meet, eat, share, splurge, and send messages. There are lights and music, trees and gifts, trips and vacations, etc., but we no longer know the “why” of this annual frenzy, of this unusual desire to be better human beings, of these sudden manifestations of joy or collective hysteria, commercialized and seemingly without motives or for unknown reasons.

The word, “Christmas,” which denotes the Christmas season, evokes Christ. This word has been falling into disuse and is rapidly being replaced by the word “Holidays,” equivalent to vacations, days of recess, rest, public holidays, etc.

I think it is right that we rejoice and try to bring about a better human coexistence, even if only for a few weeks a year. I am not against celebrations or much-needed rest. However, it seems to me better if these celebrations are lived knowing why they arose in the history of Christianity and humanity. And, better still, it seems urgent that, especially for those of us who call ourselves “Christians,” that is, the disciples of Christ, that we celebrate and commemorate, that is, we remind ourselves of the source event that, through the birth and person of Jesus of Nazareth, constitutes the reason for Christmas.

Because what we remember annually at Christmas is, as his word indicates, the birth or birthday of Jesus Christ, the son of a carpenter and fisherman from Nazareth who, with his life project consistently manifested in deeds and words, became Good News and a model of humanity for every man and woman who comes to this world. His message, his preaching, all his teaching supported by his works, to invite us to live as brothers and sisters while recognizing that we are children of the

same God and Creator whom we can confidently regard as a good Father, that he is the “way, the truth, and the life” that all humanity can approach if we want better human beings, fraternal relationships, kinder and more caring communities, and a world for justice in peace.

Such is the measure of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth for humanity that, minute by minute, we count history in years marked before and after his birth. The greatness and importance of his call continue today, more than two thousand years after his birth, summoning millions of men and women in the world to follow him in his lifestyle and ideals, confessing him the Son of God. His teaching is valid and current today and resonates as urgent and necessary in the hearts of all: Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers, for men and women of all races, creeds, social conditions, cardinal points, and cultures.

So, the figure of Jesus, his life and work, his role in human history are the reason why Christmas exists. Jesus of Nazareth is the heart of Christmas; the memory of his birth more than justifies the celebration of Christmas in all corners of the earth. And even if, in the world, we do not all call ourselves “Christians,” even if commerce and advertising try to remove the little boy from the manger of the social scene, even if we pretend to be ignorant, the “Christmas spirit” arrives every year in a thousand ways to our lives and families, to our tables and corners. It is present in lights and gifts, at family parties, and in all trips and encounters. The “Spirit of Christmas” must endure, beyond December, throughout the year, every day of our lives. The “Spirit of Christmas” happens when we can open our minds, hearts, and hands to recognize ourselves as brothers and sisters, to love, serve, and forgive each other. The “Christmas Spirit” occurs when—according to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth—we build, through our deeds and words, through our daily attitudes, human relationships, and social space-times that are more generous, more equitable, more honest, and more human.

So, my best wish to all of you is that the “Christmas spirit” will endure and be with us at this time and always. Merry Christmas!

Mario J. Paredes, CEO of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians — most of them primary physicians — serving nearly one million of New York City’s most vulnerable Medicaid patients.