

CHRISTMAS, 2014

By now we are probably all getting used to the kind of surprise that Pope Francis springs from time to time, but one of the greatest was surely the one he caused on Monday of this week in his annual Christmas address to the cardinals who compose the Roman Curia, that is, the men responsible for working in such bodies as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Congregation for Bishops, or the Congregation for Divine Worship. The talk was billed as a “Christmas greeting,” but its main content was a list of fifteen ailments that Pope Francis said has infected a number of these cardinals. One of these illnesses is what he called “spiritual Alzheimer’s,” by which he meant the disease of those who have “forgotten their encounter with the Lord ... and depend completely on their passions, whims, and manias.” Another is what he termed “existential schizophrenia,” a sickness that he said “affects those who, abandoning pastoral service, limit themselves to bureaucratic work, losing contact with reality and [real] people.” A rare Christmas greeting indeed, since these annual talks have usually been filled with platitudes about the joy that should fill our hearts as we contemplate the infant Jesus lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes and being visited by shepherds sent to the crib by exultant angels from on high.

I bring this up for two reasons: first, because it would be salutary for each of us to reflect on ways in which those two ailments or any of the other thirteen might infect us as well (the whole list is readily available on the Internet), and second because any speech or address at Christmastime, whether it be a papal greeting or a homily like mine, should avoid mindless platitudes and feel-good sentimentality. I certainly don’t intend to chide you the way Pope Francis chided the curial cardinals, but I do very much want to affirm a few sobering sentences that I read the other day from a prominent Catholic writer who said that “As Christians, we can gain real access to the reality and the meaning of Christmas only by starting from the cross and

resurrection.... Christmas may remain the lovely feast of a gracious child, but ... [it] is the [earthly] beginning of a man who, like us, would have to die in an act that was the most profound act of his faith and obedience.... Christmas is the start of this redeeming death ... [and] not a cheerful feast to make us forget for a while the mystery of our destiny.”¹

Now one way to stay mindful of our destiny is surely to reflect on one of the principal themes of Christmas, one that shows up a couple times in our readings for this Mass. The first reading, from the prophet Isaiah, says that the child born to us, whom we understand as Jesus, is one on whom dominion rests, one who confirms and sustains this dominion “by judgment and justice” and who is to be called “Prince of Peace.” This same theme of peace recurs at the very end of our Gospel reading, where the angels are said to sing praises to God in the highest and “on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” All of this, of course, foreshadows one of the Beatitudes that Jesus himself proclaimed about thirty years later in the words, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” and this, in turn, reminds those of us who follow the way of St. Benedict that the Benedictine motto is the Latin word *Pax*, meaning peace. I will comment on this in two ways, first on a more individual level, then from a societal or global perspective.

In our ordinary day-to-day life, there are many occurrences that threaten the peace that should prevail among us. Sometimes this is a matter of another’s having some object that we want for ourselves (a common cause of quarreling among children) or it might be that someone’s words or actions are seriously at odds with what we think or what we’re doing. In such instances, a peaceful resolution usually requires at least one party—ideally both—to make some concession, some sacrifice. This does not necessarily come easily, especially when one of us really is in the right and is suffering some injustice. St. Benedict, with his usual realism, was

quite aware of this possibility when he wrote his monastic rule, for in its longest chapter he says that one of the steps of humility is climbed when “under difficult, unfavorable, or even unjust circumstances one’s heart quietly embraces suffering and endures it without weakening or seeking escape.... In truth, [he goes on to say,] those who are patient amid hardships and unjust treatment are fulfilling the Lord’s command [when he said], ‘When struck on one cheek they turn the other, when deprived of their coat, they offer their cloak also; when pressed into service for one mile, they go two.’ With the Apostle Paul, they bear with ‘false brothers, endure persecution, and bless those who curse them.’” Tough language, that, altogether contrary to what many people would consider common sense, but it’s an essential part of Jesus’ teaching. This does not mean that one ought never to stand up for one’s rights and seek justice, but it surely does mean that this ought not always be our first inclination, our instinctive mindset. Such discipleship absolutely requires faith in God, for only those “who are open to God and to their own fulfillment in God do not have to accept [or provoke] an all-out conflict when they are faced with the need [or possibility] of sacrifice for the sake of peace.”²

What I have just said about personal relations on a one-to-one level is also true in society at large, including international relations. A huge amount of prudence is required here, for there are absolutely times when concessions only make matters worse. Everyone understands now what Winston Churchill almost alone understood in 1938, that appeasing Hitler over Czechoslovakia was terribly misguided. Even in that case, however, taking a principled stand would not necessarily have led to armed intervention on the part of Britain and France. While there are certainly times when military force is called for, even then the traditional teaching about just war should be followed, which means among other things that war ought only be a truly last resort. I give just one example. We have all been reading in recent weeks and months about the

precipitous decline in the number of Christians in the Middle East, many of them having been persecuted and killed, others having left that part of the world to avoid persecution, torture, or the very loss of their life. One can legitimately blame a group like ISIS for much of this, but if one goes back further to examine some of the more distant roots of the problem, I think we would have to agree with the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Sako of Baghdad, who has accused our own country “of being ‘indirectly responsible’ for the exodus of one of the world’s most ancient Christian communities due to the chaos caused by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, for in the sectarian warfare and lawlessness that followed the outbreak of that war, Christians were often caught in the crossfire or targeted for kidnapping.”³ I am willing to accept that our leaders at the time thought they were doing the right thing, but the rush to arms in the wake of faulty intelligence has had terrible consequences in that part of the world. One of the most deplorable attempts at comedy I have ever seen was a short video made somewhat later by President Bush, to be viewed at some affair like the annual Touchdown Club banquet. In it, the president was shown crawling around the floor of the Oval Office, supposedly looking beneath and behind furniture for the weapons of mass destruction that were never found in Iraq. I hope no one laughed when that was shown at the banquet.

Where does that leave us, who are faced with far less momentous issues but are no less called to be peacemakers in our own way? Perhaps most of all it is a matter of really taking to heart a prayer that the priest says at every celebration of the Eucharist, even though the rubrics say that it is to be said quietly. As he pours a few drops of water into the chalice at the offertory, he prays: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” This is a bold request, based on a tremendous promise found already in the Second Letter of St. Peter: that we are indeed called to

share in the divine nature. This is why, after the incensation of the gifts at the offertory, all of us are incensed as well, in recognition of the Lord dwelling within us, for as Jesus said, “If anyone love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come and make our abode in him.” To recognize this not only in ourselves but in others is one of the best ways to help us treat one another with the care and concern that the Lord has for each of us. To live in this way is how to celebrate Christmas best of all.

1 Karl Rahner, "Understanding Christmas," *Theological Investigations* 21, trans. Joseph Donceel, S.J. and Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 140-41.

2 Karl Rahner, "The Theological Dimension of Peace," *Theological Investigations* 22, trans. Joseph Donceel, S.J. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 41.

3 Loveday Morris, "Bleak holiday for Baghdad's Christians," *Washington Post*, Dec. 23, 2014.