

2017 – Mass of Christmas Day

Due to the generosity of some gracious benefactors the friary has a live Christmas tree; a large one that reaches all the way to the ceiling. It arrived while we were all at our province assembly, and Mike had it put up by the time we got back.

Even without lights it already started working its effect: this tree had been grown, not manufactured; it smelled like a Christmas tree and you had to water it. It could already command attention by its greenness and life. True, at some point in the not-too-distant future, we will be vacuuming up its needles, but for the moment it stands as a symbol of life in the midst of what is only made by human hands.

Now it has lights, thanks to Friar Savio, and I catch myself sometimes looking out the window from the parish office building to see if I can see it shining in the front parlor.

A Christmas tree with lights shining, especially in the dark night, can be mesmerizing. We are drawn to it. Gazing at it frees our minds to make connections that aren't normally available. It's working as a symbol, conveying to us a message and meaning that carries us into the future.

The scriptures help us make the connection in more linear terms of that symbol to the larger reality we celebrate at Christmas. John writes in his gospel that Jesus brought life; the kind of life that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

I think that's an important characteristic of how the Christmas tree works. It's in its element when it

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works as a beacon in the darkness, not allowing the night to overwhelm us, but bolstering our hope.

The Christmas tree, working as a symbol, points to an inner light, a tree of lights inside the house of our being, that invites people to come close and ponder its beauty.

We notice the light because it is contrasted with an outer darkness. And it defies the darkness, refusing to allow the outer world to dictate the terms of existence.

Although we do not always reflect on it, there is an edge to Christmas, an attitude of defiance. No matter how severe the outer world is—darkness and barrenness—it cannot snuff out the light or wither the greenness.

Christmas is about taking a proactive stance to the sin of the world, to defy its power with hope and compassion and justice. God sent his son into the midst of a dark world, full of confidence that it would not get the best of him, even if it hung him up on a cross.

We defy the powers of darkness by remembering the light and life symbolized by the Christmas tree, and letting ourselves be strengthened by its presence.

I read a story in the paper yesterday that is a perfect example of the power of Christmas to shine in the darkness. Many people in Puerto Rico are still without power, and so, quite literally are combating the darkness of life. One was quoted as saying,

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“I couldn’t allow the pessimism that is everywhere, that is covering us, to also wither the culture, the traditions,” said one woman who attended a parranda, a traditional get-together to sing carols. “We bring our happiness.”

What is needed for a life that defies the darkness is a strength, not give once for all, but renewed, revitalized, brought back into our minds and hearts when it is almost extinguished.

Can you feel the effects of what Christmas does to us? How it revitalizes our hope? Our New Year’s resolutions really are the result of the energizing power of this holy season, when we take in the message of the liveliness and light of God, and commit ourselves to being ourselves lights shining in the darkness with the love of God and the Spirit of Jesus.