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+DiNoia: Christmas & Newtown

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 26, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

It has been commented upon by several people that, this year, the death of the Holy Innocents came before Christmas and that for many, the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut made it difficult for people to feel the usual joy we associate with this season. Here is the text of a sermon delivered this past Sunday, at the National Shrine here in Washington, by Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia, O.P., that powerfully connects the tragedy and the holiday:

Brothers and sisters in Christ. A week ago today, in St. Rose of Lima Church in Newtown, Connecticut, the Dominican Fr. Peter John Cameron opened his homily with the startling words: ?Never before has the Massacre of the Holy Innocents taken place before the Birth of Christ. But that is what has happened in Newtown.? At another point in his homily he mentioned that he had run into a man that morning who reported that someone had said to him that Christmas should be canceled this year. ?No,? Fr. Cameron declared, ?Christmas will not be canceled! We need Christmas more than ever! Because the only way that we can make sense of this horror is if God himself becomes flesh and comes to dwell among us as our Friend. We need the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst to rescue us from this misery.?

All of us are stunned by the horror of Newtown and weighed down with the misery of it. When I visited my optometrist this week, he was so overcome with emotion that he could hardly speak. So many people feel this way. An overwhelming sorrow fills all our hearts. The massacre of the Holy Innocents has happened before Christmas this year, but only the mystery of Christmas makes it possible to cope with it. How can that be possible?

Micah speaks to us today of the one whose ?greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth.? These words of prophecy are echoed in the rarely sung third verse of ?Joy to the World?: ?No more let sins and sorrows grow, / Nor thorns infest the ground; / He comes to make His blessings flow / Far as the curse is found, / Far as the curse is found.?

Far as the curse is found. Now there?s a flash of biblical Christian realism with which to face the horror and misery we feel. Looking at things with the eyes of faith, terrible tragedies, like Newtown and Columbine and Stockholm, remind us of the radical peril that surrounds human existence. There was mental illness involved in these acts of horrific violence. But there was also cunning and malice. In Newtown perhaps this disturbed and hurting young man was jealous of the affection that his mother had shown for her students. We don?t know. An extreme and mentally unbalanced response, but also an appallingly evil act. We want to throw medicines, and programs, and therapies, and gun control at these horrors. And, naturally, these measures are indispensable. But the curse finds a way to dodge our feeble remedies, and comes out shooting with semi-automatic weapons.

Like the sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings of which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks today, our remedies cannot get at the root of the problem. By God?s will, ?we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all??the divine remedy for the evils that threaten us. For he has come to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

For this child, whose coming we will soon celebrate, the road that begins in Bethlehem continues on to Golgotha, and, beyond to glory. The feast of the Nativity of Our Lord in the flesh celebrates the glory of the champion of our salvation. But between the Nativity and the glory there was the Cross, the passion and the death of our precious Savior. With Mary on Christmas night we will joyfully gaze on the child over whose ruined body we shall later shed bitter tears. The Father of heaven and earth did not hesitate to allow his only-begotten Son to become the Son of Mary in order to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

We find ourselves at the absolute center of the Christmas mystery. What Mary and Joseph, the angels and archangels, the shepherds and now, brothers and sisters in Christ, all of us?what they and we behold with nearly breathless wonder is the birth of the one who, taking on our humanity, will lay down his life for us in the Sacrifice of the Cross so that we can become sharers in his divinity. This wonderful exchange restores us to life, making possible things otherwise completely beyond our reach and imagination: namely, participation in the divine life, and forgiveness and healing of our sins.

Born into our human nature, Christ makes it possible for us to be reborn as his brothers and sisters in the communion of Trinitarian love. By assuming our human frailty, the sinless One is victorious within the very arena of earthly existence where we lay under the curse, condemned to sin and death. Not from outside, but from within the arena of human existence, he comes to make his blessings flow. Like a flowing river, the uncontainable surge of his grace streams into every crevice and corner of our lives sweeping away our sins and sorrows, and all the thorns that infect the ground. How far? Far as the curse is found, deep into the dark fissures of our hearts where the thorns of envy and malice, pride and lust, greed, hatred and despair would find a niche and thrive. How far then do his blessings flow? As far as the curse is found.

But we must embrace these blessings and shake off the attachments to sin that keep us mired in the realm of the curse. We must strive to keep our hearts pure, to confess our sins regularly, not just twice a year in Advent and Lent, so that we allow the devil no point of entry into our hearts and minds. We cannot change the world. We cannot prevent tragedies like Newtown from recurring. But we can open our hearts to the Christmas grace.

Last Thursday evening I joined the Dominican friars in singing Christmas carols at the corner of 12th and G Streets. At a certain point, a homeless woman stopped and sang a couple of carols along with us, assuring us that she could sing alto or base. We were at the end of our caroling, and ready to leave. Her companion was waving her away from this strange group of twenty-odd black and white robed friars, but she ignored him. She had one request before we parted ways. Would we sing ?Silent Night? for Newtown? When we had done so, she nodded, turning away and smiling, and said: ?For Newtown.? She understands the real meaning of Christmas, I thought.

Like this good woman, the Holy Mother of God would, in effect, be homeless on Christmas night, prefiguring the terrible day on Golgotha when her son, naked to the world, would give his life for us. Today we see her visiting Elizabeth whose son silently greets the Savior of the world by leaping in her womb. My brothers and sisters in Christ, this Christmas, may we be one with Mary, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, and that cheerful homeless lady in faith, hope and love, understanding?even in the midst of mourning the massacre of the Holy Innocents that has befallen us before the birth of Christ?that he comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.

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