

Solemnity of the Epiphany
January 2, 2011

“Christ shall give you light.” Christianity is constructed on a conviction enshrined in the Prologue of John’s Gospel: “The true light that enlightens every man and woman was coming into the world.” *Every* man and woman. That is why the Church this day borrows Isaiah’s vision of world-wide belief, the colorful picture he drew of people from the Arabian peninsula associated with Abraham and the earliest ancestors, and welcomes it into her liturgy for the Epiphany, touches it to Jesus.

But what you did *not* hear today was the gloom before the glory. Isaiah the prophet continues to protest that “justice is far from us.” He might even suggest that we “walk in gloom.” As first pastor of Christ Our Hope Church, I want to give an account of the hope that is in me. We forget what the Second Vatican Council saw so clearly: “The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping.” Our hands.

Hope is not the first word that springs to mind these days as we contemplate the state of our country or church. Consider the country. Whatever happened to that amazing outpouring of hope all over the United States, even around the globe, which began in November 2008 and reached a crescendo in January of 2009? Whether you supported Barack Obama or not, it was impossible not to be caught up in the elation of that inauguration, in the symbolism of a young African American family moving into the White House, in a bright, articulate and passionate leader with an agenda for change that coincided so much with our own Catholic social teachings on poverty and health care and immigration and education. It was a hope-filled and heady agenda.

But the economic crisis only deepened and it has a human face for us: our family members, our neighbors, our friends, indeed some of us sitting in this very church, who have lost jobs or houses or savings or a sense of security in these unnerving times. Even such a bright and charismatic president can’t turn the ship of state around fast enough or get his congress to talk to one another for the sake of the common good.

We move now to the Church, the risen Body of Christ, holiness, light, life, full of grace and truth. I was a seminarian studying in Rome at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. There was new life and there was energy and there was an outpouring of hope. Fast forward to the present. The fall-out from sexual abuse has been intense and has rocked the church to its foundations. The number of practicing Catholics in the US has dwindled over the last several decades. The second largest church in the United States after the Catholic Church itself is former Catholics. I find that astonishing. Let's call it the laity shortage – people simply drifting away in search of life elsewhere. And who is asking why? There is an amazing lack of civility among us. We are mirroring the culture in our country, the shift from dialogue to diatribe.

Where do we find reason for hope? Parish communities all over the country experiencing a completely transformed liturgy: a vastly augmented Lectionary for Sundays and weekdays; the restoration of the RCIA; recovery of pastoral care of the sick; the development of communal rites of reconciliation; and the recovery of the centrality of Sunday and the major feasts and seasons of the liturgical year. The restoration of the ancient structure of word and sacrament; the homily; the prayers of the faithful; the exchange of peace; and communion under both bread and wine.

Churches, like Christ Our Hope, are renovated. Vast throngs of lay women and men are trained in ministries. One can't regularly proclaim the word, or minister the cup, or take communion to the sick, or lead the assembly in sung prayer, or accompany youth and young adults without being personally and radically changed. This is an amazing array of blessings, and an amazing foundation upon which to ground our hope for the future. We have a living and life-giving harvest from Vatican II.

“Full, conscious and active participation.” We participate in the priestly work of Christ on behalf of peace and justice in the world. We participate in the Trinitarian life of God and thus in God's work in human history. We are bound together with one another. We share a common mandate to lay down our lives for the life of the world.

We can make a decision, now, this very day, to think, study and pray about our own active participation in worship, knowing the liturgy will place whole new demands on us. Eucharist creates a new set of relationships to Christ, to the Church and to the world. We can listen carefully and thoughtfully to newer generations among us who have a deep thirst for spirituality. We can choose to keep a sense of humor. Living in hope is itself a matter of choice. We may choose to criticize and denounce others, or we may choose to announce a message of hope.

There you have it. A series of concrete choices we can make now in order to realize the future we long for. When we gather for worship we rehearse the vision and the values of the reign of God. Each liturgy is preparation for the great end-time banquet in heaven. That is why Epiphany is of such crucial importance. The three strangers from the East do not *add* anything to the basic Christmas story. But they do serve to *remind* us of something the “little town of Bethlehem” might possibly obscure. Jesus was indeed born of a Jewish girl. He did indeed come first to “the house of Israel.” But it is “every man and woman” he came to enlighten, to live for and die for and rise for. That is why we live in hope.

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