

I often think that the double consonants of the greeting “Merry Christmas” is off by one place: perhaps it should be “Messy Christmas.” Okay, that is not a wish for someone as much as an accurate description of the Feast. I do so love the Feasts of Christmas (remember – Christmas is not a day but an OCTAVE – eight days of saints and celebration – Sts. Stephen, John, Holy Innocents, Thomas Becket, the Holy Family, Mary, Mother of God!). At the same time, Christmastide always brings humanity’s messiness with it – Saskatchewan flu season, painful absences, financial worries, balancing the tensions of family life. To boot, as every pastor knows, the weeks after Christmas will see an uptick in funerals. But I do not let any of this Grinchify the days – messiness is what Christmas should be ... Because it was precisely in the messiness of our humanity that Emmanuel, God-with-Us, embraced.

There is a Basque tradition that captures this in a raw way. My parish celebrates a St. Nicholas Party at which *Tio Caca* shows up. To the delight of the children, old *Uncle Poopoo* the donkey arrives on his way to get Mary at Nazareth. He needs encouragement, being an oldster, and when the children hit him with a stick – out pops a bag of candy from his backside. The kids love it, the parents think it is strange, and I am thrilled that the tradition continues to pass on the good news: in the midst of our stinky world, Our Saviour is Born of the Virgin! God is with us in our mess so that we can be with him in His Glory. That is what the Angels sing. The Psalmist’s praise is the Christmas message:

*“Where can I run from you love? If I climb to the Heavens you are there,  
if I sink to the underworld, behold you are there”* (Psalm 139)

God-is-with-us! Jesus is *God-with us!*

Secularized Christmas is running out of steam, it seems to me. How many RomCom films on the Hallmark channel need to be made to give a sentimental answer to the “*true meaning of Christmas*”? Clearly it isn’t working. Sentiment never does. The polls are frightening – 40% of Canadians feel lonely. A third of the world’s population is lonely. The question that haunts the human person: “*Who loves me?*” seems to have no answer for a growing number of persons – especially in places of affluence.

Catholic Schools are a precious way that God – who hears the cry of His people – responds. Catholic Schools hand on the message that saves and heals and lifts up hearts in ways that *no social ideology or political strategy or marketing campaign* cannot ever approach. The Message is Jesus Christ! God-with-us-loving-us. Each of us. Bringing us into a community of saints and sinners and angels: the Holy Church. More than being “created by God in God’s image, male and female” we are loved by *name* by Jesus who has come into our messy world as the Gate of Heaven.

“Who loves me?” asks every person in our schools. The Christmas Answer rings out every day: “GOD LOVES YOU”, “JESUS LOVES YOU” God-is with-you.

*“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works;”* (Psalm 139)

This will be difficult Christmas for a precious family in our Catholic Schools System here in Saskatoon. One of our principals – an amazing faith leader whom I have known since he was in College – lost his son, his niece, and his brother in a tragic accident on a lake several weeks ago. His

family is deeply woven into our Church's schools. I know that there are all kinds of "trauma and grief" counsellors around ... but what can one say before such a situation? We Catholics say what our parents, our grandparents, and our martyr ancestors have said for centuries: God-is-with-us. The Cathedral was full to bursting with mourning people who came together to say the only thing that is worth saying: "Jesus". Jesus is with you, with us. We keep on saying this to Andrew and his family because in the moments of utter loneliness we are never alone: Jesus is with us. Jesus makes us a messy family who are with each other in God. Jesus makes us a Church. A Church that proclaims over and over the answer to the question: *who loves me?*

*"How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!*

*I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you."* (Psalm 139)

Christmas messiness gives us the vessel for merriment. Our humanity has been filled up with God. And God is still and will always be with us.

Merry Christmas.

