



## THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

600 REED ROAD, SUITE 102, BROOMALL, PA 19008 (215) 877-2660 (215) 877-2688 FAX NCBCENTER.ORG

### **The Lasting Message of Christmas Joy**

Every Christmas season we hear “Joy to the World” proclaimed in song while painfully aware of our very broken world. And we do rejoice that “the Lord is come” and fervently wish that every heart would open itself to His truth and grace. The Church gives us a great blessing through an extended Christmas season that goes on intensely for 12 days to January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, which celebrates the coming of the Magi to honor the Christ Child. The Magi represent the fact that Jesus was not just the Jewish Messiah but a Savior for the Gentiles as well. Then the festive time extends to the next Sunday celebrating the Baptism of Our Lord, which varies every year. Finally, there is a longstanding tradition of keeping the Christmas season until Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, on February 2, a full 40 days after Christmas.

Joy is strangely compatible with suffering. In fact, adverse conditions only seem to make Christmas more poignantly beautiful. Films love to portray Christmas in the midst of the tragedy of war. The contrast pulls at our heartstrings. There was a famous [Christmas Truce](#) in 1914 a few months after the start of World War I. At different places along the front ceasefires were arranged to bury the dead, but on Christmas Eve some of the trenches were so close to each other that they could hear each other’s carols. Imagine the haunting beauty of “Silent Night” wafting across no man’s-land from the German side. Almost irresistibly it was picked up in two tongues and sung in unison. Soldiers on each side deeply desired that heavenly peace unattainable here below.

Yes, there is reason that Christmas is the favorite time of the year of more than just little children. It provides hope in a world that is always full of suffering and even despair. There is nothing as innocent and harmless as a little child. I believe that the terrible frenzy of the partisans of abortion has a demonic character to it. Satan is most pleased when what is sacred and innocent is defiled or killed. The joy and beauty of the new creation of a baby shows both God’s power and goodness. The Devil cannot create, he can only ape or imitate and destroy.

The part of the Christmas story that is most tragic is the Massacre of the Innocents ordered by King Herod. His reaction to the news from the Wise Men

that a great Messiah was born was to use deception to find out where Jesus was and then to order the killing of all the baby boys in Bethlehem. God could not permit his Son to be murdered as a child, but He did not stop Herod's fury from falling on the Holy Innocents. They are celebrated as the first martyrs for Christ only three days after Christmas on December 28.

We have this opportunity every Christmas season to celebrate the incredible generosity of God in taking on flesh and our human condition. The Christ Child was born in a stable and laid to rest in a manger. I read that when shepherds in the area of Bethlehem saw a particularly perfect and spotless newborn lamb, they would wrap it up in swaddling clothes and lay it in one of the big stone mangers to protect it from damage. They preserved these perfect lambs for sacrifice to God in the Temple. When the shepherds came in the night to worship Our Lord, the way they found him must have prefigured to them his purpose and destiny to accept the sacrifice of the cross to redeem our sins.

In the end, God did not spare His only Son but accepted his offering up of himself for humanity. Yes, Christmas is full of joy and peace. It is a time of generosity and light in the midst of the darkest and coldest part of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. It also prefigures the sacrifices that faith calls us to make. We are called to defend the innocent, to stand for the truth, and to bear the burdens of others. Christmas should remind us that God gave us the example that we must follow.

***Joseph Meaney***

President of the National Catholic Bioethics Center