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Christmas 2004

“...the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” (Jn.1:5)

To all the clergy, seminarians and faithful of the Diocese of Arizona; peace, joy and our apostolic blessing.

Once again, we gather to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Everywhere we go we hear people wishing us a Merry Christmas and carols urging us to be of good cheer. People seem friendlier and children better behaved in anticipation of receiving the gifts they've asked for. Stores are adorned with Christmas decorations and homes are bright with lighted trees and elaborate displays. Festivity and excitement are in the air and somehow the world seems brighter.

In our increasingly secular world, it has become all too easy to forget the reason for this celebration. Christmas has become at best just another secular holiday and at worst an orgy of consumerism gone awry. Thanks to the expert manipulations of the marketing world, it is all too easy for us to be seduced by this mentality and to forget the real reason for these festivities—the coming of the One who brought Light to a world awash in ignorance and darkness.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World, we should pause to ask ourselves if our world is truly brighter now than when Jesus was born. Has his coming to us in human form dispelled the darkness and removed our ignorance? When we examine the state of the world, it's easy to be discouraged and to say that our world is no better now than it was before Jesus' birth. And that perhaps it's worse. We have the nuclear capability to destroy the planet several times over. Millions of our sisters and brothers starve to death or are victims of genocide. People kill each other over ideologies and every day we destroy more and more of the natural abundance of our beloved planet. It would appear that the Light has failed in its mission.

But as the author of the Gospel of John reassures us, *“...the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”* This simple, yet profound, statement is as true now as it was when it was first written. We must look beyond what our physical eyes see and see instead with the eyes of faith. When we do, we will discover

that the Light of Christ dwells at the very center of our being. Our Lord himself reminds us, “You are the light of the world...” (Mt. 5:14) By virtue of our baptism into the life of Christ, the Light of the World, we too become a living, vital expression of that Light. The darkness of the world remains but so does the Light of Christ. It is alive within every one of us, waiting for us to turn to it and embrace it consciously.

The Dominican mystic theologian, Meister Eckhart (d. 1339), questioned what good it did to celebrate the birth of the Christ hundreds of years ago if we do not bring him to birth here and now. That is the question I would urge you to ask of yourselves this Christmas. What are we doing, here and now, to bring Christ to birth in our own lives and to let that Light shine more brightly in the world? When the Light came to us as Jesus of Nazareth, the illumination and the transformation of the world began, but was not finished. Our Lord began the process and then invited us to join him in the ongoing work. As Christians, as bearers of the Light of Christ, we are called to become active participants in the ongoing work of removing the darkness of the world and restoring it to its original beauty.

The ultimate success of Christ’s mission rests with you and with me. I encourage you to think about ways that you can become more visible witnesses of that Light to our world. It is simply not enough to go to church and involve yourselves in individual pietistic practices. Involve yourselves in the world; in social, political and humanitarian efforts in accordance with your interests and unique gifts. Let the world see the values that Our Lord taught reflected in your actions, let the awareness of that Divine Light be manifest through your words, let the world know by the way you live your life that the Light still shines and that the darkness has not overcome it.

As you gather with your friends and family this Christmas, be assured of my sincere wishes for a happy and blessed Christmas. May the Light of Christ shine brightly in you this holiday season and always!

In the Light of the Eternal Christ, I remain your brother,

+Mark Elliott Newman OC
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