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“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” (Mt 2:10)

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

Joy fills our hearts as once again we pause to celebrate the birth of the Jesus the Christ, God made human, the One who changed forever the course of human history. For long millennia, humanity longed for his coming as foretold by the prophets and sages of old. As the centuries progressed and the Messiah, the Blessed One, did not appear, the promise of his coming grew dim and people wondered if he would ever come as they had been assured he would. Perhaps some even began to despair of his birth while others eventually dismissed the prophecies as empty promises that offered the masses false hope in an effort to make bearable the unbearable conditions of their lives.

But then suddenly a bright star appeared in the heavens and the sages of the Orient began their journey. Scripture suggests that they knew of the prophecies concerning the birth of the long-awaited Messiah for they came bearing gifts worthy of a king—gold, frankincense and myrrh. We can only speculate on their conversation and their musings as they made their way to Bethlehem, but it should not surprise us to learn that perhaps they were uncertain as to the star’s exact meaning and that their minds were filled with questions. Was this really the sign announcing the birth of a Savior? What would they find? How far would they have to go? How would they know they were in the right place? And then one night the star stopped and in that moment something filled their souls and they knew they had arrived, that here was the Blessed One, and as Matthew tells us, “...they were overwhelmed with joy.”

Christmas is indeed a time of joy; a time when the good news of Christ’s birth should bring us the awareness of a promise fulfilled and a renewed sense of hope and optimism for the future of humanity and our beloved planet. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. As we consider the condition of our world today, we see not an increase in joy but an apparent increase in suffering and sorrow. Where is the joy when a parent grieves a child killed in combat in a country far away, a country unjustly invaded and ravaged in the name of freedom? Where is the joy when innocent people are killed or maimed when terrorists blow themselves up in public for a political or religious cause? Where is the joy when people are left homeless from war, genocide or natural disasters and remain

dispossessed or exposed to the elements, not only in our own country, but also in countries that have no political value to us? Where is the joy when people of color or differing sexual orientation are victims of discrimination, hostility and often violence? As we ask these questions, and the many more we could ask, we may be tempted to sink into the same despair that some of those waiting for the birth of the Blessed One experienced. It would appear that there is little cause for joy in our world today.

The temptation to succumb to such a pessimistic position is indeed great, and we cannot be faulted if, in our humanness, we too wonder if, apart from our own personal ego-based joys, true, authentic joy—the joy of Christ—is possible in our world today. It is, but only to the extent that we, each of us, are willing to be that joy for the world. As a people who have been baptized into the very life of Christ, we share in the joy of His at-one-ment with God, our heavenly Father, our heavenly Mother. That joy was so strong, so certain, so essential to his understanding of who he was, that he was able to endure the most horrific suffering and an ignominious death, and transcend it, transmuting it into an act of resurrection and new life. Since we share in his life, in his consciousness, we too have the capacity—and the opportunity—to take the doubt, the despair, the anxiety of our present age, and help transmute it into joy for the world.

How do we help bring joy to the world? There is no one single way that each of us can follow. Not all of us are called to become political leaders or public officials who can influence the public consciousness collectively. Not all of us are gifted with positions of power or prestige in the business or academic worlds where our presence can influence many. But big ways are not the only ways by which we can influence the world. Every one of our actions, every one of our thoughts, influences the world in some way. If we approach our life, and the challenges life brings to us individually and to humanity collectively, with a sense of wonder at the mystery of Creation and God's unfailing love for us as demonstrated by the life and example of Jesus the Christ, then joy will flow from us naturally, despite the circumstances of our world. If we add to that a spirit of gratitude for God's graciousness, then our joy will indeed be complete and will infuse all our thoughts and actions effortlessly. Our choices will be more balanced, our outlook brighter, and the energy we put out into the mass consciousness will be more positive, eventually becoming a counterbalance to the negativity and pessimism of our time. This in turn will begin to influence those whose public policy decisions and choices lead us into those joyless situations mentioned previously.

But just "thinking happy thoughts" is not enough. Whenever possible, we must also confront directly those circumstances and decisions that rob humanity of the experience of joy. Whenever political or economic leaders make decisions that marginalize or disenfranchise any segment of society or whenever greed, lust for power, or the perpetuation of religious, social or political institutions at the expense of the common good is identified, we as followers of Christ are called to speak out, to identify the face of sin in the world and to call for justice as Our Lord himself did when he lived among us in his physical body. To do so is admittedly to risk the loss of our comfort zones and our sense of security; to fail do so is to risk the loss of true joy and to ensure that the suffering of the world continues. Through faith and good works we can make a difference in the world.

As you gather with your friends and family this Christmas, be assured of my sincere wishes for a happy and blessed Christmas. May the joy of Christ fill your being this holiday season and always! May you be that joy for the world.

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

+Mark Elliott Newman OC
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