

**MIDNIGHT MASS
25 DECEMBER 1995
ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL**

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In his 1964 play, Incident at Vichy, Arthur Miller says: "Jew is only the name we give to that stranger, that agony we cannot feel, that death we look at like a cold abstraction. Each man has his Jew; it is the other. And the Jews have their Jews."

On the 3rd of December just this year, a Catholic priest in Poland denounced the Jews in Poland. He is quoted as saying: "The star of David is implicated in the swastika as well as the hammer and sickle." The same priest said similar things only this past June. Despite protest by the Polish bishops, he seems fiercely committed to anti-Semitism.

Is this to be a homily on anti-Semitism? No, not really. Is it not, then, an inappropriate way to begin a homily amidst the glory and peace and good will of Christmas? Different, perhaps, but not, I believe, inappropriate.

The glory of Christmas or not, these are troubled times, which must be addressed more seriously than by the customary "happy talk" or sentimentality the season provokes.

New Yorkers and others are deeply worried beneath the surface of this Christmas night about such tragedies in this great city as the multiple deaths in a Harlem clothing store, the killings in a Bronx shoe store, the shocking abuse and death of the little girl named Elisa Izquierdo, lost in the child-care system, the torching of a token booth and its agent, the huge number of abortions, of unwed pregnancies, of public contempt for marriage on the part of some of the famous. Such tragedies are not unique to New York. New stories are being revealed each day of unspeakable atrocities in Bosnia carried out before the uneasy truce and the dispatching of American troops to that unhappy land: Such realities and others tell us how far we are from that peace on earth of which the angels sang on the first Christmas night.

But don't many wonderful things happen every day in New York and throughout the world? Of course they do. Crimes of murder in this City, for example, have been cut in half. Millions of fine people are doing millions of fine things. Believers must never be pessimistic. But we have a grave obligation to be realistic: to face problems we can not solve by denial. But why speak of horrors at Christmas Midnight Mass? Could they not be addressed on any one of the 364 other days in the year?

They could and must be, but I ask you to bear with me tonight, because the solution to the horrors is to be found precisely in the manger in Bethlehem. Until we see the solution there, we not only miss the meaning of Christmas itself; we will continue addressing such

such, is to hate God. Shocking, even offensive as that may sound, that's the rock bottom of it, the reality that the beautiful tree in Rockefeller Center can't hide, or all the lovely Christmas carols can't disguise, or the magnificence of this Midnight Mass can not compensate for.

"Whoever hates you, hates me," Jesus said. "Whoever despises me, despises Him who sent me". And again: "How can you hate your brother whom you can see, and claim to love God whom you can not see?"

Christ was not a city planner, or a social engineer. He was love made flesh. He never proposed a political system. The only cure he offered for the ills of the world was love. And he did this the hard way. He did it by emptying himself and becoming one of us in the womb of Mary, then by suffering and dying on a cross. That's what love means. It's not a sentimental ballad, a stroll in the park, a kiss in the dark. It's inexhaustibly self-demanding, unconditionally self-sacrificing, and totally realistic. All true love is "tough love".

I can not repeat too strongly: Christianity, Christmas itself, represents and calls for "tough love". It's the kind of love expressed by Jesus in the words: "If you love me, keep my commandments". It's not the kind of love that necessarily makes difficult marriages easier: it makes staying together for a common good possible. It's the kind of love that means walking a crying baby in the middle of the night, taking care of a helpless paralytic, a retarded child, an incapacitated mother or father. It's the kind of love that punishes kids who need punishment. It's not false compassion. It doesn't call for emptying prisons of murderous criminals, because they allegedly never had a chance in life.

Every day we all see a great deal of "tough love", Christmas love, at work among many, many people. Some are very poor, and have to work a merciless number of hours and sacrifice many things to take care of their families. Some are very wealthy, but carry hidden crosses without complaint. Some are in prison for trying to defend human life. Some risk their own lives to try to give new life to others. Some work hard in a thousand different ways to help others, never counting the cost. Some are widows or widowers, trying to go on with their lives. Some are courageous public figures; some are unknown to the world. Great numbers are among those listening and watching now on radio and television. Great numbers are here in this Cathedral.

The kind of love I'm speaking of, Christmas love, is the only kind of love that will end racism or anti-semitism, or wars in Bosnia, or wars in our city streets, or wars within our own households, between husbands and wives, parents and offspring, brothers and sisters. "I love you, but. . ." doesn't do it. Jesus says if we pour out everything we have for love, we should count it as nothing.

Imagine what Harlem would be like, or Westchester or Kansas City or San Francisco, or Bosnia or Rwanda or Somalia or Cuba or Haiti if everyone took seriously the words of Paul: "Love is patient and kind, it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-

horrors ineffectively until the end of time.

It is not that we currently ignore them. Perhaps never before has the world devised so many "programs" to solve its problems. Mind-boggling sums of money are spent; international conferences are held; the most sophisticated research and the most extensive studies are carried out; armed forces are dispatched in a multitude of directions to end, reduce or contain violence. All or mostly all of this is done with the best of intentions; much is helpful or even essential, particularly when in response to a plea for help. But when the programs don't solve the problems, we either throw up our hands in helplessness, or we look for new programs.

Here in New York, I am repeatedly asked what "programs" the Church has to offer in response to the latest Harlem tragedy, or violence toward children, or drugs? I read and listen to, as you do, complex arguments on each side of the budget war: those which protest more welfare or "entitlement" spending as allegedly destructive to the poor; those which protest the cuts in welfare or "entitlements" as allegedly destructive to the poor.

Few who ask my comments are happy with my repeated response, namely, that programs alone can not do the job. No program ever designed, no amount of money ever spent will solve our social or individual crises unless and until we take seriously the sacredness of the human person, the worth and dignity of every human person at every point of existence: the unborn, the elderly, the cancer-ridden, the poor, the wealthy, black, white, brown, Asian, Jew, Protestant, Muslim, Catholic, Hottentot, man, woman or child, of whatever orientation or attitude or background or belief or behavior.

That's what the Christmas story really means and demands. Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became an infant in his mother's womb, a vulnerable baby in a manger: not simply to look like one of us, but to be one of us. He did not become human simply to be human but to give us a share in his divine life. This is how sacred he considers us to be. Later, he was to suffer and die for us, but in a sense his greatest sacrifice was to become one of us, so identified with us that he could say, "Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me".

In my judgment, that's how we have to look at a clothing store in Harlem, a shoe store in the Bronx, a six year old named Elisa Izquierdo, a man in a token booth, an unborn baby, every Serb, every Croat in Bosnia, every American in uniform, every member of his or her family. Always, always, our primary concern must be the individual human person. Everything we do to anybody we do to God.

For us, this is not a sociological thing, it's a theological thing. That baby in Bethlehem made us his brothers and sisters -- every one of us, without exception: sons and daughters of the one Father. That Baby was a Jew. He might have been black or Japanese or Eskimo. To hate a Jew because he is a Jew is not an offense merely against political correctness. To hate a Jew, or a Black, or an Hispanic, or a Muslim or a homosexual, simply because he or she is

mannered or selfish or irritable. Love does not keep a record of wrongs, love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up and its faith, hope and patience never fail." [1 Cor.13:4-7]

Many of us will go home feeling good after this Mass, and we should. The music is lovely, the setting superb. There's joy in the air and a sense of good will. And most of us, most importantly, will receive the Infant Jesus made flesh and grown to full manhood, and crucified and risen again. We will receive the very infant conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, brought forth in Bethlehem and laid in a manger.

But this must be much more than an act of receiving. We must give. We must open our minds and hearts to love. We must permit Jesus to take us to himself, to transform us, in a sense, help us serve one another as loving brothers and sisters. Then, each of us can help change his or her own little world, until with enough little worlds transformed by love, the big wide world of all the earth will be transformed by that same love.

It's the slow way, the simple way, the painful way, the Christmas way, the way of the stable, the way of the Cross. It's the way we must not fear, any of us. If we are willing to follow it, we can take love where love has never been known, peace where peace has never been lived, hope where despair has prevailed, joy - true joy - to the world.

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