

NEW YEAR'S



Luke 2:21 "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

The story goes that a young couple went into the city one evening to finish their Christmas shopping and decided to enjoy the famous Christmas displays in the large department store windows downtown. The elaborately decorated windows were spectacular, incorporating all the traditional elements of the season. There were Christmas trees and lights galore and snowflakes falling from the sky. There was Frosty the Snowman and little children sledding down a hill. There was Santa Claus and the reindeers and the elves in the workshop at the North Pole. There was even a Nutcracker, and the Grinch and people of Whoville. Finally, as the couple was admiring the scene, one of them pointed in exasperation to the back corner of the window where there was simple manger scene with shepherds and wise men. "Look, look!" she cried out agitated, "They've even brought religion into it!"

One of the most common complaints heard this time of year, is how secularized the Christmas season has become. How we have lost the true meaning of Christmas to commercialization. And how we need to put the 'Christ' back in "Christmas." And it is a fair criticism at times, though I am not sure what Christians can really do about it.

But we also must remember that many of the major Christian holy days were themselves once non-Christian holidays that Christians simply took over. Christmas, for instance, is not celebrated on December 25th because it was ever thought to have been the actual birth date of the infant Jesus. Christians simply took over the pagan Roman celebration of the winter solstice, the *Natalis Solis Invicti*, or "the birth of the Sun of Righteousness" and they made it into a Christian feast celebrating the birth of the Son of God. In the same way, Easter is called "Easter" in English because of the Anglo-Saxon Spring goddess *Eostre* and her yearly celebration that was appropriated by Christians in Britain. As was often the case, Christian feasts superseded old pagan festivals, like Valentine's Day. Thus, the battle between Christian and secular celebrations cuts both ways.

And we should be able to admit this, I think, without shame or regret. In fact, I believe that we ought to continue this practice, recognizing that the Christian perspective has

something to add to our everyday life and its secular festivals, that our religion is not distinct from, but a part of our ordinary human experience. Is that not the real meaning of the Incarnation?

For instance, I think most Christians probably participated more fully last night, on December 31st, in the secular rites of New Year's Eve rather than in the religious celebration of the Eve of The Feast of the Holy Name. And though New Year's Eve is a rather worldly occasion, there is in my mind something distinctively religious about its activities. What most of us do on New Year's Eve, it seems to me, is to go through, though in a secular way, the actions of what is traditionally known as the Rite of Confession.

There are four traditional elements to a good Confession. The first element of a good Confession is self-examination. And sure enough, the traditional secular activities at the year's end are to review the year that has past, to consider again what has transpired since last New Year's Eve, since our last Confession. There are also numerous thrilling retrospectives of the year on television and in popular magazines where we often come to remember how much has happened in the year past, the news, the people, the events, the movies. We think about what has transpired with us, where we are now, and how we got here and what has happened in our lives in the year past. For New

Year's Eve is perhaps the most common time when even the most extroverted people amongst us think back over their lives, especially over the past year, since last New Year's Eve. Is there not a religious aspect to this enterprise? Should not Christians regularly look back upon their lives for evidence of God's activity, for a sense of Providence? Are we not strong believers in God's ongoing salvific presence in our lives and our history? How do we confirm that if we do not reflect upon our lives, and upon the year that has past?

Also, there is often a sense of regret or disappointment when reflecting upon some of the activities of the year past, a sense that we as individuals or as a nation, could have or should have done better than we have done. We often think about our failings, the mistakes we've made, the tragedies and travesties that hindsight affords us to see. Is this not a religious activity, when we regret our errors and shortcomings, when we recognize that we are called to be better than we have been? To do more than we have done? True penitence is the second element of a good Confession. Acknowledging our sins is not enough, we must also be sorry for them. We must regret the wrong things we have done, the pain we have inflicted upon others, the injury we have caused. It is a difficult enough matter to just confess such things, but we must also openly express our sorrow in a good confession, which is perhaps why we do so

infrequently, and only under the supportive protection of close friends, family, and heavy drinking.

And do we not usually respond to such feelings with a strong sense of hope and conviction, making our New Year's Resolutions, determined to change things, to strive to be better, to seek to do the things we ought to do, and to avoid the things we ought not to do. The third important element of a good Confession is a firm intention to amend our lives. We must not only acknowledge our sins and feel sorry about them, but we must firmly intend to change things, to strive to be better, to make amends, to do things differently. For so much of the time, it seems to me, we are more like the boy who cried wolf, saying to God again and again and again how sorry we are, but never really changing our behavior.

Thus, it seems to me that the Church needs to focus more attention on these secular New Year's Eve practices, to christen them as we have so many other secular feasts, and thus to confirm and encourage people to examine their lives, to feel sorry for their sins and shortcomings, and to seek to amend their behavior. Such an opportunity for the Church seems to me too good to miss, especially since the Church can provide what is still missing, the fourth and final element of a good Confession, namely, the assurance of God's forgiveness and the promise of His Grace.

Only the assurance of God's forgiveness can truly help wash away the sorrow of the past and only the promise of God's Grace can encourage us that we can indeed change our lives, that there is a greater power at work here in our lives, that we can change, that we can transform our lives even, and accomplish those resolutions which are usually so quickly broken and forgotten. For with God's help, we can do anything. Thus, our yearly Confession at New Year's can provide us a catharsis from the burden of the year past and a sure hope that little by little we can change, that we can become holy, that with God's help we can become the kind of people God wants us to be, and surely the kind of people we want to be ourselves.

It is this last element of forgiveness and grace, which can change this secular holiday of high spirits to one of great joy. And so it is that I now wish for you and your family a most joyous and happy New Year, as we all live in the assurance that the Lord has put away all our sins, such so that we can go on with our lives in peace. AMEN