



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## Why we have Reason to Hope Despite the Christmases Past

**Once again** that season returns which, for many of us, is a season of despondence, even despair. Despite the cheerfully orchestrated songs we hear exhorting us to an antiquated “merriness” somewhere beyond the plated storefront glass where others feast — and all the evidence around us that others are filled with a tinsel joy as fragile as our fabricated dreams of Christmases past ... we are left in that empty chamber just a door away from the happiness that filters in from a room beyond our reach.

Often we are wistful, reminiscing on times that never were, or at best were merely school figures upon the thin ice of fragmented memories. Perhaps our childhood knew of such times, but they are long ago, and as we grew older we became more cynical, lamenting the commercialization of Christmas but doing nothing to curtail it when we shopped until the very eve of Christmas. That our own seduction by “business models” contrived around Christmas to bring us into the malls until our last credit card was exhausted meant that others had to work those nights and be apart from their families concerned us little. They are separated from us by that same plate glass window that separates us from the happiness of others, even as we see our own reflection upon them ...

What is more, the day after Christmas our streets are lined with thrown-out Christmas trees (despite the Season of Christmas lasting until Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord over a month later) laying upon heaps of boxes of electronic presents that will need firmware updates even as they are opened and which will be superseded by newer models within 3 months. The Mangers will soon follow and within a week the house will be as sterile of Christmas as it had been the week before it.

In a word, we can become jaded with Christmas.

Why? The answer most widely acknowledged is simply that we have capitalized Christmas — no, not by means of placing a majuscule, a capital letter, at the beginning of the word, but by monetizing it. It is the yearly occasion of spending large sums of money we do not have for

people who do not need it ... obligating them, in turn, to reciprocate and to give us what we do not need, and most often do not want.

But this is a cheat. The real reason is that we have lost Christ. Had we not lost Him first, then Madison Avenue could not have coopted Christmas. The gift-giving and gift-getting would never have gained traction. It would have been celebrated as a Holy Day. Do we even remember the notion of Holy Days, that is to say, days that are holy to us in and of themselves? Indeed, do we even recognize the notion of holiness any longer — as pertaining to people, places, things, days, and occasions set apart by God and solely for God? Are our lives noticeably affected by our observance or recognition of the holy? For an hour, a day, are we better men and women for it — or do we leave our encounter with the holy utterly unchanged? Our encounters with the holy — which is to say with God — should affect us, change us, for the better.

## **When we Encounter the Holy (if we recognize it)**

There are only two ways to respond to an encounter with the holy: to be profoundly changed by it or to remain utterly unchanged because we are blind to it. If it is the latter, it is self-inflicted. We do not see because seeing requires changing, and we do not wish to change. We do not want to relinquish anything in order to receive everything — precisely because it does not include the petty things that we must relinquish. We would have it all: God and self. And some would have more: God as self. This is the sine qua non of Madison Avenue and every mass marketer: the self as the axis of the universe — and who is better prepared to serve and supply such a voracious deity?

Christ, more often than not, is the God of the poor.

It need not be this way. God knows (literally).

In this season of cynicism, despondence, and despair, there is hope — but it is only in Christ. It is not manufactured in China and promoted by Madison Avenue. You will not find it in the pop-up ads in your browser, nor in this Sunday's newspaper circular. It is definitely not a "Black Friday Deal", or "available for a limited time only." It is in Christ Alone — and it is freely given. We welcome Christ into the world on Christmas. We celebrate His Incarnation. We prostrate ourselves at the culmination of salvific history. God has come to save man. He has come to save you and to save me; to bring us to the glorious fulfillment of all His promises ... to take us home into everlasting mansions prepared for us before the beginning of the world. There is a glory, a beauty unspeakable, a happiness unending beyond the grayscale landscape of this world writhing in war and tormented by sin. It is called Heaven. It is whence Christ came, and whither we go — if we grasp this promise held out to us by the Hand of God clasped this Christmas day in the hand of Mary who ever extends this hand of grace, salvation, and glory to us.

There is hope. Let us take it by the hand and go whither it leads us.

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