

A Different Christmas Midnight Celebration

(*San Estévan del Rei, Pueblo of Acoma, 2018*)
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I think it was December 24th, 2018, that Dale and +Hubert Sanchez invited me to join in the Christmas Eve celebration at *San Estévan del Rei* at the Pueblo of Acoma. I was free from having a Midnight Eucharistic Liturgy, so I said yes. “So come up! Meet us at our house up there.” So, I did! When I arrived on that very cold and moonless part of the night, I found myself sitting on the rock stoop in front of their home waiting for anyone to arrive.

Sitting there in the cold for a while, I was confronted with focusing on the uncomfortable cold or on the marvelous shades of darkness enveloping me. I had walked up the road from the visitors’ center to the butte where the Pueblo is located, so I could not just wait in my car. I decided to focus on the darkness.

Their house is on the west end of the butte, just where the road up comes into the ancient village. Not far from the house is the back end of the old *San Estévan* church and convent compound. There were a few luminarias along the street level, but darkness is what dominated. “Would this darkness, quiet and solitariness be similar to that of the auspicious night of waiting in Bethlehem of Judea which we honor this night?” was my thought.

As my eyes focused into the darkness, I could actually begin to distinguish the darkness of the night sky from the darkness of the stone-cold northern wall and parapet of the church. Words echoing a quote from Eli Wiesel came to me, “Even in darkness there is light!” And what a calming and warming light it was. The sense of the cold diminished.

Dale finally arrived and we went near the entrance to the church building for the midnight indigenous rituals of Christmas Eve. Once the Pueblo spiritual leadership were confident the hour was upon us, the church doors were opened, the tower-bells rang, and the procession began.

As we entered the church a dance group responding to the heartbeat of their drum was entering as well. Drumbeat, chant, dance stepping in and around as we walked toward the altar of the baby swaddled in cloth on the altar awaited all who would come.

As we moved slowly forward, a second drumbeat could be felt, and a second Keresan Chant could be heard. A 2nd dance group and drum entered while the first one continued. “How can they distinguish which drum and chant is ‘theirs?’” thought I. When the third drumbeat was felt, and chant heard (elk dancers were they this time), my Nothnagel/Mueller sensibilities kicked in! “This can’t be! It is not going to work!” How can the quiet peace and focused contemplation of this night survive the din!

But like the darkness of the night quelled my eyes blindness to perceive sky from structure and my sense of cold was eased by marvel, so did the people’s faith and prayer in dance, drum and chant call my cacophonous fears to calm. As I reached the altar and made my cornmeal offering to the Prince of Peace, our Light in the Dark Night, I turned and was struck by the beauty of deer, buffalo and elk dancers weaving their dance-prayers with the procession of gift bearers. Peace was visible in the darkness of this night. Warmth exuded from the sincerity of Faith. Order was embracing us in our acting differently yet as one.

***Come, Emmanuel! Be our Light!
Enlighten the steps of our hearts’ dance!
Make straight our paths to you!***