



May 23, 2024

A Broken Toy's Christmas

Office of the Bishop

Beloved brothers and sisters,

You know, I'd bet you've never thought about how difficult it is for me, every year, to write this Christmas message. Not that you should care: everyone has to do his or her job, right? Writing pastoral letters is part of mine. But I can imagine that most folks think that it's not supposed to be difficult for clergy to write and to preach. If my thoughts and my heart are filled with wonder and gratitude (and they are), because the season calls me to reflect on the reality of Emmanuel, of "God-with-us," and to share the fruits of that reflection with you, it should be easy, shouldn't it? And yet, it is not. Not really.

I think that one of the reasons that writing pastoral letters is not easy is my sense that, for all I can see of the world around me, proclaiming the Gospel, the whole Gospel, seems like a losing battle. This tends to depress me, to "get me down," as we used to say. The hucksters and the nonbelievers (to say nothing of the nominal Christians who, while busily making excessive profits, see no connection between the poverty of the cave of Christ's birth and the poverty of the world around them) have taken our Christian celebration and have made it something that it is not. To call what they have made it "commercial" would be a gross underestimate.

And the stress! Why is the season of peace so hectic, so hateful, so—as it was this year—murderous? What lunacy is aroused in us that we sacrifice our families, our time, our peace of mind, everything that is of value, to the maniacal pursuit of—what? The best presents? The best deals?

And that is just the stress of so-called "Christmas shopping." What happens to our families when we get together, with our expectations of the occasion so high and the fear of what is likely to happen anyway so great that we are relieved when the day is over and we can go home to our own favorite chairs and nurse our headaches? We write and send Christmas cards: how is it that it is at this holiday that we sense most painfully and acutely the distance between us and those we love, even those we live with? Why, when we look inside, do we see such a gap between our dreams and our realities? What happens at Christmas that we should feel such a distance, even from ourselves?

The truth is that we—and I do mean "we," we Christians—have replaced the awesome truth behind this celebration with something that is a vague feeling, the sense that things are so wrong and so bad 364 days of the year, that we ought to be entitled to at least *one* day off a year from the human condition, with its violence, its greed and its selfishness, at least *one* day when we can believe, if only for a few moments, that there is such a thing as "peace on earth." Is that really asking too much of life?

We've replaced the truth and the meaning of our Christian feast with, for want of a better word, "The Holiday Season," which we then hand over to the world in a kind of perverse feedback loop, such that our feast day comes back to us as a vague shadow, an atmosphere that is supposed to be "X" but never is "X" (whatever "X" is for each of us). To remedy this, we spend and party and stress out over preparations and relationships until we are dead exhausted, angry, and up to our ears in our sundry addictions.

But, you know, this isn't all bad. I think there is something to be said for this demand for peace and goodness that lives in our hearts, no matter how twisted its expression may become at times. And I think that this demand comes from a very good place—our childhood. You see, despite being told to be good so that Santa, who keeps his infernal lists, will be good to us, very few of us have ever actually received a lump of coal under the tree, have we? It was as if Santa has always known that it is his job to make the day beautiful for children no matter who they are or what they have done (Moms and dads know this about Santa, don't they?).

Consequently, what we who grew up Christian found beneath the tree every December 25 was gifts—pure gifts, unmerited, undeserved gifts. There may not have been many, and they may have been poor, but they were free gifts, connected much more to the love and generosity (perhaps) or sense of obligation (likely) on the part of the giver than to our own behavior. The deception here is that because these gifts were connected to the demand that we be good for Santa, we concluded, as children, that because we received these gifts, our behavior must have been acceptable to Santa, even though we knew it rarely was to Mom and Dad.

As we grew up, Santa may have stepped out of the picture, but our longing for unmerited, free gifts did not. If we do not experience this in the course of the holiday activities, "Christmas" becomes a dud and a disappointment, sort of like finding the tree empty on Christmas morning. Worse, if the extravagance of the gifts we may have received as children engendered in us a sense of special entitlement because of who we (think) we are, our disappointment may ferment into an attitude of revenge against any and all who do not notice or respect our specialness. Still worse, if the world we grew into is one of strict reciprocity, of *quid pro quo*, of paying for all that one receives and hence of insisting upon receiving the best bang for our buck, we may find that we have become incapable of receiving a free gift.

Perhaps nothing will give you a better sense of what I am trying to say than Irving Berlin's beautiful song, "White Christmas," where what the singer is dreaming of is a Christmas that is not only white, but also "just like the ones I used to know." Now, I, too, remember that the Christmases of my childhood seemed to be much whiter and snowier than those of my adulthood, but if they were really whiter in Bing Crosby's childhood than in his adulthood, it would seem that, by 2013, we should have daffodils instead of snow at Christmas, shouldn't we?

In Ohio, at least, we do not have daffodils at Christmas (though I remember seeing out-of-season snowdrops and crocuses at times). Sometimes we have snow, and sometimes we do not. Sometimes Christmas day is dreary and damp, and sometimes it is crisp, clear, and sunny. The song, after all, is not about snow. It is about nostalgia, about time-sweetened memory. As for today's Christmas, as the saying goes, "it is what it is." And for all our complaint about the "commercialization of Christmas," so many of us are working in retail nowadays, or know people who do, that we pray, oh, do we pray, for a successful sales report at the end of the holiday. I think it is now safe to say that a Black Friday is far more important than a White Christmas to a big chunk of the population.

A fitting example of what Christmas means in the 21st century is the fact that I, your bishop, have gotten three pages into my Christmas letter without once mentioning Jesus. Did you notice that? So now you see why writing Christmas letters is so hard for me: because our hearts are right to demand free, unmerited gift, to demand the infinite, or at least a little peace on earth, but we have been nurtured from childhood in ways of thinking and acting that *guarantee we will not get what we seek*. That, to me, is one reason why proclaiming the Gospel in our age is not easy, and, as I mentioned before, it sometimes feels a bit like a losing battle.

The joy that filled our childhood hearts this time of year is real, it is true and good and beautiful, and it is not going to be recovered or reclaimed by vain exercises in nostalgia, as if the Ghost of Christmas Past could bump the Ghosts of Christmas Present and Christmas Yet To Come out of the way. Neither will it be summoned by trying to get to the "real meaning" of Christmas, whatever theologically or politically correct interpretation we may want to give to that. Nor will we achieve it by perfectionistic pursuits of any kind, whether in cooking, decorating, or, for that matter, writing pastoral letters. In other words, while we strive and stress out trying to "get joy" at Christmas, we are looking for it, like love, in all the wrong places. It is not going to be found by means of anything in this world. Nor is it something you can "get." *It can only be given to you.*

And the truth is: *it has already been given to you*. The "losing battle" part is that it is really hard to convince people that joy has already been given to them. It is, frankly, incredible, and I find myself wondering whether it could really be true myself from time to time. The evidence of our lives seems to belie this, and we, in our sorrow, often stop there and look no further for the truth. We will not ask the obvious but dramatic questions that our lives demand of us. I believe that it is true that joy has already been given to us, but the question that comes packaged with this truth is: *can we receive it?*

Only children are capable of receiving Christmas joy: "Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it," (Luke 18:17). As author Brennan Manning frequently points out, "children have no past." They are completely and utterly consumed by the present in which they live. It is their entire context, their whole world, and while they are in this state of unadulterated (interesting word, eh?) childhood, there is absolutely no doubt in their hearts that they *deserve* to receive good things *just because they are*, not for who they think they are, nor for anything they do. I would not even

call this a “thought in their minds,” because in so many ways it is entirely pre-conscious, built into every child’s very existence.

The unhappy moment of connecting what one *gets* with what one *does* or with what label one has been given or what category one belongs to comes later, when a child’s pure presence begins to slip away into fear, doubt, self-rejection: in a word, what we call “maturity.” And, because it slips away by inches and fractions of inches, we hardly notice the passing of our original state of being until there’s nothing left of it but a vague, shadowy feeling, like something we call “The Holiday Season.”

Now comes the part in my pastoral letter when I’m supposed to tell you how to fix this, how to think/act/pray to make it all better, to get to the “real meaning” of Christmas. But I’m not going to do that. We have just concluded a Year of Faith in the Catholic Church, so I am simply going to appeal to your faith through my own testimony. I will let the Word of God make my case for me. I will just give you some examples of things that I believe, upon which I have staked my life. And I will invite you to read these passages and see whether you can do the same:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17; all scripture quotations are from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition*).

He said to [his] disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your lifespan? If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? As for you, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not worry anymore. All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides. *Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.* Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be (Luke 12:22-34, emphasis mine).

Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and

welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you? ' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me,'(Matthew 25:27-40).

See to it that no one captivate you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ. For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him, who is the head of every principality and power. In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not administered by hand, by stripping off the carnal body, with the circumcision of Christ. You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And even when you were dead [in] transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions; obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims, which was opposed to us, he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross; despoiling the principalities and the powers, he made a public spectacle of them, leading them away in triumph by it (Colossians 2:8-15).

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us... God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him...We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:7-12, 16, 19).

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: "For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

And, as the epistle reading for Christmas day itself says:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Galatians 4:4-7).

I could go on, of course.

To summarize: I believe that the Source of all that is, the Power behind the universe and all that is in it, chose to connect with us by becoming one of us, by choosing to be contained by our human nature, by time and space, even though this One is uncontainable and infinite, and human nature, as well as time and space themselves, are His own creation. In the birth of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah who is the Word or Communication of God, God reveals His everlasting, unconditional, and unconquerable love for each one of us whom He has called out of nothingness into existence. We could not know this had He not revealed it. He has proven His love by being tortured and murdered by us and yet rising for us, granting us resurrection and eternal life because of who God is, not because of who we are, or who we think we are. Who we really are is God’s best idea, the object of His free, passionate, forgiving love, and His love has no bounds whatsoever.

In His humanity, God in Jesus Christ gives us the perfect model of the way to spend our time in time and space. In His message, His ministry, and especially in His passion and death, Christ teaches us—He shows us—to love every human being: friend and enemy, rich and poor, lovable and unlovable alike, as unconditionally as God loves us, as generously as God loves us, and, in particular, as nonviolently as God loves us, forgiving those who trespass against us as our own trespasses have been forgiven.

So forgive me if I have taken the easy way out in this letter by letting Scripture do much of my talking, without further explanation from me. You may note that I also made it easy for you, too: rather than give you scripture references, I have put the texts right in front of you, word for word, so you don’t even have to pull out your Bible and look them up. (Did you read them, by the way, or, noticing that they were quotes from the Bible, just pass, glassy-eyed, over them? Let’s be honest here!)

I invite you now to go back over those texts, sitting before the Lord in openness to Him as if you were a child and He your Father. Read them in quiet but faithful expectation that you will be given whatever you may lack: joy, peace, understanding, meaning, all those things that not only make for survival but that put life into life and make it human and livable as well. Read them in the peace that you may not have right now, but which is possible for you to have. Read them, and invite the Word of God, born of Mary, into your heart this very day, this very minute.

All that you need or could possibly desire has been given to you. Stop trying to get it for yourself, and just receive it from your Father, as you used to receive all you needed when you were a child. It’s all right there.

In so many ways life has made a broken toy of us all, but the Author of Life has no desire to throw us away. Like a teddy bear that is missing an eye or a leg, we are no less dear to the Child who first created us, and then was born for us. From one broken toy, then, to another, I wish you and your loved ones the peace and joy that Jesus Christ will bring into your heart, if you will only receive it—and Him.

.

With prayerful, sincere affection in the Lord,

(Most Reverend) John Michael Botean
a sinner, bishop
Romanian Catholic Eparchy of St. George