

There is nothing as consoling, as profundo, as the experience of feeling loved, understood, heard, seen, accompanied in the midst of our poverty...

I've got a Christmas Story for you...

It's December 25th 1995. I have been in the U.S. for two months, so everything is still relatively new. We live in a small apartment with mom, dad, and four older sisters, an apartment furnished with just the basics that my parents were able to get from donations. A dining room table with mismatched chairs, a couch wrapped in a bed sheet to hide imperfections, and a desk with a small fish tank and two comet goldfish which I sit by and observe for hours. Mom thought that would help me as I adjusted, it does (though I do not think she realizes this little fish tank and the comfort it produces during this transition period would be the catalyst for the many giant fish tanks and exotic animal enclosures I would have by the end of 2021... your fault mom).

As my first Christmas in the states, it was not as grand as I imagined it would be, I am a little **underwhelmed**. *Home Alone* and *A Christmas Story* had been on replay on our small box TV during the week, so I had been imagining Christmas around a giant tree filled with toys at the base, but since my parents were just grounding their feet, we knew we didn't have a lot of money, so **it was okay**.

Last night, Christmas eve was nice. We went to mass, came back, had a traditional Mexican Christmas dinner, opened a couple of presents at midnight around a small tree we had been given, and headed to sleep.

It is now around noon on Christmas day and I have been awake for a few hours. I cleaned the living room which was my usual chore, and I sat by

the fish tank daydreaming as mom was already at work in the kitchen reheating leftovers for lunch. **I feel, okay.** Sure my 8-yr-old self still would love a bunch of **presents**. Toy Story action figures were now being sold and I am convinced by the commercials that if I had them, they will **change my life**. But, I had my family, so things were, okay.

(knock knock knock). I am startled by a loud knock on the door. I turned to find mom's gaze letting me know to get it. I approach the door, turn the knob, and open. There stands a tall stranger, a tall blue-eyed-blond-haired stranger with a huge smile on his face and basket of wrapped **gifts**, with more at his feet.

Noticing my face of confusion, he crouches down to my eye level, gestures for me to take the basket, says "for you, para ti, feliz navidad." I look back at mom waiting for approval whose face of complacency says "*esta bien*, it's okay, *tomalo*, take it..."

My eyes widen and a huge grin of joy quickly takes over my face in unbelief, as I take the **gifts**, one after another, and place them inside the apartment.

Maybe there was more to Christmas than I thought...

There is nothing as consoling, as profundo, as the experience of feeling loved, understood, heard, seen, accompanied in the midst of our poverty... and that is the Christmas experience:

the birth of Christ is God coming in the poverty of our humanity, and giving us the gift of being loved, understood, heard, seen, accompanied.

For centuries before Christ, humanity had been crying out loud for deliverance, for an answer to human poverty: the problem of evil, pain and suffering. Philosophers came up with new words and concepts to try and give meaning to their lives which gave rise to those great stories of mythology and brought forth a fascination with the stars, planets, the elements... casting the human being into a search for **transcendence**, trying to find a way to free ourselves from our human **poverty**.

In that search, that desire, God began to slowly directly respond, starting in a particular place and time with a community that had suffered greatly, **Israel**. Through their culture and philosophy, they begin to identify God as **wisdom**, this tender, intelligible feminine force seeking to be known... as the Lord, a powerful masculine force producing life with a simple **word**... as the great **I AM**, the **one** and only **God**, beginning to establish a **covenant**, a **relationship** of trust.

As people grew in confidence of that great **I AM**, they began to voice to him directly their afflictions, their poverty, their cry for deliverance of sin which time and time again brought them to a place of slavery. We hear this in **Psalms 86**, it is our song, our cry of distress...

*Incline your ear, LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and oppressed.*

You are my God;

be gracious to me, Lord;

to you I call all the day.

LORD, hear my prayer;

listen to my cry for help.

On the day of my distress, I call to you,

for you will answer me.

Turn to me, be gracious to me;

give your strength to your servant;

Give me a sign of your favor:

that you, LORD, help and comfort me.

There began to emerge a **radical hope**, that sign of God's favor, a **promise**, a **trust** that the Lord will hear the cry of the **poor** and will comfort his people, all peoples, all nations, all the ends of the earth as Isaiah proclaimed...

This sign came at a particular moment in history. Yesterday we celebrated the historical moment in which God responded to our cry through the birth of a baby, a moment we need to celebrate every year because it **keeps our eyes focused on** that relationship that God desires to have with us. And today we focus on what that birth means.

The birth of Jesus is God's gift to us in our poverty.

For thousands of years we tried to transcend and reach the realm of the gods... but it had been impossible. In Jesus, **God bridges the spiritual reality and brings transcendence to us, to our level**, because by becoming one of us, God enters into our very human experience, and elevates it, brings to us something new. ***Out of our poverty, God creates something new.***

That is the continual power of Christmas. As we renew the acceptance of God's gift of Jesus in our lives, as we allow God to enter into our own poverty, allow that transformation to make of your life a gift to others, a gift of the things people truly need to receive.

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That Christmas Day in 1995... I don't remember what **gifts** that stranger brought us, I cannot recall a single one... but I do remember that stranger, his face, his eyes, his smile, his gesture of crouching down to my level, and despite the seeming language and physical differences, the joy I experienced came from feeling loved, cared for, understood, heard, seen, accompanied... and all though a minute with a complete stranger...

*those are the gifts that change us, and stay with us for
a lifetime.*

That Christmas was special, after all.

+ *Fr. Carlos Orozco*