

TEARS IN THE STRAW

My heart realizes, as I begin this annual Christmas reflection, it is not what I had been meditating on for several days. I had just finished answering several letters, and cleaning this place in preparation for His birth when I thought of taking a mid-afternoon break.

I flipped on the Discovery Channel. There was a replay of the 2000 documentary “North Korea- Children of the Secret State.” [It can be viewed on Google just by typing in the title – the secretly filmed excerpts from Ahn Chol are extremely powerful and not for the faint of heart.] Suddenly I found myself contemplating the Holy Child in the manger. Not the Child of bright eyes and smile we all know from countless works of sacred art. Rather suddenly I was hearing the cries, seeing the tears of a newborn – hearing in His voice the cry of every suffering child, every suffering human being.

My heart was also aware His tears are both sweet and bitter. The sweetness is of being born, seeing love in the eyes of His Mother, the love-protective presence of St. Joseph.

The bitterness, a foretaste of the gall which He would be given upon the Cross...

Cross... Manger... Cave of Bethlehem... Cave of His tomb and Resurrection!

As His Mother lifts Him from the manger, to place Him in our arms we not only hold Love Himself, we hold the one lifted up on the Cross for us, raised up in Resurrection, in His Ascending to the Father.

He IS the one lifted up by every priest in Holy Mass, lifted from the paten and placed in our being in Holy Communion!

A dear brother priest, in his annual Christmas letter, reminds us, quoting Pascal, that we search for Him because: “You would not be seeking Me if you had not already found Me.”

Countless of our brothers and sisters, in some mysterious way, have found Him even without knowing Him – because they struggle to be real persons under even the most horrific conditions, such as the courage shown by those trapped in oppressive societies who, like Ahn Chol, risk their lives to be a voice for their brothers and sisters.

In his book: “Circling the Sun – Meditations on Christ in Liturgy and Time”, Robert D. Pelton stresses that: “The smile of the Infant holds the secret of everlasting life.” [p. 24].

He then proceeds to tell the story of a conversation between a Crusader and his Muslim jailer about their differing understanding of God and when the Crusader shows a carving of the Holy Child in the arms of His Mother the reaction is one of astonishment to say the least!

Fr. Pelton then teaches: “There it is: the scandal of the Gospel....The Infant’s smile scandalizes for the same reason that the cry of anguish torn from the full-grown and crucified Jesus, swaddled this time in pain and blood and loneliness, scandalizes.” [pp.25/26]

I volunteer at least one day, frequently several days a week, at a soup kitchen here in the city. Often Jesus arrives in the arms of a mother, or in a stroller. Sometimes He cries, sometimes He smiles...sometimes He comes in as a teenager, battered by a life of heartache, as an adult worn out with mental illness or addiction, or as one of the working

poor or lonely elderly....in a word, the great chance to truly see Him is where He tells us, in Matthew 25:35ff, He can be found, touched, seen:

“I was thirsty...a stranger...naked...ill...in prison....”

A woman who was in my life a great teacher about the Child was the Servant of God Catherine Doherty, Foundress of the Madonna House Lay Apostolate.

Catherine was a nurse on the Russian front in WWI, was wounded when the revolution occurred, almost died of starvation during that same period, and there were other times when she suffered assaults and heartache, such as when she would challenge racist-Christians to meet Christ in their black brothers and sisters.

Yet not once in all the years I knew her did I ever hear her speak of those who tried to kill her. Rather, Catherine truly loved and forgave her enemies, and indeed anyone who hurt her. This is perhaps the most scandalous thing this Holy Child ever did!

He neither used His power to prevent evil the way WE would expect God to, nor did He use His power to destroy evil doers, the way WE often wish He would!

“Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. *Jn* 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. *Jn* 19:34).” [Pope Benedict, encyclical “God is Love.”]

There it is! This beating Heart of the Little Child in the manger, lying there with tears in the straw, will grow and beat until on the Cross His Heart will stop beating, for a time, so that in stillness, surrendered, vulnerable, It may be opened wide, wider even than the entrance to the cave through which the Mother beckons us: “Come, see Him smile upon you!”.

The wound in His Heart, the very Heart beating in the Child in the manger, lanced open, is the portal from which cascades the merciful love of God for every human being!

Indeed in his Apostolic Letter for the Year 2000 Pope John Paul teaches us that in Jesus not only is God speaking to us but is searching for us: “The Incarnation of the Son of God attests that God goes in search of man....It is a search that begins in the heart of God and culminates in the Incarnation of the Word.”

My prayer, for the suffering children in North Korea and around the world, for the protection of all children in the womb, for the homeless we serve in the soup kitchen, for those extraordinarily courageous, generous men and women who put their lives on the line each day for our protection and well-being: in the military; those who as first responders rescue us in emergencies; those almost invisible men and women without whose fidelity to their tasks we would be shivering, hungry, in the dark, like millions of our brothers and sisters in so many countries – yes my prayer for every human being is that we will see and contemplate the Holy Face of the Child, of the Crucified and Risen One, receive the gift of His tears of joy, tears shed in anguish and understand how truly beloved we are!

Christ IS born! Christ has died. Christ IS risen!

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