



Deacon Steve Szmuto's Reflection 4th Sunday of Advent & Christmas

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." (Matthew 11a – from Isaiah 7: 7)

As a child, I found that the final weeks of Advent seemed endless. Every afternoon at Immaculate Conception Grammar School, the good Franciscan Sisters would march us to the auditorium to prepare for our annual Christmas show

and party. With the special smell of freshly run ditto sheets permeating the air, we rehearsed both sacred hymns and Christmas Carols. There was a fixation on two songs in particular: *The Little Drummer Boy*, and *Silver Bells*, for which the nuns had great affection. The sounds of "Pa-rum-pum-pum-pum" and "Silver Bells (the latter in two-part harmony of course) echoed endlessly throughout the auditorium. Perhaps for this reason, I have mixed emotions to this day about the little drummer boy (Enough with the drum, already!), but realize it could be worse; thank goodness that *Dominic the Christmas Donkey* was not on the playlist. Finally the day would arrive and we would perform – singing loudly, if not always perfectly – to Sister's magic pitch-pipe or the ancient, slightly-out-of-tune, tinny upright piano in the corner of the stage. We sang of Santa Claus, city sidewalks, Rudolph, and – as was appropriate – of The First Noel, heralding angels, the manger, and lastly, the joy and peace of Silent Night.

Years passed! Soon we were married with children. Christmas came quicker and the few weeks after Thanksgiving seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. There was so much to do: presents, decorations, Christmas lights and – somewhere in the midst of all of the secular "stuff" – the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Often we, like many other parents, collapsed in the wee hours of Christmas morning from exhaustion – awakening bleary-eyed just a few short hours later by the gleeful shouts of children discovering the presents under the tree. More years pass and soon our children are grown and experience the same joy with their kids – our grandchildren. Ah, the circle of life!

Yet, in quiet moments of grace, we realize that there is more, much more, to the great Feast of Christmas. As wonderful as the celebrations are, as beautiful as the Christmas tree and lights and ornaments are, as gracious as gifts can be, they are but a small part of the significance of the Nativity and pale before the Solemnity's profound meaning. For many, Christmas can be a time of sadness and loneliness, a remembrance of those who are no longer with us, or a reminder that life in this world is not all that we had hoped it would be.

It is often in those times – as it should be in all times – that we come to know the true meaning of Christmas: that God so loved this world, that he sent his only begotten son to bring us peace and salvation so that we might share in the Kingdom of Heaven. What greater gift can be given or received than that of eternal life! And so, in moments of grace and tranquility, let us pause to give praise to God and thank him for his blessings. As we share in the Sacred Eucharist, let us ponder the great mystery of our Faith. Christ, fully divine, became fully human for our sake, and – in a quiet stable in the side of a hill – entered into the world to begin the journey that culminated in the great gift of his Paschal Mystery. Merry Christmas and may the peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts and minds and spirits with grace and joy, now and forever.

"Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." (Luke 2: 10-12a)

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