

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM FR. TOM

I started playing Christmas Carols on Dec. 1st as there still is the little child alive in me that anticipates such a wonderful feast day! Many feel Christmas ends on Christmas day. Technically, as far as holy mother Church is concerned, the holy season ends with the Epiphany, Jan. 4th. However, I prefer to extend it until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Jan 11th. Therefore...we light our outdoor Nativity on the First Sunday of Advent, or Dec. 1st, whichever comes first, and turn them off after the last Mass on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This marks my 15th Christmas with you. If my plans unfold as I prefer, I have 9 more years before I retire. I know what you are thinking, the Lord lovingly laughs when he hears "our" plans. He always has better ones if we trust in His wisdom. Each year, Christmas at 98 Riverside Avenue, which I now simply refer to as "98", brings Christmas surprises, challenges and refreshment. I always loved Christmas and have happy memories of getting up early on Christmas morning. I was always the first one awake and would wake up my 4 brothers to get downstairs to see all those beautifully wrapped gifts beneath the tree! Where did they all come from? Oh, the innocence and the wonder. It still lives on in the little minds and hearts of our parish children. My parents worked so hard to make Christmas a happy memory for us. I couldn't wait to unwrap the gifts. One year we were so excited that we opened up every gift before my parents even woke up. It was and remains magical and mystical. God gives us the best gift of all: life, love, faith, family, friends, all of these are ways of...how do you spell baby Jesus. Our theology of the birth of Christ makes that connection for us between heaven and earth. All those disconnects are overcome. The birth of Christ ends the dualistic way of living with either/or distinctions. Earth is joined to heaven and heaven to earth. God has become human. It is a recreation...a new Adam (Christ) and new Eve (Mary) have replaced the old. We have a second chance...God has not given up on us...for too long we felt worthless and now as the Christmas Carol "O Holy Night" says... "the soul

felt it's worth". I know we pray at Mass, "Lord I am not worthy"... but God in the incarnation, the nativity, the Christmas story does not believe that for one second. He sent his best because God believes in us, holds us worthy and wants us, perhaps for the first time, children and full blown adults with our sin, hypocrisy, brokenness to humbly accept, to feel our worth. Imagine how our lives would change if we really felt our worth? So much of our behavior reveals how worthless we feel. I am deeply aware as I anticipate my retirement the challenge presented to many retired priests who feel worthless...our work becomes our worth and not to work is not to live, not to be happy, not to live a meaningful life. So here is my Christmas message for you this year...**FEEL YOUR WORTH!** If children could learn this in their youth, how differently the experience of applying to College would be. If the parents could learn this, how differently their social lives would be and for the elders, and I happily include myself, it is never too late to learn, to change, to grow young again in wisdom. The fool learns in the end what the wise person learned in the beginning. What is it all about? Which Gospel is worth attaching our wagon to? Is it me first or me last? Is it the one who dies with the most toys wins? How do I live a meaningful life? Where is the inner peace every human heart longs for? Can't I just believe and not belong? What gets me out of bed each day and keeps me going? Christianity is a way...the way and if centered and balanced, it leaves room for everyone to live other ways and patiently awaits them to come to their senses even if they go to their graves clinging to what they can never take with them. Unhealthy fear is no motive to cultivate a love relationship with God or others. We have to be free. It has to be an attraction and an openness to interiorize a learned wisdom that seldom comes from academic degrees or titles. More than a few of our "distinguished" University Professors, Royalty, Church, Local, State, Federal and World Leaders are clueless! I think of the line in Amadeus..."those distinguished who are so incapable of distinguishing!" Why has Pope Francis done more in less than 2 years than prior religious leaders have done since John XXIII? It has nothing

to do with his being a Jesuit, a PhD, well educated...it never has anything to do with being liberal or conservative. Such labels are smoke screens keeping one from doing the painful, necessary work of honestly taking the inner journey, that difficult yet avoidable interwork...removing the plank from one's own eye first before removing the speck from everyone else's eye. Francis is humble, he does not hunger to be infallible but prefers instead to be faithful and he preaches less with words and more with deeds, and like Jesus, he merits a prophets reward loved by most Catholics and more non-Catholics. In salvation history, the hallmark, is the Birth of Christ, which divided on earth the way we date the world as we attempt to understand time...before and after Christ. Christianity, which too often fails to reflect its liberating philosophy affirms the material, the human body, the earth, creation...the word became flesh...the flesh is not evil... it mirrors the Divine Artist...and only when we slow down, be still, stop running after and running away, only when we make the effort do we get it...OMG...I am worthy! God became like me in everything but sin, and even better news, he takes away my sin, forgives my sin, and better yet... even if I prefer sin and sinning...God still loves me. Christmas, for me, began so mysteriously...where did all those gifts come from and why? Why would I be gifted? When we start practicing the theory of Christianity there will be more peace on earth and less terror. In the meantime, there is always hope because, in the midst of all the brokenness, we can imagine, when the world/we “feel our worth” we will feel the worth of those who love us and even those who don't. May the Christ child gift you with childlike Christmas wisdom to grow young, live meaningful lives and find what every beating human heart desires.

Fr. Tom