

# The Spirit of Christmas

## As it was in the beginning, is now and . . . ?

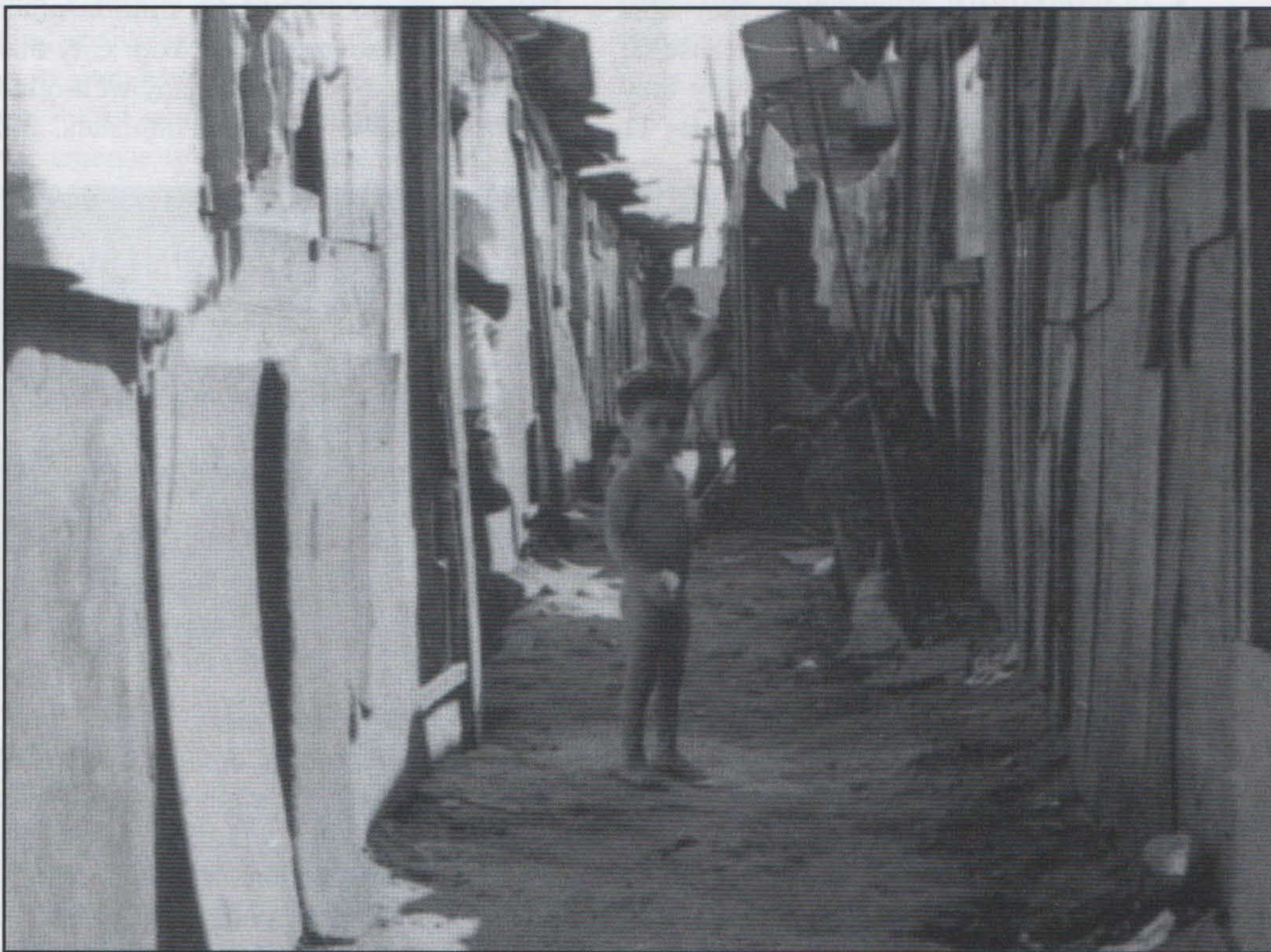
By Fr. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

The Spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons and daughters and it makes us cry out, "Abba, Father!" (Rm. 8: 14,15)

The single greatest event in the history of the universe occurs on the first Christmas Day when God becomes a human being in Jesus! Not even the creation of the universe itself is greater than this. The enormity of the majesty, mystery and mercy that enters time and space on that day is beyond the capacity of the mind to fathom. Each human being and all humanity can only bask in holy awe before the wondrous glory of this happening. The breath-taking realization, that God from all eternity becomes one of us, should bring forth tears of joy and hearts full of gratitude for the One who so loves us.

Alas, in America and in most of what is pridefully misnamed the "First World," Christmas has become little more than a cash-cow for a paganized corporate capitalism. The spirit that rules the contemporary Christmas season is 99% hostile to the values proclaimed as Divine Values by the Person whose birthday is being celebrated. There is really no need to belabor this annually well-documented point and oft commented on reality. Lists of Christmas evils posing as acceptable Christian life choices are so many and so long that another enumeration of them is unnecessary. Just let it be said that First World Christmases normalize and "divinize" every one of the seven Capital Sins, i.e., pride, lust, envy, revenge, gluttony, greed and sloth in order to make a buck.

Worst still, what the Church calls, "*sins that cry to heaven*: the blood of Abel, the sin of the Sodomites, the cry of the people oppressed in Egypt, the cry of the foreign-



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er, the widow, the orphan, injustice to the wage earner," (Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1867) are the very realities that the cornucopia of Barbie Dolls and Nike footwear depends on. The "shop until you drop" Merry Christmas of a few in the First World is utterly dependent on a miserable Christmas for many in the Third World, since well over 50% of what is sold during this season comes from slave labor operations beyond the borders of First World countries. But, in the spirit of a paganized "eat, drink and be merry"

Christmas, who cares? Almost no one cares except the One who so identifies Himself with the "no-bodies" and the "wretched of the earth" that He says, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me." (Mt 25:40) It is therefore very difficult to see how a Christian acquiescing to the spirit of the Christmas of paganized corporate capitalism can honestly believe he or she is glorifying the Christ whose birth is being celebrated this day. Yet, this is the universal liturgical refrain heard in the

Churches of Christianity on Christmas Day: “Christ is born! Let us glorify Him!”

Several years ago one of our Melkite priests, David Kirk, who has been the Director of Emmaus House in Harlem for over 36 years, told me of an incident that happened that was causing him some spiritual distress. Christmas Eve that year was bitterly cold in New York City. Homeless people began coming to Emmaus’ door in large numbers asking for a night’s shelter from the killing cold. David Kirk, himself, had been out on the streets bringing homeless folks in from where they normally slept, e.g. in doorways, because he knew there was a serious possibility they could freeze to death on this night. By 11

“Christ is born! Glorify Him!” God never morally expects a person to do the impossible. But very, very often Jesus expects His followers to do what is extraordinarily difficult. The cross, which Jesus asks each of His disciples to pick up daily, is not a symbol of what is easy or what is impossible. So, we must not confuse the extremely difficult with the impossible and thereby give ourselves an escape hatch from Christ’ cross of nonviolent love for all — friends and enemies. If there is no room, then there is no room. However, there were three million other baptized Christians in New York City that Christmas Eve, including many well-oiled and heated bishops, priests, ministers, and

munities rests primarily on the shoulders of Church leadership — popes, bishops, priests, ministers, etc. The abdication of moral responsibility by the official moral leaders of the Churches in this area is due partly to the fear, that unless they tell their congregation what the congregations want to hear about the Gospel, their people will desert them or stop contributing money, time, etc. to the Church. A second reason for Church leadership’s blasé attitude toward what has become an all but pagan transformation of Christmas is that leadership wants to indulge itself in the same anti-Gospel spirit as its congregation and therefore would be exposed as hypocritical if it condemned for others what it personally wallowed in. How absurd and truly sorrowful it is then when Church leadership endlessly publicly struggles with such questions as communion in the hand or whether “women” should be referred to as “men” in liturgical texts while the greatest event in the history of the world, the Incarnation, is turned inside-out by Satan in order to make it just another gimmick by which people are coaxed into evil for profit.

But, Christ is in fact born and nothing can reverse that reality. Eternal salvation for one and all is now possible. The only question is whether Christian leaders, Christian laity and Christian communities will participate in the process of salvation or not — whether they will glorify Christ by their words and deeds or whether they will glorify some false god by their words and deeds, whether they will live-out-of the luminous Spirit of Jesus Christ or whether they will live-out-of some dark deceptive spirit masquerading as glory by wrapping itself in tinsel.

“Christ is born! Let us glorify *Him!*” An equally acceptable English translation for the word that is rendered “glorify” is “magnify”: “Let us magnify Him.” How do we magnify, make more easily visible, God who reveals Himself definitively for the first time in Jesus on the first Christmas Day, 2000 plus years ago? How do we make such a God visible in a world that is almost totally blind to His existence and presence, in a world whose eyes are almost completely covered by the

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p.m. on Christmas Eve Emmaus House was packed. People were trying to sleep anywhere they could find a few empty feet of space. The stairwells were totally clogged with refugees from the cold, every inch of the Chapel was filled with homeless men and women. That night Emmaus was literally a sardine can filled with people broken in mind and/or body, people with no place to go and no one to go to for protection from the cold. About midnight some men came to the door and wanted to come in. David said he had to tell them that every inch of space was taken and therefore they would have to look elsewhere. It was only a few minutes after he closed the door that it struck him that what he had said to these poor men on this Christmas Eve was that “There was no room for them in the inn.” (Lk 2:7) This is what was so spiritually disturbing for him for an extended period after that particular Christmas.

laity who had empty rooms in their inns. Why was there no concern in the hearts of these Christians — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — for those among them who had no protection from the weather on this brutally cold night before Christmas?

Of course, the issue being illustrated here is not merely that there were a multitude of empty rooms owned by Christians in New York City on one frigid Christmas Eve. The issue is the utter indifference to relievable and preventable human suffering that the Christmas spirit of paganized corporate capitalism nurtures. The issue is that obliviousness to self-evident human need is only one in the chamber of Biblical evils released by the contemporary spirit that governs Christmas in the First World.

The moral responsibility for allowing this pseudo-spirit of Christmas to spread freely through the various Christian com-

cataracts of Church-endorsed anti-Gospel behavior? These are the serious questions that every Church leader and every Christian and every Christian community should be addressing this Christmas season, instead of, "Where are we going to get the money to buy more and better Christmas decorations for the Church?"

Perhaps a way for leaders and laity, as well as, for Churches collectively to enter into a spiritually serious discernment on the Church's mission in the face of this First World anti-Christmas phenomenon would be to ponder and discuss the meaning of the very first words that are spoken by the angel after Jesus is born: "Fear not." (Lk 2: 10) It is fear that drives people away from love and care and empathy. It is fear that drives people to hate, violence, lies and greed. Indeed in the New Testament the ultimate human spiritual battle is between fear and love: "In love there can be no fear, but fear is driven out by perfect love." (1 Jn. 4:18) Since "God is love [*agape*]" (1 Jn. 4:16) there is nothing of fear in God, Our Father. It is impossible to combine the love of a son or daughter for their parent with the fear of a slave. So, the New Testament testifies that, "We ourselves have known and put our faith in God's love towards ourselves." (1 Jn. 4:15) Yet, in our day and age fear mongers roam the earth, mass media, movies, politics, cyberspace and even the Churches like roaring lions, seeking people to devour by terror. Therefore these "first words" of the Gospel revelation are of critical importance if a Christian or Christian community is to make Christmas a significant spiritual force in our time — instead of the moral equivalent of a Super Bowl Sunday.

In short, what these divinely placed "first words" communicate is that while terrorists abound on earth, God in heaven is not a terrorist. What these "first words" of the First Christmas say is that while many try to incite terror in the souls of men and women through violence, mass media and manufactured lies, God, who on this day is a smiling infant in a manger, has no interest in terrorizing anyone — nor is He interested in having any of His human brothers and sisters be agents of

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terror by any means for any purpose. On the contrary, God desires that all humanity know that it is in that delight that the smile of a baby brings to the human heart that a person experiences what the true God really is. There is nothing on earth more removed from fear and terror than the joyful smile of an infant — except the essence of God as revealed by Jesus, the Christ.

It is reported over and over again by "mass media with an agenda" that 2,821 people died on September 11, 2001. The fact is that 160,300 people died on this planet on September 11, 2001, as 160,300 died on September 10, 2001, as 160,300 died on September 12, 2001, as 160,300 people died today. Beyond this I personally know of two people, and I suspect there are many more, who were in the World Trade Center on September 11 and survived, but who are both now dead: one due to being hit by a car while exercising and the other by suicide after his mistress left him. So, let's get it straight, the terror and fear and anxiety that lurk behind and within and alongside of every human life are ultimately about death and suffering and not about a particular brand of death and suffering.

It is as easy as saying, "Boo!", to scare people, because peoples' awareness of their own earthly fragility and mortality exists in their minds from the day when as children they make the connection between the dead cat in the street and themselves. Crying, "Wolf" in order to manipulate people is a ploy that is at least as old as *Aesop's Fables*. (560 B.C.) However, "Alleluia! Alleluia!" It is precisely into this fear-saturated human situation that God comes as the most vulnerable of all creatures — a human baby — and sets in the Gospel forever as the first spoken words of His Good News: "Fear Not!"

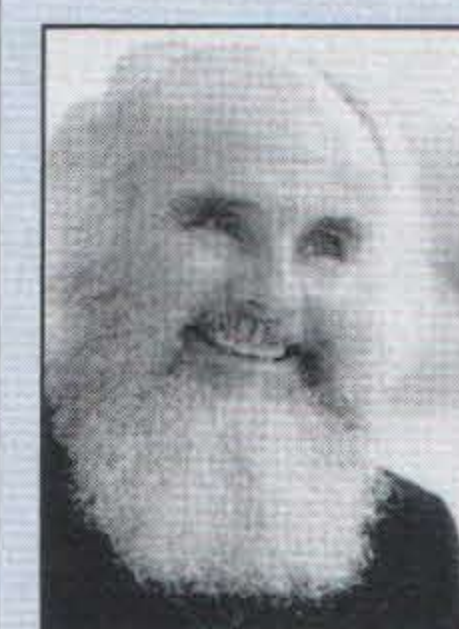
What a service the leadership and laity of the various Churches could be to humanity every Christmas season if, by words and fearless deeds of Christ-like care, they proclaimed with power to a fear-burdened world enslaved by terrorist gods the Good News of Jesus Christ:

*Fear not, you are forever as secure as a baby in the arms of its loving mother! Let the nations and their rulers rage, you be at peace and give no heed to their terrorist gods and their terrorist ways because the Truth is this: "Neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power or height or depth, nor any created thing can separate you from the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

(Rm 8: 38-39)

Oh, if only the Churches and their leadership would stop their petty quarrels and unite in telling the world by word and deed the Good News of God magnified in the baby of Bethlehem; then a humanity, terrorized by false gods and exploited by their unwitting servants, could begin the process of an ever-increasing experience of that Spirit of peace and Divine benevolence that the angels announce moments after the birth of Christ-God on the First Christmas Day. (Lk 2:14)

Christ is born! Glorify Him! ■



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