

December 25, 2013 – Christmas Day

Prepared by Jason and Felicia Gehrig, former Maryknoll lay missionaries, Bolivia

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalms 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

“He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

For many of us, perhaps no other day of the year brings to mind such fond memories as Christmas day – families slowing down to be present to one another, children delighted by the arrival of new gifts, the celebration of beautiful liturgies in thanksgiving to God for loving us so much as to dwell among us. This morning, let us also remember our sisters and brothers throughout the world who are equally, if not more so loved by God, yet do not have such Christmas-time memories. Serving in Catholic mission and living among our impoverished neighbors on the outskirts of El Alto, Bolivia made this all too clear. We will never forget the Christmas morning in our small adobe home when our four-year old daughter hesitated during her opening of gifts to innocently ask us, “Why does Santa Claus not come to brown children’s homes?”

At that age, she already knew, and cared, that such presents would not be awaiting her closest neighborhood friends, Eliana, Marimar and Gustavo. They came from a family, like so many others, who just barely survived under the terms and conditions, or lack thereof, of the current market-driven, global society. They are the “collateral damage” of our lack of solidarity, solidarity that is necessary to challenge the influential who would prefer we blindly accept the status quo as the most efficient, productive system possible.

Many struggling families who make this indigenous city of El Alto their home are comprised of young Aymara who left the difficult rural life of the Andean altiplano to seek opportunities that too often never materializes. How many of our adult Bolivian friends confessed their painful recollections growing up with not so much a present on Christmas day; basic needs such as feeding of the family took precedence. At Christmas time, the children’s only gifts would often be through their church communities. Christmas Eve and morning Masses would be packed with children and their families, often participating in Nativity re-enactments. Modern day shepherds – neighbor children whose daily tasks included grazing their family’s sheep – would bring one of their lambs for the pageant. Meanwhile, dozens of angels with cardboard wings glorified God in song for the gift of loving Divine self-expression – the Word made Flesh, Jesus. Afterward, the sharing of bread and chocolate milk, even small presents for the children, were moments of joy for the whole community of faith.

These marginalized families especially relate to the humble beginnings of Jesus’ arrival into our world. For them, as in the time and place God chose to reveal his self through Jesus, the world of those on the margins is marked by struggle and injustice. Given such darkness resulting from humanity’s lack of solidarity, the manner of God’s Light, Truth and Grace coming to dwell among us was certainly no mistake, which should lead all of us to pause.

In today’s Gospel, John the Baptist recognized this true source of Light, in whom there is Life. How are we, like John, to acknowledge that each of us, regardless of our relative level of human-defined success – “not the light, but called to testify to the Light”? Do we find ourselves too self-absorbed to ponder this meaning? Does our frantic life style impede us from contemplating the mystery of God’s love for all of Creation, and taking action on behalf of our hurting world that would naturally flow from such

recognition? What example are we setting for our children, who most certainly take their cues in life from the priorities we demonstrate through our lived values?

One of the many gifts of being in mission in the world's highest city of El Alto was to awake to the towering Andean snow-capped mountains. Well before sunrise, the beauty of new light penetrating the morning darkness would be cast upon their elevated frozen water slopes. While not the source of the light, those peaks reflected the hope of a new day for those with eyes to see and gratitude to share.

This Christmas morning and beyond, may our own lives follow in the humble yet prophetic footsteps of John the Baptist. In doing so, may we shine with the love of God, love of others and all of Creation, reflecting the brilliant rays of God's divine Light in a broken world in search of healing.

Today we celebrate the Eternal Word of God dwelling among us – may we live accordingly all our days.

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: Peace, social justice and integrity of creation

200 New York Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20001

202-832-1780 ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org