

God is Not a Bystander

In 1993, in South Africa, a little girl laid on the ground trying to summon the strength to crawl to an aid station for food and water. Severely emaciated, her ribs stuck out like they might rip through her skin at any moment. Just a few feet behind her was a vulture, waiting for her to die. A South African photojournalist, Kevin Carter, came upon the scene and, standing at a distance, quickly got out his camera. He waited for twenty minutes, hoping the vulture would spread its wings and give him a better photo. Not wanting to wait any longer, Mr. Carter took the picture and left. After the photo was published, Mr. Carter came under attack for not helping the girl. More than likely, the girl died. Carter claimed later that he just, “didn’t want to get involved.” His photograph earned him a Pulitzer Prize; a year later he killed himself.



Psychologists and sociologists have given us a lot of fancy terms and theories to explain how we, as human beings, can justify ignoring one another, keeping our distance, and choosing not to do what love requires. One of the most famous of these theories is the “Bystander Effect,” defined as a crowd’s unwillingness to get involved when a person desperately needs help.

What we celebrate at Christmas is that God knew all of us were desperately in need of help and He did not just stand by! Spiritually, we were like that little girl, unable to save ourselves, hoping to be rescued, hoping to escape eternal death. And, it was in the midst of our inability to save ourselves that God came. He did not ignore us or keep His distance, but rather, He chose to do what love required—sending His only Son to become human in all things but sin so that we might be saved! What is our response to such an amazing reality? Ideally, our response is gratitude and love!

As you’ve heard me say before, the depth of our gratitude is proportionate to the depth of the poverty that was remedied in our lives. In other words, the level of our gratitude at Christmas is proportionate to the level of our awareness of how desperately we needed Christ’s Incarnation! All of the elements of the Christmas Season—the decorations, meals, gifts, cards, etc.—are all supposed to remind us of the eternal gift we’ve been given by God. They are meant to point us deeper in our awareness of the gift of the Incarnation. And, the gratitude that we feel for the elements of Christmas is supposed to be an echo of the gratitude we feel for the gift God has given us in Jesus Christ. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, “We who are receiving the unshakeable kingdom should have gratitude, with which we should offer worship pleasing to God in reverence and awe” (12:28).

If we struggle with being grateful for the gift of the Incarnation, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, in his book, The World's First Love, reminds us of just how extraordinary it is that God chose not to be a bystander. He writes—

The difference in the God-man relationship between Eastern religions and Christianity is that in the East man moves toward God; in Christianity, God moves first toward man. The Eastern way fails because man cannot lift himself by his own bootstraps.... So if man is to share the Divine Nature, God must come down to man. This is the Incarnation.

-Fulton J. Sheen, The World's First Love, Ignatius Press, 1996, pg. 145

In addition to gratitude, the Incarnation challenges us to love. As we have experienced God's love, especially the fact that God did not remain a bystander in our eternal suffering, we are challenged to love others and not remain a bystander in their suffering. In the first letter of John, we are taught—

Let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. We love because he first loved us.

-1 John 4:7-9, 11, 19

One day, while I was in seminary in New Orleans, I got to see such love in action. I was walking down the street and a homeless man told me he was hungry. I told him I would bring him some food. I ran to McDonald's and bought him a hamburger, fries, and drink. He and I sat down on a park bench and he began eating. It was obvious that he was truly hungry. As we sat there, another homeless man walked up to us and sat down, hungrily eyeing the burger. Without a word being exchanged, the first homeless man tore the hamburger in half and gave it to the other man, who devoured it. I was deeply touched by the homeless man's generosity! "We love because he first loved us." The more aware we are of having been loved and rescued by God, the more willing we become to be active participants in the healing, forgiveness, and charity that our world desperately needs.

May our Christmas Season be filled with great gratitude and love as we celebrate the fact that our God did not ignore us, or keep His distance, but rather, chose to do what love required in order to rescue us and heal our eternal suffering!