Las Posadas in Ireland

Our version of *Las Posadas* lacked the formality and pageantry of the ritual in Latin American countries, but we celebrated the nine nights of Las Posadas in our own way in the West End of Providence. Each night, a group of people would approach the home of a fellow parishioner. A Christmas carol would be sung outside the door, and then a dialogue would follow that reenacted Joseph and Mary's request for lodging ("posadas" is the Spanish word for "lodgings"). Once it was confirmed that it was Mary and Joseph seeking shelter for the imminent birth of Jesus, the door would open for everyone to enter. Prayers would be said and refreshments shared. It was a wonderful way to place us in the Christmas story and to spark a spirit of welcome toward the arrival of Jesus.

Recently, I stumbled across an Irish Christmas song, *The Kerry Christmas Carol*. The lyrics describe an Irish custom of readying the home to welcome Joseph and Mary as they travel looking for shelter. *Brush the floor and clean the hearth and set the fire to keep*, the song begins. Then it recommends that a tall white candle be lit in the window, food and drink prepared, and the door left unlatched so that *they'll know they're welcome here this holy Christmas night*.

When I heard the carol and learned the tradition to which it refers, I thought, wait and minute, that is Las Posadas! I have no idea if or how these customs are related, or what the cultural crossover might be. More than likely, they are only connected in a shared faith and in a desire to celebrate Christmas with an open heart.

These Latin and Irish traditions echo the Gospel that is read at many Christian churches on the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Luke 1: 39-45), a story that describes someone being welcomed into a home. Mary, pregnant with Jesus and needing a place to stay away from public scrutiny, goes to her cousin Elizabeth's home seeking shelter. Elizabeth warmly receives her.

What strikes me about Elizabeth's taking Mary in, the actual innkeeper who readied the only space she had in the stable, and the many believers who reenact that reception in rituals like those found in Latin America and Ireland, is that they saw the need and immediately responded without question. It was assessment without judgment, hospitality without counting the cost, openness to whatever might come next, a "what is mine is yours" attitude.

More remarkable in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary and in the innkeeper's unrecorded exchange with Joseph and Mary is their recognition of the divine in another person. "There is something special about this couple and the child they are expecting," the innkeeper may have thought. We know that Elizabeth remarked, "The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby leapt in my womb for joy." The baby in Elizabeth's womb grew to become John the Baptist. They realized that the fetus growing in Mary's womb was divine.

This recognition of the divine in another person is central to the work of the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order of sisters founded by Mother Teresa. Across the globe, in every soup kitchen, homeless shelter, clinic, or other charitable facility, they have a crucifix hanging on the wall with the words "I Thirst" tacked onto the wood of the cross. You will recognize that phrase as one of the last words of Jesus as he was dying. To understand why this is hung wherever the

Missionaries of Charity work, you need to know a little about what Catholics believe about the Eucharist (sometimes referred to as “Holy Communion”).

The Mass is the central religious ceremony of Catholics. During the Mass, the priest repeats the words that Jesus used at the last supper he shared with his followers the night before he died. Over bread, the priest says, “This is my Body,” and over the wine he says, “This is my Blood to be shed for you.” Catholics believe that even today, when these words are pronounced over the bread and wine during the Mass, Jesus is present under the appearances of bread and wine. Furthermore, some bread thus consecrated during the Mass is kept and reserved in a receptacle called a tabernacle. If you enter a Catholic church, you will see the tabernacle with a candle lit next to it signaling that Jesus is present. Catholics have special times of prayer when they meditate and pray before the tabernacle.

As part of their way of life, the Missionaries of Charity have a daily hour of prayer before the tabernacle when they worship Jesus under the appearance of bread. More significantly, in their rule that governs their religious order, they enjoin the sisters to worship Jesus “under the distressing disguise of the poor.” In other words, their works of charity and service of the poor are really acts of worship, recognizing Jesus in the poor that they serve. They understand Jesus’ words, “I thirst,” as a thirst for love and care, the same thirst experienced by the poor, and they respond with their service.

A Gospel passage about the end times read every three years on the First Sunday of Advent (Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36) brings to mind the dramatic portrayal of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25: 31-46. There, Jesus validates how some have lived their lives. In so many words he points out that, “You fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty. You welcomed the stranger. You made sure people had adequate clothing, and you cared for the sick. You visited the imprisoned.” In other words, these people lived as Jesus would live. More remarkably, Jesus emphasizes his identification with those in need: , “I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it for me.”

Elizabeth, the innkeeper, the believers reenacting the reception of Mary and Joseph into the innkeeper’s stable, and the Missionaries of Charity all recognize the divine in other people. This joining of the divine and the human is the great mystery we celebrate at Christmas. The weeks leading up to and following Christmas is our chance to renew this openness to the divine in the people and the world that surround us.

Having this disposition at our core is especially important in times of uncertainty and stress when we are tempted to abandon our option to follow Jesus’ example and to place our own needs before others’. Christmastime brings our focus outside of ourselves, moving us to “unlatch the door” for those who need our assessment without judgment, hospitality without counting the cost, openness to whatever might come next.