

4th Sunday of Advent “Simbang Gabi”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Let's begin with an observation. December is the dark, wet, and miserable, and yet houses, malls and even streets are arrayed with festive lights. We take these things for granted because it happens every year. However, the day after Thanksgiving, there is a complete frenzy in my neighborhood to put up Christmas lights. I did that. How many here did as well? This drives liturgists crazy. They want to drape our houses in purple until Christmas morning. However, anthropologically speaking there is something right about the instinct we have of celebratory lights this time of year, especially the ones with religious themes, even during the season of Advent. This is especially relevant in the Simbang Gabi tradition of processing into mass with the parols.

As many of you know, especially if you were with me at the opening Simbang Gabi mass at the cathedral earlier this month, Simbang Gabi began with the witness of a conquered people, who were forced to work long hours through the day to the point of exhaustion. Indeed, it was because the workers were truly exhausted after a long day of manual labor that the Church offered the mass in the morning before it was light out so workers could attend mass when they were most rested. It was therefore also called *Missa de Gallo*, as it was celebrated when the roosters started to crow. I thank you for scheduling mass at 6 PM! The parol's origin comes from a mixture of faith and practicality. Just as a star led the Magi to Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, these beautiful lamps also lit the way to the Holy Mass.

However, as many of you know, a celebration of lights during the darkest time of year isn't unique to Christianity. Hanukkah is also a celebration of light in the darkness starting with one candle a day being lit until the whole menorah is lit eight evenings later, celebrating the Maccabean liberation of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Temple. Japan, China, India, you name it, they all have celebrations of lights with their own traditions that celebrate the triumph of light over darkness. We welcome Spring with the celebration of the Resurrection in a darkened church with the paschal candle guiding the way, soon the church is lit with our tapers representing the light Christ has given us in Baptism. And let us not forget our Advent wreaths, one candle each Sunday until all four candles are lit. And, here we are. Only now are we ready for Christmas, and the birth of the light of the world at a time of year when each and every day that follows has a little more daylight.

Candles, Christmas trees, houses lit with Christmas lights, advent wreaths, parols, what is it about celebratory lights this time of year? They almost feel like an act of defiance against the darkness, don't they? The symbol of light this time of year, what does it say? It says even though life can get dark, sometimes very dark, God will give us the light we need every day if we stay close to Jesus. God offers us this grace; however, we must also freely choose it.

In the Gospel of St. Luke, the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will be the Mother of God. This moment in Luke's Gospel recalling Mary's fiat is the subject of many paintings, statues, and songs over the centuries and rightfully so. On the other hand, if we were to enter the Gospel and contemplate this moment in salvation history, the Annunciation can be unsettling for several reasons. Here are my top two:

First, what if Mary said no? Back in seminary, we would debate this point. If Mary was kept safe from original sin at the moment of her conception, how would it be possible for her to refuse? On the other hand, Adam and Eve were not born with original sin either. Look what happened to them. And so, I have always been in the camp that Mary indeed had a choice. She could have said no. The salvation of the whole human race was placed on the shoulders of a young Jewish woman. Think about that. Without her "yes" we would have never known Jesus. It is beautiful when you think about it. However, it is unsettling that something as important as our salvation depended on one person's response. Makes you wonder how much depends on our response to God's invitation, not only on us and our families in the present, but the ramifications our response to God has for the generations after us.

The second aspect of the Annunciation that is unsettling for me is how quickly she said yes. And, from a biblical perspective, this is wise. God can be very persuasive and creative. For example, I bet Jonah didn't see that big fish coming. However, when I encounter this passage of Mary saying yes so quickly to God's plan for her, or the passages about the disciples of Jesus leaving their nets to immediately follow him, I find it unsettling. It can take me hours to decide what I want for dinner let alone change the trajectory of my life. There is saying yes to God; and saying yes to God quickly.

Such was the spirituality of the Filipino people when the celebration of Simbang Gabi began. Despite their exhaustion of being forced into labor, the rose quickly in the middle of the night so to follow the parols to celebrate the holy Mass together. In our culture, it is hard enough for people to get out of bed to attend a late morning mass, let alone one in the middle of the night. We can therefore ask ourselves, what kind of faith did these people have that we don't? What are the areas in my life I need to say "yes" to God? What are the areas in my life I need to say "yes" to God quickly?

For me, the parols that lit the field workers' path the morning mass before another hard day of working in the fields says one thing loud and clear: celebrating Christmas makes absolutely no sense without our Easter hope. For me, the parols during Simbang Gabi symbolize that essential message. Celebrating Christmas makes no sense without our Easter hope. We do not celebrate Jesus' birth because he was a great thinker, or historical figure. We worship him and we long for him at Christmas morning because Jesus is our savior. Amen?

In the times when it is dark, and we are filled with doubt, wracked with anger, or filled with grief, it is then that we know how helpless we are. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot do it. We need Jesus. My friends, the world needs Jesus. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we remember a young Jewish girl who was given a choice. We give thanks to God for her yes that gave us Jesus who alone is the light of life.