

Christmas 2025 Who do you Follow

Bishop Frank Schuster

In recent years there has been a growth in social media of so-called influencers. Do you know what I am referring to? They are on-line celebrities that have hundreds of millions of followers. That is why I guess they are called “influencers”. They have very large audiences to get their message out. For example, celebrities like Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber have over a half billion followers each. Imagine that. And they are not even remotely alone. There are dozens and dozens of influencers with hundreds of millions of followers. And these influencers do in fact influence culture. Some influencers tell us what to eat, some tell us what to wear, what to listen to or watch, who to vote for, what to believe, the list goes on. I thought Pope Leo would have a similar audience on-line. He is not even close to those on top of the list. Admittedly, posts along the lines of “Go to Church. Say your Prayers. Be Generous to the Poor” probably aren’t going to be as flashy as what Beyonce or Lady Gaga might post. However, what Pope Leo has to share is nevertheless far more helpful. Everyone should be listening to him. Read his stuff, he is truly amazing. However, like St. John the Baptist, St. Paul, or St. Mary or St. Joseph, Pope Leo’s power isn’t about drawing attention to himself. He always points us to Jesus. And yet, people evidently are more interested with what the Kardashians are doing. Don’t get me wrong. I have nothing against Kardashians. I just don’t know what a Kardashian is. Or as Nate Bergatze might say, “No one knows”. I am just saying, this whole influencer phenomenon in our culture is very strange to me.

Which begs the question: Who influences you? Who do you follow? Let that question bounce around inside a little, because you are all familiar with one of our newest saint Carlo Acutis, right? He was born in 1991, lived in Italy with his family, and he was devoutly Catholic from his earliest childhood. There was something obviously special about him as a child that only got stronger, even after he became sick with cancer. He was a kid who would find ways to drag his family to Church, rather than the other way around. We call him the patron saint of the internet and social media because he was very good with computers, started a website and developed a fan base to help evangelize other teens and anyone who would listen. Why stop with just dragging your family to Church when you can influence as many people as possible who click your way? He was quite good at it to. One of the titles that have stuck to him over the years is that Carlo was, and continues to be, God’s influencer. God’s influencer. He wasn’t interested in posting about what he had for breakfast or what shoes he liked to wear (Spoiler alert: Nikes). All he wanted to do with his online presence was to introduce anyone he could to the Lord. You see, that is who Carlo followed, particularly through adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Even as he was slowly dying, he called the Blessed Sacrament his “Highway to Heaven”. What a witness! However, as good as Carlo was with the internet, he also understood all too well the dangers. One of his insights was that every single person online and here today was created by God to be uniquely you, to be originals. God makes us all that way from the beginning, to be originals. However, Carlo also said that too many of us die as photocopies. That is an interesting perspective. That can happen if we follow the wrong “influencers” in life or get bamboozled by false gospels.

To underscore that point, our Gospel reading says, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.” Joseph’s intention was to divorce her quietly. Why? Probably because that is what other men in his culture did in that situation. Thank God an angel of the Lord intervened and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” We can thank God that an angel intervened; however, the choice was still Joseph’s to make. It was his choice to make. That is how Joseph became St. Joseph, by the way, by choosing God’s will for him rather than choosing what others expected of him. It was the same way how Mary became St. Mary. She said yes to God’s will, not no. By choosing God’s will for her, despite all the dangers, she became an original, the Mother of God. By extension, that is how one single family in the history of the world became the Holy Family, not through modeling what they saw on TV, but by welcoming Jesus into their midst. Just seeing if you are still awake.

My friends, we all have darkness to contend with this time of year, whether it is worries about our family, concerns regarding our job, the grief that comes from losing a loved one, a health concern we have about ourselves or with a family member, or simply the spiritual darkness that comes from hurt or doubt. How do we get through it? Who can teach us? Whose example can we follow?

My friends, I am here to tell you that the only influencers you need tonight is the Holy Family! Brass tacks, we don’t celebrate Christmas because Jesus was an intriguing historical figure or because he was a remarkable philosopher or philanthropist. We celebrate Christmas because Jesus is our Savior you see. And that message will ring empty in our hearts unless we know deep, deep down inside of us that we in fact need saving. We hide from it. We deny it. But, deep down, we know. There is a brokenness inside all of us that we can’t fix. We just can’t do it. We can’t save ourselves from hurt. We can’t save ourselves from our sins. We most certainly cannot save ourselves from death. Only Jesus is Emmanuel, a word that means, “God is with us”. And just in case we missed the point, “Jesus” is a word that in fact literally means “God saves”. The incarnation we celebrate on Christmas morning was a rescue mission that culminates in his passion, death and resurrection. That hope God has given us in the future, that we have a future, shines light on what we should be doing today that demonstrates our love for God and love for our neighbor, especially those who are struggling, poor, or alone. All this is to say: celebrating the birth of Christ makes absolutely no sense without our Easter hope. There would be no point.

And so, if you are having a difficult Christmas this year, and yes, there are people here tonight who are having a difficult Christmas and for good reasons, that is how we get through it, by remembering the reason for the season. My friends, only Jesus is the light that stays on when all other lights go out. Thank you, Tolkien. Yes, the Lord can be that light for us that will reveal a path forward. However, like Mary and Joseph, the decision is still our own to make. When it comes to discipleship, faith must look like something. So, do you dare? Do you dare to truly open your hearts to God this Christmas? What does that look like? Do we dare kneel before the Christ child in the manger of our hearts? If we do, a Christmas miracle might happen for us. With all that can weigh heavy on our hearts this time of year, we might be surprised by Easter hope.