

Christmas Eve 2018
Cathedral of the Holy Trinity
Paris, France
The Rt. Rev. Pierre W. Whalon

This is my last Christmas with all of you as Bishop across Europe. Next year it will be Mark Edington in this pulpit, I imagine. For some weeks now, I have been wondering what I should say, one last time.

No, I am not trying to craft some “famous last words.” Not there yet by a long shot! No, just to tell you why I love the story we tell tonight.

Of course, I should start with the Christmases that my parents celebrated with me and my four sisters. There was always a big Christmas tree, midnight Mass, putting the Christ Child in the crèche, presents to open after church, and then when we were older, the réveillon meal that went into the wee hours.

Then I remember all the Christmases that I celebrated on an organ bench, leading the congregation in the great songs of praise that the Church has collected over the centuries for this night. And then beginning as a young priest to celebrate the divine mysteries of Christmas in a little church in a little town with the spine-tingling name (to me at least) of “North Versailles.”

A little town outside Pittsburgh. And yes, there is also a Versailles, P.A., on the Monongahela River, also a little town. It was the height of the industrial collapse of western Pennsylvania, so Christmas was an especially difficult time for people who’d lost not only their work but their entire way of life that was the proud, hard culture of the mill towns.

And then a parish just outside Philadelphia, a beautiful church with all Tiffany windows, that had no problems of unemployment but other hardships, of course. Christmas has a way of laying bare all kinds of pain, because it is such a powerful reminder of what is now past forever.

And my last parish, a big congregation with a school in a poor town in Florida, Fort Pierce. One memory I have is turning on the air conditioning on Christmas Eve. We had all kinds of people mixing together: fruit pickers, commercial fishermen, oceanographers, retired Yankees, old Florida cattle ranchers and citrus farmers, prostitutes from the local ministry. All sorts and conditions of people, one story to celebrate.

And seventeen years here celebrating as your bishop in his seat, his cathedral. How many nationalities are present tonight? It’s always different here in Paris... never the same congregation.

But looking back over 66 Christmases (Good Lord, did I just say that?), of course I remember Nativity scenes, department store windows, Christmas trees, caroling in the snow, wrapping a palm tree in lights, unwrapping presents, showing up one Christmas Eve at the home of a family that had been flooded out with an armful of presents from all those unemployed people who’d heard of their plight... on and on.

But under all the trappings that we humans have made of this winter festival, the one thing I remember, the one thing I want to tell you tonight, is that none of those trappings matter. The one thing about this evening that is always always always worth remembering, worth teaching our children, the one thing that it means, is to have hope.

Long before the birth of Jesus, our ancestors developed winter festivals to express hope that the days would start getting longer again, that spring would come, and their crops bloom and their herds reproduce. The Church took it over at the end of the Roman Empire not only to express those hopes

but much more deeply, to reaffirm that the darkness of our lives will never have the last word. To shout that life is always worth living because it will not end. The Lie that is so pervasive will never conquer the Truth. The Evil that so many do, including our own, will never prevail over the Good. Death will have a day, but we will have everlasting life.

This is what I love about Christmas. Jesus Christ, the reality of God come into our lives, is the hope of humanity. The hope of the whole creation. Your hope, and my hope. And friends, I can tell you after 66 Christmases that there is no other hope on this earth.

As the Prayer Book office says,

V. In you O Lord is our hope
R. And we shall never hope in vain.

Never. Never. Never hope in vain.

So as the Episcopalians across Europe are saying to each other tonight,

Buon Natale!
Frohe Weihnachten!
¡Feliz Navidad!
Joyeux Noël!

And

Merry Christmas.