

"Faith & Values"
Feature Essay



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Christmas needs more than one day!

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CENTER VALLEY – By now the gifts have been put away, the decorations can come down, the leftovers are all gone. Despite the big build-up to the season, with shopping that began well before Thanksgiving, Christmas seems to have come and gone, as we now turn our attention to the bowl games and parties that will ring in the New Year.

Many factors contribute to the fleeting experience which results from shortening this season. Economically, our consumerist mentality reduces the holiday to the time it takes for the exchange of gifts, and possibly another day to return them. More pragmatically, the geographic dispersion of family members lessens the amount of time able to be spent together. Even religiously, our penchant for convenience has changed the traditional twelve days of Christmas, for now we designate the Epiphany not as a distinct holiday on January 6, but merely as a Sunday celebration falling nearest to that date.

Our haste over Christmas also risks diminishing its monumental meaning. Giving but one day's time, or in some cases just part of a day, to celebrate this event shortchanges its significance. This day, this birth, this person is far from ordinary; indeed, it is unique in the history of the world.

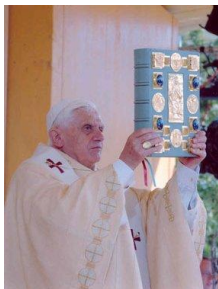


Giving Christmas its due calls for a distinctive sense of time. Whereas our Western and American notion is chronological, this holiday partakes of time as “kairos,” a reckoning that considers not the succession of measurable moments (days, months, years), but instead the eventful happenings that break into, and have a transformative effect upon, our history. For this reason, the Church’s commemoration takes place for eight days, not just one.

In biblical times, an octave, or “eight day” celebration, surrounded major events in the communal history of the chosen people, such as the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:36) or the Dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 7:9). Later, Roman emperors such as Constantine lauded major projects, like the construction of basilicas in the Christian world, with eight days of celebrations.

In today’s world, the Roman Catholic Church distinguishes two feasts with an octave – Christmas and Easter – to highlight those historic events on which the entirety of the faith is anchored. Theologically, the eight-day celebration signals both completeness and newness, one day more than the whole week of creation. As such, an octave marks a special occurrence, a dawning of a new day, a change in time itself that creates a new course for human history.

This, the second day in the octave of Christmas, has particular relevance in an expansive appreciation of the Nativity, for it also celebrates the feast of St. John the



Evangelist. John begins his story of Good News to the world not with the narrative of a miraculous birth, but by singing the praises of the One who was “in the beginning” and is now the “word made flesh.” His poetic prologue to the gospel makes evident that this celebration is far more than a one-day wonder. Pope Benedict XVI offers a new understanding of John’s poetic word (“logos”) when he explains that now “the ‘eternal Sense’ of the world is made tangible to our sense and to our intelligence; now we can touch it and contemplate it.”

Christmas is our opportunity to make sense of this Sense, to appreciate the Word that continues to call all peoples of the world to a fuller and richer humanity. As Walter Brueggeman once wrote, the “energizing hope” for which our world still yearns comes to us not in the materialism of packaged gifts, nor in the rationality of scientific discovery or political order, but in the song of Christmas, in the “amazements (we) can neither explain nor understand.”

One day does not suffice. Whether with eight days of feasts or twelve days of songs, the seasonal celebration of Christmas has only just begun!
