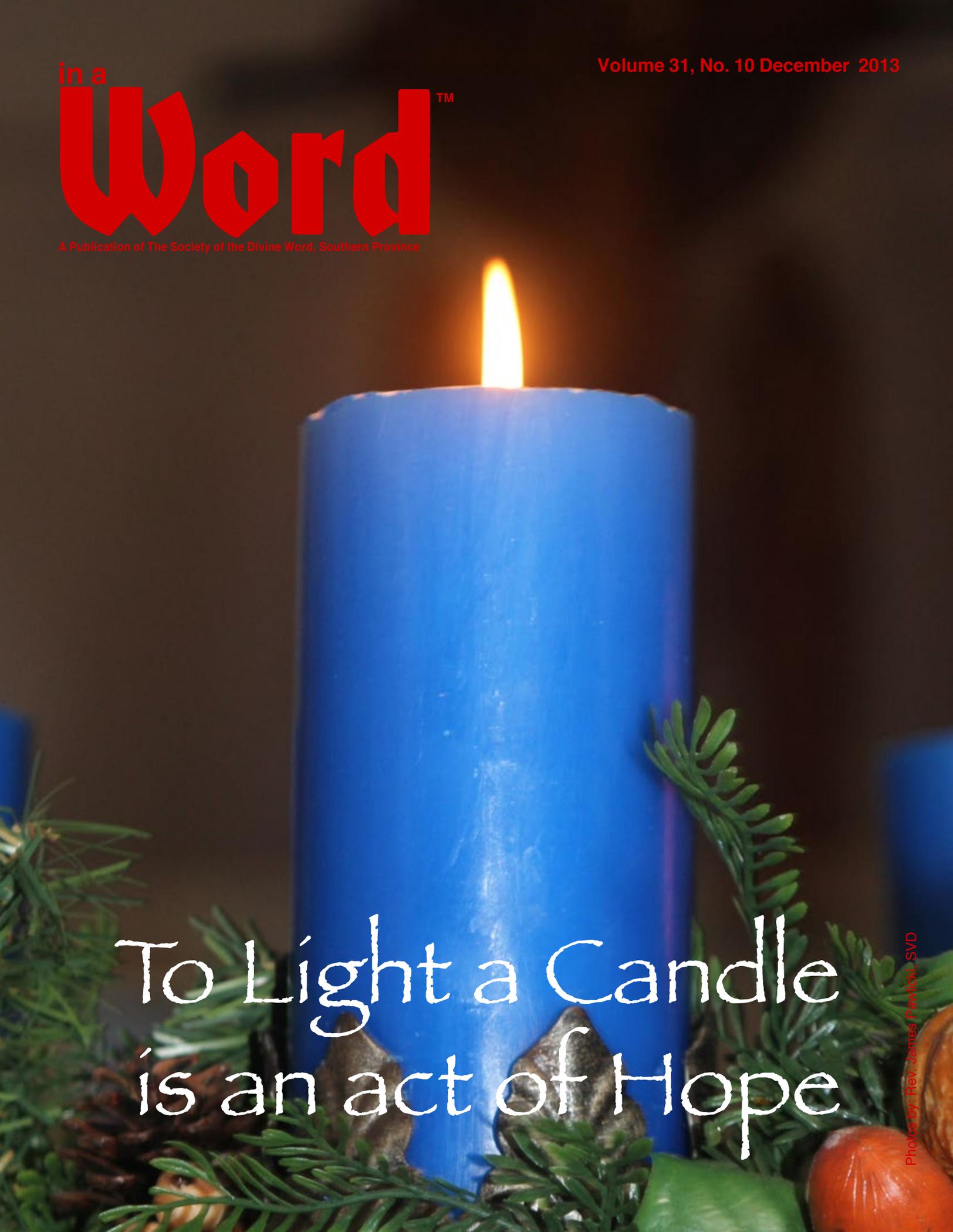


in a

Word™

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A lit blue candle is the central focus, with a bright flame at the top. It is surrounded by greenery, including ferns and pine needles, and several oranges are visible in the foreground. The background is dark, making the candle and its light stand out.

To Light a Candle
is an act of Hope

Photos by: Rev. James Fawick, SVD

CHRISTMAS, THE GIFT THAT KEEPS GIVING

by
Father Jerome LeDoux, SVD

Sometimes surreptitious and sneaky, at times in-your-face and boisterous, love is here, there and everywhere. It is known to hit you with great force and sweep you off your feet. But it is also known to approach you silently and capture you while you suspect nothing.

So does Christmas, the birthday of God's Son as man, since God is love, and all who love abide in God and God in them, as 1 John 4:16 advises us. I dare say that most people are not even aware that they are being ensnared by the love that is Christmas, for Christmas love does not broadside most people as love is sometimes seen to do. It is almost a sneaky love.

This is obviously the case, because we celebrate birthdays by giving presents to the birthday girl or boy. Our culture and custom of celebrating Christmas is upside down, for the birthday Boy does not get the presents. We do. And, save for the exception of people born on Christmas Day, we should not be receiving but only giving presents to the birthday Boy.

But what is so sneaky about the love found in this culture and custom of giving gifts at Christmas time? Most people conveniently overlook the fact that they should be giving to the birthday Boy himself, not to their dear family and friends. So, they also tend to overlook the fact that they are spreading the real Christmas message of love by giving gifts to others.

So who has the last laugh? Venal shopping insanity aside, we can say unconditionally that the Christmas birthday Boy is having the last laugh and has been laughing since his epic years on earth. "The Man Of Sorrows," "God's Suffering Servant," poignantly depicted by Isaiah 53, is also the Center of our joy, the Image of the eternal Father, the Prince of Peace.

So incredibly compelling is the Christmas birthday Boy's message that one day it would be recorded through John 15:9,12, "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love... This is my commandment: love one another as I love you."

The last laugh is not had by "Ho, ho, ho!" merry shoppers who cannot get enough of the madness that is Black Friday, anticipated Black Friday, and finally the Black Friday trailer, Cyber Monday, that invites you to jump online and save big bucks on everything!

Not far behind the bona fide fanatics that camp out day and night for several days to get a jump on all other shoppers, the barely-sane, herd-driven shoppers stam-pede before the fairly-sane regular shoppers who fancy themselves driven by the spirit of Christmas. In spite of themselves, despite their consumer-driven pursuit, all of them salute the birthday Boy.

Christmas gifts range from the crudest homemade to the most lavish, expensive rocks imaginable, platinum or gold trinkets, eye-popping motor vehicles wrapped in a huge red ribbon with a bow, unreal watches, computers with all the bells and whistles, mega-screen TVs with an entertainment center, smart phones of every description with more computer power than our early spacecraft, electronic gadgets, fancy clothes and paraphernalia galore.

Looking at it another way, without the obscure, little birthday Boy, once hidden away in the relative comfort of the straw in a cattle cave, none of this merchant madness would be going on, the world would not even know the excitement it would be missing at Christmas time, and the global atmosphere would be dull and pedestrian but for New Year fireworks.

While tens of millions are willing to acknowledge and celebrate the Reason for the season, untold millions more are willy-nilly, grudging fellow travelers who swell the outsize numbers of participants in scores of parades around the country and the world, scenes with billions of multicolor lights embraced by most, countless movies and musical extravaganzas.

Unwittingly, often against their intent and will, those grudging fellow travelers nonetheless keep alive, promote and propagate the birthday Boy's story with his message that still eludes the grasp of a baffling number of individuals as well as that of the United Nations who give perennial mere lip service to the feckless pursuit of peace around the world.

Now what about you personally? Do you keep in touch frequently with your relatives and other dear ones? Do you engage in family activities that enable you to bond more deeply and more firmly as you continue your pilgrimage here on earth? Do you reject the venal, commercial Christmas to find the birthday Boy's peace in yourself and your own family?

Perhaps Nat King Cole said it best of all when he sang, "I want your arms around me for Christmas. I need no presents under the tree. You're all I want, my darling; and that will be the world to me." A warm person is all that most folks really want. Just ask anyone lonely, separated, abandoned, forlorn, without family or companion, or in a loveless relationship.

When the high-priced commercial gifts lavishly offered on Christmas Day have lost their luster and glamour, relegated to the ho-hum heap of baubles and trinkets that are no longer lovingly appreciated, the birthday Boy's message of anxiety-proof peace that the world cannot give lives on the loving hearts of all who embrace him and his enduring love.

CHRISTMAS LIGHT

"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

This is the motto of the Christophers whose mission is to encourage people of all ages, and from all walks of life, to use their God-given talents to make a positive difference in the world.

The Christophers believe that each person has a God-given mission to fulfill, a particular job to do that has been given to no one else. Love and truth come to us through God, but these gifts are not ours to keep. By sharing them with others each of us becomes a Christ-bearer, a "Christopher" in the most fundamental sense of that word. (go to www.christophers.org)

Darkness has long been a metaphor for ignorance or evil. At Christmas we Catholic Christians believe that evil has been overcome with the light of Christ. At this darkest time of the year we remember that when we light a candle darkness is overcome.

This symbolism of a lit candle overcoming darkness, ignorance and evil was a powerful sign at the death of Nelson Mandela. Throughout South Africa and the world people lit candles to honor his legacy.

Yet the symbolism of the lighted candles is important to the people of South Africa. Father Ronald Rolheiser explained it well in an article he wrote in 2002. He said.....

"To light a candle is an act of hope.

In the days of apartheid in South Africa, Christians there used to light candles and place them in windows as a sign to themselves and to others that they believed that some day this injustice would end.

A candle burning in a window was a sign of hope and a political statement. The government didn't miss the message. It passed a law making it illegal to place a lit candle in a window, the offense being equal to owning a firearm, both considered equally dangerous. This eventually became a joke among the kids: "Our government is afraid of lit candles!"

They had reason to be! Lit candles, more than firearms, overthrew apartheid. Hope, not guns, is what ultimately transforms things.

To light a candle as an act of hope is to say to yourself and to others that, despite anything that might be happening in the world, you are still nursing a vision of peace and unity based upon something beyond the present state of things and this hope is based upon deeper realities and powers than the world admits. To light a candle is to state publicly that you believe that what's real and what isn't is ultimately determined by powers and issues that go beyond what's seen on the evening news. To light a candle is an act of political defiance. It's also an act of hope." (see the entire article at www.ronrolheiser.com/columnarchive/?id=245)

So when we light our candles this Christmas let us remember the hope that Christ brings to a world filled with injustice. We must be witnesses to that light and make a difference in our world.



in a word or two

On Christmas day, 1864, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow received word that his son, Charles, a soldier in the Civil War, had been wounded. Just two years before, Henry had lost his second wife in a fire. As he sat alone with his grief, on the most joyful of Holy Days, he penned words of hope to challenge his own despair. He called his composition *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. Little did he know that those words would someday be set to music and become a blessing to millions of people around the world.



If there are dreams about a beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to their goal. Two of these roads could be named Goodness and Forgiveness.

-Nelson Mandela

I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day

by

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Till ringing, singing on its way
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head
'There is no peace on earth,' I said,
'For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.'

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men.'



Photo by: John Pawlicki

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

AND

PEACE TO ALL

FROM:

IN A WORD

AND

THE DIVINE WORD MISSIONARIES

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas.

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