

Christmas 2018

St. Patrick's

It was also Christmas Eve. The year was 1818, exactly two hundred years ago tonight. The place was a small village in the Austrian Alps by the name of Oberndorf, not far from Salzburg (1).

The young assistant priest of the parish, Father Joseph Mohr, was wondering what the parish would do for music that evening for Christmas Eve Mass. The pipe organ at the church had broken. Parishioners wouldn't be able to sing the great Christmas hymns they were used to singing for this holy night.

Father Mohr got an idea. He found a poem which he had written two years earlier after a summer of violence in Salzburg. On Christmas Eve morning Father Mohr asked the parish organist to set the words of his poem to music. He asked the organist to set it to a simple tune that could be played on guitar. Two hundred years ago tonight, the organist played the guitar, and Father Mohr sang for the first time the song, "Silent Night."

It has become the most loved of Christmas hymns. We'll sing it tonight, accompanied by our restored organ at St. Patrick's, the oldest functioning pipe organ in the city.

**"Silent night, holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories streams from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing, alleluia
Christ the savior is born
Christ the savior is born."**

"Christ the savior *is* born"...odd, that it doesn't say, "Christ the savior *was* born." Perhaps it's poetic license. But then, there's another way to look at it. A way that does put Christmas in the present.

Some forty-five years ago, as a seminarian student, I visited one of the most renowned cathedrals in the world—Chartres, some 40 miles outside of Paris. It is home to the largest collection of preserved stained-glass windows from the Middle Ages. These stained-glass windows are among the most beautiful in the world. The Incarnation windows were cut and set into the west wall of the cathedral. They go back to the 1150s. Back then, stained-glass windows were the creative

way of teaching folks about the faith—an innovation then, like the internet has become in our lifetime. The Nativity stained-glass scene is compressed—with cows and other animals crowded together, Joseph sleeping, and Mary—reclining and pointing to her infant Son. Surprisingly, however, the Infant Jesus is not lying in a manger. Instead, the Infant Jesus is set on what is an altar.

Friends: It was a magnificent, creative teaching tool. In the 12th century the church wanted folks to learn and know in their heart that the same Jesus born as an infant in Bethlehem—well, that same Jesus *is* on the altar at every Mass...no longer an infant, but the crucified and risen Christ. That Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary and thus made her Mother of God, we call upon that same Spirit at this altar, this table, and wondrously Christ is just as present with us tonight as in that Bethlehem manger.

Yes, it's the angel's message to us, this holy night:

“Do not be afraid, for—

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: You will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

Lying in a manger. And, just as present in our Eucharist.

St. Patrick's: This Christmas stretches our faith...to believe that God became flesh, born of Mary—yes, God-with-us, our Emmanuel. That same faith pushes us further: **“Christ the Savior is born,”**—and, we take him on his word that he becomes just as present among us tonight in the Eucharist, as he was to those shepherds that first Christmas night. And, as Pope Francis uses this image, we as church are like a “field hospital,” for those who are hurting, broken and needing emergency care. If tonight we can say “Amen”—“I believe”—to the Eucharist, as the flesh and blood of the Risen Jesus, he invites us forward for that gift—his Christmas gift to us all. Yes, “say but the word and our soul will be healed.” If we come forward humbly, Jesus always says that word of mercy.

Two hundred years ago this very night, Father Joseph Mohr could not have imagined how the song he sung for the first time would grace the hearts and faith of millions of people. Friends: I'm very grateful we're all together—*this* “Silent night,” *this* “holy night,” because we can't imagine how Jesus' grace will touch and enrich *our* lives this Christmas. Yes, God so loves us that this God became

one with us...that first Bethlehem, and tonight, as we gather around his altar.
“Come, let us adore him...”

- (1) For this and the following, see Edward W. Schmidt, S.J., “‘Silent Night’ turns 200 this year. It is the greatest Christmas song ever?” [America](#) (December 24, 2018), online version. See also “Silent Night...” in [The Little Blue Book: Advent and Christmas Seasons 2018-2019](#) (Saginaw, MI: The Diocese of Saginaw, 2018), under “Second Sunday of Advent.”