

## ***Silent Night/Stille Nacht***

Christmas Eve Homily 2018 for St. Paul Cathedral, Yakima Washington USA

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Peace be with you! Tonight marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous Christmas carol, “Silent Night.” The tune, by Franz Xavier Gruber, first debuted two hundred years ago tonight on Christmas Eve at St. Nicholas Church in the Austrian village of Obendorf. The lyrics were composed two years earlier by Father Joseph Mohr in the village of Mariapfarr.

So, permit me to offer a few observations on this hymn – Silent Night – and on this particular anniversary night of this Christmas Eve.

My first observation about this hymn, “Silent Night,” is deeply personal. As many of you know, my mother went to school here at St. Paul Cathedral, my parents were married here by Father Ned McGrath in 1956, I was baptized here by Father Gerry Corrigan in 1957 and my grandparents were parishioners here at the Cathedral for many years until their deaths in 1996 and 2001. Monsignor Ecker presided at the funeral of my grandfather and Father Michael Brzezowski helped when I buried my grandmother. “Stille Nacht” was a mainstay of Christmas carols at home. My grandmother first taught me this hymn in German.

This leads to a second observation. In English hymnals we normally have three verses. But Fr. Gruber composed six verses. We are all familiar with the refrain “Sleep in Heavenly Peace” or in German, “Shalfe in himmlischer Ruh,” Yet the German verse four – a verse we don’t have in English – has an additional refrain, “Jesus die Völker der Welt!” In English: “Jesus, all nations on earth!”

Related to this refrain is that fact that we just had the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War. Pope Benedict XV had just taken office in 1914 as the new Holy Father. He was deeply troubled by the war. He called for a Christmas truce. Officials rejected the idea. Yet on the battleground the idea took hold. No one knew by who or how it started. But one historical account notes that 19-year-old British Lieutenant Charles Brewer of the Bedfordshire Regiment of the Second Battalion saw a small glistening light on a German parapet about 100 yards away. He raised his head over his sandbag and began to faintly hear the German lyrics of “Silent Night” being sung. The Lieutenant responded by singing “Silent Night” in English. That night, two thirds of the fighting troops from both sides followed the Holy Father’s appeal and observed their own informal Christmas Eve truce, bringing special meaning to those German lyrics, “Jesus, all nations on earth!” “Jesus die Völker der Welt!”

As our emeritus Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI noted in his encyclical “Spe Salvi:” “Christianity did not bring a message of social revolution like that of the ill-fated Spartacus, whose struggle led to so much bloodshed. Jesus was not Spartacus, he was not engaged in a fight for political liberation like Barabbas or Bar-Kochba. Jesus, who himself died on the Cross, brought something

totally different: an encounter with the Lord of all lords, an encounter with the living God and thus an encounter with a hope stronger than the sufferings of slavery, a hope which therefore transformed life and the world from within.”

My final observation refers to the refrain from the fifth German verse which, again, is not a verse usually translated into in English. The refrain in German: “Aller Welt schonung verhiess!” The German verb “verhiessen” means “to conserve.” This is an unusual phrase. It refers to the theological concept of “salvation.” But literally the phrase translates “All the world protectively conserved.”

What does this protective salvation look like? How is Jesus at the center of all nations? Permit me to share this story that I shared a couple of years ago with our priests. A Spanish-speaking mother told me the story of how she had only fifty dollars left for the month. Her husband had been deported. The fruit packing plant where she worked reduced its hours for the winter. She had a \$50-dollar power bill, but she still needed to buy groceries for her three children. She decided to go to Mass and while at Church she would beg quietly, asking a few familiar parishioners for money. She went but she felt too ashamed to beg. So, she went to the store and spent the last fifty dollars for food. She prepared the meal for her children. She went to bed depressed.

The next morning, she got up and put on her coat while getting her children ready for school. She reached into her pocket. Miraculously she found fifty dollars and some change. She took the children to school and then raced to pay the power bill in person. She went home relieved. But then she thought: “Did the clerk give me too much change? Did she think I gave her a \$100 bill instead of a fifty? Or did God perform a miracle?” She felt guilty. She went to confession. She went to confession to one of our Yakima priests. “Was it a gift from God?” she asked the priest. “Or do I need to pay back the \$50 dollars – the \$50 dollars I already spent for the power and heat in our house?”

“It’s not a miracle and it’s not a gift,” the priest told this young mom. “It’s a loan. It’s a loan from God. The next time you have an extra \$50 you will pay the loan back to God by helping a person in need.” When the woman told me what our Yakima priest said, I thought to myself, “I have got GREAT priests here in Yakima!”

Tonight, we sing of God’s greatness. Like those German parishioners 200 years ago, we stand before the Christmas crèche. We sing the hymn “Silent Night.” We behold the first sight of our Lord and Savior as a vulnerable infant we can hold, so we can pass him on to the person next us in need of care, protection, conservation, support and – in a word – salvation. May we share the richness of our faith this Christmas! Peace be with you!