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Happy Christmas

Br. Seán Sammon



When Danni and Agustin returned from language study in Ireland this past summer both recommended that I read a book by John Boyne entitled: The boy in the striped pajamas. Now, Saint Benedict was not shy about reminding his Abbots that wise decisions are made only if advice is sought from both the youngest and the oldest in the community. Keeping this principle in mind, I set out in search of the book.

Boyne's tale centers around some years in the life of a young boy named Bruno. As World War II gets underway we find him living in relative comfort with his family in Berlin oblivious to the human suffering that is unfolding all around him. This situation changes dramatically, however, when his father, a Nazi officer, is assigned as Commandant of Auschwitz,

a concentration camp in Poland whose purpose is to implement the extermination of the Jewish people.

Displaced and lonely in his new environment, Bruno's curiosity is awakened and he begins to survey the camp that surrounds the enclosed compound where his family now lives. From his bedroom window, the boy can see a fence and behind it many people dressed in striped pajamas. Though he concludes that they are farmers, they are in fact Jews removed by force from their homes and shipped to this camp.

Eventually Bruno meets a Jewish boy named Shmuel who lives on the other side of the fence. The two become fast friends and Bruno visits every afternoon to talk, with each boy remaining on his

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side of a barrier that never ceases to remind us of the grave differences in their situations.

Rather than spoil the ending of the story for those who might choose to read it, let me stop here and ask: why tell this tale of suffering and death and the friendship of two young boys on Christmas day? Is it to remind us about the presence of evil in our world or to make us take some measure of responsibility for the lives of those who have so much less than we do?

I tell this story because it confirms the power of friendship and the transforming influence that love can have in our lives. For that is the lesson of this story: friendship and love transcend differences in race, creed, intellectual ability, socioeconomic status and a host of other measures that society uses to distinguish one person from another. Bruno loved Shmuel and as a consequence was able to look beyond whatever others might point to as making him different.

Christmas is not about the birth of a baby, nor is it about stables and farm animals, angels and magi. No, Christmas is all about the unimaginable love that our God has for each of us. For what else would possess that very same God to take on our nature, to make his home among us, to call us his delight.

So, let's be honest: if there are problems in this world of ours it is not because of God; rather it is because of each of us. For we are the ones who harbor prejudice, teach children to hate, refuse to forgive.

Marcellin understood the problem well and that is why he was so insistent about two points: the nature of our communities and the focus of our mission as Marists. We know well the founder's message to our early brothers. Undoubtedly they had their differences. In spite of that fact, Marcellin challenged them to let love mark their life together. Regardless of what divided them, he told them that they must learn to forgive and reconcile. Yes, for Marcellin these two qualities were at the heart of our lives as brothers, part of its very fabric. And what if reconciliation and forgiveness are missing from your life or mine today? Well, then we must ask ourselves if we are actually one of his Little Brothers of Mary. For we cannot have it both ways: either we live this life fully or we should choose to live another life.

And what about the focus of our mission: poor children and young people. The founder understood that they have a harder time in life than others their age and thus are deserving of our time and attention. With

little in terms of material wealth, many also often feel ashamed about their situation. For example, what does a girl whose family is homeless tell her classmates when they ask her where she lives? Or where does a boy who is in jail find an adult who will look out for him and help him to become a man?

At the heart of these two enterprises: life in community and our mission lies the love of Jesus Christ. The extraordinary and at times frightening love that God has for each of us. Marcellin Champagnat was so in love with this God of ours that he could not contain himself; he had to tell each child and young person he encountered about the love of the Lord.

Bruno and Shmuel enjoyed the gift of boyhood friendship; their love helped them to transcend the differences that life had imposed on each of them. The love of our early brothers for our founder and for one another helped them to forgive, to reconcile, and to get on with life. The feast of Christmas reminds us that at the heart of our faith are but two commandments: love of God and love of others. God came into this world and lived among us to make that point crystal clear. And that is what the feast of Christmas is all about. Amen.

