

A faith perspective on creating a better 2021

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: As part of CBC Calgary's Filipino pop up bureau, we wanted to acknowledge the profound role religious belief plays for many in the community. We asked Fr. Edmund Vargas, Pastor at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in south Calgary to share his thoughts as we enter the new year.)

Christmas is behind us, and a new year about to begin.

There is a poem by Howard Thurman which speaks to this time of year, in its Christian context.

"When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and the princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart..."

To heal. To rebuild.

As a priest, having been receiving calls, emails and other correspondences to the parish since the pandemic, I learn more and more about how people are challenged, hurt, wounded by the pandemic with its mandatory restrictions. Some have lost their sense for God or religion. Others lose hope. People ask where God is right now.

The pandemic has impacted most of our seniors who consider the church as their "community". Yet following the rules of the pandemic restrictions, we try to create community in ways new and old.

We continue to celebrate baptisms, weddings and funerals. We continue to minister to the sick and dying in hospitals and nursing homes. The new year will require us to make many more phone calls, send more texts, emails and note cards, to share our stories, messages and reflections through our website and Mailchimp.

We have to get used to Zoom meetings and livestreamed services and other online platforms. We will continue to record video for school liturgies. And we have to work on a much lower budget.

As a church, we too have to adapt to the new "normal".

Face our fears

This past pandemic Christmas was actually so like the first Christmas in terms of its poverty and homelessness. In a way, the gentleness, peace and joy portrayed by the Christmas story have been brought about by its aspects of fear, insecurity and violence.

A time, for many, not unlike now.

Within my faith, Christ's birth into our world does not save us from the harsh, ugly and dark realities of our life. But it equips us with the grace to face our fears and frustrations in the faith that love can overcome death.

The "*unspeakable power of a baby born in straw poverty*" sang Bono of U2. It reminds us Christ shared in our humanity.

This, in my faith, the faith shared in my community, is a call to action now and into the new year. We must discover God in our human relationships, in our marriage and family and in our work. This is when we transform life into prayer, our faith into life.

And so, we all have to take action. Whether it is rooted in my faith and the faith of my community, or your faith, or simply because you feel it is the right thing to do, take action. And honour the fundamental dignity of the human person.

It is part of our being human to share the plight of so many who languish in poverty and desolation. The new year can prove to be a high point of poverty, loneliness and alienation for many in our midst.

All of us have to strive to make a difference in the lives of other, especially those who are in need of our love and friendship. A phone conversation, a smile or a gift of a small amount can all contribute to a more loving and healing world.

During this pandemic, all of us should work together to create a new world where we recognize the importance of every person, irrespective of race or religion.

The efforts of other faith communities toward a more humane society are to be shared by all of us. We have to be together in our common task towards health and healing.

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reflects in *The Gulag Archipelago*: "Even if you haven't come to love your neighbors in the Christian sense, you are at least learning to love those close to you..."

Call to action

As church, we have to afford more to spend on God's poor, even with our current financial struggles. We will continue to reach out to our needy families through a hamper program and through other ways.

In the midst of the pandemic, the parish has committed to sponsor a refugee family from Iraq, arriving in the new year from Turkey. As in the past years, we will host the Feed the Hungry dinner this coming June 13, the feast of our parish patron saint: St Anthony.

As individuals, as the year turns, we must all do what we can in love and friendship.

As we move into a new year in the midst of a pandemic, the real work of Christmas begins.