



Joy to the World

December, 1999

My Fellow Innkeeper,

It's late in the day on December 24. There's a knock at the door. The person answering the door sees standing before him a young man and a young woman, obviously pregnant, and probably about ready to deliver. The couple greets the man answering the door and quickly says, "Can you help us? We have no place to stay."

Does this story sound familiar? Given the time of year and the letterhead on which this Message is written, you might think I'm about to tell you the Christmas story. Well, in a way I am and in a way I'm not.

The above story is about Christmas. However, the young couple's names are not Mary and Joseph and the story did not take place in Bethlehem. The story is about Christmas 1998 in Paterson, NJ. There was a knock on the door late in the day on December 24 at our Catholic Family and Community Services offices at 24 DeGrasse Street. There was only a skeletal staff on duty as most of the staff had been sent home early to be with their families on Christmas Eve. It was a very cold Christmas Eve day. The couple related to me that they had been searching all day for a place to stay but were told that "We're full", "Try someplace else" or "Call us in a couple of days and maybe we can help you then". Well, we made room in the inn that night. That couple spent Christmas Eve and Christmas night at a hotel as our guest.

Each year I try to focus on one part of the Christmas story in my annual Christmas Message. This year, I would like to focus on Joseph and Mary's search for lodgings on Christmas Eve, and on that one line repeated hundreds of thousands of times over the centuries as the Christmas story has been told, "There's no room in the inn". As the story goes, Caesar had decreed that there would be a census. All were required to travel to the city of their birth to register. In many locales, including Bethlehem, this led to a housing shortage which ultimately led to the birth of our Savior taking place not in a house or an inn but in a stable because there was no room in the inn.

There is very clearly a connection between us and our work, the Christmas story of old and the Christmas story of December 1998 that I used to introduce this Message.

I'm sure if you think about it you can recall stories of there being "no room in the inn" in your own work or personal life. If you are in a position of providing direct services, food, shelter, addiction services, counseling, etc., very likely you can recall times when you were the innkeeper, and you have said "I'll put you on the waiting list; call us back in a couple of weeks maybe we can help then; all of our funds are expended, we can't help now, etc." In essence you said "there is no room in the inn". Or, perhaps while trying to assist clients you have had the experience of calling other agencies for services and being told through similar lines that there was no room in the inn.

I believe that the "no room in the inn" part of the Christmas story presents an opportunity and a challenge to all persons of faith. Two thousand years ago Jesus came knocking at the door. He was in disguise. He presented Himself through the persons of Joseph and Mary asking for hospitality. Many refused that hospitality and only one welcomed Him. Well, Jesus comes knocking every day. Very often He comes at less than opportune times and He is hard to recognize. He comes when we have a full schedule. He comes when we're trying to rush out to a meeting or to get home at the end of the day. He comes when we may be low on funds or supplies. He comes when we might be dealing with multiple crises and problems. He might come to us as an HIV infected person who was just thrown out of his own home and disowned by his parents. He might be someone suffering from addiction. He or she might be the breadwinner of a family who was just laid off and now wants our help finding a job and paying the rent or putting food on the table until a job is found. He might be knocking on the door as a young woman seeking help to deal with an abusive relationship. Or, he/she may be a recent immigrant looking for a new start in a new country.

My Christmas, New Year and Millennium wish for all of us is that we be kind, welcoming innkeepers at all times. Take that phone call; see the person that shows up without an appointment; make room in the inns of our hearts and souls and agencies for Jesus each and every time He knocks, whether He comes as a baby, an adult, male, female, young, old or sick person.

Have a Blessed Christmas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joe Duffy". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name "Joe Duffy". A long, thin horizontal line extends from the end of the signature across the page.

Joe Duffy