

The Triple “P” and Triple “H” of Christmas
-Peace, Politics and Prayer-
-Heart, Hope and Humanity-

Noël A. Kinsella
Speaker of the Senate

Address to the Christian Embassy
Christmas Banquet

Ottawa, ON
December 1, 2009

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to have been invited to participate in tonight's Christmas banquet which has been provided by our host, the Christian Embassy. To have been asked to speak at this dinner is a special privilege.

Given that Christmas is a season associated with "good news", I wish to begin by sharing with you the very good news that notwithstanding that my job in Parliament carries the title "Speaker", I shall not be speaking long this evening!

The title which I have chosen for my brief remarks is: "the Triple 'P' and the Triple 'H' of Christmas", with the subtitle being:

Peace, Politics and Prayer

Heart, Hope and Humanity

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Each day when Senators from across come together for a session of the Senate of Canada, we begin our work, just as begin our meal this evening, by giving thanks to the Creator and asking for his guidance and Blessing.

Our Senate prayer each day is as follows:

Almighty God, we beseech thee to protect our Queen and to bless the people of Canada. Guide us in our endeavours; let your spirit preside over our deliberations so that at this time assembled, we may serve ever better the cause of peace and justice in our land and throughout the world.
Amen.

Seigneur Dieu, daigne protéger notre reine et bénir les Canadiens. Dirige nous dans nos travaux; fais que ton esprit anime nos délibérations pour qu'ainsi assemblés, nous servions toujours mieux la cause de la paix et de la justice dans notre pays et dans le monde.
Amen.

In the early days of the United States, one of the greatest of all our American cousins, Benjamin Franklin said in a 1787 speech that the meetings convened to draw up a constitution for the United States should open with a prayer. Benjamin Franklin stated:

I have lived, sirs, a long time – 81 years – and the longer I live the more convincing proof I see of this truth, that God governs the affairs of men. And ‘if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice’ is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid. We have been assured by many faith traditions including that of the Christian writings that “except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.”

Benjamin Franklin firmly believed this. He went on to state that:

... without His [the Almighty's] concurring aid we shall
succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel”

The juridical and the metajudicial both find explicit expression in the preamble to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was proposed by our New Brunswick delegation led by Former Premier and Senator Richard Hatfield during the patriation meetings of the early 1980s.

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the
supremacy of God and the rule of law,

In the new “Discover Canada” study guide recently released by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, it states that the preamble underlines the importance of all religious traditions and the value of our faith communities. The dignity and worth of the human person is secured by the positive law, whether local, provincial, federal, or international, and also by the law of the heart which finds expression in a metajudicial way in all faith expressions.

Given the tragic events which occur in all corners of our global world of today, it might well appear that neither domestic nor international law has been successful in curbing acts of terrorism which are the antithesis of respect for the dignity and worth of the human person.

The following story could be reported on from any part of the world today:
Arms laden with bags of vegetables and loaves of bread, and with her two young children at her side, the mother turns onto the central aisle of the crowded market place when an earth shaking explosion

detonates a bomb packed car. The mother, her two innocent children and thirty-one other morning shoppers are killed and one hundred and three others are injured.

This deadly assault on the “right to life” perpetuated on the innocent is offensive to all known domestic laws as well as violating all norms of international law. Yet such assaults remain prevalent in our time and the perpetrators seem to have no regard to positive law. Does this mean that we are without any normative paradigm with which to influence the conduct of those who show such disdain for positive law?

I believe that we might wish to appeal to the law written in the hearts of the human person. In all the faith traditions of the world there is a recognition of the dignity and worth of the human person and a recognition that in the hearts of all is an aversion to evil and an appetite for the good. The world might well wish to rally to the articulation of the moral law which is richly inherent in the tradition and spirituality of the world’s religions.

In my opinion such an enterprise could exceed that undertaken by Henri Dunant, the father of international humanitarian law and the consequential Geneva Conventions. I believe that every person, notwithstanding political ideology, system of law or faith tradition, reacts with horror toward, and disdain for attacks on human rights perpetuated by terrorists. I believe the root of this universal repugnance is not only the fact that such attacks are contrary to international human rights law but these assaults stir offense in the heart of everyone and speak to the law of the Creator written in the heart of every person (cf Romans 2:13-16)

Perhaps this truth which helps to explain the many stories of the cessation of hostilities at Christmas time during the Great Wars and their madness.

Christmas within the Canadian context can also be a time to pause and reflect on the importance of peace and goodwill notwithstanding ethnocultural or confessional community.

It is a time when Canadians often extend to each other good wishes and kind regards. One medium of such expression is the Christmas card. Within this custom, politicians like to send out Christmas cards. I am no different.

In choosing my first Christmas card since being named Speaker, I wanted something rather unique. When I was presented the standard options for the Christmas card, there were lovely photographs of Parliament Hill covered in snow, the Rideau Canal, the foyer to the Hall of Honour, the Senate foyer. All lovely pictures. I do not want to denigrate my fellow parliamentarians who have chosen from these options, but I wanted something different: a crèche.

The initial reaction from the protocol people was shock, “Mr. Speaker, you might offend non-Christians!” After reminding them my name translates to “Christmas” and therefore anyone offended by the reference to this specific feast is going to be offended no matter what I send them, they relented. So my first Christmas card was the oldest known three dimensional crèche, carved in marble by Arnolfo da Cambio in 1291. The photo was taken by my favourite photographer, a master of light and shade: my wife, Ann Kinsella.

The reason I wanted the crèche for my Christmas card was to demonstrate during this season where we are bombarded by commerce, that central to this season is the human person. It takes the form of Jesus Christ, God's will made flesh, but I believe our common humanity is essential to the meaning of Christmas. Of all the creatures on earth God could have chosen to imbue with his being, he chose humanity. As Thomas Merton said:

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

I also wanted the card to highlight something very important about Canada. Canada prides itself as multicultural society. A multicultural society is by definition a multi-confessional society. As such in Canada, we do not chase religion out of the town square; we open the town square for all faith communities to share their beliefs with their fellow Canadians.

For some there is the sharing of tidings of good news and joy. I like to give focus at Christmas to the message of hope and peace.

The motto of my Province of New Brunswick is "Spem Reduxit" or "Hope Restored" in many ways a very poignant Christmas wish. Let me explain this by referencing an experience which the great American writer and thinker Emerson

tells us about a bus trip he once had – indeed not unlike an OC Transpo opportunity.

Emerson was tired, stressed and weary as he boarded a bus one dark afternoon. The sooner this trip is over, the better, he thought. And no doubt that was the wish of every other worn out and dreary passenger. Unrest and fatigue were written on the faces of all.

Suddenly, the atmosphere began to change. People sat up straight and smiled, first to themselves and then to one another. What caused this change? A young mother had boarded the bus, in her arms her little son. Although the bus was crowded, a place was found for the two, who became at once the centre of attention. When the little child would smile, everyone else would smile. When the little one asked a question, everyone would bend to listen. When he waved at one, all would wave back.

Two thousand years ago, the world was in pretty much the same condition as that bus. Humankind seemed to have nothing to live for. Discouraged and despondent, weary and unhappy, the world was rushing along hopelessly.

Suddenly there came upon the scene a mother and child. Not an ordinary mother and not an ordinary child. For Christians, the coming of this child changed the face of the earth. His coming brought joy and hope to those who saw Him. His arrival was announced and sung by the angels. From the moment he came upon this earth things turned much more promising and hope was restored.

Christians in Canada and throughout the world celebrate and recall His coming. They celebrate with childlike joyfulness the scene in the stable where he was born. They hurry again with the shepherds across the hills to see the new-born Babe. They enter the stable and stand in awe and superhuman happiness. They rejoice in new hope and goodwill toward all peoples.

To reflect on Peace, I return to my Christmas cards. In the Senate of Canada chamber one finds on the walls eight impressive oil paintings representing scenes from the First World War. One of these paintings displayed depicts the ruins of the Cathedral of Arras, France, the work of artist James Ken-Lawson. On a visit to this region of France where so many Canadians made the supreme sacrifice, I visited the restored Cathedral of Arras and was delighted to discover a beautiful “nativity” painting completed by the French artist George Desvallières. And so it was that my Christmas card last year contained this painting of this crèche and the destroyed cathedral with the articulated hope:

One trusts that the peace message of the Nativity painting adorning the restored cathedral of Arras shall overcome the tragic story of the scene of ruin.

My Christmas message is: “that peace shall reign throughout the world” - “Que la paix règne dans le monde entier.”

My Christmas wish to all present this evening, and paraphrasing the monk from Assisi:

May each of you become an instrument for peace,
Where there is hatred may you sow love,

Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is sadness, joy,
And where there is despair, hope.

In the words of Dicken's Tiny Tim: God bless you every one.

God Bless Canada,

Merry Christmas,

Thank you.