During the holiday season 'the silent word is pleading'

H. Paul Santmire

It may be time to declare a moratorium on "Silent Night." That thought struck me the other day as the shopper in front of me got into a shouting match with the department store clerk, for some obscure reason. In the background, meanwhile, the Muzak was bleating out the strains of the famous Franz Gruber hymn: "Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace."

Or better, let's not stop with "Silent Night." Let's declare a moratorium on all the Muzak and all the Christmas clangor that goes with it: the honking traffic jams at the mall, the mindless chatter at the office Christmas parties, the insipid pieties uttered with such dead seriousness when the nation's Christmas tree is lighted. For good measure toss in, or toss out, the glut of TV Christmas specials that clog the airwaves. Call it all noise pollution. Turn it all off.

Do I speak with the voice of Scrooge? Perhaps. But is this not the season that is supposed to lead the faithful, anew, to the word made flesh? And is it not the case, as the "Greensleeves" carol suggests, that "the silent word is pleading"? Don't we have to be silent in order to hear the Christmas message?

What ever happened to the silence of "Silent Night" anyway?

Consider the dimensions of silence. To interpret music, any good performer knows, one must feel the rests as part of the music, as well as play the notes. An untrained performer may simply stop and relax when the rests come. On the contrary, the rests have their own rhythmic vitality. Otherwise music would be little more than noise. The silences are as important as the sounds.

Likewise for life as a whole, as numerous mystics have testified. A holy silence, that deep resting of the human spirit, is the only mother of true peace and lasting joy. "Life is not to be regarded as an uninterrupted flow of words which is finally silenced by death," the American Catholic writer Thomas Merton observes. "Its rhythm develops in silence, comes to the surface in moments of necessary expression, then ascends quietly into the silence of heaven which resounds with songs of unending praise."

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It may come as a surprise to some, but the early Christian church apparently never preached the message of Christmas to the world. Studies of early Christian preaching have shown that the Gospel the church proclaimed to the world focused on the cross and resurrection, not Christmas.

St. Paul, for one, apparently never heard of the traditions of Christmas. Those traditions, as we have them in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, were apparently narratives that were told mainly in the intimate moments of the church's private times of memory. They were savored with silent joy in the family, as it were, in keeping with the picture of Mary that Luke gives us in his nativity account: "she kept all these things in her heart."

The Christmas message was never intended for public consumption.

So it's appropriate to call an end to all the clangor of this season, lest those of us who seek to celebrate the season lose its meaning altogether, numbed by the noise of this world. Silence *is* golden, perhaps at this time of year more than any other.

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