

December 4, 1983

Chanukah is the festival of lights. It reminds us of the time about a century and a half before the birth of Christ when the Jewish Temple was rescued from desecration by the Syrians. There was only enough oil in the sacred lamp of the newly rescued Temple for one day's burning. But, miraculously, the flame remained lit day after day until eight days had gone by and new oil could be prepared and introduced. This joyous holiday, then, celebrates the persistence of light, the eternal recurrence of truth, in the face of all circumstances which would extinguish it.

It is probably no accident that another great festival of light occurs in the same season of the year, the season when the darkness of our nights is of greatest duration. Christmas celebrates the appearance of One among us who sublimely and perfectly personified that light which enlightens every person, the fleshly appearance of that Word of grace and truth in whom, we are told in scripture, there was no darkness at all.

And yet, as we look closely at the origins of these two great festivals of light, these two great celebrations of the persistence of Truth, we may find a good deal which is not to our liking.

At the time of the first Chanukah, the Jews were being pinched between Syria and Egypt, leftover kingdoms spawned by the dissolution of the empire assembled by Alexander the Great. The Syrian kingdom was imbued with a leftover Hellenism, urbane and agnostic. The King of the Syrians, Antiochus, gave himself the title "Epiphanes," meaning "God manifest." To them the insistent monotheism of the Jews seemed intolerant, quarrelsome, and divisive. For the Jews, on the other hand, the pantheon of Hellenism seemed nothing more than the fashioning of idols out of what were merely human lusts, greeds, prides, envies, and passions. Ultimately, the Syrian king, in his impatience, conquered Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple to Zeus!

As will always happen in circumstances like this, some Jews accommodated to the new order. They became what we would call collaborators. Still others distanced themselves from affairs, trying to remain neutral, and to make a safe place for themselves and their families. But one group led by Judas Maccabeus went underground and started a guerrilla war of liberation. It was a war which had characteristics with which we are all too familiar, as the would-be liberators wiped out those of their countrymen whom they viewed as collaborators, or as insufficiently militant. It was thus a bloody war which was as much a civil war as it was an international war. Judas Maccabeus won this war, the Temple was saved, and the lamp was relit with its one-day supply of oil. Judas Maccabeus' heirs, in order to keep the Syrians at bay in subsequent years, sought support from Rome and, in fact, opened the doors to Roman encroachments which ultimately were to result in the complete absorption of Judea by the Roman Empire, a circumstance which so roiled and troubled the political context in which unfolded the destiny of Jesus of Nazareth.

The story of Jesus, too, is a tragic one—a great teacher scarcely understood by his own followers, abandoned by them, even betrayed by them—a saga which ends in an ignominious execution. Yet out of all this we celebrate a festival of light.

Thus these two great festivals of light are intermingled not only in their joyous character, not only in the symbolism of light, not only in their proximity in the calendar year,

but also in the political agonies out of which they sprang.

The genesis of these two joyful holidays in such miseries brings to mind the symbolism, so common in eastern spiritual thought, of the lotus, or what we would call the water lily. The water lily springs from ooze and muck and mire, in swampy places, places from which we ordinarily recoil. Yet somehow, floating on the surface of the water, the lotus exists in a plane in which is reflected the glorious sunlight and the great arc of the heavens, and there unfolds there, with their roots in the mud, blossoms of extraordinary purity and beauty.

How can we light a candle of truth and of hope in the midst of the agonies and turmoil of our own time? How can we nourish ourselves as blossoms of purity and truth while rooted in the quicksands of this dark era?

Surely it is not by allowing ourselves to be molded by the times in which we live. Surely, it is not by allowing ourselves to drown in a shipwreck we are trying to prevent. It is true enough that we unfailingly dissent from much of what goes on about us. We may not want the Marines in Lebanon. We may object to the Administration's policy in Central America. But is this merely political dissent enough? Are there more subtle ways in which we are molded by our environment? What about the shrillness of our spirits and our discourse? And what about our calendars, our frantic running from pillar to post, from committee meetings to public demonstrations, as our hours and our days and our years fill up with plans and projects? Is this not, in the final analysis, simply allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the world's concept of effectiveness? The temptation is to go mad with those who are mad, and to go around yelling and screaming, telling everyone where to go, what to do, and how to behave.

It is through silence that we qualify ourselves to speak the healing word. The fact that silence is an indispensable part of spiritual life has been recognized since the time of the prophet Isaiah. Silence is the furnace in which a transformation takes place. Without it, we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in its illusions. But through silence we lay aside creaturely things, we lay aside the world and the world's way of doing things.

The word of truth arises out of silence. The word of power, the word which heals, reminds us of the silence from which it springs and the silence to which it returns. This is not a vacant silence, but a silence of fullness, of richness, of awareness, a silence in which love rests secure. This is the silence which enables us to ignite another candle in the eternally recurring festival of light and truth.