

Christmas is all about light! We have lights on our houses, lights on our trees, Advent wreath candles blazing, and churches lit up at midnight to commemorate the star which led the Magi of Matthew's Gospel and to remember the heavenly light of the angels that proclaimed the Good News to Luke's shepherds.

But what about darkness?

We have to admit that all too often there is darkness, not only in our world but also in our hearts. The greatest saints have also taught us this. One of the early and passionate prayers of St. Francis of Assisi, for example, begins like this:

*Most High and glorious God,  
Bring light to the darkness of my heart...*

St. John of the Cross learned to embrace silence and emptiness in his poem *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and the masterpiece of mystical spiritual writing which was his explication of this poem in terms of the relationship between the Lover (Christ) and the beloved (the soul). This was the darkness also embraced by St. John's compatriot and colleague, St. Teresa of Avila, and her 20<sup>th</sup> century namesake, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Even St. Thomas Aquinas referred to this darkness, or silence, or imperceptible Presence, in his great hymn *Pange, lingua* (which we sing on Holy Thursday in its entirety, and of which we sing verses 5-6 as "Tantum Ergo" at Adoration and Benediction):

*Praestet fides supplementum/Sensuum defectui.  
[Faith is ready to support us /When our senses fail to see.]*

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Rahner wrote an important book of spirituality called "Encounters With Silence." And perhaps one of the best books on Catholicism in this past century was written by Shusako Endo—*Silence*, about missionary efforts in Japan in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Why this emphasis on silence and darkness?

Mostly, I think, it's because so often we live in what seems darkness to us. We long for what sometimes, in a tacky way, has been called the "hand engraved invitations on a silver platter," and we think if we do not receive these from the hand of God we have been ignored, or rejected, or worse. But there is good news in this, in spite of the pain. Where else can the Light shine, if not in the darkness? We are reminded, "The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). Still, this is the Light that experienced our darkness in its deepest horror, on the Cross: "...why have you forsaken me?!" (Mark 15:34).

He knows. He embraces us, and He loves us. He is Light in our darkness, Word in our silence. He comes simply, quietly, like dew from heaven, like a child in a barn: "...not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street; a bruised reed he shall not break..." (Isaiah 42:2-3).

It's only in silence that we can hear whispers; it's only in the darkness that we can see the one candle better than cursing.

So we come; we celebrate the darkness, and we embrace the silence—because we trust and are convinced of the truth of the Presence.