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DENVER CATHOLIC REGISTER

Week of December 08, 2004

Archbishop's column



The meaning of the season is the birth of Jesus Christ

The 'holidays' exist because of Christmas the holy day

The people of Denver elected John Hickenlooper as their mayor because they saw in him the common sense that guides every good leader. He earned their confidence last week. In the face of a strong and unhappy public response, he reversed his decision to retire the "Merry Christmas" lights on City Hall. "Merry Christmas" will remain part of Denver's public celebration of the holidays for at least the foreseeable future.

Mayor Hickenlooper deserves the thanks of the city. He certainly has the gratitude of Denver's Catholic community.

Looking back on the events of the last two weeks, a fight over "Merry Christmas" would have baffled our parents. Roughly 80 percent of Americans are Christians. The United States has the highest church-going rate in the developed world. The public institutions and founding documents of the country are filled with Christian language and ideas. Our nation just went through an election that showed, once again, that most Americans root their key political decisions in their

moral convictions. And they root their moral convictions in their religious beliefs.

The idea that religion can be exiled from public life is not just strange and illogical. It's deeply offensive.

The overwhelming majority of Americans celebrate Christmas — not a bland and generic set of “holidays.” And for the vast majority of Americans, Christmas has a distinctly religious, Christian identity rooted in Scripture. Publicly ignoring this fact is not a form of “inclusion” or “tolerance.” On the contrary, it's a deliberate act of *intolerance* and *exclusion* against Christians.

Lumping Christmas together with the winter solstice and other seasonal celebrations has only two purposes: to devalue and marginalize the sacred nature of the season; and to reduce Christian influence on the culture. Religious believers are right to be upset about that. Christmas may also be a secular “holiday,” but that's only because it is first and foremost a religious holyday embedded in the moral heritage of Americans since our nation's founding.

Public institutions and leaders have the obligation to respect the beliefs of the people they serve. Publicly acknowledging and revering Christmas for what it really is — a time of *both* secular and religious celebration penetrated by Christian meaning — in no way imposes anyone's church on anybody. Rather, to not show public respect for the religious identity of Christmas is a form of bigotry against most American voters.

This has been a year of surprises for American Catholics and other Christians — not all of them happy. The lumps began with a hostile public debate over “*The Passion of the Christ*,” continued through a divisive political campaign, and now conclude in Scrooge-like attempts to cut the word “Christmas” from our public discourse. No other religious community would be subjected to this kind of treatment — and remember, American Christians are in the majority.

The lesson for all of us is simple. Separating our personal religious faith from our public life and actions doesn't work. All that results is a smaller and smaller space where our religious beliefs are safe from criticism. Living that way is not discipleship. That's not the courage and confidence Jesus called us to when He told us to be “leaven in the world” and to “make disciples of all nations.”

This December, I have a modest proposal. Let's scrub the expression "Happy Holidays" from our vocabulary. We don't need it. We don't celebrate a generic excuse for gift-giving. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

So let's say it — and mean it — with all our hearts: *Merry Christmas.*

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