

Defiant Christmas Trees

With December, Christmas trees begin to appear.

We suddenly notice they are in our hospitals, our office buildings, and the vast variety of sites where we deliver health care. We also find them in malls, on lawns, and coming through the television with steady, even annoying, regularity. In fact, for many of us, the furniture is moved aside to make room for the tree to join us in our homes. They seem to be everywhere.

Christmas trees may be hard to avoid, but their message is easy to miss.

Spiritual traditions interpret December as the season the sun arrives late and leaves early. More scientifically, the earth is turning in such a way that we are in darkness more than at other times of the year. This greater darkness symbolizes the growing power of all that afflicts us – in body, mind, society, and spirit. Winter brings with it a sense of our vulnerability.

As an antidote, Christmas trees accompany the darkness of December. They are symbolic push backs to the absence of light. Their branches are not bare but full, leafy, and strung with lights. Their power glows, radiates, shines. They are not victims of the December darkness, and they refuse to allow it to dominate. Their brightness is defiant.

What is the message of this defiance?

We may want a perfect world - good enough health, good enough finances, good enough relationships, and a good enough, stable, non-violent society and world. But that is not what we always get. We find our health precarious; our careers, jobs, or vocations under stress; our finances dipping badly; our relationships in need of repair; our society and world either slightly or wildly insane. We are under duress.

Enter the Christmas tree. Its lights say: “Give all the things that afflict us their due, but do not give them our soul. There is something stronger in us than the surrounding darkness.”

That is why Christmas trees are perfect for Catholic Health Care. Catholic Health Care holds human dignity to be essential. It does not come and go with the fickleness of fortune. The body may be under siege, the mind may be quivering with anxiety, and social supports may be waning, but dignity is the rock that remains, the rock on which the whole house is built. There is always a power of love that holds us, a deeper identity

that survives all attacks. It is imperative to allow Christmas trees to remind us of this deeper truth when the December darkness is parading a shallower truth.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.” (Jn. 1:5)