



Dorian Haqmoun, detail of *Toward the One*, 2009, Acrylic on canvas

# ***Light through Love***

## **A Christmas Reflection**

BY BISHOP PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

On this darkest day of the year, December 21, the winter solstice, as we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Light of the World I am reminded of how important light is in our lives. Lord Byron, the imaginative 19th century English poet, spent some time journeying in the Middle East. It was an experience that provided material for his writing, and led to his marvelous poem titled *The Giaour*, that includes these exquisite lines;

*“Yes, love indeed is light from heaven;  
A spark of that immortal fire. . .”*

Light and love are two primary themes of our Christmas season. Lights of all shades and sizes serve as the foundation for much of our decorations and festivities. And love is expressed at Christmas by all the gift-giving that takes place. Christmas is essentially a love-story between God and humanity that enlightens our lives, enabling us to see as we’ve never seen before. The ultimate Christmas verse is the one so many know by heart, regardless of church background. The Gospel writer John gives it to us; “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” Hence, when describing our faith, we most often focus on God’s love as opposed to God’s light. However, as soon as John mentions the *love* aspect of Christmas, he draws our attention to the *light* aspect, as he describes Jesus’ coming into our world as a “light shining in the darkness.”

When reading the first Christmas story, we usually open to the Gospel narratives of Matthew and Luke, providing us those familiar stories of Jesus' birth. They share in beautiful prose the physical realities of the nativity: shepherds, angels, magi, stable, animals, etc. We are almost able to smell the very setting into which the Christ Child was born. However, John, in his account, doesn't tell us any of that. Rather he focuses on the metaphysical or spiritual nature of the nativity. In doing so, John intricately weaves together the themes of love and light to describe what is happening. While attempting to share about Jesus coming among us through the concept of divine love, he can't help but use light to define it. This is why in church tradition while John is initially known as the "disciple of love," centuries later he was called the "Apostle of Light." John is not able to write about the love of God without speaking of the light of God.

Ever since Christmas was first celebrated in the Western Church it has been affiliated with light. In ancient times, December 25 was seen as the day of the

winter solstice, when the earth was furthest from the sun. Great festivities for the sun were held on that day. This was the day the Persian Mithras cult, affiliated with the Roman Army, celebrated the "God of Light" - the sun. There were many temples in Rome to the "sol invictus" (the invincible sun). Emperor Constantine, in the 4th century, who was half Christian and half sun-worshipper, wished to combine the Feast of the Sun with the celebration of Christ's birth, leading to the first Christmas celebration being held in Rome on December 25 in A.D. 336. This is how light came to be associated with our Christmas, with "the light shining in the darkness" playing the central role during the Christmas nocturnal worship commemorating Christ's birth on what was considered then the darkness day of the year. And today, Christians all over the Western world celebrate Christ's birth by participating in candlelight processions and services, shining lights on trees, and lighting candles at home. We also exchange gifts, an idea arising from the actions of the Magi who followed the light of the star.



Detail of Ann Veronica Janssens' *Yellow Rose*, 2007 (Projectors, dichroic filters, and artificial mist, dimensions variable), Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany. Photo: Philippe De Gobert.

Of course, other religious traditions use light as well in their celebrations at this general time of year. Buddhists celebrate Bodhi Day, the day they believe that Gautama Siddhartha, the first Buddha, obtained enlightenment. Our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrate Hanukkah, known as the “Festival of Lights,” by lighting a menorah and placing it where it can be seen. The Chinese light up the sky and the streets with fireworks during their Lunar New Year celebrations, paying homage to “the bright pearl in the sky.” Many indigenous peoples of Mexico and South America still celebrate the moon at the end of the year. The Maya Indians dance, sing and light lights to give praise for what they believe to be the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to their ancestors. In Africa, followers of Macumba, make offerings to Yemanja, the “goddess of light.”

The message is clear. People everywhere are looking for light or “enlightenment” in some way or another. An entire period of our Western history is known as “The Enlightenment,” where eyes were opened in new ways. Everyone is looking for someone or something to shed light on their present reality, whatever that reality may be. In our Christmas story we see the Divine coming into the world as a light in the form of a child, who when grown up, said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

In each of our own spiritual journeys we have all undoubtedly had times when we experienced things we have never experienced before. Seen things, heard things, learned things, dreamt things - where God has shed light and revealed things, about ourselves, our present situation, and about God’s desire for us, leading to an entirely different perspective on life.

Of course, some areas of our lives are still in the shadows, even though God’s light is nevertheless present. I recall my first visit to Timbuktu, in Mali, West Africa. In the Sahara Desert, without any artificial light in the night sky, there were so many stars that it created a visual reversal, with the darkness of the night sky becoming more like black dots on a vast lighted background. Looking up into that luminous Saharan night, I was reminded of a children’s game I used to play called Star Bright. It consisted of a piece of black construction paper extended over a plastic frame with a light bulb behind it. We would

poke small holes in the paper to allow dots of light to shine through. And the more holes one made the more the light shone through. Little by little the light would take over the darkness. The 18th century Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, best known for *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, quite powerfully described an experience he had as a child. He was looking out the window of his house at the man lighting the street lanterns, one by one. His mother asked him what he was doing, and he responded, “I am watching a man punch holes in the darkness.”

I have often seen the journey of faith as to similar those dimmer dial switches that are installed for overhead lights. When turning it one way it brightens the room, and when reversed, darkens it. There are certainly times in our lives when the “Light” becomes significantly, and often mysteriously brighter. However, more often in our spiritual journeys, the Light comes to us gradually, little by little, providing more and more light as we go along, albeit not always at a consistent speed. Yet, from time to time, whether for reasons unbeknownst to us, or consciously due to our own letting go of the dimmer dial, it can seem as if it is being turned back in the opposite direction, where things get dark again. Yet, the beautiful mystery of our faith is that over time, we are promised that the Divine Light will get brighter in our lives.

One of the best ways to know if God’s light is getting brighter in our lives is if our love for God and others is growing. I recall St. Teresa of Calcutta being asked years ago, when serving among the poor in South India, if she thought the church would ever make her a saint. She said, she did not think so, but if so, she only wanted to be considered a “Saint of Darkness,” as she was only interested in spending time in the darkest places of our world and making them lighter.

At Christmas we are reminded that our love for God and others is what lights our lives as nothing else can. May this year’s Christmas celebration enable us to encounter anew the source of that Divine Light as we journey again toward that sacred star. As we prepare to celebrate God’s light entering our world, I leave with you a moving song titled “La Luz” (The Light) written and performed by Brother Isaiah Hofmann, CFR, a priest with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in The Bronx, a borough of New York City.

The YouTube and Spotify links and lyrics are below.



## SHADE // La Luz // Brother Isaiah (Live)

### “La Luz” (The Light) – From the album SHADE by Brother Isaiah

You are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
You are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
You are the light, Lord, yes, you are the light

Well come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come and burn in me, yeah

Well I was sitting in the darkness  
Waiting for the daybreak  
Sweet dawn from on high  
Come and break upon me, I pray  
'Cause dawn seem so far away  
'Cause dawn seem so far away  
But he said, “Hope and watch and wait  
Watch and pray  
You know me coming, Sonny  
You know me don't delay  
They call me New Sunshine

They call me New Daybreak  
They call me Sweet Dayspring  
'Cause with my help my kingdom bring

“So wait child”—and so I wait  
I heard him say, “Pray child”—and so I prayed  
I pray, “Light from light, come and drown on me now”  
Me say, “Light from light, come and shine on me now”  
Light from light, come and shine on me now  
Me say, “Life from light from light”

You are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
You are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
You are the light, Lord, yeah, yeah, you are the light

Well come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come and burn in me, yeah

Well in the middle of the night  
Beneath the starlight  
I was sitting in the dark when I heard a cry  
Singing, "Glory, glory, glory!"  
There was angels singing, "Glory, glory, glory!"

Then in the quiet of my heart  
There came a little light shining  
Daystar rising, breaking through my night  
And then a light from on high  
Broke upon me inside  
Like a fire burning bright  
Put the darkness to flight

With all that glory, glory, glory  
There was angels singing, "Glory, glory, glory!"  
There was angels singing, "Glory, glory, glory!"  
And all of heaven ringing, "Glory, glory, glory!"  
And then my soul was singing, "Glory, glory, glory!"  
There was singing, there were: "Glory, glory, glory!"

You are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
Yes, you are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
Yes, you are the light, Lord, yeah, you are the light, yeah

Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come and burn in me, yeah

Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come alight, come fire, come and burn in me  
Come and burn in me, yeah

'Cause you're the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
Yes, you're the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
You're the light, Lord, yes, you are the light  
Yes, you are the light of the world, yeah, yeah  
You are the light of the world, yeah, yeah

Yes, you are the light, Lord, yes, you are the light  
Yes, you are the light, Lord, yes, you are the light

[\\*Listen to "La Luz" on Spotify and click here.](#)