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**Monthly Patriotic Instruction
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What exactly is the holiday season? In 1864 I don't imagine anyone had the faintest belief in a future where Americans would kill one another over a discounted TV on black Friday, and neither did they care if a person said "Merry Christmas" in public. It was, in the words of the author Michael Crichton, "not always thus."

Aside from those points, I imagine things looked much the same as they do today. People still gathered to raise and dole out charity to the homeless and suffering in big cities, celebrated Christmas in their homes, sang carols, attended worship services, and where possible, served family dinners. Santa Claus as we know him today was a tradition only 32 years old in 1864 and not widely acknowledged, but even he managed to make appearance at military hospitals in a few places. Christmas trees, newly in vogue thanks to Queen Victoria and her husband, were becoming a staple in the homes of the wealthy across the country. Of course, hundreds of thousands of homes were marked by the conspicuous "vacant chair," the unmistakable sign of a relative off fighting in the Civil War or worse, dead because of it.

December of 1864 saw a distinct shift in operational policy for the Union Army. Sherman was on his way to Savannah, Hood's army was smashed to pieces at Nashville, and Grant's army was inching closer and closer to Richmond. Armies in the west were moving against American Indians and the Confederate armies of the Trans-Mississippi. Unlike previous years, soldiers were on the move and busy, not hunkered down in winter quarters. The end of the war was drawing nigh, and everyone knew it.

When I think of these things, I look around at how we are doing today. I am blessed with renewed faith in my conviction that Christmas will always remain my favorite holiday. Why, you ask? Because of who and where we are. We must remember from whence we came and consider those remarkable achievements of stability we have accomplished. For example, let us remember:

Christmas seasons from 1775 to 1783 were marked with no guarantee that our new nation might live at all, but it did.

Christmas seasons from 1860 to 1865 told much the same story.

Christmas seasons during the six major recessions we have had and the Great Depression were marked with untold hardship, yet we survived as a nation intact.

Now let us reflect on today.

Unfortunately, things are not cheery in every corner of the world, or even within the United States, and this we must remember. The circumstances may be somewhat different than they

were in 1864, but some things remain the same. We remain at war, families are still remembering lost loved ones from the current conflicts, and servicemen and women are on watch around the world while we enjoy our holiday gatherings in safety and in comfort. There are also untold thousands of people in need. Despite these circumstances, let's face it: dinner will be served to most, uncles will be sleeping off the turkey or goose in the living room by late afternoon, and there will be drama, lots of drama.

The holiday season is, despite the commercialism and every other possible complaint, a wonderful time for displaying patriotism. It is a time to lay wreathes on the graves of soldiers long departed and remember them. It is a time to call the brothers from your camps you have not seen in a while and wish them good cheer. It is also a time for generosity. Holidays are supposed to be time of celebration. Be generous. Generous in spirit, generous in kindness, generous of memory, and be, as Francis of Assisi argued so many centuries ago, "really present," to those in need of anything you can provide.

Finally, I wish you joy from my family and me as we celebrate Christmas in the Catholic tradition, and hope that however you choose to spend your holiday season amounts to a wonderful, reverent, and memorable occasion. Merry Christmas!

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