

Over the years, hate has always been something quite powerful, particularly in times of war. In particular in World War I and World War II, the concept of “total war” caused people to see the enemy not as human, but as someone that had to be destroyed at all costs. But what if, despite the hate that was there as a consequence of original sin, something far more powerful emerged? Namely, a recognition of the other person not as an enemy based on their uniform, but as a human being?

In 1945, Fritz Vincken was a child. Some 30 years later, he wrote a story that ran in Readers Digest that recalls what he saw during the Battle of the Bulge, namely what occurred on Christmas Eve. In it he writes:

It was Christmas Eve, and the last desperate German offensive of WWII raged around our tiny cabin. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door...

When we heard the knock neither Mother nor I had the slightest inkling of the quiet miracle that lay in store for us. I was 12 then, and we were living in a small cottage in the Huertgen Forest, near the German-Belgian border. Father had stayed at the cottage on hunting weekends before the war; when Allied bombers partly destroyed our hometown of Aachen, he sent us

to live there. He had been ordered into the civil-defense fire guard in the border town of Monschau, four miles away.

“You’ll be safe in the woods,” he had told me. “Take care of Mother. Now you’re the man of the family.” But nine days before Christmas, Field Marshal Von Rundstedt had launched the last, desperate German offensive of the war, and now, as I went to the door, the Battle of the Bulge was raging all around us. We heard the incessant booming of field guns; planes soared continuously overhead; at night searchlights stabbed through the darkness. Thousands of Allied and German soldiers were fighting and dying nearby.

When that first knock came, Mother quickly blew out the candles; then, as I went to answer it, she stepped ahead of me and pushed open the door. Outside, like phantoms against the snow-clad trees, stood two steel-helmeted men. One of them spoke to Mother in a language we did not understand, pointing to a third man lying in the snow. She realized before I did that these were American soldiers. Enemies!

Mother stood silent, motionless, her hand on my shoulder. They were armed and could have forced their entrance, yet they stood there and asked with their eyes. And the wounded man seemed more dead than alive. "Kommt rein," Mother said, finally. "Come in." The soldiers carried their comrade inside and stretched him out on my bed.

None of them understood German. Mother tried French, and one of the soldiers could converse in that language. As Mother went to look after the wounded man, she said to me, "The fingers of those two are numb. Take off their jackets and boots, and bring in a bucket of snow." Soon I was rubbing their blue feet with snow.

We learned that the stocky, dark-haired fellow was Jim; his friend, tall and slender, was Robin. Harry, the wounded one, was now sleeping on my bed, his face as white as the snow outside. They'd lost their battalion and had wandered in the forest for three days, looking for the Americans, hiding from the Germans. They hadn't shaved, but still, without their heavy coats, they looked merely like big boys. And that was the way Mother began to treat them.

Now Mother said to me, Go get Hermann. And bring six potatoes.

This was a serious departure from our pre-Christmas plans. Hermann was the plump rooster (named after portly Hermann Goering, Hitler's No. 2 man, for whom Mother had little affection) that we had been fattening for weeks in the hope that Father would be home for Christmas. But, some hours before, when it was obvious that Father would not make it, Mother had decided that Hermann should live a few more days, in case Father could get home for New Year's. Now she had changed her mind again; Hermann would serve an immediate, pressing purpose.

While Jim and I helped with the cooking, Robin took care of Harry. He had a bullet through his upper leg and had almost bled to death. Mother tore a bed-sheet into long strips for bandages.

Soon, the tempting smell of roast chicken permeated our room. I was setting the table when once again there came a knock at the door. Expecting to find more lost Americans, I opened the door without hesitation. There stood four soldiers, wearing uniforms quite familiar to me after five years of war. They were Wehrmacht – Germans!

I was paralyzed with fear. Although still a child, I knew the harsh law: sheltering enemy soldiers constituted high treason. We could all be shot! Mother was frightened, too. Her face was white, but she stepped outside and said, quietly, "Froehliche Weihnachten." The soldiers wished her a Merry Christmas, too. "We have lost our regiment and would like to wait for daylight," explained the corporal. "Can we rest here?"

"Of course," Mother replied, with a calmness, born of panic. "You can also have a fine, warm meal and eat till the pot is empty." The Germans smiled as they sniffed the aroma through the half open door. "But," Mother added firmly, "we have three other guests, whom you may not consider friends." Now her voice was suddenly sterner than I'd ever heard it before. "This is Christmas Eve, and there will be no shooting here."

"Who's inside?" the corporal demanded. "Amerikaner?"

Mother looked at each frost-chilled face. "Listen," she said slowly. "You could be my sons, and so could they in there. A boy with a gunshot wound, fighting for his life, and his two friends, lost like you and just as hungry and

exhausted as you are. This one night,” she turned to the corporal and raised her voice a little, “This Christmas night, let us forget about killing.”

The corporal stared at her. There were two or three endless seconds of silence. Then Mother put an end to indecision. “Enough talking!” she ordered, and clapped her hands sharply. “Please put your weapons here on the woodpile, and hurry up before the others eat the dinner!

Dazedly, the four soldiers placed their arms on the pile of firewood just inside the door: three carbines, a light machine gun and two bazookas. Meanwhile, Mother was speaking French rapidly to Jim. He said something in English, and to my amazement I saw the American boys, too, turn their weapons over to Mother. Now, as the Germans and Americans tensely rubbed elbows in the small room, Mother was really on her mettle. Never losing her smile, she tried to find a seat for everyone. We had only three chairs, but Mother’s bed was big, and on it she placed two of the newcomers side by side with Jim and Robin.

Despite the strained atmosphere, Mother went right on preparing dinner. But Hermann wasn't going to grow any bigger, and now there were four more mouths to feed.

"Quick" she whispered to me, "get more potatoes and some oats. These boys are hungry, and a starving man is an angry one."

While foraging in the storage room, I heard Harry moan. When I returned, one of the Germans had put on his glasses to inspect the American's wound. "Do you belong to the medical corps?" Mother asked him. "No," he answered. "But I studied medicine at Heidelberg until a few months ago." Thanks to the cold, he told the Americans in what sounded like fairly good English, Harry's wound hadn't become infected. "He is suffering from a severe loss of blood," he explained to Mother. "What he needs is rest and nourishment."

Relaxation was now beginning to replace suspicion. Even to me, all the soldiers looked very young as we sat there together. Heinz and Willi, both from Cologne, were 16. The German corporal, at 23, was the oldest of them all. From his food bag he drew out a bottle of red wine, and Heinz

managed to find a loaf of rye bread. Mother cut that in small pieces to be served with the dinner; half the wine, however, she put away, “for the wounded boy.”

Then Mother said grace. I noticed that there were tears in her eyes as she said the old, familiar words, “Komm, Herr Jesus. Be our guest.” And as I looked around the table, I saw tears, too, in the eyes of the battle-weary soldiers, boys again, some from America, some from Germany, all far from home.

Just before midnight, Mother went to the doorstep and asked us to join her to look up at the Star of Bethlehem. We all stood beside her except Harry, who was sleeping. For all of us during the moment of silence, looking at the brightest star in the heavens, the war was a distant, almost-forgotten thing.

Our private armistice continued next morning. Harry woke in the early hours, and swallowed some broth that Mother fed him. With the dawn, it was apparent that he was becoming stronger. Mother now made him an invigorating drink from our one egg, the rest of the corporal’s wine and

some sugar. Everyone else had oatmeal. Afterward, two poles and Mother's best tablecloth were fashioned into a stretcher for Harry.

The German corporal then advised the Americans how to find their way back to their lines. Looking over Jim's map, the corporal pointed out a stream. "Continue along this creek," he said, "and you will find the 1st Army rebuilding its Forces on its upper course." The medical student relayed the information in English.

"Why don't we head for Monschau?" Jim had the student ask. "Nein," the corporal exclaimed. "We've retaken Monschau."

Now Mother gave them all back their weapons. "Be careful, boys," she said, "I want you to get home someday where you belong. God bless you all!" The German and American soldiers shook hands, and we watched them disappear in opposite directions.

When I returned inside, Mother had brought out the old family Bible. I glanced over her shoulder. The book was open to the Christmas story, the

Birth in the Manger and how the Wise Men came from afar bearing their gifts.

Her finger was tracing the last line from Matthew 2:21, "...they departed into their own country another way."

Though we are far removed from World War II, the truth is we too these days can be full of polarization. Racism is still in the world, as is intolerance; sometimes even hatred. There is sometimes a mentality of tribalism. But, this great feast of Epiphany reminds us this is not how things are meant to be. For God has come for all, and loves all without exception. How then do we try to grow closer together to achieve not just what happened on Christmas Eve 1944 but throughout our lives? I think two key things we have to confront is the reality of racism in our world, and even shadows of it in our souls even if we are not overtly racist, and the growing problem of intolerance and polarization, namely seeing someone not as a fellow American or Catholic, but as someone we are opposed to based on their ideology.

I think a starting point is to remember that while we have made great strides, there can always be elements of racism in our hearts. Fifteen years ago, Archbishop Harry Flynn wrote a powerful letter on racism to our archdiocese, called "In God's Image." In it, he remembers vividly being 6 years old, wanting to have a birthday party at his home, which his mother fully supported. But he also remembers saying it's probably not best to invite the girl in his class who was African American, because she was different. His wise mother told him that he is free to not invite her, but were he to do that, there would be no party at all. Years later, when he was a bishop in Lafayette, Louisiana, some 20 to 30 years after the Civil Rights movement and desegregation and the overturning of Jim Crow Laws, racism was still an issue. He writes: "I repeatedly heard stories of blatant racism — both within the society and within the Catholic Church. For example, during Mass in a predominantly white parish, a young African American Catholic extended his hand to give a greeting of peace and was told by the white gentleman next to him, "I don't shake hands with your type." He also expressed his concern about racism against Muslims, especially since 9/11. And here in Minnesota, he said racism here exists too - in his words, "It might take the form of ignoring or turning a cold shoulder to people of color, rather than saying overtly, "I don't shake hands

with people of your type.” At the cathedral for instance, an usher there, well-intended, came up to an African American woman in communion line and said “I’m sorry mam, this is only for Catholics.” The point is racism here is often more indirect and less open. He also says that when he hears parish leaders say “we’re not racist,” he says the intent is good there - and a person may not be overtly racist, but we do have to be aware of issues. As he puts it, a person can indeed be “stopped unnecessarily by the police, being ridiculed because of cultural customs, or being the victim of overt discrimination, people of color in our community have daily experiences which demonstrate that racism remains a powerful force in our society.” So I think it is important to remember as our former Archbishop does, that for many of us who may be white or not experienced racism, that a person who is of a different ethnicity or culture may in fact still experience it. This requires empathy but also action. We need to be honest with ourselves and ask ourselves if we use racist language in the home; or what is in our hearts when we see someone of a different color or culture. As the Archbishop put it, we need to be open to a change of heart, and in our prayer we should ask God’s Spirit to remove from us all traces of racial prejudice. We avoid racial stereotypes, slurs and jokes. We should correct any expressions or racist attitudes among family members, friends, and co-

workers. We should seek opportunities to know and learn from people of other races. We also look at our own lives and look at our assumptions on race, and ask ourselves if there is fear there when we drive through certain neighborhoods or interact with people of other races. All of us are called to develop a sense of solidarity with our neighbors, Archbishop Flynn writes, who are racially and culturally different from us, as in doing so we live out the unity in diversity that is reflected in the life of the Holy Trinity. At that Christmas dinner, there were not so much German and American soldiers but rather simply young men, breaking bread together as members of the human race. Hopefully we can strive to see a person's humanity and dignity as a human being always first and foremost.

With that though too, so important is to have tolerance. And I think sadly this too can rear it's head in many forms. There is the intolerance that can be there between people of different political backgrounds. Even within our Catholic church, I've seen intolerance between factions in parishes I've been at, or people on social media attacking the pope or people they deem too liberal or conservative in the outlook on the direction the Church should go. But what happens when you tolerate, and see a person not as a threat, but as an equal? I recently read the story of Allison Yates, who is a young

woman who of all things taught Zumba, a fitness program, at a Muslim community center. She's not a Muslim. She was asked by friends and family if you aren't Muslim, why are you working there. She hadn't thought about it like that though; she was just finishing her first year of college studying the Arabic language and culture, so a summer internship at the community center seemed like the perfect place to put her skills to use. The center helped immigrants settle into the Indianapolis area, and helped refugees with legal matters and was a place where Muslims could celebrate their holidays or hear a lecture about religion or history. These were things she wanted to learn more about too. She was one of two non-Muslims working at the center, but she says she was accepted. Over the summer she met refugees from Ethiopia, Burma and Iraq, and participated in an inter religious night where she made spring rolls with a Vietnamese-American co-worker. She went to a lecture on the Syrian Civil War. And she continued her fitness classes, where participants formed friendships. She reflects people are often busy in their daily lives and stay in the same circles, but it connected people. Even her own aunt got a lot out of the class, and her aunt said to her "You know, Allie, I was kind of scared of Muslim people before the class, but then I got to know them and realized they are normal just like everyone else." Her attitude changed though due

to tolerance; the Muslim center giving her a space for her class, and in a little way changing attitudes. Tolerance is important for us all. It can open doors between people, and our eyes to our common humanity. On the one hand, we need to respect differences and the choices people make. It's also quite OK to have strong partisan and political beliefs or beliefs on the direction of the Church; I certainly do. We also need to evangelize too - meaning some might call us intolerant for just talking about things like the sanctity of the unborn child, capital punishment, or same-sex marriage. Of course never talking about these things out of fearing to offend isn't about tolerance at all; it's cowardice. The point is we as Christians need to look at one another not with seeing just differences first or as someone we have to "fix," but rather as people who are all loved by the same God. Once we can get past the fear, we can engage in dialogue. But it of course requires patience too. Sometimes we can become so frustrated with others or angry, we let that get in the way of what could be a friendship. So starting with what we have in common, we can then have dialogue, and through that exercise patience with someone who maybe isn't fully understanding of our faith and morals. It's worth looking at people we know in life, and being honest if a bias or fear is getting in the way of a relationship with that person. With tolerance, we might not only forge new friendships, but we

may help someone over a period of time to see what our faith is all about and bring them to Jesus.

Like the Magi, we journey to Jesus at each Mass. And hopefully like them, we return to our country too, by a separate route - the route of love, mercy, peace and justice. Jesus is meant to change us. And while we might think about sins of habit like lying or struggles with the flesh, or frequently pray familiar prayers, true spiritual growth also requires digging deeper. In a world that can be so polarized, even if we aren't in a hate group or overtly racist, sometimes we too can be intolerant or judge in our hearts when we learn of a person's politics or faith. We can do something about it though, and in a small home in the forest in one of the fiercest battle of World War II, tolerance and an understanding of the unity of people brought together the most unlikely of individuals for a moment. That's what God's love can do. For as the visitors from the East remind us, God's love is not meant to be revealed to just some, but to all people. So may we strive to do that through how we live our lives, being a people who love one another without exception.