Christmas Day

When Fr. Aloysius Kasoma visited our diocese for an appeal earlier this year, I asked him about Christmas decorations in his home country, Uganda. I've known him over 40 years. I understood that Christmas customs vary from country to country around the world, so I hoped to learn about distinctive practices pertaining to decorations in his part of East Africa. He said, "We do what you do. We put up lights." I challenged him on this—perhaps out of disappointment, or from some inappropriate prideful snobbishness. I said, "But Uganda sits on the equator. You have twelve hours of light and twelve hours darkness every day all year round. Your winter solstice is no different from your summer solstice. We put up lights because in the northern hemisphere this time of the year, it's dark." He responded very simply, "I know. But we like the colors." The southern hemisphere is another matter altogether. People there had their longest day of the year this week. But one reason Christmas lights developed the way they did here in the north is the incremental diminishing of darkness and advancing of light.

The Prologue of St. John's Gospel says the figure we know as John the Baptist "was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. [John] was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

Other gospels lovingly recount the coming of the child Jesus into the world. We often call that "the first coming." Near the end of his life, Jesus predicted his "second coming" to judge the living and the dead. St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote about a "third coming" of Christ, a secret one that happens in a person's heart by faith. Christ comes to each person. Bernard defends this view with another passage from John's gospel, where Jesus says, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him."

Yet today, in the Prologue to John's Gospel, we hear of something that preceded all three comings: not a coming at all, but a presence, an eternal presence existing before time began. John opens his gospel with the same words that open the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning." Genesis speaks about the beginning of creation, but John steps back even further: before the beginning of creation, in the very beginning "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Before there was anything, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was there. When John calls the Second Person the Word, his metaphor implies communication—even though there was no one yet to communicate with. But being the relationship-hungry Word was of the very nature of God. After creation, this Word, anxious to speak, entered the world. John says, "He came to what was his own." He "made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory."

In Uganda, people don't need more light this time of year, but they use colors to show other eyes what each eye sees. When God created us, he also gave us ears to hear the Word and lips to proclaim it. Our mouths tell other ears what our ears have heard. Like John the Baptist, in word and deed, we testify to the light that dawned on this day: Jesus Christ.