Opinion
Guest Voices



Palestinians search for bodies and survivors in the rubble of a residential building destroyed in an Israeli airstrike, in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, on Dec. 15. (AP/Fatima Shbair)



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It is Christmas. In peaceful towns, Santa Clauses smile from storefronts as carols fill the air. Children make their lists and send letters to the North Pole.

Elsewhere, the world is exploding.

There is no Christmas in Gaza this year, and celebrations are cancelled in Bethlehem as well. Ukrainian cathedrals may hazard midnight Mass, but there is no Christmas truce in sight.

There are other wars, smaller wars with less world media focus. Innocent people are in danger in Afghanistan and Ethiopia, in Haiti and in Nigeria. There is fighting in Syria, Somalia, Sudan and in at least a dozen other countries.

Refugees roam the globe, hoping for a safe harbor. They may land in Lampedusa or end up in Turkey or the United States. They have no food, no clothing, nothing but the hope of a future without bombs.

They are not looking for "more" or "bigger" or "newer" anything. The displaced people who roam the globe are looking for food and freedom, and most of all for peace. The United Nations estimates some 35.3 million refugees are among the 108 million displaced persons in the world, and those numbers are more than 1 year old.

Not long ago, Pope Francis spoke about a different kind of freedom to the people not threatened by war, to the people with credit cards at the ready to buy whatever

strikes a fancy. He spoke about a freedom that feeds the soul and brings interior peace. He told of a place where individuals are freed from the superfluous, from the pain of wanting what is unnecessary.

Francis said you can only find that place in silence. He said freedom is necessary from what he called "the pollution of vain words and gossip." He said that is essential.

So where is that place in this world?

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TikTok has over 1 billion users. It has been downloaded more than 4 billion times. The social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) boasts some 372 million users, and it ranks only 15th in the world. Among and between are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Reddit and too many others to count. Some lean far left or right. Some, too many actually, present the "fake news" we know too well, along with large doses of vitriol.

Only the media are new. The old standbys of anger, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth and pride are always available. One, more or all can move easily into the mind and heart. The noise covers their footsteps.

The noise destroys the silence and any possibility for reflection, thought and calm discussion.

It seems civility has left the planet.

Witness the recent grilling of three Ivy League university presidents by the New York Republican Rep. Elise Stefanik, who demanded loudly they answer her with a "simple yes or no," refusing to consider that after two hours they might be worn out from constant questioning. The content of the discussion is not at issue here. The loud lack of respect is.

In micro doses around the world, the same demeaning conduct rails, whether in vulgar late-night television or in political memes from either side of any race.

It is no wonder civilization seems on the edge of collapse.

Which brings us back to Santa Claus, who benevolently promises happiness. In most places he has taken center stage and pushed the creche and the menorah off to the side. There are too many hurting people frightened today. Can we not quietly and with respect focus on their needs this season and discard the noise and disrespect that fuels the wars large and small? Can we not seek peace?