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Honorable Consul General Ambassador Prabhu Dayal, Mrs. Chandini Dayal, members of the Consulate, distinguished guests:

First of all, on behalf of the invited guests I would like to express our gratitude for organizing a Christmas reception at the India Consulate for the first time. It is an honor to be here at this historic landmark building in the great city of New York, the city of the United Nations, the city that V. K. Krishna Menon, a Keralite (please allow me to be proud), conquered fifty-one years ago through his intellectual prowess and intimate knowledge of the world order. Here East meets West, or, better, West meets East. Needless to say, the two shall never be the same.

One could not but notice the word “Christmas” in the invitation that the Honorable Consul General sent to us. At a time when America, a country founded on Judeo-Christian principles, is shying away, under the pretext of political correctness, from the use of the word Christmas, and CEOs and television anchor persons are trying hard to turn this into a holiday/shopping season, the Consul General of a secular country is reminding us that this is **Christmas**, and that the reason for the celebration is the birth of Jesus Christ, and more so, that the birth of Jesus should be celebrated. The invitation itself is the message: that we should call the Christmas, Christmas. The deliberate decision to celebrate Christmas and Hanukha and Eid and Diwali shows that India considers religious diversity as an asset and a reason for celebration. It comes from a world view that encompasses all. Over the centuries, India welcomed with extended arms everyone who came to her, the Aryans, the Zoroastrians, the Jews, the Persian Christians, the Arab Muslims, the list goes on and on. Like the river in Herman Hesse’s *Sidhartha*, India silently absorbed and slowly transformed them. Not only that, she had a prayer for everyone. That prayer read: *Lokah samasthah sukhino bhavanthu* (let there be happiness to all people), the entire world, even the world that lie beyond her shores (*lokah samasthah*). Ironically, the land of a thousand gods is also the land of strict monotheism: *ekam sat* (the truth is one), the seers said, *viprah bahuda vadanthi* (men of intellect speak of it in many ways); this is the land that taught her children to transcend from the idea of a particular god to the universal God (or, if that is your choice, to no-god; one of the six systems of philosophy in India is atheistic. Only in India!)

Coming back to Christmas, humanly speaking, the child whose birth we celebrate today was born into a Jewish family. According to the Gospels, he grew up in the Jewish faith and adhered to it until he died. However, during his public life, he challenged the existing social structure that supported a kind of caste system which divided people into separate groups of Pharisees and Sadducees and tax collectors and so on. He said such divisions were unfounded because they were all children of the same God. On a larger scale, he challenged the dichotomous world view of humanity as Jew and Gentile, and the particular idea of God that supported that bifocal vision, “my god versus your god.” Instead, he called his God in his mother tongue (Aramaic) “Abba,” which means “father” or “progenitor” without the male-female distinction. He had a special privilege to address God as Abba, because he was the Son. He extended the same privilege to his followers to address God as “**our** Father.” It did not matter whether they were Jews



or Gentiles, Sadducees or Pharisees, Samaritans or sinners; everyone was included in the “our” of the Our Father. Jesus asked his followers to pray that God’s will be done on all people, everywhere: “Thy will be done on **earth** as it is in heaven.” The word “earth” may be interpreted as the entire world, “lokaḥ samasthah.” Thus, the Sanskrit prayer and the Our Father imply the same unified vision of world and humanity.

In India, we have a term to refer to those people who have achieved this unified vision of world and humanity: *mahaa aatma* (great soul), *mahaatma* as in Mahatma Gandhi. For such people, Harijans and Brahmins and Samaritans and Sadducees all belong to the same class, the class of the children of the same parent-God. The Mahatma-s in human history have shown us that adherence to one’s faith is not a hindrance to achieving that higher level of consciousness. One can be rooted in one’s faith and yet grow big like a tree, spreading branches in all directions, long enough to shelter birds of all kinds, and tall enough to give shade to people of all faiths.

What is the meaning of all these musings, one might ask, when the wounds, both physical and psychological, are still fresh in Mumbai, when people in the name of their particular idea of god hurt other innocent human beings? The terrible events in Mumbai brought out the worst in man, and at the same time, those events also brought out the best in human beings. Some people predicted a communal riot; the opposite happened. The New York Times carried the following report on Monday, December 8: “Muslim leaders have refused to allow bodies of the nine militants killed in the attacks to be buried in Islamic cemeteries, saying the men were not true Muslims.” It was heartwarming to see pictures of people of all faiths joined together in prayer. They may have prayed to their particular gods, but by the very act of praying together they made the journey from a particular idea of god to God, the Supreme Being, the progenitor of all. Even amidst darkness and death, the people in Mumbai became a beacon of light and hope for humanity.

That is the message of Christmas.

Let me conclude by singing a Sanskrit sloka from *Kristu Sahasra Naamam* (Thousand Names of Christ), written by Illipparambil Cora Chacko (1876-1966) from Kerala:

Taaraa suchita janmaanam	By star was your birth proclaimed
Jyotishaaraadhamarbhakam	“You the child is our King,” the Magi acclaimed
Goshtajam pathikam wande	Born in a manger, you are the guide divine
Raajaanam rajapujitham	O King, adored by kings.
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Kristum kanya sutam wande	O Chrsit, son of the Virgin, I bow to thee.

Jai Hind