

FR. HENRY ATWELL

Toward Tomorrow



The hills near Bethlehem echoed the cries of a Babe born in a cold cave on the first Christmas night long ago.

The cries of a child can still be heard there today.

The "little town of Bethlehem" which we see pictured in the background on most Christmas cards still looks very much as it did in centuries past. A few church towers or mosque minarets pierce the skyline but, otherwise, time hasn't changed it very much.

And it remains, as Simeon had foretold, "a sign of contradiction."

Msgr. Donald J. Mulcahy and I were there this past summer. We walked the narrow streets where shepherds and wise men walked and we knelt in a cave which tradition says is where our Savior was born.

A vast church is built above the cave now, built 1600 years ago, soon after the era of Roman persecution ended. Clustered close around the ancient church are monasteries of monks of six different Christian denominations, each group claiming the church is theirs.

Franciscan priests keep alive the claim for Catholics. Priests who visit Bethlehem may offer Mass in the grotto but only within limited hours and never at the altar erected at "the exact spot" where Jesus was born. The Greeks reserve that altar for themselves. The present arrangement has been hammered out over many centuries of conflict, even to the point where Christians would fight and kill to gain control of these sacred places.

And all this in the name of the Prince of Peace.

We can be grateful that now at last the different groups abide by the "status quo" agreement and the monks of the different monasteries are on friendly personal terms with each other.

But there are also other divisions in the Bethlehem community.

Bethlehem has been for centuries an Arab town, few Jews lived there, and between 1948 and 1967 no Jews at all. Then came the swift Six Day War and Israel captured Bethlehem, a city holy for the Jews because it is the city

where their famous king David was born and where Rachel, somewhat of the original Jewish mother, is buried. So now the blue Egged buses from Jerusalem bring throngs of Jewish pilgrim-tourists to Bethlehem, many in their kibbutz hats and shorts, while the Arab Bethlehemites grow more bitter by the takeover, many of them having lost their savings and their jobs when they were cut off from their ties to relatives and businesses in Jordan and other Arab nations.

The more enterprising Arabs have adjusted to this new influx by providing souvenirs for Jews as well as Christians. Yarmulkes (Jewish skull caps) and mezusahs (capsules which designate a Jewish home) with colorful post cards in Hebrew script proclaiming "shalom" are placed for sale next to Nativity sets, Rosaries and post cards with angels singing. "Gloria in excelsis Deo."

The anguish and anomaly of Bethlehem does not end even here.

War, disease, poverty have left in their wake hundreds of waifs. Their parents dead, off in a refugee camp, just too poor to accept another child, these youngsters fill several orphanages in Bethlehem, one especially which is appropriately called "The Creche," the French word for the Nativity scene.

At the Creche I talked with the four nuns, two from France, two from Lebanon, who have the care of over 200 toddlers all under the age of four. At another orphanage I met the soft-spoken nun from Ireland who is superior of a community of five nuns from as many nations and they are both teachers and surrogate mothers for well over 100 girls of elementary school age. (And if you'd like to help these nuns in their care of these children, you can send your contributions through the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, 330 Madison Ave., New York City.)

Perhaps this is where we can find the key to the Christmas story, not in churches however venerable or ancient they may be, not in tombs and memories, but in the love, concern and care we give day by day in humble service to those in any need.

FR. PAUL J. CUDDY

On The Right Side



Christmas brings memories; and I am thinking of my last military Christmas. It was at Biggs Air Force Base, El Paso, Texas in 1956. Military men have always gotten pretty poor publicity. But when one considers that there is hardly an American who has not had a father or brother or uncle or cousin in the Armed Forces serving the country, we know that there must have been, and are, a multitude of fine men in the Service. Indeed, I can assure you that I found more genuine Christianity and dedication among thousands of service men and among the poor whom they frequently assisted than I ever found in civilian life.

In 1955, I was assigned to the base at El Paso. It was part of SAC. Before Christmas Lilly Cruise, the Swiss wife of M/Sgt. Toro Cruise, and Captain John Spearman, a B 56 pilot and a man of the greatest compassion, telephoned. They wanted help with their squadron project, which was the Christmas party for Mexican orphans.

The youngsters were the poorest of the poor: Spanish speaking little Mexicans, cared for by the poorest of Nuns who shared the poverty of their charges. I visited their place in El Paso: dumpy buildings, stark rooms, monotonous food, and a vegetable garden in the back. Yet, I have rarely seen more happy children. They suffered from the neglect or loss of parents and home. But they had security and exuberance from Nuns whose whole lives were centered in being permanent mothers to Christ's littlest ones.

The nuns were not highly trained in theology or in social sciences. In fact, as we observe the decline of our present day communities, there seems to be a calamitous connection between their technical advancement and simple Christian spirituality. These sisters were magnificent in their evangelical simplicity. They remind me of Mother Teresa's sisters of charity. And the children knew genuine love which was always there.

The Christmas program was arranged. The committee concurred that before dinner the children should come to Mass at the base chapel. Now

I am convinced that just giving things to the poor can be a dehumanizing act. Whenever possible I have expected and accepted from the poor, a contribution in return. This preserves their personal dignity. So I said: "Lilly, the children and the sisters must make a contribution. It is wrong just to give and not let the poor give in return. The kids don't have material things, but they do have their own talents. So at Mass we'll have them sing Mexican hymns. This will be their gift."

After midnight Mass I buttonholed Carol Dillon, wife of Col. Steve Dillon, as she came out from Mass. It was Christmas day, yet I said, not looking her in the eye: "Mrs. Dillon, what are you doing about 11 o'clock this morning?" This with full knowledge that her often absent husband and their eight children would be home together! Her answer was simple and direct. "Why Father, nothing I can't rearrange if I can be of help..." I stammered to her our plans for the orphans, and added "The kids are coming to 11 Mass and I want them to sing, but we need the organ accompaniment. Would you come and play the organ?" Her answer was unhesitating. "Of course, Father. And I'll bring Stephanie. She might help with the singing." Stephanie was her beautiful 13 year old daughter, named after her father.

So it was done. It was a crisp Christmas day. Lilly Cruise, Captain Spearman, my good assistant Jim Brown, who later became assistant to Father Lawrence Ward in Newfoundland; oh, there were so many others who planned the day out of love. The orphans gave their own gift of song; the simple Sisters so complete in their dedications gave their mother-love; the Dillons, an Air Force family for 14 years; the Service men who served the children in the mess hall; the transportation men who carried the children; all so full of the spirit of Christ. This was a Christmas of delight and holiness.

So a Christmas blessing to all men of good will, with a special salute to those good men in the military service who on Christmas day will repeat in 1972 a version of Christmas in El Paso, 1956.

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