

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Advent and the Nearness of God

[The last of three essays]

Five hundred years before Christ's birth, Isaiah felt awe-struck before "the hidden God." (Is 45:15) in the 18th Century leading thinkers speculated on "the absentee God." In our own century Martin Buber dramatized "the eclipse of God." A dozen years or so ago, a handful of American theologians launched the so-called "death of God theology."

Each different in its own way, these various references to God highlight one powerful truth: the reality of God is difficult to grasp. He is, after all, Mystery of mysteries. Yet while awe and philosophy tend to cultivate remoteness, Christian faith, especially of the Advent variety, reminds us that God is "ever near, at the heart of every moment." Indeed, every page in Scripture stands ready to proclaim His presence. In the poet's words, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

This truth is rooted in Scripture. No other truth is more often repeated, more eloquently celebrated. Each page is eloquent testimony to the God who is present, powerful, and available. And this, in three classic ways.

There is first of all, the discovery of God through personal encounter. Jacob may serve as the prime example of this. There is hardly any need to recall the patriarch's encampment "in a certain place" where, at the going down of the sun, he entertains a dream of a mysterious ladder stretching from earth to heaven. God's presence does not depend

on Jacob's perception: "Surely the Lord is in this place; I did not know it." (Gn 28:16) A presence bigger than Jacob's own awareness surrounds him, leaving him richer for the blessing of the encounter.

Then there is the quest for God in nature. Elijah illustrates this type of discovery. Fleeing from the arrogant Jezebel, he runs off into the wilderness and in his desolate hours, he does not find God in the howling wind, the tremor of the earth or the roaring fire, but only in a "still small voice." (1 Kgs. 19:1ff) This manifestation of God occurs in a simple and unexpected way.

A third way of pursuit after God is in the setting of history. Isaiah 10: 5-19 pictures the military muscle of Assyria flexed at Israel's northern border. Yet the nation is deaf to the Lord's demands. Israel slumbers in carelessness. Isaiah, sharp of vision and incisive of word, proclaims that the power of the Lord will unfold in the coming bloodshed.

Personal encounter. Nature. History. All three of these are sanctuaries where the presence of God can be experienced. All three men, Jacob, Elijah and Isaiah, found God in unexpected ways. In this sense, each of them is an Advent figure. They lived in the expectation of a coming, and their Advent was transformed into an adventure.

Advent must teach us to keep our vision sharp, our expectations keen, our horizons spacious. Because we have a tendency to "giftwrap" God in predictable packages and with carefully worded labels ("Don't open till Christmas — or Sunday!") we all too often miss Him where He is really to be found. Only when we live in the spirit of Advent can we find Him.

These three Old Testament models impose a respectable caution on all of us, especially as we assess the contemporary scene. It is all too easy to write off, say, charismatics in our midst as "odd creatures," whereas most of them are deeply committed believers who live in a vibrant, enthusiastic sense of the Spirit's presence. It is all too easy to reject the unconventional types, as "rejects or fringe of society," whereas many of them witness values deeper than comfort or ease. It is all too easy to decry the Godlessness of the contemporary scene, viewing it as a hopeless mess. Might it not be more effective to see in our various contemporary crises the handwriting on the wall, reminding us of neglected values: international peace, self-imposed discipline, sober recognition of human frailty?

Let us not quickly write off those who remind us, even if in strange yet striking ways, that God is not some detached landlord perched on the edge of the cosmos. If we brought more thoughtfulness to seeing the kaleidoscope of events as the varying manifestations of a God who is still with us, we might better understand the meaning of Advent.

When all is said and done, Advent is a celebration, even if in a minor key, of God's nearness. Advent is the approach of God. For it is a seasonal reminder that God yearns for personal encounter, can speak to us in the tenderness and tones of human nature, can infiltrate history, and become so close that one can touch him in the flesh.

Advent is the eloquent silence that prefaces the Word.

Advent is Emanuel (God-with-us) realized. "The Word became flesh, and pitched his tent in our midst." (Jn 1:14) What more can one add?

Pope Hails U.N. Rights Declaration

United Nations, N.Y. [RNS] — The U.N. General Assembly met here on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for a festival commemoration.

The 135-nation Assembly heard a message from Pope Paul VI, who called the declaration "one of the finest titles to glory," especially when one evaluates the importance which is attributed to it as a sure path to peace.

The message was read by Undersecretary-general of the

U.N., former Congressman Bradford Morse of Massachusetts.

The pontiff told the General Assembly that in reality, peace and rights "are two benefits directly related to each other as cause and effect."

He said there could be no peace where there was no respect for, defense and promotion of human rights. While promotion of the rights of the human person leads to peace, at the same time peace contributes towards the realization of this aim, Pope Paul said, adding:

"We cannot then remain indifferent in the face of the urgent need to construct a human co-existence which will everywhere guarantee to the individual, to communities, and particularly to minority groups, the right to life, to personal and social dignity, to development in a safe and improved environment, and to an equitable division of nature's resources and the fruits of civilization."

"The Church, though concerned above all with the rights of God, as we said last year to the Secretary-General, Dr. Kurt Waldheim, can never cease to be concerned with the rights of man, created in the image and likeness of his Creator. She feels herself to be wounded when the rights of one man are ignored and violated whoever he may be and wherever this may occur."

"For this reason, the Holy See gives its full moral support to the common ideal contained in the Universal Declaration, as also to the progressive affirmation of the human rights which are expressed in it."

Pope Paul noted that objection is sometimes raised that collaboration of all states in promoting the rights of man constitutes interference in internal affairs.

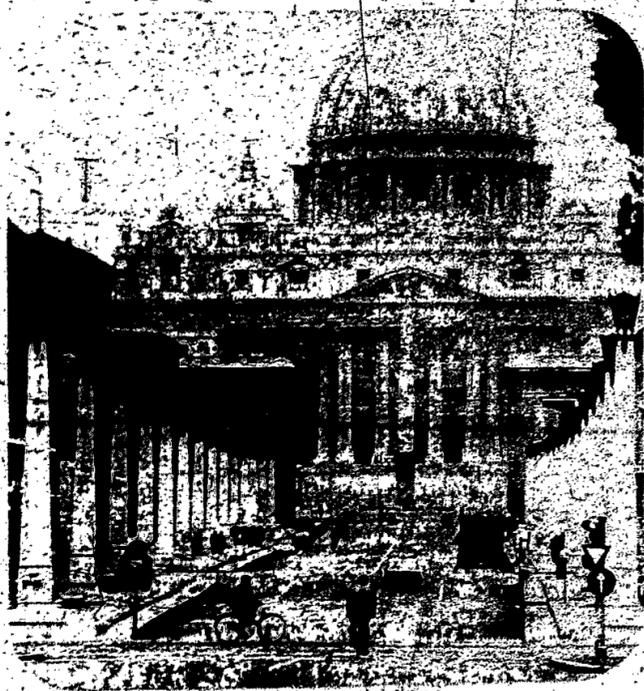
"But surely it is true that the most certain means for a state to avoid external interference is precisely for it to recognize and ensure that in the territories under its jurisdiction fundamental rights and liberties are respected," the pontiff answered.

Then he stated: "We cannot conceal our serious anxiety at the persistence and aggravation of situations which we bitterly

deplore — situations such as racial and ethnic discrimination, obstacles to the self-determination of peoples, the repeated violations of the sacred right to religious liberty in its various aspects and the absence of an international agreement supporting this right and specifying its consequences; the repression of the freedom to express wholesome opinions; the inhumane treatment of prisoners; the violent and systematic elimination of political op-

ponents; other forms of violence; and attacks on human life, especially on life in the womb.

"To all the silent victims of injustice we lend our voice of protest and of entreaty. But mere denunciation, often too late or ineffective, is not sufficient. There must be an analysis of the deep-rooted causes of such situations and a firm commitment to face up to them and resolve them correctly," the Pope added.



Empty Streets

The road to Vatican City is almost devoid of cars as Italy's motorists obey the nation's ban on Sunday driving. Normally, the Via della Conciliazione would be jammed from curb to curb in a king-sized traffic jam. Italy's Sabbath driving law permits only taxis, buses and cars that operate in the public welfare or are needed in emergencies [RNS]



Festival of Lights

Holding a prayerbook, a youngster sings a traditional song before the Menorah during Hanukkah — the "Festival of Lights" or "Festival of Dedication" — when Jews commemorate the Maccabean victory over the Syrians in 165 B.C., and the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem which had been defiled by the King of Syria, Antiochus. Since then Hanukkah has been celebrated by lighting candles for eight days as a reminder of the container of oil which burned miraculously for eight days instead of one. When Hanukkah begins this year on Dec. 20, special prayers will be said, a special song is sung and candles blessed. Then, using the ninth candle, called the "Shammash," one of the eight Menorah candles will be lighted. The lighting will be repeated for eight successive sundowns until all eight candles on the Menorah are ablaze. [RNS]