

Churchmen Speak of Christmas Challenges, Hopes

New York (RNS) — In a world filled with rising economic uncertainty, hunger, hate and war, what is the justification of heralding the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace? What are the hopes and challenges of Christmas 1974?

Religious leaders in their Christmas messages note that it is precisely the low moral tone and despair of the world at this hour that makes the hope and joy brought to earth by Jesus more meaningful today than ever before.

Christmas 1974, as it comes to a world tense with disasters and crises, is forcing humanity to seriously consider the most basic priorities: food, safety, life itself, God's love — and that Jesus lives today.

Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Mestice of the archdiocese New York said the spirit of God is the hope of Christmas 1974 and the challenge for all Christians is to "renew in our souls the presence of Christ" and share it with others and the world.

"My hope for Christmas 1974 would be that all Christian people, fortified with the sacraments of the initiation, might be enabled to meet the challenges of the world securely and forthrightly," he said.

"The low moral tone of the

world offers a continuing challenge to Christian people. The authentic Christian, ever mindful of the active and abiding presence of God's spirit within him is challenged to bring this Christian witness to the world which he must do with a gentle, firm and unwavering faith conviction."

Archbishop Iakovos, primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, said his personal hopes and challenges for Christmas 1974 were:

"That we arrange our modern erratic thinking along lines of Christian responsible reasoning;

"That we commit ourselves to the faith which demands from us deeds that would promote good will among men;

"—That we feed the famished with such nutriment that would sustain their faith in man in the God Who keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets captives free, gives sight to the blind, raises up those who were bowed down, loves the just, protects the strangers, sustains the fatherless and the widows, but the way of the wicked, He thwarts." (Psalm 146, 6-10).

Dr. Jorge Lara-Braud, assistant general secretary for Faith and Order of the National Council of

Churches, said Christmas this year "is marked by the hope of millions for the source of a meaningful life."

"Perplexed and disillusioned as we are by securities that proved unreliable, that hope has never been more intense," Dr. Lara-Braud said. "The message and reality of Christ could not be more timely, precisely when the grim challenge we all face is whether in solidarity we can meet the threat to our physical and spiritual survival. The ancient prayer 'Come Lord Jesus' is the cheerful certainty that because He overcame the world of pride and death we can hope for a new order of just love and eternal life."

Roman Catholic Bishop Francis J. Mugavero of Brooklyn said this Christmas should challenge us to a greater awareness of conditions that all too often go unnoticed.

"Human pain, hunger and need should always cause us distress but perhaps never more than in this time when we celebrate Christ's first coming into the world and His continued presence in the midst of our human community. In this Christmas season let us leave behind a callousness toward the poor and lack of concern for the starving," Bishop Mugavero said.

Dr. George F. Harkins, general

secretary of the Lutheran Council in the USA, said "the essence of Christmas is God's love. And the most striking evidence of that love is the gift of God's son, Jesus, for all mankind."

"To treasure Christian joy and peace in secret would be to prostitute God's love; they are to be shared openly so that others' hopelessness and meaninglessness can be transformed into Christian joy and love," Dr. Harkins said.

"Today's undernourished and starving millions, those here and in other parts of the world, look to the Christians of the world for additional, up-to-date evidences of God's love. Let this Christmas season be marked by an outpouring of His Love, through us, for His children everywhere, especially those who are disadvantaged by lack of food and medicines, a lack of hope and meaning, by lack of joy and peace."

Msgr. James J. Murray, executive director of New York Catholic Charities, said that during "the holy season of Advent we are reminded once again of the fleeting aspects of affluence and of our dependence upon God and our interdependence upon one another. Runaway inflation and rising unemployment are taking their toll on all of us but none more so than on the poor, the

disabled and families on fixed incomes."

"Christmas 1974, however, offers all of us both the challenge and the opportunity to reflect and act upon the true message of Christ's humble birth, life style and compassion for the multitude," Msgr. Murray said. "Counting our own blessings, let us then seize the opportunity to become the instruments of His love, peace and good will among men and nations."

Dean James P. Morton of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine, said "the context of Christmas is poverty and homelessness, a refugee family at a time of world economic crisis and the threats of war."

"As always, the gospel is the most relevant history!" Dean Morton said. "Relevant because the gospel points to the eternal issues before man, and not simply a topical news peg."

He said "what is fascinating about Christmas 1974 is that the de-facto context of the gospel — poverty, refugees, homelessness, economic crises, wars — is in fact the news peg. Which may mean, at another level, that with this coincidence we may be enabled for the first time to have eyes to see and ears to hear that poverty and homelessness and powerlessness are really essentials, not tangential dimensions of the proclamation of the gospel."

Tensions High at Christmas Family Counselor Finds

By BONITA BALDWIN

"Some families never have a good holiday," according to Alice Attridge, family counselor for Catholic Family Center. Family tension rises at Christmas, and consequently, troubled families either cover their problems with phony merriment or find their woes erupting, she explained.

Depression is a very common ailment at holiday time, when high expectations can be cruelly disappointed. Many families have one person who is especially unable to cope with the dreams and disappointments of Christmas. This individual typically gets drunk and ruins the day for everyone.

The most unhappy people at Christmas, according to Miss Attridge, are those who recently have been divorced or separated. "It's a terrible loss and adjustment to suddenly find yourself alone and feeling rejected at Christmas," she said. Miss Attridge counsels one such young woman whose husband recently left her with two young children. "She's going to have a very unhappy Christmas, but at least she's working at it and trying to cope."

The "orphans of divorce" are another unhappy group, often shuffled between two homes and two sets of parents, with no real sense of belonging.

As the counselor sees it, gift-giving is part of the Christmas stress. The pressure to buy frays the nerves of families with already stretched budgets. Many gifts are given with a sense of guilt. A gift may say, "I know I didn't give you what you needed emotionally during the year. I'm trying to make it up with this gift." Gifts given with this feeling can cause a sense of resentment or emptiness, like that of the woman who told Miss Attridge, "I don't want my husband to give me anything for Christmas." She was in effect saying, "We have no relationship."

Entire families are increasingly coming to the center for counseling. Miss Attridge feels that the cooperation of an entire family provides excellent counseling possibilities. "Families have systems and we try to work within that system to get at the heart of the problem."

Families also have scapegoats, she said. For example, a family may think that an unruly adolescent daughter is their biggest problem. The daughter may in fact only be acting out deeper problems within the family.

A family of seven learned ways of dealing with their complex problems at the center recently. The father had been bedridden for two years, with no hope of recovery. The mother needed to go to work full-time to support the family, and the children had been left without strong guidance. They now look forward to a happier, more cooperative life together.

Group and individual counseling also are available at the center. More and more men are seeking help. "More men are suffering now," Miss Attridge noted, because the balance within marriage is shifting and today women sometimes decide that they do not want to be married.

Young marrieds with perhaps one or two preschoolers are

finding their way to the center more also. In the past, Miss Attridge observed, couples found their children and working together to raise them and to make a home for them one of their major satisfactions. "Couples don't seem to find that gratification anymore."

There is, however, cause for optimism when people come to the Catholic Family Center to talk about their problems. Miss Attridge feels that those who come may have happier families than many who stay away from help. "People who come are working at their relationships and have a better chance of succeeding."

Christmas At the Cathedral

Bishop Joseph L. Hogan's family Mass at 5:30 p.m. Christmas Eve, a 7:30 p.m. Mass with folk music and a midnight sung Mass, celebrated by the parish clergy, were the high spots of the Sacred Heart Cathedral Christmas program.

Families were asked to bring home-made cardboard ornaments to the bishop for decoration of the tree, and the Children's Choir was scheduled to sing. The adult choir prepared an hour-long carol concert to precede the midnight Mass.

The schedule announced for Christmas Day followed the Sunday schedule, except for the elimination of the regular 5 p.m. Mass. Christmas Day Masses: 7, 8:30, 10, 11:15 a.m., 12:30 p.m.

YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

New York — Good buys. For \$2 CARE serves 12 children a daily bowl of nourishing porridge for a month, \$5 gives 270 children a full lunch and \$10 provides 3,600 children with a protein-enriched beverage.



Photo by Susan McKinney

Father Helps

Father John O'Connor holds the microphone for 2nd grader Patty Doran, during a Christmas liturgy celebrated Wednesday, Dec. 18, for pre-school through 2nd grade pupils at St. Pius X School.

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Courier-Journal 1

Atwell	19	Editorials	6
Beahon	18	Sister Frances	16
Bishop Hogan	5	Greeley	16
Child	9	Hohman	14
Classified	18	Letters	6
Costa	17	Murphy	6
Cuddy	7	Shamon	15
Doser	18		