

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Bishop's Christmas Message

Strange as it may seem to all of you whose lives reflect my personal love for Christmas, I have found the lively debate about its celebration a fruitful meditation. Let me share it with you on this birthday of the Lord Jesus in the hope that the affirmative side wins the argument so forcefully that more and more of us will be committed to the Crusade of 'Christmas every day of the year!'



Let us call the opposition or the Cons the 'Bah, Humbug' participants in the debate, and the affirmative side the 'Joy to the World' team. And now we listen to the argumentation, labeled henceforth as 'B.H.' (negative) or 'J.W.' as the affirmative side of the contest.

B.H.—It's just another day. You stole December 25 from the pagans who were celebrating the birthday of their god, Mithras and you thought it cute to make a play on 'god of sun' and a new festival for your 'Son of God.'

J.W.—You've made a point, I must admit. We were never sure of the precise date of Jesus' birth — but we recognize Him as the Light of the World and our faith assures us that He came to destroy the darkness in which you admit you were groping, and about which you were forcefully reminded by the Winter solstice. I admit we have messed up our celebration, but good. We hail Him as

'born in the humility of swaddling clothes and a manger bed' and we celebrate by spending millions on gifts for ourselves while others starve. We do make a one-shot effort at being kind and loving, but depression sets in for most of us who are evil the rest of the year. Our celebrations are as gluttonous as yours, perhaps. Maybe we surpass you by helping a needy family this day — but, like you, we spend the rest of the year ignoring them or condemning them for their laziness or shiftlessness. I recommend we keep your date and change our spirit.

B.H.—Christmas is good for children but I would like to think I am mature in my thinking. Christmas is a toy and a legend, a stocking by the fireplace, a Santa Claus kept immortal for the sake of the very young.

J.W.—Christmas is a renewal of faith that knows neither time nor age. The Christ of Christmas is without beginning and without end, as new as the morning sunrise, as eternal as the stars, as infinite as the heavens.

B.H.—Very poetic! The reality of my life is prose — not poetry. Christmas means shopping for days, and traffic jams and bustle and rudeness. It is over-commercialized and expensive.

J.W.—The Christ of Christmas is not a burden. Angelic Messengers announced His birth as good news of great joy. His life was the joy of sharing and giving.

B.H.—I am a young man but I have been watching you grown-ups very carefully. I say that Christmas is nothing. It's not relevant in today's world. How can we lie and cheat and steal and kill and go to war and then come to a screeching halt for one day to celebrate Christmas?

J.W.—I regret our hypocrisy. You have a point. But, if as you say, Christmas has no meaning, then life has no meaning. Without the peace that is Christmas, how can man hope to put down his sword? Without the truth that is Christmas, how can man hope to trust his brother? Without the love that is Christmas, how can we ever live in harmony? The Christ of Christmas is eternal, ageless, quiet, loving — the fullness of truth and of life and of love.

Now let us interrupt the debate for reflection. The opponents offered us words to challenge our celebration. Let us, then remind ourselves that Christ was born for us to lead us from a fragmentary existence to full humanity. He has come to ransom us from our vulnerability. He brings us hope and light when we, left to ourselves, would harvest only despair and darkness. The light of Christmas is bright enough to reveal us all as blind in some way. The Light that shines today allows us to see beyond our own pettiness and small vengeance. It summons us to joy within ourselves so that all can be messengers of the good news that the Angels first announced. I pray that we begin today to see the affirmation of Christmas as Christian duty today and forever.

Bishop's Message to Religion

My dear Priests, Sisters, Brothers —

At Christmas in past years, it has been my custom to send each of you a personal greeting, assuring you of my gratitude for all that you do in this diocese to minister to God's people.

This year, however, I realize that even this small personal gesture is a luxury that we cannot afford in the face of such great world suffering. Instead, I have taken the cost of preparing and sending such a greeting — approximately \$200 — and sent it in your name to CARE.

It is my prayer that at least a fewer number of people will die of hunger because of our concern for them. Be assured of my continued gratitude for your generous service to the People to God. May our gesture of concern bring us the real joy and peace of Christmas.

With a blessing, I remain

Gratefully yours in Christ,

+Joseph L. Hogan
Bishop of Rochester

Return to Magisterium, Pope Urges Moralists

Vatican City [RNS] — Pope Paul, deploring what he called a "disintegration" in Christian morality, has urged a return to the sources of revelation as interpreted by the Magisterium (teaching authority) of the Church.

The Pope was addressing a plenary assembly of the Vatican's international Theological Commission which convened here Dec. 16 to consider the theme, "The Sources of Christian Moral Knowledge."

Emphasizing that the commission's discussion topic was "important, serious, and pertinent" for the Church and for the world at large, the pontiff said:

"No one can be ignorant about how Christian morals are being questioned today in their very principles and how the concept

of an objective moral order is under attack."

"Contemporary man," he said, "no longer seems to know where good is to be found or where evil is to be found or where he can find principles of morality he can trust."

"And a certain number of Christians share in this doubt, having lost their faith in both natural-law moral concept and in the positive teaching of revelation and of the Magisterium."

Pope Paul indicated what he said were two "major" causes of this "disintegration" in Christian moral teaching and practice.

"First of all," he said, "there is the separation of morals from religion, and especially from the teachings of the Church," as

regards certain moral questions, such as contraception, abortion, sterilization, and euthanasia."

The second "cause," he went on, is to be found in "the prevailing opinion which considers the moral teachings of the Church outmoded," and in a "spreading relativism that encourages amoral tendencies in modern life."

He said that "the proclaimed right to indiscriminate freedom dispenses with the sense of duty and moral obligation even in obviously serious and binding aspects of both personal and social life," such as in the area of "divorce, homosexuality, and pre-marital sex experiences."

Praising the members of the Theological Commission for their decision to deal with the question of morality under the aspect of

"criteria for action," the Pope said:

"We recall that the Sacred Scriptures must have the prime place in these inquiries, both to advance studies on revelation as the fountainhead of moral laws and to emphasize the great directives of Biblical morality which lead to participation in the Paschal mystery."

Pope Paul alluded, in passing, to the recent decision of the French legislature to legalize abortion in the first 10 weeks of pregnancy, and the Vatican's issuance of a document condemning abortion, absolutely, on the eve of the vote in the French National Assembly — a move that was criticized by Vatican opponents as "interference" in French domestic politics.

"The Magisterium," he said, "cannot still its voice on basic

options of human behavior and must help Christians and all men of goodwill to behave in a responsible and correct manner."

The Theological Commission was set up as an adjunct to the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1969.

Its purpose is to provide the doctrinal congregation with the consultative and advisory services of theologians and scriptural and liturgical experts representative of various schools of thought. Its international membership is restricted to 30 — all appointed by the Pope.

SELF HELP

Gaza — CARE staffers used the proceeds from the sale of empty food containers to buy industrial sewing machines. Now a group of Arab women earn a living wage by making towels for a commercial distributor.