

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Christ the Liberator and the Kingdom of God

As your Bishop, I sometimes feel at a great loss to know how to preach Christ Jesus to you. The sheer greatness and goodness of the mystery of Christ present with us and working in us overwhelms me with joy, gratitude, wonder and finally silence. Then I ask myself: How, from the full reality of what Christ is for us, can I draw out a few true and adequate words to share with His people so that they may more ardently know and appreciate Him?



I suppose this sense of inability to preach Christ Jesus in the way that He deserves must also have saddened Saint Paul and Saint John — and, indeed, all the apostles and saints. Saint Paul, himself, humbly declares that, in the end, it must be the Spirit of Christ, Himself, who will teach us, and "ripen" in us the reality of Christ. He says to the people of Philippi and to us: "I am sure of this much: that he who has begun the good work in you will carry it through to completion," for "it is my wish that you may be found rich in the harvest of justice which Jesus Christ has ripened in you, to the glory and praise of God." Like Paul, I know my greatest dependence on Christ is the very act of trying to speak of Him to you, His people.

Nevertheless, in the three weeks that remain before the Feast of Christmas, I would like to speak to you of Jesus Christ as our Liberator, Savior, and Source of Life. The words of the Bishops of Vatican II are in my heart as I begin:

"By himself and by his own power, no one is freed from sin or raised above himself, or completely rid of his sickness or his solitude or his servitude. On the contrary, all stand in need of Christ, their model, their mentor, their Liberator, their Savior, their Source of Life." (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, Art. 8)

How can we realize and say that Christ Jesus has come and is present among us as our Liberator? What does this mean? How can I make this saying real and meaningful for each of you who read these words?

Part of our difficulty in not being able to realize and admire the extraordinary liberation we have received in the gift of Jesus Christ is due to the fact that we do not really perceive or understand our full oppression without Christ. We do not realize or understand our deepest oppression: our own sinfulness, the sinfulness in human history, and the radical scatteredness and human weakness of all creation when left to its poor, separate, suffering, death-prone self. Or if we do realize this fundamental oppression in our nature we grimly take it for granted as a necessary and permanent part of our human condition.

We try at the Eucharist on Sundays in Advent to enter into the ecstatic joy of a man like Zephaniah who cries out to us

"Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
sing joyfully, O Israel.
Be glad and exult with all your heart
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has removed the judgment
against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your
midst,
you have no further misfortune to fear . . ."

but we do not really understand what he is talking about or why he is so exultantly happy. We try to realize and be glad about such liberation but we do not fully understand what it means for us, perhaps because we do not know our most fearful "enemies" and "misfortune": the isolation, separateness, sinfulness, disintegration and death at work in our human condition. We FEEL this, but we do not KNOW it for what it is: the kingdom of man all by himself

Therefore, we do not understand what Origen meant when he declared that Christ, Himself, is the Advent of the Kingdom of God. We do not really know what this "Kingdom of God" is — this Kingdom of wholeness and Holiness in which, by which, and for which we are liberated by Christ Jesus. For the Kingdom of God is not a "place" to which we are going but rather a new life, a new way of being

human, a new freedom, a new wholeness which has already entered our world, has already come to us, and is even now more fully approaching us in and because of the Father's merciful gift of Christ. This is THE central mystery of our faith. In our poor inability to fathom it, we lift our hearts and minds to the Spirit of God that He may help us to understand — He who, Jesus said, "will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you."

The oppression from which Jesus Christ has liberated us is the oppression of our own sin, our unloving and unloved separateness, our unconstructive sickness, our painful solitude, our servitude to the things of earth and the death they contain. In a word, Jesus Christ has liberated us from our lack of holiness, which is another name for our lack of wholeness of life with the Father our Creator, and with the whole human family, our brothers and sisters.

Jesus Christ did indeed say to us: "be holy as your heavenly Father is holy." These words are not accurately heard as a command — in the way that we might hear a friend say to us, "Take care of yourself till I see you again" but rather as a statement or claim of a mysterious and accomplished reality, of a promise fulfilled.

So Jesus Christ says to us: I have liberated you and am even now liberating you from all that you most fear, suffer, regret, resent; I have released you from your aloneness, your weakness, your failures, your suffering, your death; I have disengaged you from all that holds you captive; I have broken the bondage of your being all-by-yourself; I have raised you above yourself and made you free in the wholeness of God's love. I have done this for ALL of your brothers and sisters, not just for you alone. This I have done for you and am even now doing for you, but one day, if you believe me, you will see and enjoy the fullness of the life for which I have liberated you.

That is what it means for us to be the Kingdom of God: it means that we are and will in time be more fully a people in and through whom God's love thoroughly and finally reigns supreme — with no hold-outs, no resistance, no selfishness, no death-dealing, no sin, no prejudice, no hate, no irreverence, no hurting of one another, no fragmentation, no disunity, no ungodliness, and no painful effects of all this scattered humanity.

This Liberation or Redemption is so wonderful a reality, and the presence of such a Liberator in our midst is such a divine mystery that it is hard for us to believe. It is hard for us to realize such a deliverance and to live in terms of it in our daily lives

I can only tell you, my dear people, that, in this historical time between the Ascension of the Lord and the Second Coming which we await, Christ the Liberator is at work all around us, if we have the heart and eyes of faith to see Him. He is in poor young boys who play with guns and accidentally kill others, and He is in all those who die; He is in those who negotiate for real peace, and He is in those who struggle to find just solutions to human and social problems; He is in those who hunger and thirst, and He is in those who serve them; He is in parents who save money to buy gifts for their children, and He is in their children; He is in husbands and wives who forgive one another, and He is in husbands and wives who ask forgiveness; He is in the blind eyes, and deaf ears, and gnarled hands of arthritic old men and women in nursing homes, and He is in those who love them and care for them; He is at work in those who speak harsh words and are sorry, and He is in those who receive those words gently and do not retaliate; He is in car drivers who give others the right of way in five o'clock traffic, and He is in those who respond with a grateful wave of the hand. Christ the Liberator is alive and active in our world wherever and whenever men and women try to love one another generously, mercifully, selflessly, gently, thoroughly, unconditionally.

The prophets of the Old Testament consoled Israel with their testimony that such a Liberator would come to deliver Israel from her sin and from the suffering, exile, and estrangement that are the effects of sin. No prophet announced this promise of Liberation more movingly than Hosea who saw and described God's liberation of His sin affected people in the history of his own relationship to his adulterous wife Gomer:

"Yahweh said to me, 'Go a second time,

give your love to a woman, loved by her husband, but an adulteress in spite of it, just as Yahweh gives his love to the sons of Israel though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.' So, I bought her for fifteen silver shekels and a bushel-and-a-half of barley, and said to her, 'For many days you must keep yourself quietly for me, not playing the whore or offering yourself to others; and I will do the same for you.' For the sons of Israel will be kept for many days without a king, without a leader, without sacrifice or sacred stone, without ephod or teraphim. Afterwards the sons of Israel will come back; they will seek Yahweh, their God, and David, their king; they will come trembling to Yahweh, come for his good things in those days to come." (Hosea 3:1-5)

Almost eight centuries later John the Baptist recognized the Advent of the Liberating One in Jesus of Nazareth, and proclaimed His presence for all the Comers of the world and for all history to hear: "Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the one I spoke of . . . Yes, I have seen and I am the witness that he is the Chosen One of God." (John 1:29-34)

Advent is a time to celebrate with renewed gratefulness and gladness the arrival of the Liberating Christ, the Deliverer from our scatteredness and sinfulness, the Redeeming Gentle One who is in a profound and divinely mysterious sense a holy Lamb of God for us. Advent is a time for celebrating and witnessing to Christ's continued presence in our world, and His continuing work of liberating us from all that is harsh and unwhole. We are all the Comers of the Lord, but through Christ Jesus the Father has brought us back from the grasp of evil and death, and continues even now to bring us back, to liberate us for the holiness and wholeness for which He made us in His own image and likeness.

Wherever and whenever in this diocese men and women struggle to increase the integrity, gentleness, love, fidelity, goodness, truthfulness, justice, mercifulness in our world and in our history, Christ the Liberator is alive and active, taking away the sins of the world. This is the living Christ whose human birthday we will soon celebrate. This Christ is the Advent of the Kingdom of God: the gentle, redeeming lamb through whose life, death, and resurrection God has chosen to deliver us, His poor people, as He promised

"Do not be afraid, Jacob, poor worm,
Israel, puny mite.
I will help you - it is Yahweh who speaks —

"The Holy One of Israel is your redeemer." (Isaiah 41:14) God has not only given us this tender prophetic word; He has already accomplished this magnificent Helping in Jesus Christ, His Son and our Liberating Brother. Even now, He is saying to us: "I will help you." Jesus Christ IS that unbelievably simple and outgoing Sentence of the Father.

FAO Leaders Hear Vatican's Position

Vatican City (RNS) — Bishop Agostino Ferrari-Toniolo, who heads the Vatican's delegation to the Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome, told the agency's representatives here that his delegation has studied the decisions that must be made and the tasks that must be accomplished to meet its goals to aid the world's hungry

"It pleases us," he said, "that the role which the FAO is taking on more and more is not only aimed at greater functionality and more realistic operations, but also to attain more decidedly human objectives"

Bishop Toniolo reminded FAO leaders that Pope Paul told representatives of the World Food Conference in November 1974, that the

position of agriculture in the world is still underestimated.

Echoing a comment made in the speech by Andrew Young, US ambassador to the United Nations, the Vatican aide said that government must be encouraged to give agriculture its fair place and to assure farm workers of the same compensations as those available to factory workers

Bishop Toniolo said that the Vatican delegation approved of the FAO guidelines to the conference calling for the fuller integration of the rural population into the national economy and the adjustment of food consumption for all socio-economic groups.