

Spirits of the season

By Father John Gurrieri
NC News Service

Whatever else one says about the theology in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," it gives people who are pestered and bothered by Christmas preparations a glimpse into the meaning of generosity and giving.

Perhaps the ghosts who haunt Scrooge also hunt us out, scaring us into believing that Christmas is not just the bother or joy of shopping. It is a moment for which special preparation is necessary.

In a sense, the spirits of Christmas past, present and to come are the faces of the spirit of Advent.

The spirit of Advent?

When Pope John Paul II proclaimed a special holy year in 1983, his message really was about developing an Advent mentality in the 20th century's remaining years. There is more than a hint of what the pope had in mind in the church's readings and prayers for the Advent season and the songs of the four weeks preceding Christmas.

Advent is the time for remembering two important Christian realities:

- Christ was born for our salvation.

- Christ will come again.

What is needed to make more of Advent than a wreath of evergreens and candles or the Advent calendars coming back into fashion?

We get into the spirit of Christmas in late November, thanks to television and shopping malls. But what about Advent?

In a sense Advent spirit is present when we begin to plan gift giving, bake fruitcakes and think about decorating for Christmas. Preparing to celebrate Christmas means we are getting ready for the Lord, even if consciousness about the Lord sometimes ebbs into oblivion.

But Advent is more. It is about the coming of Christ — and that both fascinates and frightens.

- It fascinates since we know that in Christ all things will come to fulfillment.

- It frightens since it also is about the end of time — the end of what we know, understand and perhaps cherish too much in this world.

It fascinates and frightens because today images of "The Day After" still linger to conjure up visions of horror and holocaust, of wars and rumors of war, of a "Star Wars" without Princess Leia or Chewbacca or the cuddly Ewoks.

Who can possibly know what path the Lord will take for the second coming? Who can second-

guess God? No one.

We don't know what the end will be like. Nor should we bother our heads about it, except to make sure we don't make it happen by pushing the panic button, or by destroying God's good green earth and azure skies.

Still we must prepare as though the worst is about to happen. The early church did that with great courage. And there's a lesson to be learned from our ancestors in faith.

We should not look for mountaintops to wait for Christ or shelters to hide from him either.

Developing an Advent mentality — Advent spirit — means preparing for this Christmas, this moment of God's generous love.

It means learning the generosity of the reformed sinner, Scrooge.

Perhaps like Scrooge we must be frightened into feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Maybe we must have ghosts to haunt us — collective and personal ghosts who remember better than we the lessons of war, injustice, poverty, hunger and rage.

But wait just a minute. The true spirit of Advent is not the spirit of fear. The gentle Savior and his graceful mother can transform Dickens' poltergeists into spirits of hope in the Lord's final day — hope that takes form now in generosity, care for others and love that transforms the world.

(Father Gurrieri is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.)



ADVENT-URE

A string of unbroken promise

By Father John J. Castelot
NC News Service

Considering everything, Abraham had absolutely no reason to hope for an heir. But St. Paul tells us Abraham never doubted that he would become the father of many nations, as God had promised.

"Without growing weak in faith (Abraham) thought of his own body, which was as good as dead (for he was nearly a hundred years old), and of the dead womb of Sarah. Yet he never questioned or doubted God's promise; rather, he was strengthened in faith and gave glory to God, fully persuaded that God could do whatever he had promised" (Romans 4:18-21).

- Hope and faith are like two sides of one coin.

- Hope is based on the faith that God will keep his promises.

- And hope is what Advent peo-

ple are all about: They are people of unconquerable hope.

Faith and hope are so closely connected that when the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews speaks about faith he often means something closer to hope. He writes:

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called, and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage; he went forth, moreover, not knowing where he was going...By faith Sarah received power to conceive though she was past the age, for she thought that the One who had made the promises was worthy of trust.

"As a result of this faith, there came forth from one man, who was himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore" (Hebrews 11:8,11-12).

Hope was powerful. It sustained

God's people in the Old Testament. They suffered reverse after reverse, until the one remaining tribe of Judah was itself dragged into exile far from the homeland. But even then the people refused to give up hope. They were convinced that the Lord would not go back on his word. And he didn't. Once again God vindicated their hope and brought them back home to a new beginning.

In the New Testament, Luke portrays Jesus himself as one who trusted deeply. Even when it seemed that all hope was lost, Jesus could still say with his dying breath: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

One of the most reassuring sections of Scripture is found in Romans, chapters 5-8. The underlying theme of the chapters is hope — hope rooted in the certainty of God's love for us.

The tone is set right at the

Wh

By Sist
NC News

Marv

The

and ne

Out

workec

father

staying

young

Day by

habit; t

Her

day wh

ed up.

missed

15; nev

school,

didn't

Beacu

ed to v

regular

over th

Marv

weeks

the cou

tion. E

the two

wrong.

she list

childre

The j

a home

good S

"The Si

teen-ge

hundred

anced ec

A Sisi

gave Ma

titude t

the cen

twice. I