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Bethlehem revisited: this time a vacant room

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

This Christmas story is about the power of an unborn child to renew and transform.

But the story is colored by the change and instability that are both the hallmark and the curse of modern living.

A young man named Paul came to see me. He had sent me a brief letter, hoping I remembered him. I remembered well.

I knew him when he was just a kid. Paul was never at the head of the pack. But he was conscientious, kind and gentle, the sort you would just expect someday to be a solid citizen, a good husband and father.

He works now in his father's electrical-supply business. Construction cutbacks meant things had been tight.

But that is not why he came to see me. He wanted help for a friend.

Since school days Paul had known a girl, now a young woman. She had married, one of those marriages that probably should not have taken place, for both were young and immature.

She had no family to guide her; her husband's family was happy to see him out of the house. The priest counseled delay. But they got married.

Then she became pregnant. And what it would mean to be a father and to provide for a child finally dawned on the young man. It was more than he could take. One day he was there. The next day he was gone — simply disappeared with the car, his clothes, the little in the checking account and the stereo.

The young woman found

herself pregnant, with no money, no husband and no family to turn to. With rent coming due and no prospect of paying it she faced being put out on the street. She was beside herself with anxiety.

This is where Paul came on the scene. He had kept contact with the couple during their marriage. He felt sorry for her now, but didn't know what to do. Only recently had he and his sister moved away from home, renting an apartment. They had a small, extra room. But the young woman's needs seemed larger than Paul was ready to handle.

He suggested she contact local authorities. But they kept talking about her "problem pregnancy." The young woman found the sim-

ple, final solution proposed to her unacceptable. She wanted to keep her baby.

Then my young friend made what is proving the biggest decision so far in his life. He decided to take care of her and her baby. He doesn't know how — but somehow. He offered her the small, extra room in the apartment he and his sister rent. He is providing food and medical care.

Perhaps most important, he removed fear and uncertainty from the life of the young woman and her unborn baby.

One day Paul brought her to my office so we could begin to plan the baby's baptism. Paul and his sister would serve as godparents. He recognizes that, with no father and provider around, being a god-

father might well go beyond a ceremonial role.

I saw Paul and the young woman to the elevator after our discussion. Watching his generous attention, I was reminded of the Christmas story.

A young woman ready to give birth is so dependent on others for survival — as is her child. That dependency is not a fault or a problem. To the contrary, it is humanizing. It touches us and brings out the best in us.

We and our world need the good it brings if we are to make it.

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The day that celebrates human

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

In boiling an egg, you keep one eye on the little hour glass. When the bottom half is full of sand, you know it is time to get cracking.

The "fullness of time" has come.

This idea is behind St. Paul's statement in Galatians 4:4: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son born of a woman."

By sending his son on his saving mission, God brought to a decisive turning point the plan he had for humanity's happiness.

"God chose us in him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love; he likewise predestined us

through Christ Jesus to be his adopted children" (Ephesians 1:4-6).

God had created humans in his image.

To be in God's image is to be given a share in God's creative love. It means that to be authentically human, to fulfill God's intention in creating us, we must love — selflessly, creatively. Not to love is to become subhuman. As Paul put it in his famous hymn to love: "If I 'have not love, I am nothing.'"

Sadly, men and women chose self-love over creative love. This choice destroyed them. To regain their human dignity, they would need to be shown the way.

To this end, God "sent forth his son," who was perfectly in God's

image. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creatures" (Col. 1:15).

People could see in Jesus what it was like to be really, gloriously human. For they had as a model not some mythical, unreal ideal, but a flesh-and-blood man.

Jesus shared all their weakness, their ordinariness, their uncertainty and fear and pain. He could and did rise above these obstacles. And he did this in a strangely paradoxical way, by denying himself, by setting on its ear all that society prescribes as the secret of happiness.

A nobody from nowhere, born and raised in humble circumstances, Jesus changed the course of human history, pointing humanity toward its original dignity. Jesus did this by loving