

The blessings of Christmas

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Q. Do you enjoy Christmas?

A. It has its pluses and minuses.

Q. What do you mean?

A. The reason for Christmas is Christ, but so many things militate against the feast that the reason for Christmas can be either diluted or lost entirely. On the other hand, some good things that really come from the occasion would never come to pass were it not for the Christmas feast.

Q. Like what?

A. 1) Family reunions. We know the importance of families uniting. It is heartening to see children who have been scattered all over converging on "home" — children, grandchildren, grandparents and friends coming together; Christmas tables bountiful and special; the family chatty, relaxed and excited; the recollection of past Christmases. All these are occasioned by the birthday of Christ.

2) The greetings — by letters or cards — a way of touching relatives and friends in a special way. And then there are telephone calls. I remember in my army days, watching the number of men and women who could not go home on leave standing for hours in the PX at the telephone exchange, awaiting their chance to call home. I remember the glow of a young soldier who met me saying, "Oh, Father, I just talked with my father and mother and five sisters and brothers!" When I asked where they lived, he told me California. "Must have cost you plenty to call," I remarked. "Oh, it was worth it, just to hear their voices," he responded. There is an old Latin adage: "Amore, more, ore, re/Servantur amicitiae" which translates to: "By love, by custom, by word, by deed/Friendships are preserved." Christmas is the great occasion for family bonds and friendships being renewed or preserved and strengthened.

3) While we often lament the secularization of Christmas, we should recognize the fact that Christmas not only preserves ties of families and friends but also religious practices. Sometimes people snort about Catholics who just

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go to Mass on Christmas and Easter. Isn't that better than not at all? And many go to long-delayed confession because of the feast. And even the television and radio present lovely things. Pavarotti's annual concert from Notre Dame Basilica in Montreal with a glorious choir and orchestra singing Christ's praises at Christmas season is almost the highlight, a manifestation of faith and devotion. Even movies have an indirect tinge of devotion. That nice tear-jerker "The Bells of St. Mary's" with Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman warms the heart toward religion and the sisters. A friend of mine came back from New York City overflowing with enthusiasm. "The Rockettes at Rockefeller Center was as good as a religious service," he said.

4) Christmas brings a genuine concern for the underprivileged, with a healthy sharing-of-often by children encouraged by good parents.

Q. And the negative?

A. Don't you think it lamentable that our affluent society practically trains our children to be selfish, to be obsessed by a desire — even a demand — for material things? The Webster Kiwanis Club presented an educator over the local cable Channel 12 who gave the finest talk. He said our children are being ruined by parents and grandparents who train them to be people of the "gimmies," instead of people outgoing in solicitude for others. The speaker commented: "Then parents, having lavished all kinds of material things on their children, are shocked to find that they receive no thanks."

Q. Any suggestions?

A. Yes: Cut down on the material things; build up the spiritual. Enjoy the day and the season in the love of Christ and His mother. And a happy Christmas to everyone!

The Word makes its entrance

By Father Richard P. McBrien

As we approach yet another Christmas, one is reminded of the manner in which the Word became flesh and made its dwelling with us. It was not by force, not through coercion, and not with threats.

The Word made its entrance humbly, unobtrusively, gently, and in poverty.

There's a lesson in that for every Christian, and particularly for those of us involved in intrachurch controversies. There is simply too much meanness, too much rash judgement, too much sarcasm, too much intimidation, too many threats of reprisal and punishment.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom provides all the principles and guidelines any of us will ever need for conducting arguments within the Church in a truly Christ-like manner.

"The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power (#1).

"Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue. In the course of these, men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order to thus assist one another in the quest for truth (#3).

"In the exercise of their rights, individual men and social groups are bound by the moral law to have respect both for the rights of others and for their own duties toward others and for the common good of all. Men are to deal with their fellows in justice and civility (#7).

"God calls all men to serve Him in spirit and in truth ... This truth appears at its height in Christ Jesus ... Christ is our Master and our Lord. He also meek and humble of heart. And in attracting and inviting disciples, He acted patiently ... His intention was to rouse faith in His hearers and to confirm them in faith, not to exert coercion upon them (#11).

"He refused to be a political Messiah, ruling by force. He preferred to call Himself the Son of Man, who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many! (Mark 10:45). He showed Himself the perfect

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Servant of God; a 'bruised reed he will not break, and a smoking wick he will not quench' (Matthew 12:20) (#11).

"The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ his Master ever more adequately to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it, never — be it understood — having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to act lovingly, prudently and patiently in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith (#14).

An examination of conscience:

1. In arguments with other members of the Church, do we respect their human dignity and rights? Do we honor their God-given freedom?

2. Do we seek to help one another arrive at the truth, or do we approach our fellow Christians in a manner that suggests we already have the truth and that it is they, and they alone, who need to acquire it from us?

3. As we argue with one another, would a disinterested onlooker characterize our demeanor and our behavior as meek, humble of heart, patient, gentle, respectful, prudent, and loving?

4. Do we leave the definitive judgement of our adversaries to God, or are we too quick to render final judgement ourselves?

5. In the final accounting, is our manner of criticizing fellow members of the Church "incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel?" If so, just what is it that we think we are defending against attack and error?

It would be a strange "defender of the faith" who would violate the Gospel in order to protect it. Unfortunately, it happens all too often in today's Church.

Christmas is as good a time as any to think about that.

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