

Bishops and angelic wisdom

By Father Richard P. McBrien

We don't talk very much these days about infused knowledge, but the distinction between infused and acquired knowledge somehow always found a place in pre-Vatican II philosophy and theology courses.

Infused knowledge's decline in prominence parallels a similar decline in the fortunes of angels. Angels were the only creatures who were said to have infused knowledge, as a matter of necessity.

Since angels are pure spirits, they cannot attain knowledge as we do -- by the use of concepts abstracted from the material world. Their knowledge is given to them directly by God. It is "infused."

The current debate over academic freedom for Catholic theologians and institutional autonomy for Catholic universities has unwittingly revived the notion of infused knowledge. By implication at least, some of the critics of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are proposing that infused knowledge is not limited to the angels. Bishops also possess it, they seem to believe.

Among the points being raised against academic freedom for Catholic theologians is that the bishops must make the "final" decision on what is true and what is false in theological "speculation."

Although theologians are encouraged to probe and to push back the frontiers of knowledge through painstaking scholarly efforts, they are also reminded that the "final" decision regarding the validity of those efforts rests solely with the hierarchy.

After there has been sufficient "dialogue, discussion and even disagreement," Pittsburgh's Bishop Donald Wuerl insisted in an address at the University of Massachusetts last summer, we "cross a line from discussion about various theological conclusions to the approbation and application of the conclusions."

"The work of theological development," he declared, "is to push our understanding of the faith to new and more profound limits. It is the task of the bishops to note when the limits have been crossed."

But such a claim begs an important question: How do the bishops know when "the limits have been crossed?"

Essays in Theology

When professionally active theologians and Scripture scholars seek truth, they do so by examining the primary sources in the original languages, by studying all the relevant secondary literature, by engaging in careful textual exegesis, by sorting out the complexities and ambiguities of the historical record, by trying to fashion a sustained and compelling argument that will survive the critical scrutiny of a wider community of scholars, and then by defending that argument in a variety of scholarly settings.

Yet very few bishops are professionally trained and professionally active theologians who have the time and the training to undertake such research. So if the bishops know when "the limits have been crossed," it must be because they have attained the answers through some other means. What is that means?

The only conclusion we can draw is that the bishops must have infused knowledge, while the theologians have to gain their knowledge the old-fashioned way. "They earn it!" as the late John Houseman used to say in the Smith Barney ad.

But why work when you don't have to? When a biblical scholar has a difficult problem with a particular text, why doesn't he just call up his local bishop and ask for the answer?

And why should Karl Rahner have struggled so long with the problem of the consciousness of Jesus? His bishop had the answer all the time. Ditto for complicated questions in medical ethics and for all matters pertaining to human sexuality and reproduction.

Many years ago a committee submitted to the Vatican a set of plans for a new seminary. Someone noticed there were no bathrooms. "Sunne angeli?" ("Are they angels?"), the Vatican asked.

Good question -- then and now.

A meditation for Christmas

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

The stable of Bethlehem has no tree, no decorations, no blinking lights to prettify, nor pretty boxes with toys and socks.

The baby's bed is not bedecked with a baby boy's blue blanket. It has no varnish. It smells of dry grass and other feed for sheep and donkeys.

The baby's food is from His Mother's breast. As Christ sleeps, Our Lady and St. Joseph munch a simple Christmas fare of bread and goat's cheese, a bit of fish and sup of wine.

And yet this cave so dark and stark God's calm spirit pervades. For infinite love is incarnated in the Baby Jesus.

And God's spirit joins together Jesus and Mary and Joseph in one great love, not with stuff that perishes, stuff that TV ads seduce us to believe brings happiness; but the gift that perseveres; the gift of the heart, this is God's love, never to corrode or rot or dissipate.

In Christian homes all over our country the memory of that stark night is recalled.

Alas, celebrated strangely by pretty cribs so clean and colorful; so odorless; celebrated by stuff piled high as if love were measured in things material. In dull incomprehension these seem to say: expensive toys and costly liquors, sparkling trinkets, exotic smells, laden tables

On the Right Side

and every flesh-satisfying comfort: these are the Gospel of Bethlehem.

But the Gospel of the cave is otherwise. It is a divine protest against utter poverty and unconcern in the scandal that a Child however loved, should be so born in starkness.

It is a lesson that even in poverty happiness abides where there is love and self-giving.

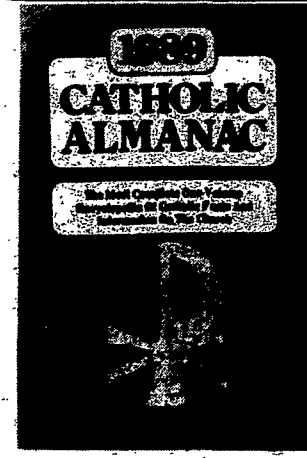
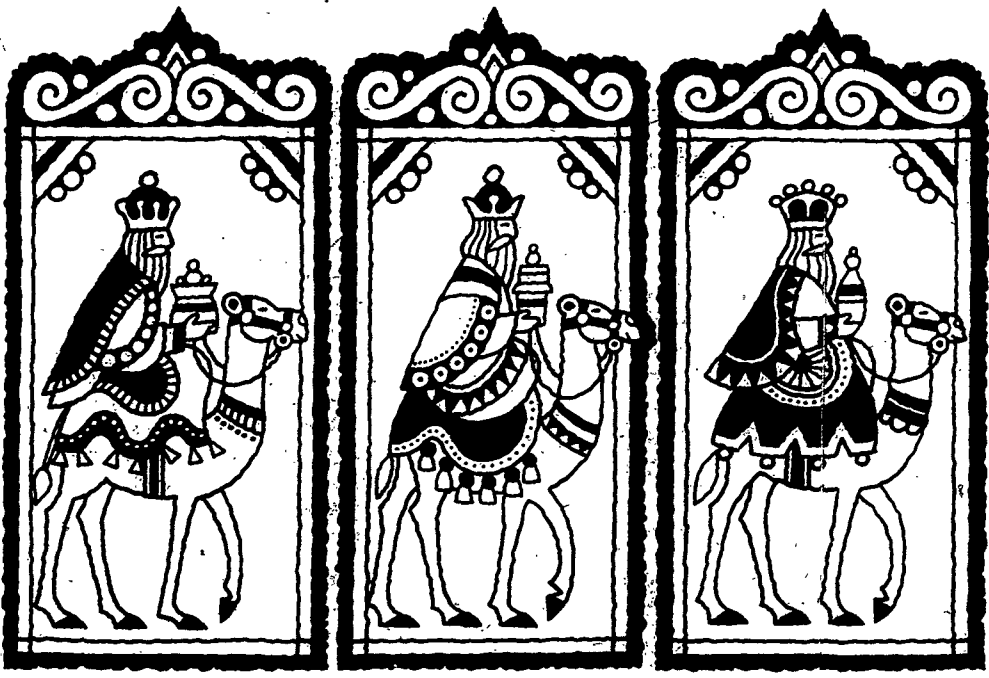
And by inversion there is a lesson this affluent nation has yet to learn: that material stuff corrodes and rots and dissipates but the things of spirit; love and truth and beauty flow eternally from the Incarnate Christ "from Whom and through Whom and in Whom All good things come."

And our greatest gift is the word made flesh who still dwells amongst us. That That word continues enfleshed in men who love and serve in the spirit of God's love and service.

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