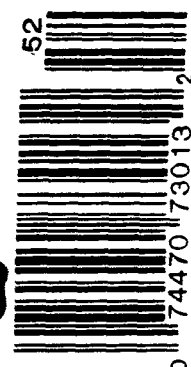


CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, December 27, 1990

50¢ 16 pages



"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.'"

The Book of Revelation,
Chapter 21, 1-4

UTOPIA: Fables chart paths to future

By Karen M. Franz
Editor in chief

Throughout the ages of humanity, people have told fables of a far-off land of milk and honey whose inhabitants live in utter peace and contentment.

No matter how improved were the social conditions of each age over those of its predecessors, every generation has longed for more, noted University of Rochester Professor J.W. Johnson, "for man is perhaps the one animal whose wants are never entirely satisfied."

Johnson's 1968 anthology *Utopian Literature* chronicles the development of a class of literature that has been the voice of mankind's hopes for a better life — from idyllic myths that predate history to foreboding visions born in the shadow of the atomic bomb.

The Greek philosopher Plato (427-348 B.C.) presented the first formal blueprint for a perfect society in *The Republic*, a political treatise describing a State operating solely on the principles of reason.

While the Greeks contemplated a society based on man's ability to achieve perfection through the use of intellect, the ancient Hebrews dreamed of regaining the happiness lost in Eden through the benevolence of God and the coming of the Messiah.

After Jesus' ascension into heaven, early Christians looked forward to his imminent return, when he would vanquish Satan, establish the Heavenly City and inaugurate the 1,000 days of earthly peace St. John predicted would precede the end of the world.

But time passed, and Christ had not returned to liberate his followers from the cares of this mortal coil. By the time St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) wrote *The City of God*, the mighty empire of Rome had fallen. Augustine,

Johnson observed, thus despaired of man's ever achieving a worldly paradise, and counseled Christians to focus on earning the reward that awaited them after death.

In his 1922 *The Story of Utopias*, Lewis Mumford noted that it was not until the Renaissance that writers again expressed hopes for a perfect earthly society. Then, in 1516, St. Thomas More became the godfather of an entire genre of literature by presenting in his novel *Utopia* both a name and a framework for fictional models of paradise regained.

More's ideal civilization — an island society with agriculture at the center of its economic and social life — was based upon the precepts handed down by the island's conqueror, King Utopus. Chief among these principles was the abolition of private property; economic equality of all people; a modest standard of living; and rigidly structured social and political patterns.

Although these principles are common to nearly every vision of future perfect written since 1516, it is significant to note the message implicit in the name More gave to his island paradise.

"Utopia" is a pun derived from the Greek words "eutopia," the good place, and "outopia," nowhere. Thus, More's novel indicts the inequity and injustice of 16th century England, but also speaks to the unlikelihood — and perhaps impossibility — of achieving earthly perfection.

More, himself, amply demonstrated that improbability within the legal framework he designed for his mythical society. Although he outlawed capital punishment of crimes, for example, More envisioned lifelong slavery for criminals and execution for any slaves who attempted escape. And even though the social precepts set forth by King Utopus may well have been an improvement over those guiding England in More's day, few today would consider them ideal.

Since More's seminal work, countless authors — including Francis Bacon, Thomas Campanella and Samuel Johnson — have sought to perfect his vision of perfection.

One of the most influential of More's successors was Massachusetts' Edward Bellamy, whose *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* outsold all books other than the Bible during the 1890s and launched a U.S. political movement — the Nationalist Party.

Like *Utopia*, Bellamy's novel was a reaction to squalid conditions afflicting a large portion of his society — conditions that many social thinkers of the 1890s attributed to human nature, not to the prevailing economic system.

Bellamy, on the other hand, expressed an optimistic view of humanity, observing that the fragile rose of human nature will provide fragrance to the world once it can be transplanted to fertile soil from the fetid bog of capitalism.

Thus *Looking Backward* predicts that by the year 2,000, the U.S. will have evolved through a process of monopolistic centralization from a capitalist economy to a welfare state. In Bellamy's new Boston, each person — male or female, able or disabled — spends 24 years as an equally compensated soldier in "the industrial army" and is then discharged to a life of leisure pursuit.

Several later utopians — sometimes called dystopians or anti-utopians — have taken a much dimmer view of human nature. Two of the best known are Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, whose novels *Brave New World* and *1984*, respectively, anticipate totalitarian regimes in which human beings surrender their liberty under promise of mindless pleasure or pain of torture.

Although they differ on their views of humanity and on conditions that constitute a perfect society, each of the major utopian writers has struggled with such issues as the structure and role of religion; the sufferings of the poor and homeless; the integration of new cultures into existing society; the resolution of conflict without war; the proper role of parents in the education of their children; and the importance of leisure and athletics in a balanced lifestyle.

Today these issues are components of the futures anticipated by members of the Diocese of Rochester who express their hopes in this issue of the *Catholic Courier*. We hope you'll enjoy these visits to the ideal societies they envision, for, as Professor Johnson observed in the postscript to his anthology, "To read utopian literature is to see defined the basic questions that all of us must face, alone and together ..."

Collage by

By Badette Augustine



H O L I D A Y I S S U E