

# True meaning of Christmas has faded

By Father Paul Cuddy  
Courier columnist

During my six years at St. Bernard's Seminary, Christmastime was a wonderful time of devotion and tranquility for me. We seminarians were given a short retreat, in an atmosphere anticipating the great feast.

We held a glorious Midnight Mass with a stirring Tridentine solemn liturgy. The music was a haunting experience of joy and beauty, with the voices of 220 seminarians, dressed in black cassocks, white surplices and even birettas — simultaneously doffed at the Holy Name of Jesus — the doxologies and the *Verbum Caro factum est* ("The Word was made flesh").

Christmas Day brought a second Mass, with a special dinner — not exactly gourmet, except when you compared it with the usual fare. Then we had free time until solemn vespers at 4:30 p.m. The whole next day was free!

However, priesthood brought with it the activities necessary to serve the parishes: baskets for the needy, the preparation for Christ-

mas Mass with the special training of the altar boys. It has always been a mystery to me that so many of these boys would have made fine priests, but elected otherwise. There were the choirs that prepared the special music so faithfully. In addition, the sisters and helpers decorated the church so beautifully.

With so much stark poverty in the world, I became very distressed as I observed parents, grandparents, relatives and friends in a kind of frenzy over material gifts for many people. The real meaning of Christmas, so evident in the seminary, became dulled in the zest for material gifts.

Jesus was being put on the back burner, replaced by stuff, foods and drinks — and the Christmas football game on TV. It became Jesus' birthday, with the guest of honor sitting on the side.

In 1969, this column expressed an anxiety in a Christmas meditation, part of which reads:

"In Christmas homes throughout our country/the memory of that stark night is recalled —/alas, celebrated strangely by pretty cribs,/so clean and colorful, so odor-

less;/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 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 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 the spirit, love and truth and/beauty flow eternally from the Incarnate Christ./From Whom and through Whom and in Whom/all good things come."

Because of my convictions, I give few material gifts at Christmastime. As the uncle of 21 nieces and nephews and the great-uncle of 84 more, I send them subscriptions to *Catholic Digest* and/or *Our Sunday*



IN THE  
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Visitor. These can edify the families, and are a reminder once a month — or 52 times a year — that their ancient uncle loves them and hopes to be remembered.

Many gracious people also send me checks they know will go to sundry missions to bring to them Jesus and Mary and Joseph, the family of Bethlehem, an important part of the evangelization of the church.

## Only the confessional removes the pain of sin

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 13:24-32; (R1) Daniel 12:1-3; (R2) Hebrews 10:11-14, 18.

Nobody knows when the end of the world will come. Nor need we know. What is important is that we always stay ready. We can be ready, because sin can be forgiven.

In the letter to the Hebrews (R2), a contrast is drawn between the priests of the Old Testament and Jesus. The sacrifice of Jesus did what none of the sacrifices of old could do — namely, removing sin.

The priests of old used to "stand" as they offered their many "sacrifices," which could never "take away sin." Jesus offered "one sacrifice," and then "took his seat." It was as if the author were saying that Christ's sacrifice was enough; His work, so to speak, was done; He could now sit down and rest. And that's what He does: He sits and waits until his glorious return.

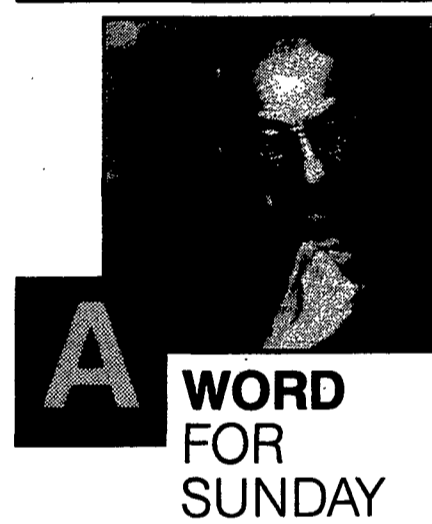
All of us sin during this in-

between time. Sin's consequence is guilt, which takes a toll on the mind and body. It causes us to imagine problems that we may not even have. It shatters our sense of self-esteem. Those in its grip live in the service of a cruel, sadistic master.

From the day Thomas Jefferson became president until he left office, he was plagued by excruciating headaches. Although a slave owner, Jefferson was morally opposed to slavery. He introduced a bill into Congress to forbid slavery in any new territories. Had the bill passed, the Civil War may have never happened. The legislation lost by a single vote.

Perhaps because his political base was in the South, Jefferson did nothing more about slavery during his presidency. President Harry S. Truman reported that inaction was the source of his headaches.

Truman was probably right. Studies at Harvard, Dartmouth and Michigan suggest that the physiological effects of prolonged self-blame are cumulative and cause physical



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discomforts, such as the headaches Jefferson experienced.

Tranquilizers won't help get rid of guilt. Positive thinking isn't the answer. The brain knows when it's being hoodwinked. All the good thoughts in the world won't take away the stain of sin from the hu-

man soul. There is no place in this world that gets rid of guilt like the confessional.

Dr. Paul Tournier, a famous Swiss psychologist, once wrote: "There are around us vast numbers of people sick for confession." Countless are those who throw themselves on couches to have their guilt explained away. But every rationalization or justification is a burial, not a cancellation. Not all, but many psychoses and neuroses are the superficial manifestations of some disclaimer of being a sinner.

Take the cap off a tube of toothpaste and squeeze it; the paste oozes out easily. But keep the cap on and squeeze it hard. The paste will break out in the weakest spot in the tube. Confession is the normal outlet for sin. Cut off this outlet and the repressed sins and guilt will break out in one's weakest spot: drugs, drink, violence and so on.

God loves us. And because He loves us, He died for us that He might take away our sins forever in the confessional.

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