

The real meaning of Christmas

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Christmas is a feast with many themes. One of them is the story of the inn. Jesus, we are told, had to born in a stable, in an animal feed-box to be exact, "because there was no room ... in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

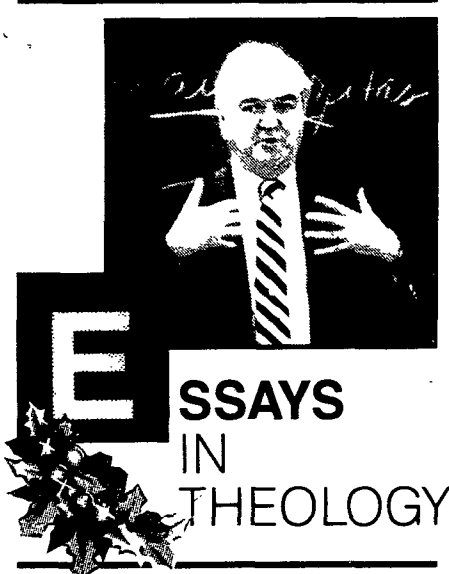
Mary and Joseph weren't turned away because they had failed to guarantee their room for late arrival on their credit card. They were turned away because they were strangers and obviously poor. No gold-card couple, this.

Much is made at Christmas each year of the loss of the day's religious meaning, of its gross commercialization, of its corruption by secular symbols, and on and on.

The counterattack is as predictable as it is unproductive. We press the causes of creches in public places and of caroling in public schools, resenting all the while the impertinent complaints of religious minorities who, we seem to imply, are barely welcome guests in this, our Christian nation.

But the real meaning of Christmas has more to do with the doors of the inn that were closed to Mary and Joseph and their unborn child than it does with artistically mediocre Christmas scenes and endlessly repeated Christmas music.

Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus were forerunners of today's homeless families and unwelcome immi-



grants.

Societies tend to accept people who fit in and reject, or only grudgingly tolerate, those who do not.

The poor do not fit in, because they are regarded as a burden to the better-off. Nor does the stranger fit in, except to do the menial work that the better-off no longer do.

When the strangers multiply at times of economic hardship, they become objects of scorn, of resentment, of fear and of reprisal. In a word, they become scapegoats for social failure.

It happened in Nazi Germany against the Jews. It has happened in France against the North Africans. And it is happening today in Germany, Austria, and Belgium against

the new immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe.

No culture is immune to the disease of xenophobia. No ethnic group unaffected. No political landscape securely quarantined.

The situation one finds today in Western Europe appears in different forms throughout the Middle East, the several republics of the Soviet Union, Indonesia, white and black Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, not excluding the United States.

Indeed, the foul-smelling elements of racism and resentment that gurgled to the surface in Louisiana's recent gubernatorial election pollute the waters of social comity — to one degree or another — in every state of the union.

Their rooting-out is a challenge for every society, and not least of all for the church.

There is no excuse for Catholics — and particularly those who wear the pope's colors on their sleeves — to ignore the relevant teachings of their church, inspired as they are by the teachings and example of Jesus.

In his first major social encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), Pope John Paul II insisted that the immigrant worker "not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the other workers in (a) society in the matter of working rights. Emigration in search of work must in no way become an opportunity for financial or social exploi-

tation" (n.23).

In his second major social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On the Social Concern of the Church), the pope wrote movingly of the millions of refugees — displaced by war, natural calamities, persecution, and discrimination of every kind — "who can no longer find a home in a divided and inhospitable world" (n.24).

Later in the same document, John Paul II appealed, as he often does, to the powerful parable of Lazarus and the rich man in St. Luke's Gospel. Everyone, he said, has a right to be seated at the table of the common banquet, instead of lying outside the doors like Lazarus (n.33).

And in his third and most recent social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year), the pope exoriated "a mentality in which the poor — as individuals and as peoples — are considered a burden, as irksome intruders, trying to consume what others have produced.

"The poor," he continued, "ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all" (n.28).

Putting teachings like these into practice would contribute far more to the resacralization of Christmas than having some creche reinstalled in a public square or carols wafting once again down the corridors of a public school.

Shepherds behold the Messiah's birth

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

From his vantage point high up in the hills overlooking Bethlehem, Daniel could see that his brother had come alone. He waited until Jesse had called him several times before finally answering.

"I should have known that I'd find you up here," Jesse said. "You always come here after you've had a fight with Father."

"Father is not being fair!" Daniel protested angrily.

Jesse sighed. "Daniel, this time you are the one who is being unreasonable. Father said from the beginning that as soon as Emma was fully grown she'd have to be sold at the temple like any other sheep."

"Emma is not like the other sheep!" Daniel insisted.

"Well, you are right there," Jesse said, grinning. "This one has somehow mistaken you for her mother."

When Daniel continued to sulk in stony silence, Jesse asked, "Where is she anyway?"

"Promise that you won't tell Father?"

"OK," Jesse nodded.

"I've hidden her in one of the caves," Daniel said.

"And I suppose you think you can just keep her there forever?"

"At least until you help me change Father's mind," Daniel said, finally breaking into a smile.

The two brothers were less than a year apart in age and always had a steadfast loyalty to each other. Daniel already knew that Jesse would not refuse to help him, especially when he saw how much Emma meant to him.

"When have I ever asked Father for anything?" Daniel asked. "I take my turn at the night watch even on the coldest nights without complaining. All I have ever asked him for is this one sheep."

"Father doesn't raise sheep for pets," Jesse said. "Emma would fetch a handsome price at the temple in Jerusalem."

Daniel's eyes smarted with angry tears. "I could never let Emma be slaughtered for a good profit!"

"I think you might be missing the point here," Jesse said. "The sheep are sacrificed as a gift to God."

"Will you help me or not?" Daniel asked.

"You know I will," Jesse said, giving him a punch on the arm. "Come on, let's get Emma and go see Father."

As the two brothers walked toward the village, the hills around them were suddenly illuminated. "I think I hear music or someone singing," Daniel said.

"Look, there's a man over there," Jesse said, pointing to a stranger dressed in a white robe that seemed as radiant as the hills around them.

"I have the most wonderful news that the world has ever heard. Tonight, here in Bethlehem, the Messiah has been born! You'll find the baby lying in a manger."

Daniel and Jesse were still pondering this message when the man was joined by several others dressed just like him. "Glory and praise to God!" they all sang. "Peace and joy for all who receive Jesus!"

And then, just as suddenly as they had come, they were gone. "Hurry, Daniel, let's go and tell Father!" Jesse said.

They had run nearly halfway down the hill when Daniel stopped suddenly. "Wait, we forgot Emma! The cave where I hid her is nearby."

As they approached, they heard Emma's mournful bleating and Daniel ran ahead to comfort her. Once all three of them had started together back down the hill, Daniel said, "I've made a decision about



Emma. You said the sheep are a gift to God. I'm going to give her as a present to the baby when we find him. Then she won't have to die."

Even in the darkness, Daniel knew Jesse was smiling.

"When the Light came into the world, only a few would welcome and receive Him. But to all who received Him, He gave the right to become children of God. All they needed to do was to trust Him to save them." (John 1:12).

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