

A life given over to serve others

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

One of the earliest and most dangerous heresies in church history was called Gnosticism (from the Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge").

The Gnostics held that salvation comes from secret knowledge — or *gnosis* — imparted to the elect by a heavenly revealer. The purpose of this knowledge is to free souls from ignorance and from bondage to this world. (The Gnostics regarded the human body and its passions — especially its sexual passions — as part of the "bondage" from which they yearned to be free.)

Not surprisingly, Gnostics and orthodox Christians were at odds over major points of theology and doctrine. The Gnostics claimed creation is evil, the instrument of a malicious god. Orthodox Christians insisted that creation is good, the product of a loving and benevolent God.

The Gnostics exaggerated Christ's divinity to the practical exclusion of his humanity. For orthodox Christians the Christ of faith is also the Jesus of history, human as well as divine.

The Gnostics said it was irrational to believe that the spiritual Christ could actually have died on a cross and then risen bodily from the dead.

For them, the crucifixion and the bodily resurrection were a deception created by the demonic powers and their agents in this world. It was only



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an empty body, "Jesus," that was nailed to the cross. The spiritual Christ had already left the body.

For orthodox Christians Jesus Christ saved us not by imparting secret knowledge to a select few but by sharing our human condition and then by really dying on the cross and rising bodily from the tomb.

Although Gnosticism was soundly rejected by the early church, its spirit survived in later heresies, such as Monophysitism (which denied that Christ had a human nature), and in later moralistic movements, such as Jansenism (which regarded the body as enslaved to corrupt human passions and sexual appetites).

Indeed, Gnosticism's spirit survives

even today. It survives in the minds and hearts of Catholics who think and speak of Jesus Christ as if — for all practical purposes — he were only divine, a "heavenly revealer" in human form.

For them, Christ could not really have taken on our flesh in the fullest sense of the word because our flesh and the material world from which it comes are mired in corruption.

The church may be the body of Christ, but of the spiritual Christ, not the earthly Christ. As such, the church has only a spiritual or other-worldly mission.

The liberation of the poor and the powerless from oppressive structures, the struggle for peace and social justice, advocacy of human rights, challenges to political authority (except when that authority violates the rights of the church or of the unborn) — for these Catholics, such concerns have no place on the church's missionary agenda.

Instead, Catholicism is to measure its missionary success not by the effect it has on the quality of life in this world but on the number of souls it guides into the next.

The feast of Christmas provides an annual corrective to such distortions of the faith.

At Christmas we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation, not simply of the moment of Jesus' conception in Mary's womb but of the whole process of God's becoming one with

us in the flesh, sharing our human condition to the fullest, like us in all things except sin (Hebrews 4:15):

Jesus knew and experienced every human emotion and every human situation. He knew what it was to love and to be lonely, to laugh and to cry, to trust and to be betrayed, to be at peace and to be angry, to be filled and to hunger, to celebrate and to mourn, to rejoice in the truth and to struggle to find it, to work hard and to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

And he knew poverty. The Infancy Narratives stress his humble origins (Luke 1:52-53; 2:7,24), and in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus first blesses the poor and promises them entrance into the reign of God (6:20).

He also experienced religion's dark side: its intolerance, self-righteousness, and hypocrisy. He chastised the Scribes and Pharisees for imposing burdens on others that they would not carry themselves, for straining at gnats and swallowing camels, and for neglecting the law's weightier matters, especially justice and mercy (Matthew 23).

"Treat others the way you would have them treat you," he said, "this sums up the law and the prophets" (7:12).

At Christmas we are reminded that ours is a life-affirming faith that offers salvation not through secret revelations from heaven but through a life given over, like Jesus', to the service of others.

Let love overflow to all during season

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

My children — all pre-schoolers, ranging in age from 5 to 3 — are at the age when Christmas' enormity has just sunk in, but its meaning is difficult to grasp.

They are surrounded by advertisements and peer pressure to covet all kinds of toys and games. They firmly believe in a guy who is going to deliver a full sled of presents to them by somehow squeezing down our chimney. And they haven't quite yet grasped the concept that it's better to give than to receive.

My job as a parent is to teach them about the real meaning of Christmas, but it's not easy. I want to give them at least some of the toys and games that they beg me for. (What father or mother among you, if his or her child asks for a Barbie doll or a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, will hand him or her a package of underwear?)

My childhood memories of Christmas are filled with images of bright wrapping paper covering big boxes of



FAITH AND WORK

my most coveted and requested dreams come true. My parents somehow always came through on Christmas, and I try to do the same for my kids.

Of course, they're not going to get everything they ask for — nor did I. For one thing, there's not enough gold in Fort Knox to fulfill the average pre-

schooler's entire wish list. (What do they care how much it costs? Santa and his elves make the stuff for free anyway, right?)

Even more important, however, is to teach them that, as Mick Jagger put it so succinctly, "you can't always get what you want." We all experience limits and choices in life, and Christmas is a good time for children to start learning that lesson.

Another of Christmas' lessons, of course, is that God so loved the world that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us." How does one teach that mystery to a youngster?

One way is to use the traditional sacramentals of the Christian faith: Advent wreaths and calendars, Nativity scenes, stories, carols, etc. One of my childhood traditions that we have continued in my own family is to leave the baby Jesus out of the Nativity scene prior to Christmas Day. Then on Christmas morning — before anyone can open any presents — the entire family gathers at the top of the stairs.

One child carries the baby Jesus, the

others carry angels, and mom and dad each have a candle. We march into the living room singing "Silent Night" and place Jesus in the manger. We blow out the candles, say a prayer, and only then do we turn our attention to the piles of presents awaiting our delight.

We have adopted a Polish tradition from my wife's family in which we share the *oplatki*, a thin, host-like bread which is shared, along with a kiss and a Christmas greeting, with everyone who comes to the family Christmas dinner.

We have started another custom in our family whenever we visit a toy store with the children. In addition to pointing out what they want for themselves for Christmas, they are each allowed to buy one small toy for "the poor kids." These toys go into a big box that we deliver to Catholic Charities just before Christmas.

All of this is an attempt to teach our children — and remind ourselves — that the true spirit of Christmas is to overflow with love for others. Just as God did for us 2,000 years ago.

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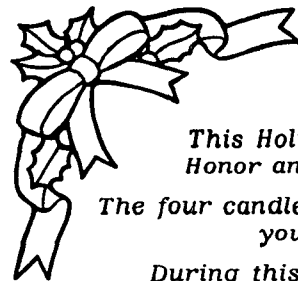
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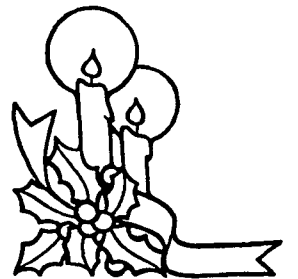


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This Holiday Season light four candles in Honor and Celebration of your loved one.

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