

Christ appears in the here and now

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

As most Catholics know, the Advent season serves to prepare us for the coming of Christ — not only his coming at Christmas, but his Second Coming, or *Parousia*, at the end of history, and his coming into our lives here and now.

As for the first, it's not likely that many of us need to be reminded of Christmas' proximity. We're surrounded by its commercial symbols as early as Halloween.

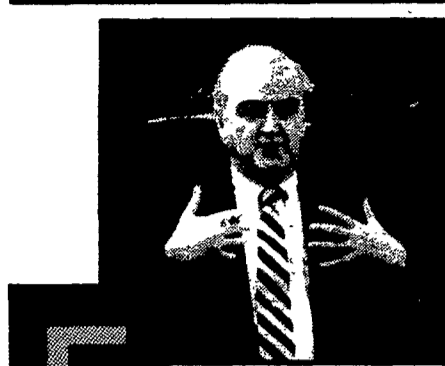
The second meaning implied in the word Advent (literally, a coming toward/near, or an arrival) is more elusive. It refers to Christ's promised and hoped for coming at the end of the world, when all things have "arrived" at their final destination in him (Rev. 21:1-5).

Although the Second Coming is a crucial event in salvation-history and an essential part of our faith, the event itself has no analogue in ordinary human experience. We have nothing with which to compare it.

While we believe in it, we don't really know quite what to make of it.

That leaves the third and final meaning of the word Advent: Christ's coming to us here and now, in the ordinary experiences of life, including our gatherings for worship.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminded us that, when we assemble



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for the Eucharist, Christ is already present in the worshipping community, in the Word that is proclaimed, in the ministers, and uniquely in the consecrated elements that are distributed and received as holy Communion.

What is perhaps less easy to grasp is how Christ comes to us, in the present, apart from the Eucharist.

Not surprisingly, the Scriptures provide some insight.

When his disciple Philip asked him to "show us the Father," Jesus replied with a measure of exasperation: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8-9).

But that begs yet another question:

what about those of us who have not seen the Lord as Philip and the rest of the disciples saw him?

Jesus seems to have anticipated this question with his parable of the sheep and the goats.

He told his disciples that those would be saved who gave him food when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, a welcome when he was a stranger, clothing when he was naked, care when he was sick, and a visit when he was in prison.

Both the righteous (the sheep) and the unrighteous (the goats) would ask him on the day of judgment how they were to have known when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison.

"Truly I tell you," he will reply, "just as you did it (or did not do it) to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it (or did not do it) to me" (Matt 25:40,45).

We have to be watchful, therefore. "Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives" (Matt 24:46). "Keep awake, ... for you know neither the day nor the hour" (25:13).

But is our generation any less watchful than others? Is Christ any less expected? I don't mean "expected" in the sense of our waiting for his Second Coming at some unknown point in the far distant future, but "expected" here and now, as the Son of Man incognito, as the one who comes unknown and unannounced in life's

ordinary situations and circumstances.

We shouldn't forget that not even his disciples "expected" him following his death on the cross. He walked alongside two of them on the road to Emmaus, seeking to be accepted as an ordinary stranger before being proclaimed as the Risen Lord. They recognized him only later, in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13-35).

And when he appeared to several other disciples, including Peter, by the Sea of Tiberias where they had been fishing without much success, they, too, did not recognize him at first. Not until he told them to cast their net to the right side of the boat where they caught a great haul of fish did they know him to be the Lord (John 21:1-8).

The mystery of the Incarnation, which is the religious core of Christmas, reminds us that God enters our lives and our history through the stable door of ordinary human experience. While we are fishing. Or taking a walk. Or engaged in conversation.

Indeed, Christ is to be found more often there, in these ordinary circumstances of life, than in our creeds, our codes, and our cults.

Advent is surely a time for heightening our sense of expectation for the coming of the Lord. But more than that, it is a time for redirecting that expectation — away from "out there" to "right here."

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food ...?"

Do some not-for-profits operate unfairly?

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Here's a justice question for all not-for-profit groups (including churches) to consider: Are you raising the funds you need fairly?

Three recent examples prompt this question:

- The not-for-profit parents' association at one parochial school sold Christmas candy, advertising it at "10 percent discount and no sales tax."

- One not-for-profit public television station ran 40 full hours over 15 days of what they called their "Holiday Gift Exchange," during which they sold Christmas merchandise from various not-for-profit art and cultural institutions.

- Not-for-profit groups were charged lower rates than for-profit businesses to exhibit and sell material at a church-sponsored conference.

None of these not-for-profit organizations, of course, ever pay property



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or corporate income taxes. My partner and I, on the other hand, run a small for-profit business. Our company pays considerably higher rates than not-for-profit competitors to mail catalogs to our customers. We pay sales

tax on all supplies and equipment we purchase. We also pay substantial property tax on our building.

It is true that we might have set up our business (publishing religious books) as a not-for-profit corporation, but we chose not to. We were willing to pay the taxes and additional costs in return for the chance to own our own company and perhaps make a reasonable profit over the years.

Not that we are opposed to the breaks given to not-for-profit organizations. Most of them perform a real service to the community and should be exempt from paying taxes. Donations to legitimate not-for-profit causes should continue to be tax deductible.

We do wonder, however, about the justice of not-for-profit organizations competing directly with for-profit companies for the sale of merchandise, while still enjoying their tax and postal advantages.

For example, if the candy store on

the corner has to charge sales tax, why shouldn't a parish have to do the same? (Should a parish be in the candy selling business at all if it takes business away from a local business — perhaps even one owned by a parishioner?)

And why should my partner and I donate any funds to the public television or radio station (as they are constantly asking us to do) if they are going to become another "Home Shopping Network" that is in direct competition with us and other for-profit companies for holiday gift customers?

Or why should church-sponsored events give a break to not-for-profit organizations that are going to sell exactly the same items as for-profit retailers who are required to pay a higher fee?

Maybe the Christmas season is a good time for not-for-profit organizations to do some soul searching on the question of justice to their for-profit neighbors.

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