

Life influences Christmas celebration

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

How one hears God's word depends on where one is sitting — not where one is sitting physically, as in a church, but where one is situated in life.

Thus, the story of the Exodus of the Chosen People from the slavery of Egypt into the Promised Land is heard one way by a congregation of poor peasants in Latin America, in another way by a congregation of Palestinian Christians on the West Bank, and in still another way by a small congregation in Middle America with little or no direct experience of poverty, prejudice, or Jews.

Holidays and festive seasons are like that, too. Christmas is no exception.

Christmas holds a powerful emotional and cultural sway over most of us. Songs and books have been written about it. Films and plays have been inspired by it. Customs and symbols have been created around it — religious and secular alike.

But, like God's word, Christmas looks, sounds, and feels different to different people, depending upon where they observe it — not where physically, but where contextually, in terms of their life-situation.

Christmas can be a gloriously triumphant time for a family, one of whose members has just received a major promotion at work or been elected to high public office.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

It can be a particularly joyful time for a family in which a new, healthy grandchild has been born, or where a daughter or son has just been accepted into their first choice of colleges.

Christmas is a family holiday par excellence. Where families are intact, healthy, and happy, with the wherewithal to gather together for the holidays, there is no lovelier time of the year nor more wondrous experience of love and solidarity.

But Christmas's special character also has its downside. Christmas is a holiday for homecoming. What does it mean for those without a home?

Christmas is a celebration of family unity and harmony. What does it mean for those whose families are bro-

ken by bitter conflict or divorce?

Christmas is a celebration of children, and of the newness and promise of life which they embody. What does it mean for those whose only child has died or is sick unto death?

Christmas is a time of gift-giving and sharing of material blessings. What does it mean for the unemployed, and those too poor to give to others, even to their own children?

Christmas is a time for visiting relatives and friends, for partying, for enjoying good food and drink. What does it mean for those who are isolated by physical disabilities or locked in depression?

When we hear the word of God, we should not forget that not everyone hears the word of God as we do. Indeed, it is only when we can put ourselves in their place — not physically, but contextually — that we can begin to appreciate the full range of meaning and power that God's word holds for us all.

And when we celebrate Christmas, neither should we forget that not everyone will, or can, celebrate it as we do. It is only when we can put ourselves in their place, situationally, that we can begin to appreciate not only Christmas's meaning but the meaning of the Gospel itself.

The day after Thanksgiving a former graduate assistant of mine at the University of Notre Dame was killed, along with his infant grandson, in an auto accident in Iowa. Ralph Smith

left his wife (who was injured in the accident), and his two daughters, one in her senior year of high school and the other just beyond high school age (she was the mother of the infant who was also killed).

The Lutheran seminary where Ralph taught liturgical studies is devastated by the sudden loss of their colleague, teacher, and friend. He touched many lives there as a professor, as he had here at Notre Dame, as a young graduate student in the early and mid-1980s.

Four years ago, on Reformation Day, I had the honor of preaching at Ralph Smith's installation as a tenured faculty member at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque.

The presiding eucharistic minister on that occasion was another former graduate assistant of mine, and another Lutheran, Paul Nelson, who holds a national post in his church.

As I said from that Lutheran pulpit, "no Catholic theologian has been better served by two young Lutheran scholars" than by these two extraordinarily gifted Christian ministers of the Gospel.

Paul is awaiting his turn for a bone-marrow transplant to combat his newly virulent leukemia. Ralph and I had been deeply concerned about him, but now it is Ralph who is suddenly gone.

Such are the unfathomable ways of Providence. Such are the different kinds of Christmases we celebrate.

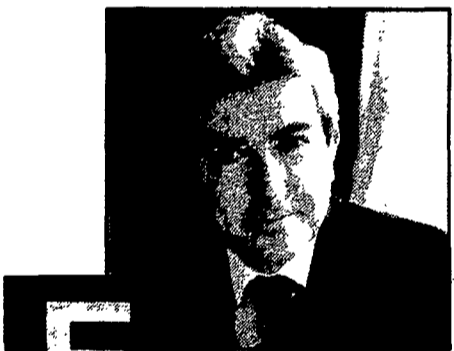
Classic movie shows work's spirituality

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

As you watch the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" for the 100th time this holiday season, look at it not so much as a Christmas classic but rather as an example of the spirituality of good work.

Unlike Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" — who comes to the realization this his work as a businessman has blinded him to the really important things in life — Jimmy Stewart's George Bailey discovers Christmas's meaning in the ordinariness of his daily work.

Like Scrooge, George Bailey was a businessman. Bailey wasn't a great businessman, at least in the eyes of people like Mr. Potter, the banker who was always trying to take over the Bailey Building and Loan Company. But



FAITH AND WORK

Bailey paid his bills, served his customers, took care of his employees, and contributed to the welfare of the

Bedford Falls community.

He was also a husband, father, brother, son, friend and community volunteer. As the movie so poignantly shows, it was his faithfulness to life's everyday tasks that made George Bailey a hero to those around him. He pulled his brother from a freezing lake when they were kids, prevented the local pharmacist for whom he worked as a teenager from making a fatal mistake, and served in the civilian patrol during the war when his deafness in one ear prevented him from enlisting and becoming a "real" hero.

Countless vignettes in the movie show how George Bailey's work as a banker touched so many people's lives. He used his and his wife's honeymoon money to stop a run on the savings and loan; he funded moderately priced housing for people such as Bert the cop and Ernie the taxi dri-

ver (the original Bert and Ernie?); he even made a personal loan to a woman who wanted to leave town to start her life anew.

Like many people, George Bailey never got to fulfill his dreams of travel and adventure. Somehow he became bogged down in the responsibilities of job, family and community. His resentment of the day-to-day aggravations and life's demands strikes a nerve with every person who tries to do his or her duty towards others.

What saved George Bailey from his contemplated suicide was the ability of his guardian angel, Clarence, to show him what the world would have been like if he had never been born.

Perhaps this Christmas season, we could all ask our guardian angels to do the same for us.

Season's Greetings

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