

## Story offers modern challenges

Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ  
Courier columnist

As we move toward the end of the Christmas season, we have much to celebrate. Among the many gifts available to Christians is the Christmas story itself, filled as it is with so many rich and unforgettable images that have by now implanted themselves firmly into our minds and hearts.

Not too long ago, I considered the images of the Christmas story as comforting and cozy mental pictures that produce warm feelings as we gather with family and friends for the holiday festivities. I concluded that the Christmas story showed us pictures of life from a bygone era in a far away land. While we might collect little replicas of some of these as part of our Christmas decorating, they actually had little to say to us of a challenging or disturbing nature.

More recently, however, I have discovered that some of the images from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth carry challenging reflections for Christian communities of the late 20th century.

In fact, behind many of the events that constitute the Christmas story rest very unsettling realities of political life that still dominate many regions of our world. Just the fact that Mary and Joseph set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem to pay their taxes should alert us that this story is



### THE MORAL LIFE

not just about sweet nostalgic reminiscences!

On next Sunday's feast, the Epiphany, we read about the wise men who intend to bring gifts to the Christ child. These men encounter the lying Herod, and provoke in him such fear (just by telling him the story of Jesus' birth!) that he begins to slaughter innocent children in order to secure his own political future. Like so many ruthless political systems in our time, Herod pursued his own political ambitions at the cost of death and suffering for many innocent and powerless people.

In the meantime, Joseph is alerted in a dream to the danger of this

slaughter of innocent children, and he escapes with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where he hopes they will be safe. Like many fearful refugees in our own times, the Holy Family flees from an oppressive political system in search of safety and security.

Considered in this way, the Christmas and Epiphany stories can become one of the most challenging and realistic of the stories in the Bible. The birth of our infant Savior takes place in a stable, not just because little hotels under our Christmas trees would be less attractive than little barns!

Homeless, excluded, hidden people are everywhere around us even today. Dishonest, ruthless political systems continue to sacrifice innocent lives, and children continue to suffer and die because of war, poverty, abortion and violence of all sorts. Refugees fleeing political and economic injustice continue to populate our globe as they migrate and immigrate in search of safety and security for their own children.

It can be difficult for us to think about some of these challenging messages from the Christmas story because we have come to hear the story in a way that associates it exclusively with homey images of the joy and warmth of our own family celebrations. We hardly even hear the political undertones in it!

Recently I heard that the military government of Argentina had forbid-

den Christians to pray the Magnificat over the radio. Church leaders were dumfounded about this prohibition, and could not understand why the prayer would be dangerous to the military regime.

The prohibition may be easier to understand if we remember that it was government officials who had actually heard this prayer first pronounced by a pregnant Mary as she greeted her cousin Elizabeth. The Magnificat, prayed every day in the Catholic Liturgy of the Hours, probably has been denied some of its power by our tendency to personalize and spiritualize our prayers and religious images. The Magnificat actually does include phrases that carry powerful political implications.

In the prayer, God is said to: look with favor on the lowly, show the strength of his arm by scattering the proud, cast the mighty from their thrones, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. The Argentinian government was right on target in forbidding this prayer of Mary, the young, unmarried, impoverished pregnant mother of Jesus!

We can all do well to look again at the many images that make up the story of Jesus' birth. We need to discover in this story not just an enchanting, warm and personally comforting narrative. We also need to hear in this story the many challenges to our social and political ethics.

## Courier plans exciting coverage for '95

By Karen M. Franz  
Editor

This week, we at the *Catholic Courier* are very proud to present a special supplement containing the complete text of the diocesan Synod Pastoral Plan, along with Senior Staff Writer Lee Strong's history and background article on the Synod process.

Graphics Manager Lorraine Hennessey has put countless hours into the presentation of this plan, working with the Synod's director, Deacon Tom Cass, and Liz Brown, diocesan director of constituent relations. We're very pleased with the outcome, and hope you will enjoy having your very own copy of this important and attractive document.

As many of you may recall, the Synod began with a survey of opinion about issues the diocese should address in the years 1995-2000. The questionnaire was mailed to all registered Catholics in the diocese.

Our publication of the Synod Pastoral Plan brings that process full circle, because this special edition of the *Catholic Courier* is being mailed not only to our 50,000 weekly subscribers but also to more than 80,000 non-subscriber households listed in the diocesan database!

We're glad the *Courier* could con-



### BETWEEN THE LINES

tribute its resources and expertise to this project. We also viewed it as an opportunity to introduce — or reintroduce — the *Catholic Courier* to many non-subscriber households. Thus, I'd like to use the remainder of this column to highlight for those of you who have never read the *Courier* — or have not read it in many years — some of the reasons to consider subscribing.

First of all, through the support of Bishops Matthew H. Clark and Dennis W. Hickey, the *Catholic Courier* is run as a newspaper — not a bulletin or newsletter. That fact means we report

both the good and the bad, the positive and the negative — and that we don't duck sensitive issues or sweep matters under a rug.

The second reason, on the other hand, is that the *Courier* is a family newspaper. We're not a scandal sheet filled with sensational headlines, nor do we seek out depressing news with which to berate our readers. While you'll sometimes read unpleasant news in the *Courier*, you'll find that those stories are more than offset by human-interest stories and personality profiles that will cheer and inspire you.

Thirdly, we're a community newspaper, even though our community spans more than 7,000 square miles. For the past year, we've been emphasizing that fact by traveling the diocese for twice-monthly Parish Profile visits. Moreover, we've made a great effort during the past decade — and especially in the past three years — to increase coverage of areas outside Rochester and Monroe County.

In this issue, for example, the cover story on parish synod implementation highlights efforts in Geneva, Elmira, Caledonia, Bath, Horseheads and Rochester. Our diocesan news pages include an update on an Elmira group known as Peaceworks. This week's youth page profiles Joel Stephens of Elmira, and our centerfold presents es-

says and drawings from children all over the diocese.

Those essays and drawings were submitted to the *Courier* in response to questions posed in the "Kids' Chronicle," our bimonthly page for children ages 6-12. "Kids' Chronicle" is just one example of our efforts to serve a range of needs among Catholic households.

We also have pages devoted to teenagers, senior citizens, sports aficionados, commentary, opinion and a calendar of events. Our cover stories and other forms of in-depth coverage provide background, history and analysis on the development of current church teaching and practice — which can be very useful in ongoing adult education.

Adult education is just one of the four Synod goals subscribers will see addressed by the special supplements we've planned for 1995. Spirituality, faith in the workplace, marriage, education and the consistent-life ethic are just a few of the topics we'll be exploring in '95 supplements.

We hope those of you who do not already subscribe to the *Courier* will consider joining us for what promises to be a very exciting year. You can order a subscription by using the self-mailer enclosed in non-subscriber copies, or by calling (716) 328-4340. We look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes for a wonderful year!

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