

COLUMNISTS

Secular feasts can be spiritual

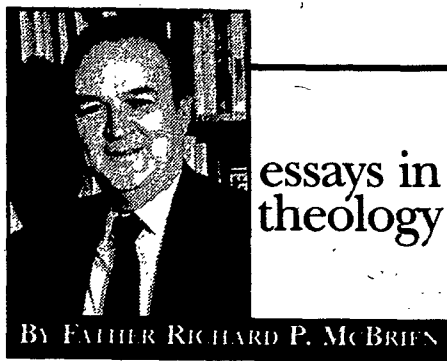
Thanksgiving Day reminds us that there is a secular as well as a religious "liturgical" calendar according to which we Americans note and celebrate the change of seasons and the passages of life. It is remarkable how authentically "religious" in essence and in spirit these secular "feasts" really are.

The Thanksgiving holiday itself draws our attention anew to our need to give thanks to God and to one another for all the blessings we have received.

Indeed, thanksgiving is at the very heart of Christian faith and worship. The Eucharist, which is "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and the fountain from which all its power flows" (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 10), means, literally, "thanksgiving."

It is more than fitting, therefore, that we should observe the holiday with a festive meal that does more than nourish us physically. It binds us more closely together as families and as friends — as the Eucharist is intended to do within the family of Christ.

Unlike Thanksgiving, Christmas is both an explicitly religious and a secular feast. The focal activity of the holiday is gift-giving. Its point and purpose are in making others happy, particularly children. What could be closer to the heart



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

of the Gospel itself, which bids us to share what we have with others and to accept God's own gift of the kingdom "as a little child" (Mark 10:15)?

New Year's Day prompts many of us to make resolutions in the hope that we might emerge somehow a better person by year's end. The secular equivalent of conversion?

Alas, such resolutions aren't usually kept, but is that so different from what occurs within the Christian life itself? Why else, indeed, do we have the sacrament of reconciliation?

Although hardly in the secular "liturgical" category of Thanksgiving or Christmas, Valentine's Day seeks to evoke and express warm and sometimes romantic feelings toward significant others.

Now dropped from the church's liturgical calendar, this holiday remains with us as a secular "feast" with conspicuously religious overtones. To love others, after all, is to observe the Second Great Commandment. And when that love is expressed in a life-generating marriage, it draws a couple into an intimate, co-creative relationship with God.

Like Christmas, Easter is both an explicitly religious and a secular holiday. Indeed, it is the most important of Christian feasts, celebrating the central act of our redemption, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

As a secular "feast," however, it echoes the resurrection-motif of new life and new beginnings, reflected, for example, in the traditional Easter egg and the wearing of new clothes. In the Northern Hemisphere at least, Easter is also the celebration of spring.

Mother's Day and Father's Day provide occasions for expressing love and gratitude to one's parents and for according them special honor, in explicit fidelity to the Fourth Commandment.

Memorial Day, much like its religious counterpart, All Souls' Day, reminds us that our bonds of love, affection, and gratitude do not end with death. We remain bound together with our loved ones in a vast communion of saints,

awaiting the day of our final reunion in Christ.

Labor Day celebrates the dignity of work and of workers, a principle of Catholic social teaching that has been articulated many times over during the course of the past 100 years, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and including Pope John Paul II's eloquent testimony to work as a co-creative activity with God in his 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*.

Even Halloween, seemingly the most secular of all the "feasts" listed herein, can lay claim to a religious dimension. In medieval England the church's liturgical feast of All Saints (November 1) was called the feast of All Hallows. Its vigil (the evening before the feast) was, therefore, called Hallows' eve. Thus, the name Halloween.

In addition to these assorted nationally recognized holidays, there are annual "feasts" that have profound meaning and consequence to people.

Birthdays are first among these other "feasts," but wedding anniversaries are not far behind.

These, too, celebrate the gift of life and of love, of family and of friends which is what the mystery of creation, of the church, and of the heavenly kingdom are all about.

The little we know of Jesus goes long way

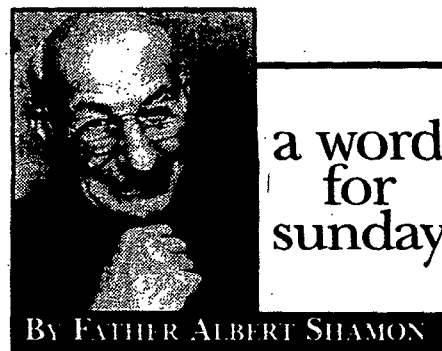
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 23:35-43. (R1) 2 Samuel 5:1-3. (R2) Colossians 1:12-20.

Two years after he had completed his term of office as the sixth president of the United States, John Quincy Adams took his seat in the House of Representatives. It was an unusual step, to go from being president to being a mere congressman. Yet Adams is remembered more for what he did as a congressman, from 1831 until he died in 1848, than for what he did as president.

In those days the slave trade was prospering. Adams fought for freedom of the slaves. The gag rule of the House was introduced solely to stop Adams. But he fought on and made the eventual abolition of slavery a possibility.

Sunday we celebrate a more humbling experience than that of going from the White House to the Congress. We celebrate the willingness of the Son of God to empty himself and take the form of a slave to save others from the slavery of sin and eternal damnation.

The Lyndon Johnson Library, commemorating the life and accomplishments of this former president, contains over 32 million documents. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is contained in four little booklets. We don't know a lot about him, but what we do know is enough to bring meaning and purpose into our lives and to give us



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

strength to resist those powers within and without that would destroy us, and to foster a hope everlasting in a final victory of love over hate, joy over pain, and justice over evil.

For one thing we know that, as St. Paul wrote, "He is the image of the invisible God" (R2).

A little boy lived near Chartwell, England, home of Winston Churchill. His nanny took him there to see "the greatest man in the whole, wide world." Churchill had retired for his afternoon nap. While the nanny had tea, the child sneaked off to look for his hero. He found him reading in bed.

"Are you the greatest man in the whole wide world?" the boy asked.

Churchill replied, "Of course I'm the greatest man in the whole wide world. Now buzz off."

Imagine if that little boy had gone to

Jesus and asked the same question. The child would have gone away feeling he was the greatest person in the world. The measure of true greatness is what we bring forth out of others. Jesus brings out the best. He is the image of the invisible God.

Jesus is also the image of true humanity.

Sometime back, a white prisoner died of a heart attack in a Montgomery, Ala., jail. In prison he had had a profound conversion: He had found Jesus. The convict in the next cell, a huge black man, was a cynic. Each night the white prisoner spoke through the bars and told him about the love of Jesus. The black man mocked him, told him he was sick in the head. Yet the white man passed Scripture passages to him and shared his candy whenever he received a gift from a relative. At the white man's funeral, when the prison chaplain spoke of the Easter victory of Jesus, the black man stood up and, pointing to the coffin, said, "That's the only Jesus I ever knew."

Jesus was the image of the invisible God, and when we do his work we become the image of the invisible Christ. That is who we are.

Finally, Jesus is the bridge between the human and the divine. Because he is, he is also the bridge between persons of every background and situation. Je-

sus is like the hub of a wheel; we are the spokes. The closer to the hub are the spokes, the closer they are to each other. Likewise the closer we are to Christ, the closer we become to each other. He is the bridge. The same Christ who binds us to God, binds us to one another.

Malcolm Muggeridge, speaking of the famous people he had met, the fame and wealth he had achieved, the glamorous places he had visited, said: "Let me tell you that they mean nothing beside what Jesus Christ has to offer us. For me, it is Christ or nothing."

May his kingdom come on earth!

Daily Readings

Monday, Nov. 27

Dn 1:1-6, 8-20; Lk 21:1-4

Tuesday, Nov. 28

Dn 2:31-45; Lk 21:5-11

Wednesday, Nov. 29

Dn 5:1-6, 13-14, 16-17, 23-28;

Lk 21:12-19

Thursday, Nov. 30

Rom 10:9-18; Mt 4:18-22

Friday, Dec. 1

Dn 7:2-14; Lk 21:29-33

Saturday, Dec. 2

Dn 7:15-27; Lk 21:34-36

Our monthly Parenting page will appear in the November 30th issue

"IF YOU'VE MADE A WILL THERE'S ONE MORE THING TO DO."

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