

COLUMNISTS

Even 'The Grinch' relates Jesus' message

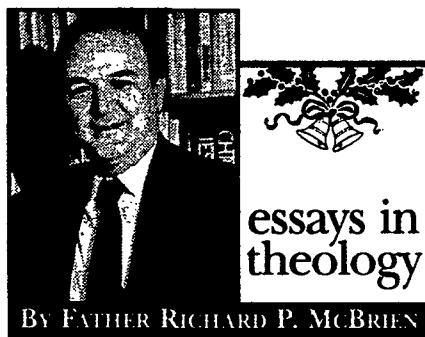
When we Christians bemoan the secularization of Christmas, we usually trot out, along with the seasonal decorations, such perennial clichés as "Keep Christ in Christmas" — even as we ourselves jump headlong into the gift-buying, gift-exchanging fray.

This week's column offers a dissenting opinion. So long as Christians are free to celebrate Christmas at home and in church as a religious feast — complete with advent liturgies, Christmas Masses, sacred music, Nativity scenes, religious cards, and Bible-based story-telling about the baby Jesus and why he came among us — we have no real reason to complain.

Indeed, we ought to be secretly pleased that the spirit of Christmas has permeated the secular culture as extensively as it has, even if there is too much commercialization.

What are some of those redeemably "secular" aspects of Christmas? Gift-giving. Family reunions. Festive music and decorations. Renewed concern for the poor and the homeless. Giving children a sense of joy and mystery.

The implicitly religious values of the secular culture are conveyed in many different ways, not least through some of our most popular Christmas stories and films. "The Gathering" (starring Ed Asner



and Maureen Stapleton) reminds us that success in business is no substitute for a happy marriage and a closely knit family. When Asner's character is told that he has a terminal illness, with little time to live, he arranges, with the help of his estranged wife, one last gathering of the family he has neglected — at Christmas.

"The Homecoming" (starring Patricia Neal, and the inspiration for the "Waltons" television series) tells of a poverty-stricken family at the tail end of the Depression in Appalachia. The father of the family is expected home for Christmas (a farmer, he's had to seek work miles away), but there is a snowstorm and then the report of a bus accident.

When the father eventually makes it home, with a modest present for each under his arm (including a bouquet of flow-

ers for his wife), the scene is emotionally compelling.

The film reminds us that Christmas is about family, about being together at home, however humble the circumstances.

The classic Dickens' story *Christmas Carol* (Alistair Sims stars in the best film version) recounts the conversion of the miserly, miserable Ebenezer Scrooge into a joyful, kind-hearted benefactor of the poor and the powerless. And it's all done on Christmas Eve, through the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future.

Dr. Seuss' classic, *The Grinch That Stole Christmas* (in the cartoon, Boris Karloff provides the Grinch's voice), challenges the notion that Christmas joy is measured only by gifts. The little people of Whoville have all their presents and decorations stolen by the evil Grinch during the wee hours of Christmas morning. But when they awake to find their "material" Christmas gone, they show that the "spirit" of Christmas cannot be taken away. They begin to sing, and their song fills the valley and the mountains all around it.

Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed star in "It's a Wonderful Life," the story of an earnest young man who takes over his late father's struggling savings-and-loan business to carry on his work of helping peo-

ple whom the rich, grasping Mr. Potter would otherwise crush underfoot. Because of a gaffe by his inept uncle, George Bailey (the Stewart character) finds himself \$8,000 short on Christmas Eve.

He faces disgrace and prison and contemplates, first, suicide and then eradication (as if he never lived at all), only to be saved from despair by the angel Clarence, who shows George that, had he never lived, many people, including those closest to him, would have lived far less fulfilling lives and others (like his younger brother) would have died long before their time.

Finally, "The Miracle on 34th Street" provides its own distinctive conversion story. Although it may appear to be only a story about believing in Santa Claus, it is really about a faith and a trust that draw a person beyond herself or himself to accept the love of another.

Explicit references to Jesus are, for the most part, nonexistent in these films and stories, but the heart of Jesus' message is in all of them.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21).

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Christ child fulfills God's promise

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:26-38. (R1) 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16. (R2) Romans 16:25-27.

When King David was at the height of his power and wealth, and when he had rest from his enemies on every side, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!"

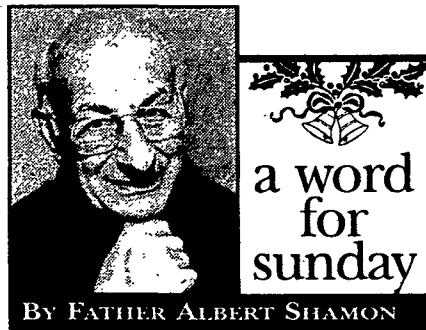
So David planned to build a palace of ivory and gold for God. God, however vetoed David's plan, for David was a man of blood. Yet God was deeply touched by David's thought, so he made a great promise to him.

"You were going to build me a house," God said. "Rather, I'll build a house for you. Your house and kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever."

A thousand years later, God fulfilled that promise. All of us are familiar with St. Luke's story of the Annunciation. The Annunciation story climaxes the Advent season. William Griffin tells the story in a charming way in his book *Jesus for Children*.

"Stay where you are," said the young girl, "or I'll scream!"

The tall stranger said, "Don't be afraid.



I'm Gabriel."

"Are you an angel?" asked the little girl Mary.

"Yes, and I have a message for you."

"You shouldn't go around surprising people," Mary said, closing her book.

"Angels are for surprises," Gabriel said. "I didn't know that," Mary said.

"You are one of God's favorites," Gabriel said. "God wants you to know that."

"Thank you for telling me," Mary replied.

"And he wants to ask you a favor," Gabriel continued. "He wants you to be the mother of his child. The child the Scriptures speak of. The child that will save all the people of the world. Will you

do God this favor?"

"Does he have to ask?" Mary questioned.

"God always asks," Gabriel said.

"He knows I read the Scriptures and will do whatever he asks," Mary replied.

"Blessed are you among women," Gabriel said, and then was gone.

As she returned to her book, Mary thought that God did have to ask; and that she would never say, "No."

The angel announced to her that she would have a child. God would not be content to communicate with his creation by satellite or Internet. He would actually become one of us. That is mind-boggling!

Have we heard the story so many times that we miss what it is saying? The manger of Bethlehem becomes the entry place for God to reveal himself in human flesh. That's deep!

As the Christmas carol goes: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." The child of Mary is the hope of all and his love for us allays all fears.

That is the message of Christmas. Power and possessions are illusions. Here today and gone tomorrow. Pride and pretense are tragedies. Only make-believe.

Only one thing matters: the eternal and relationships.

Father Shamón is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, December 23
Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Luke 1: 57-66
- Tuesday, December 24
2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16;
Luke 1:67-79
Vigil: Isaiah 62:1-5; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Matthew 1:1-25 or 1:18-25
- Wednesday, December 25
Night: Isaiah 9:1-6; Titus 2:11-14;
Luke 2:1-14
Dawn: Isaiah 62:11-12; Titus 3:4-7;
Luke 2:15-20
Day: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6;
John 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14
- Thursday, December 26
Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59;
Matthew 10:17-22
- Friday, December 27
1 John 1:1-4; John 20:2-8
- Saturday, December 28
1 John 1: 5-2-2; Matthew 2:13-18

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The Word of God Came as a Baby To dwell Among Us Oh, Come Let Us Adore Him.
John 1:1-18
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