

COLUMNISTS

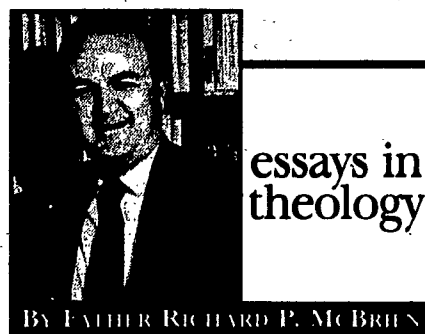
Amid millennium fervor, faith is a constant

Advent is a season of preparation: for Christmas, which celebrates the first coming of Christ in history; for his continued, unexpected comings into our daily lives, as portrayed in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25); and for his final coming at history's end, when "all things" will be restored in Christ, "in heaven and on earth" (Eph 1:10).

Advent should spark particular interest this year because it is the last Advent not only of the 20th century, but of the Second Christian Millennium as well.

Taking into account the total number of human beings who have populated the earth since its creation, relatively few of us have experienced the transition from one millennium to another. What sort of experience is it likely to be? Most people will probably stay awake until midnight to witness the historic transition. Those who keep watch can look forward to a little extra sleep in the morning, because the first day of the 21st century and the Second Christian Millennium is a Saturday.

Life will undoubtedly go on as usual over the weekend, that is, if the Y2K monster doesn't devour us beforehand. There will be meals, errands, appointments and other family and personal matters to attend to. And, of course, foot-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ball on television.

But Jan. 1, 2000, will come to an unceremonious end at midnight (most of the previous night's revelers having already gone to bed), and Jan. 2 will be just another Sunday. Many will go to church, and some of them will watch even more football later in the day.

There will be a surfeit of references to "the first" this or that of the new century and millennium (the flip side of the inevitable references to "lasts" during Christmas week). But that should wear thin soon enough. In our culture, novelties age rapidly. The thirst for the new beyond the new continues unabated.

Advent helps us to put all this into perspective, bathing everything in the light of salvation history. In Christian faith, the many centuries and millennia before

and after Christ derive their meaning, purpose and eternal value from him — from his person, and from his life, death and resurrection. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15-17).

To be sure, human history is also a history of suffering and tragedy. St. Paul assured us, however, that "the sufferings of the present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." Indeed, creation will be "set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:18, 21). In the meantime, creation "groans" as if in labor, awaiting its final transformation in Christ (vv. 22-23). This "waiting" for the coming of Christ has been at the core of Christian faith and hope from the beginning, and it remains at the vibrant center of Christian worship today.

In one sense, Advent 1999 will be no different from any other Advent that preceded it. The same biblical themes will be sounded on each of the four Sundays. The same prayers and the same eu-

charistic formulae will be proclaimed. The same transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ will occur. The same act of holy Communion will ensue. And there will be the same commissioning to change the world into Christ just as the Eucharist continually changes us into him.

Therefore, it is more likely that we will be struck by the banality of the coming transition from one century and millennium to another than by its novelty. Life will go on in the year 2000 very much as it has gone on before, which is to say routinely — sometimes in joy, sometimes in sorrow. A mere change in dates will not change us. For the Christian, every new year is a year in which the Holy Spirit renews us in the grace of Christ and prepares us for his Second Coming, when the world will be brought to perfection.

In the meantime, the Christian walks with the assurance of faith that "whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor 5:17).

Advent, in 1999 or any other year, directs us to those "new things" to come.

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

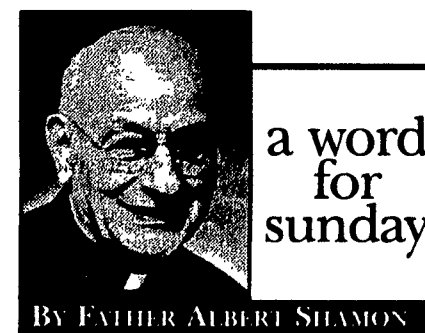
Jesus is the reason for the season

First Sunday of Advent (Nov. 28): (R3) Mark 13:33-37. (R1) Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7. (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

St. Mark says in Sunday's Gospel: "Be watchful ... Watch ... Watch." Advent is a season for watching. But watching for what? Our children watch for Santa Claus, but how about us adults? The Scriptures say we are to be watching for Christ's return. How should we feel about that return?

We should not be apprehensive nor fearful. Virtue based on fear of punishment will not last. When virtue is fear-based, what is forbidden somehow becomes more attractive. We want it more simply because we can't have it. Forbidden fruit often allures. But virtue based on love lasts forever.

Walter Wangerin Jr. tells of the time that he deliberately disobeyed his father. Around the hockey rink at the college where his father was president, there were powerful floodlights. Often Walter threw stones at them. One day he hit one of those lights, exploding 6,000-watt light bulbs. Young Walter kept his secret, hardly daring to look at his father at home. His deed haunted him. Finally, he decided to come clean and confess.



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

He entered his father's office and began to stammer out the story. When he was done, his father slowly rose from his chair; Walter feared the spanking coming that he deserved. Instead, his father knelt, took him into his arms and hugged him. His father loved him and that love changed Walter's life.

So it is with God. He loves us and nothing we do will ever change that love. Though our sins are red as scarlet, his love will make them white as snow, so long as we confess them to him.

God wants us also to be merciful, to pass on his love to others. From 1979 to 1981, the Maze Prison in Belfast, Northern Ireland, was a hotbed of inmate protests. No one from the outside world

dared visit the prison. On Christmas Eve 1980, a retired schoolteacher named Gladys Blackburne pondered Christ's humility in being born in a stable. At that moment, she felt God calling her to the prison. When Gladys arrived, an official sent her to a young inmate named Chips. She told him about the love of Jesus Christ. Today, as a free man, Chips leads a prison ministry.

At Advent time children think mostly of Santa Claus; we adults ought to think more of the birth of Jesus.

Santa loves us when we are good. Jesus loves us even when we are not good.

Santa lives at the North Pole. Jesus lives everywhere.

Santa comes but once a year. Jesus never leaves us.

Santa fills stockings with goodies. Jesus fills all our needs.

You wait in line to see Santa. Jesus is as close as the mention of his name.

All Santa says is, "Don't cry little child." Jesus says, "Cast all your cares on me for I care for you."

Santa's helpers make toys. Jesus makes new lives, mends wounded hearts, repairs broken homes and builds mansions.

Santa may make you chuckle, but Jesus gives you joy that is your strength.

Santa puts gifts under your tree; but Jesus gives himself to us and died for us on a tree.

Actually, there is no comparison. We need to remember Christmas is all about Jesus, and put him back in Christmas. Jesus is still the reason for the season.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, November 29

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 8:5-11

Tuesday, November 30

Romans 10:9-18; Matthew 4:18-22

Wednesday, December 1

Isaiah 25:6-10; Matthew 15:29-37

Thursday, December 2

Isaiah 26:1-6; Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Friday, December 3

Isaiah 29:17-24; Matthew 9:27-31

Saturday, December 4

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26;

Matthew 9:35-10:1, 6-8

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