

# COLUMNISTS

## Defining Christ's humanity and divinity

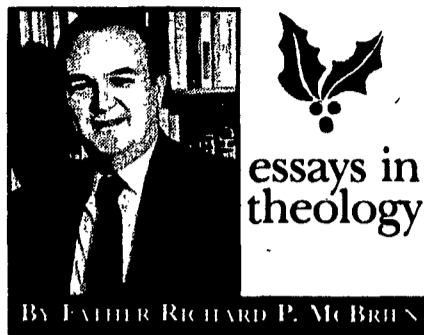
Christmas is the church's annual celebration of the event by which the Word of God entered our history, became one with us in the flesh, and initiated the wondrous process of redeeming and recreating us in God's image and likeness, in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That paragraph doesn't say anything that readers don't already know and take for granted as the central truth of Christian faith — even if they might express it differently. The prologue of the Fourth Gospel says it more simply and more directly: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14).

Catholics may differ today about women's ordination, birth control or the scope of papal authority, but not about the mystery of the Incarnation that is proclaimed and celebrated anew each Christmas. That was not the case, however, in the earliest centuries of the church. The question most fought over then was at the heart of Christian faith itself: Who is Jesus Christ?

Was he human like us in all things except sin, as Paul insisted (Hebrews 4:15)? Or did he simply appear to be human, as the Docetists believed?

Was he only the greatest of creatures, but not equal to God, as the Arians held?



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Was he two persons — one human and one divine — as the Nestorians maintained? Did he have only a divine nature, as the Monophysites proposed?

One of the first major heresies said that salvation comes to us through knowledge, and this saving knowledge is available only to an elite few. Since the Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*, adherents of this view were called Gnostics.

The Gnostics believed that we are imprisoned in an evil material world, yearning all the while to be liberated from it. God sent us a bearer of divine enlightenment so that those of us to whom this special knowledge, or revelation, is given can be led out of this evil world into the kingdom of truth and goodness.

Gnosticism had much in common with an even earlier heresy, Docetism

(from a Greek word that means "to seem"). The Docetists held that Jesus only "seemed" to be human. He was a divine being in human form.

Against both Docetism and Gnosticism the early fathers of the church, especially bishop-theologians like St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 200), insisted that the material world is essentially good because it comes from the creative hand of God. We ourselves have been divinized because the Son of God took on human flesh. He redeemed us on the cross and through his Resurrection, and he marked out the path to eternal life in his own Ascension into heaven. But the foundation of it all — of our redemption, of our transformation into new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit, of our entrance into eternal life, of the salvation of the world and of its history — is the Incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That is what Christmas is all about — not only this year, as we stand on the threshold of a new century and a new millennium, but every year.

Christmas — both the day itself and the season — provides an opportunity to reflect anew and more deeply on what we really believe and on how this belief can or should affect our thinking, our attitudes, and our behavior toward others.

Because of the Incarnation, human history and the lives of each individual within it have been radically and permanently altered. This world of ours has become a different place because the Son of God has become its center and its driving force. And we, too, are different, no longer guided and directed by human values alone but by the mind and heart of Christ.

But this Christ is no "ordinary" extraordinary person — someone whom *Time* magazine might include on a list of the greatest men and women of history. He is not simply the greatest of creatures, as the Arians believed, nor, at the opposite extreme, is he only a divine being in human disguise.

The early fathers of the church found the right balance: If Christ were not human, he could not save us because he would not have been one of us. And if he were not divine, he could not save us, because he would have lacked the power to do so. In the end, salvation is rooted in the person of Christ himself, and not in any esoteric knowledge about him.

But it all began with Christmas, two millennia ago.

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

## Holy Family serves as ideal model

**The Holy Family (Dec. 26):** (R3) Luke 2:22-40. (R1) Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14. (R2) Colossians 3:12-21.

Holy Family Sunday is a kind of dangerous Sunday — dangerous because a preacher can get bogged down in a lot of clichés or sentimentality. Or he can go into a jeremiad — a lamentation about the breakdown of the family, the soaring divorce rates, child delinquency, drugs, abortion. Rather let us consider the positive side of things: children, parents and family.

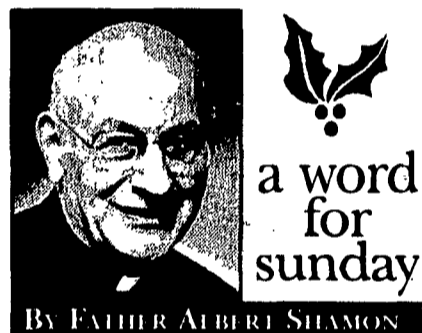
First, to children, the liturgy says two things: to young children — be obedient; to older children, take care of your parents in old age and always honor and respect them in life and after life.

Sometimes kids are tyrants; they treat their parents as servants.

Don't you think Jesus knew more than Joseph and Mary? Yet he obeyed them.

Don't you think he often dreamed of leaving home early to go do his Father's work? Yet he waited it out for 30 years.

There is such a thing as prematurity. Youths tend to be impetuous; they can jump the gun: drop out of school early, drop out of religion classes too soon, marry too young! The Prodigal Son became prodigal because he left home too



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

soon! Growth, especially human growth — takes time and plenty of it! You can't make a tulip grow faster by tugging at the stem. That's a good way to destroy it. Toadstools grow overnight, and they are poisonous. It takes years for an oak tree to grow, but then you have something.

So Jesus settled down to home life for 30 years. This was no waste of time, for the Gospel says that "He grew steadily in wisdom and age and grace."

Secondly, today's liturgy speaks to parents also. It says to them to help their children solve their personality problems. How? By creating for them an environment of love and security.

Children need love more than food. In an orphan asylum in Brazil, there was an epidemic of infant deaths. After a

deep study, it was discovered that the infants were dying because of a lack of love. So the nurses were instructed to cuddle and coddle the infants every hour. The deaths ceased.

Love means taking care of the physical needs of children: good home, good food, good rest, good medical care; of their emotional needs — a hug, a kiss, acceptance of their efforts; of their intellectual needs — answering questions, listening, taking them to interesting places, peoples, things; and of their spiritual needs — teaching them their morning and night prayers, the rosary, religious education, Sunday Mass together.

Besides love, children need security. Be firm: say what you mean and mean what you say. Be fair: Discipline with love — neither too severe, nor too lenient. Be consistent: Children feel secure when they know the rules and boundaries. Sirach said: "Pamper your child and he will be a terror for you; indulge him and he will bring you grief" (30:9).

Jesus was not isolated. He was insulated by having Mary and Joseph who gave him love and security.

Finally, Jesus was brought up in a family to teach us to live with others. Charity, we say, begins at home. This means

we ought to learn to love others at home, especially the unlovable. It's easy to love lovable children, but to love them when they are unlovable is the unfailing sign of a good family. A family must be a support community.

Jesus got along so well with others, because he learned to get along so well at home. Joseph taught him his trade; and Mary taught him how to pray and how to love. He needed no more.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, December 27**

John 1:1-4; John 20:2-8

**Tuesday, December 28**

John 1:5-2:2; Matthew 2:13-18

**Wednesday, December 29**

John 2:3-11; Luke 2:22-35

**Thursday, December 30**

John 2:12-17; Luke 2:36-40

**Friday, December 31**

John 2:18-21; John 1:1-18

**Saturday, January 1**

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7;

Luke 2:16-21

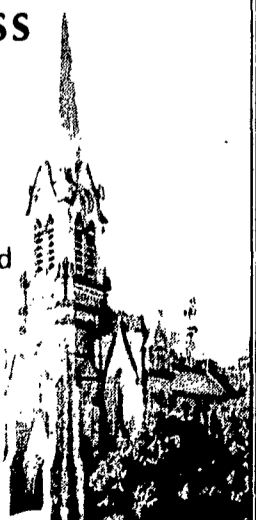
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