

COLUMNISTS

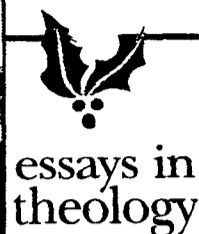
'Dominus Iesus' and the Christmas challenge

The document, *Dominus Iesus*, released in September, stirred a proverbial hornet's nest of controversy. Many concluded, on the basis of excerpts in the press and various other public reactions, that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had reversed the ecumenically enlightened teaching of the Second Vatican Council and reverted to the pre-conciliar claim that the Catholic Church is the "one, true church," outside of which there is no salvation.

The document does not say, however, that the true church of Christ exists only in the Catholic Church; it says that it is only in the Catholic Church that it continues to exist fully. As one of my former teachers in Rome, Father Francis Sullivan, SJ, (1. sw of Boston College), put it, "The difference between those statements is the difference between the doctrine of Pius XII and that of Vatican II."

Nor does the document consign non-Catholics to eternal perdition. It cites Vatican II's teaching that, because Christ died for all, "the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 22).

Nothing in *Dominus Iesus* contradicts this. It also follows the council in recognizing that the various non-Catholic



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

churches are, by the action of the same Holy Spirit, instruments of salvation for their own members (n. 17, para. 3).

This whole question of the role of Christ in the salvation of the world is especially relevant to the feast and the season we are about to celebrate. At the core of Christian faith is the conviction that God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, a divine person with both a human and a divine nature. Christians believe that through his life, death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation (that is, through the whole paschal mystery), Christ took upon himself the sins of humankind and won divine forgiveness and redemption for Christians and non-Christians, for believers and nonbelievers, alike.

Such a faith may have been easier to profess in the Middle Ages when the world was thought to be much smaller

and overwhelmingly Christian. Through the process of exploration and discovery in subsequent centuries, it became clear to all except those too stubborn to see it that the world was not coextensive with Christendom, that there were many millions of non-Christians living happily in other parts of the globe, and that most of them had never even heard of Christ.

As missionaries attempted to proclaim the Gospel in foreign lands, some gradually came to appreciate the cultures and even the religions of so-called "pagan" peoples. They detected similarities with the figure of Christ and the content of the Gospel in the beliefs and practices of those whom they sought to convert.

Unfortunately, some church officials and rival missionary communities disdained the approaches taken by their ecumenically-minded brethren. For example, the Dominicans fought the efforts of the great Jesuit priest and scientist, Matteo Ricci (d. 1610), to adapt Christianity to Chinese culture and to promote the use of Chinese rites in the liturgy.

Although Alexander VII had explicitly approved of these new missionary methods in 1656, Clement XI revoked that approval in 1704 and forbade the use of Chinese rites — a decision that proved disastrous for the church's future missionary outreach to China. Its nega-

tive effects are felt to this very day.

In the latter part of the 20th century, a few innovative Catholic theologians attempted a similar adaptation of Christian doctrine to the culture and religious practices of the millions of Buddhists and Hindus in Asia. In two or three cases, theologians may have gone too far in collapsing any meaningful distinction between Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of faith and other so-called "Christ figures."

As a consequence, the Vatican adopted an initially skeptical, then an openly censorious, attitude toward the work of most other theologians engaged in this quest. There was a tendency to lump these theologians together, as if all were, in effect, denying the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one Redeemer and Mediator of salvation for humankind.

Given our growing appreciation of human diversity and the minority status of Christianity in much of the world, the need has become even more pressing to "find" Christ also within other religions and in the human family at large, and somehow to proclaim him there.

Is not this one of the central and enduring challenges of the Christmas message?

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

God calls us to keep the spirit

Christmas Midnight Mass (December 25): (R3) Luke 2:1-14; (R1) Isaiah 9:1-6; (R2) Titus 2:11-14.

One thing we can say about Christmas is that it is a surprise. There are few events in history that were quite as surprising. The shepherds out on the hillside were certainly surprised. In fact, they were "filled with fear." This was no ordinary night. Perhaps when they tried to tell their neighbors what they saw, they probably looked at them like some did at people who claimed to have seen UFOs. Can't you hear their friends and neighbors: You saw what? Angels? They did what? They sang? God as a baby?

It took angels to put Mary and Joseph's hearts at peace. Herod was surprised. He was so shocked by the situation that he had a whole generation of baby boys wiped out.

More importantly, the people of Israel were surprised. The Messiah was to come, but not like this. The Messiah was to come with power and might. But a babe? God in a manger? No way!

In 1809 a war-weary world anxiously watched Napoleon march across Europe. People were discouraged. Hope for the future was frail. All the while, however, babies were being born. Lord Tennyson, Edgar Allen Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Felix Mendelssohn, William Gladstone, Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln — all were born that very year. While one age



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

was dying, another was being born. That is the way God works. Quietly, steadily. We want to look for God in the whirlwind and storm; God speaks in quiet whispers. If there is one thing you can say about Christmas, though, it is a surprise.

Another surprise is to experience the true message of Christmas — love. How many times have you heard it said, "Oh, if we could keep the Christmas spirit all year long." Don't we say that because it is a joy when people actually are charitable to one another? And sometimes a surprise when people go out of their way to help somebody else?

Self-giving love always comes as a surprise in this cold, cruel world. We don't know why it should. We've heard a million times that it is more blessed to give than to receive. And somehow we suspect that is true. But we see it so rarely lived out. And when it is lived out, we are surprised. But even more, we are happy. That love so

often uncultivated often is lived out at Christmas.

Finally, Christmas is intended to be God's surprise for the world. God looked down upon creation in profound sorrow. Humanity, God's highest creation, had been a disappointment. Instead of embracing peace, humanity embraced war; instead of embracing generosity and love, humanity embraced greed and hate. So God had a baby born in the little town of Bethlehem — God's surprise for the world.

On Christmas Eve, 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, the French and Germans faced each other in trenches before the city of Paris. Suddenly, a young Frenchman jumped out of his trench, and in a beautiful voice astonished the Germans with Adolphe Adam's incomparable *Cantique de Noel* ("O Holy Night"). The Germans seemed awestruck by his performance; not a shot was fired in his direction. When the singer had finished the carol, a German responded. He came out of his trench to sing, in his own language, Luther's beloved Christmas hymn, *Von Himmel Hoch* ("From Heaven Above I Come to You"). For one brief moment in the midst of the insanity of war, there came a message of God's love and God's hope.

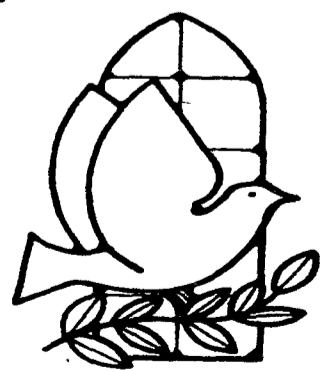
That is what Christmas is all about. God sent a babe into the world. And that babe grew to adulthood and called out to men and women to be his Christmas light to

the world. You and I are those men and women today. We are called to love the world as he loved the world. We are to be God's Christmas surprise to our families, to our friends, to our community, to our world. Can't you imagine how surprised the world would be if we all determined to live out the love and joy of Christmas throughout the year? And yet that is God's plan; his gift to humanity.

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

Daily Readings

Sunday, December 24
Micah 5:1-4; Hebrews 10:5-10;
Luke 1:39-45
Monday, December 25
Day: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14
Tuesday, December 26
Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59;
Matthew 10:17-22
Wednesday, December 27
1 John 1:1-4; John 20:2-8
Thursday, December 28
1 John 1:5-2:2; Matthew 2:13-18
Friday, December 29
1 John 2:3-11; Luke 2:22-35
Saturday, December 30
1 John 2:12-17; Luke 2:36-40



May the
Timeless Message
Of Christmas
Fill Your Heart With
Joy and Love

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