

Christmas message remains unchanged

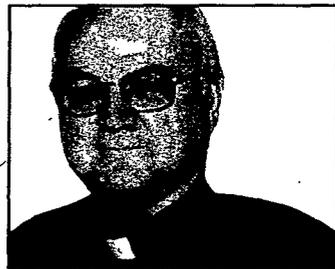
I had a professor in the seminary who used to point out that the liturgical year moves not in a circular fashion, but in an upward spiral. Even though we celebrate the same major feasts each year, our observance of them is never exactly the same as it was the year before, because we have changed since then and so has the world around us. This is surely the case with Christmas.

The message and meaning of Christmas have been the same since the time of Christ himself. The customs and carols are of more recent origin, but long-standing enough that they seem bathed in the aura of eternity.

We experienced our earliest Christmases as innocent, vulnerable children, completely dependent on our parents for love, sustenance and security, and then as gradually maturing, but often uncertain and conflicted, teenagers tentatively testing our capacity for independence.

We continued to move through the subsequent stages of life: as young adults, newly marrieds with children of our own, aging adults with grandchildren, widows and widowers, singles of all ages, living alone or with others.

Christmas always loomed large in each one of those stages of life. And so it shall be this year. The difference is that we are likely to be at a slightly higher point on



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

liturgy's spiral — and life's.

The unchangeable message of Christmas is that Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem some two millennia ago, uniquely personifies the reality of God and mediates God's redemptive power on our behalf. Which is to say that the words and example of Jesus Christ are the eternal standard by which every human life and human history itself are to be measured.

This is in accordance with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" that Christ is "the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history" (n. 10).

The feast of Christmas proclaims that Jesus Christ is the answer. But answers have meaning only in relation to questions.

Vatican II listed "the most fundamental of all questions" for which Christ provides "the key": "What is humanity? What is the meaning of suffering, evil, death ... ? What is the purpose of [human] achievements, purchased at so high

a price? What can people contribute to and expect from society? What happens after this earthly life is ended?"

Such questions as these are more practical than theoretical because they apply to life as it is, not as we might imagine it to be. Jesus did not come to provide us with a secret code by which to decipher the mysteries of reality. He came rather to illuminate what is already visible, tangible and familiar within our ordinary human experience.

Indeed, Jesus is much like a good teacher who guides us in the reading of a classic text, calling attention to its most important passages, while turning us away from what is trivial and insignificant. We learn to read the book with wholly different eyes and to reflect on it in a wholly different spirit.

Some of the Fathers of the Church compared Jesus to a singer with a strong voice and a perfect pitch who joins a discordant choir and completely transforms it. It is not that Jesus gave us a different set of songs to sing, but helped us instead to perform our standard repertoire in an entirely new and more beautiful way.

Christmas is a time for remembering that, and for moving upward with him on the spiral of liturgy and life.

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

Jesus was clear about killing enemy

To the editor:

We appreciate Rob Cullivan's coverage of the trial of "The Ash Wednesday 13," arrested for praying within the Federal Building that our nation would turn away from war against Iraq.

Christians are called to boldly proclaim Jesus' requirement of unconditional, nonviolent love of enemies. To do so, and to expect our Church leaders to do so, is neither unrealistic nor violent. Indeed, abdication of the Christian responsibility to teach this command has left a trail of suffering and death across the globe.

Jesus' "Kingdom values" were so offensive to contemporary religious leaders that they demanded his execution. Today, Jesus' commandments remain a stumbling block to those who would compromise or nuance to near-extinction His unequivocal prohibitions against killing our enemies.

Moral theologian Father Bernard Haring stated, "The goal (of the church) cannot be a perpetrated ethical pluralism, but (rather) a solitary option for nonviolent defense." Biblical expert, John L. McKenzie, SJ, stated, "The people see at once the 'way' of Jesus is very hard to do, but easy to understand. It takes cleverness and sophisticated intelligence to find ways to evade and distort the clear meaning of what Jesus said, and to find reasons why His

words are not applicable to a more advanced and sophisticated culture ... Complexity is the last refuge of scoundrels."

It is erroneous to cite Joan of Arc, saint and warrior, to prove the acceptability of justified violence. The sanctity of Joan of Arc, an illiterate girl unable to read sacred Scripture, rests not on her theological correctness, but rather on her heroic fidelity to what she believed was God's will.

Because all, except Mary and Jesus, have been sinners, Dorothy Day's insightful comment applies: "If you (knowingly) follow a saint in what they do that is non-Christlike, you go to hell."

Fidelity to Jesus' way is the Christian's pathway to holiness.

Jan Bezila
 Highland Avenue
 Rochester

Gift of faith worth price

To the editor:

I had the opportunity the other day to attend morning prayers at my children's school, St. Michael's in Penn Yan. My middle son, who is in first grade, was doing a reading for the first time, and he wanted me to hear him.

As I stood in the background and watched the children — gathered together, hands folded, asking God's blessings for their concerns: a pet cat, a grandma, a brother who is sick — I was overcome with emotion. It's hard to explain. I guess, it's the simplicity or the honesty of the kids' faith. The beauty of them praying never fails to move me.

Occasionally throughout the year, my husband and I debate the financial burden of Catholic School. The conversation usually starts out with, "If we weren't paying for tuition we could ..." and then ends with whatever topic is currently on our minds, "send the boys to lacrosse camp, buy a camper and scrap our old tent, even buy a new sofa." Yet I know deep in my heart,

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