

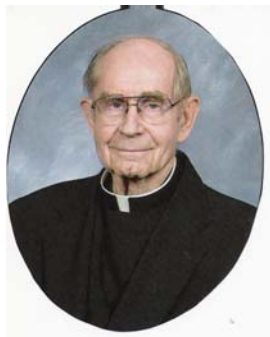
Justice Theme
Homily Aids
for Sunday Liturgies

C Cycle

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

End times Perspective (E.P)

Jeremiah 33:14-16 "The Lord our Justice"

Thessalonians 3:12, 4:2 The Coming of our Lord Jesus

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 "... People will see the Son of Man coming with great power and glory."

This is the time of year when the Church in its liturgies keeps the end times in our awareness through the Feasts of All Saints, All Souls, the last Sundays of the year, and the First Sunday of Advent. I like to call this awareness the eschatological perspective, or E.P. for short.

In Catholic teaching, E.P. includes the second coming of Christ, the resurrection, judgment and the end of human history, as we know it.

Some might say, "Why concentrate on the end times? Why not concentrate on our life now?"

My answer is that E.P. has a great deal to do with our lives now. E.P. makes a big difference now. I sometimes pray my personal prayers in St. Mary's Cemetery in Red Lake, Minnesota, while walking around the cemetery. One of my friends asked, "Why pray in the cemetery." I answered, "For three reasons: It's quiet here, I'm reminded to pray for our deceased people and I'm reminded of my own mortality." I need this healthy reminder because it helps me keep important things in mind at the present time in my life. So also, the end times perspective reminds us of who we are, where we came from, where we are going and what's really important now with that perspective in mind. An example—a college student who maintains a graduation and profession perspective is likely to utilize well his/her times through college days and years.

I like to consider E.P. with the paradigm of life as a treasure hunt. Many of us — maybe most—get caught up in the interests and activities of day-to-day life that we easily forget important priorities and concentrate on fool's gold—shallow values that are relatively unimportant. E.P. can bring us back to the real and lasting values priorities.

I think that St. Paul had something like this in mind when he wrote Philippians 3:8:

“For his (Christ’s) sake I consider all things as so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”

A treasure is what we spend our time, mind and money on. Jesus puts it his way:

“Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy ... for where your treasure is your heart will also be.” (Matthew 6:20-21)

I ask my readers, and myself “What are our treasures? On what are we spending our time, mind and money?”

A final and very important question—“What does end times perspective have to do with justice and nonviolence?” A lot! When we keep our mortality and the end times in mind, we are more likely to make better value and faith decisions today in our lives. We are more likely to live for others, do justice in working for human rights, and to strive to do the will of God. We are more likely to overcome the temptations to greed, racism and other forms of selfishness and violence.

So—with an eschatological perspective, it’s easier to remember what life’s all about and, as St. Paul advises, to “keep our eyes on Jesus.”

* * * * *

“Unless enmities and hatred are put away and firm, honest agreement concerning world peace are reached in the future, humanity, which already is in the middle of a grave crisis, even though it is endowed with remarkable knowledge, will perhaps be brought to that dismal hour in which it will experience no peace other than the dreadful peace of death.” Gaudium Et Spes, 82.3

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Justice and Liberation

Baruch 5: 1-9 "...peace of Justice" "...with His Mercy and justice"

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11 "...rich in the harvest of justice"

Luke 3:1-6 "Make ready the Day of the Lord."

Liberation of the People

"A herald's voice in the desert crying, "Make ready the way of the Lord, clear him a straight path. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be leveled. The windings shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth, and all human-kind shall see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:4-6)

This passage, quoted by Luke from Isaiah the prophet, is originally about the end of the Babylonian Captivity (587-538 BC) of the Hebrew people. This prophecy, found in Isaiah (see The New American Bible, Mark 1:2-3), is about God leading his people out of Babylon to their own land. This is about liberation of the people from Babylon, a symbol of unfaithfulness and evil (Book of Revelation).

The first reading for this Sunday (Baruch 5:1-9) is also a prophecy about the glory of Jerusalem when the people returned from exile.

Coming back now to the Gospel reading with quotations from Isaiah, Luke compares John the Baptizer to the original "herald's voice in the desert." John is now preparing the way for the Lord, the promised Messiah who comes to liberate the people from the slavery and captivity of sin as Yahweh liberated the people in history from the slavery of Egypt and the captivity in Babylon.

In short, the Second Sunday of Advent is about liberation. As we apply this message of liberation to the people of today, we recognize that we also need liberation through Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah. Today, we are bound by various forms of slavery and are in need of liberation from our present kinds of captivity. We, in our various addictions, need the liberating grace of Christ to recover from, be freed from our debilities, paralyzing addictions to alcohol, other drugs, abusive sexual habits and, especially, from the destructive addiction to wealth. Today, we also need liberation from economic selfishness, from pervasive violence in our "culture of death" and from the

imprisonment of our “terrible sin” of racism.

Liberation is an appropriate and very relevant theme for Advent, the Coming of Christ, the liberator of the people.

Jesus said to those who believed in him, “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciple, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

(John 8:31-32)

* * * * *

“In devising more effective arrangements for pursuing international economic justice, the overriding problem is how to get from where we are to where we ought to be. Progress toward that goal demands positive and often difficult action by corporations, banks, labor unions, governments, and other major actors on the international stage. But whatever the difficulty, the need to give priority to alleviating poverty in developing countries is undeniable; and the cost of continued inaction can be counted in human lives lost or stunted, talents wasted, opportunities foregone, misery and suffering prolonged, and injustice condoned.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 324

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Rejoice Sunday—Advent/Christmas Sharing

Zephaniah 3:14-18 “The Lord Your God is in your midst”

Philippians 4:4-7 “Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again, Rejoice!”

Luke 3:10-18 “Let the person with two coats give to one who has none.”

“Rejoice always, never cease praying, render constant thanks; such is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

I wrote this on a Third Sunday of Advent, past—Rejoice Sunday. I rejoice this Advent and Christmas season—and I am thankful. I’m a rich man.

When I got up this morning, I was grateful that I could get up on my own. Even though I am aging, I didn’t need help. I got out of a warm bed with blankets to spare, in a warm room with a floor and carpets and electric lights. In our house, we have running water, hot and cold. So I was able to take a hot shower and dress with good clean clothes. We take these blessings for granted. Most of the people of the world don’t have beds, plenty of blankets, automatic heating units and indoor running water.

I rejoice and thank God for a lot of other gifts and blessings that we take for granted. After dressing this morning, I came down to our well-equipped kitchen and made a cup of coffee in our microwave oven. Coffee is a pure luxury, very expensive and devoid of nourishment, but I love it. I made a tasty breakfast with food found abundantly in our refrigerator and cupboards. My decision was a matter of choosing among several options of food for breakfast. I do not have the problem some people have: whether or not there will be enough food for breakfast. I rejoice and thank God for these gifts. I’m a rich, gifted and privileged person.

After breakfast, I read some of my prayers from the Church’s official prayer book and I read a Sunday newspaper. Many can’t read and many cannot even see. Most people can’t afford a daily newspaper. I rejoice and am grateful for the ability to see and read and to afford newspapers.

I rejoice and am grateful for my car. It started immediately because I also have the luxury of a garage. As I drove to a mission Church for Sunday Mass, I listened to the

news and some music on my car radio. I remembered that some people do not have a car, a radio or the gift of hearing.

I rejoice, too, and am grateful for health insurance and good health, for 23 years of formal education and for a TV set for news updates or for entertainment.

I am especially grateful and joyful for this time of year, for Advent and Christmas, a time for parties and good food, turkey and ham, candy and cookies, pie and ice-cream—gifts that are easily taken for granted, Christmas after Christmas. Most people in our world can't afford the seasonal exchange of gifts and sometimes they rejoice and are grateful for much simpler and low-cost gifts.

I am richer than 80% of the world's people. In the rich United States, one in every four or five children is born into poverty. The number of people visiting homeless shelters and food shelters is growing, partly because of the dearth of compassion in the so-called welfare "reforms" that do not help the poor as much as they help the affluent to pay less tax.

I rejoice and am grateful that I do not have to receive welfare aid or beg for help. I rejoice that I have a surplus of resources so that I am able to give and do not have to receive those necessities from others.

Beyond the rich United States, about 60,000 people die daily of the effects of poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate health care and polluted water. I rejoice that I am not destitute and sick. I rejoice that I can afford to bring some rejoicing to some people who have little to rejoice over or be thankful for. I rejoice that I am able to stand in for Santa Claus who seldom finds the houses of the destitute.

I write these thoughts, not to cause people to feel guilty. Guilt is not a very effective motivator. Love and compassion are a much better motivator for helping us to reach out to others and serve them in a loving way.

I need to remind myself from time to time of Jesus' words: to also "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" when we celebrate with a party. I suspect that there would be a lot less suffering and a lot more joy in our world if we took Jesus' words seriously. His Gospel is truly good news when compared with the Gospel of Santa Claus—a gospel of self-serving for those who are economically comfortable.

Rejoice in the Good News of Jesus.

* * * * *

“What are less than human conditions? The material poverty of those who lack the bare necessities of life, and the moral poverty of those who are crushed under the weight of their own self-love; oppressive political of power, from the exploitation of the worker or unjust transactions. What are truly human conditions? The rise from poverty to the acquisition of life’s necessities; the elimination of social ills; broadening the horizons of knowledge; acquiring refinement and culture. From there one can go on to acquire a growing awareness of other people’s dignity, a taste for the spirit of poverty, an active interest in the common good, and a desire for peace.”

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL

CHRISTMAS MASSES

Midnight: Messianic Reign of Justice

Isaiah 9:1-5 Culture of death and light of hope

Psalm 9 Messianic Reign of hope and justice

Luke 2:1-14 Jesus born in simplicity and poverty

Mass During the Day: Darkness of Sin and the Light of Life

John 1:1-18 "The light shines in darkness..."

"Peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14)

The celebration of the Christmas mystery continues now. The Incarnation is now, still going on. Jesus continues to be born among us and in us now. Emmanuel is still "God with us."

An appropriate song for the Christmas season is the song that begins with "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." If peace does not "begin with me" it is not likely that it will be achieved by nations. If nonviolence does become a real part of my own faith-life then I shall have become a more integral person, a more authentic disciple of Christ even though peace is not attained at the international level.

Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychologist, has published a book entitled, The Violence Within. Tournier convincingly argues for the universality of violent aggressive tendencies in people and he develops his conviction that violence is progressive and escalatory unless checked. However, violence is not the bottom line for Tournier; it is power desired for self-interest. He is convinced that bluntly or subtly, most of us—maybe all of us—trap ourselves in power games, through the pursuit of wealth, status, popularity, and achievement in competition. This happens to people in families, in commerce, in nations, as well as in the Church. To Tournier's "power," I would add "fear" as a dominant root of personal violence—fear arising from threatened self-interest, fear of powerlessness and vulnerability.

According to Tournier, voluntary relinquishment of power and control is an essential step if we are to move toward a nonviolent way of life. The author sees Jesus' nonviolence as voluntary relinquishment of power under personal attack. In the Gospel, Jesus did not let go of His personal power when love and the welfare of others called for a power-response. He did abandon power-responses when power would have been

used for personal aggrandizement.

As I indicated above, fear is also a source of violent behavior. If we are to grow in Gospel-nonviolence, we need to shift our security base from one of self-protection to trust in Christ. This kind of shift is a process involving Gospel-meditation, prayer, and Christ's healing grace. It took the Apostles some time, struggle, and the coming of the Spirit to make this shift.

In Chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel, James and John sought position and power. The Apostles did not understand Jesus' reply:

“Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first must serve the needs of all. The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve—to give his life in ransom for the many. (Mark 10:43-45)

Henri J. M. Nouwen also deals with this personal violence in his book: Intimacy.

Chapter 2, “The Challenge to Love.” Both authors point out how Jesus voluntarily renounces power—all power that aims at self-aggrandizement, and allows Himself to be completely vulnerable, out of love, in the incarnation and crucifixion. Henri Nouwen develops his thesis that mature, deep love is only possible within the fellowship of vulnerability—the fellowship of the weak.

In this meditation, Nouwen sees the Incarnation, visualized in the manger scene, as God's expression of love for us—his risking vulnerability to be with us—to be one of us. The risk was real for we know that it brought the disarmed, vulnerable Jesus to the wood of the cross. We also know from the Gospel, that we are called to the same personal disarmament and to the fellowship of the “weak.” Jesus said:

“If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps. Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's, will preserve it.”
(Mark 8:34-35)

Christmas

Midnight Mass: Messianic Reign of Justice

Isaiah 9:1-5 The culture of death and light of hope

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.
(Isaiah 9:1)

The people of the Old Testament “walked in the darkness” of Egyptian slavery, desert hardships, and Babylonian exile. They longed for the coming of the Messiah to liberate them.

Today, we still walk and dwell in a “land of gloom,” a “culture of violence and death.” We still need the Christ, our light of hope, to free us from sin in the Messianic reign of justice and nonviolence. We long for the “Prince of Peace.”

Christmas

Mass During the Day: Darkness of sin and the Light of Life

“The light shines in darkness.” (John 1:5)

Homily reflections from the midnight Mass would be appropriate.

* * * * *

“At the center of the Church’s teaching on peace and at the center of all Catholic social teaching are the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person. The human person is the clearest reflection of God’s presence in the world; all of the Church’s work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person.”

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE, 15

SUNDAY IN THE OCTAVE OF CHRISTMAS—HOLY FAMILY

Sources of Nonviolence

Colossians 3:12-21 “Christ’s peace must reign in your hearts ...”

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 Holy Family exiled and homeless

“Put on, then, as God’s chosen ones ... heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another ... as the Lord has forgiven you And over all those put on love And let the peace of Christ control your hearts”
(Colossians 3:12-15)

Nonviolence in Families and Other Small Communities

Our dominant culture considers the above virtues recommended by Saint Paul to be the weak virtues. I consider them to be the strong virtues, absolutely necessary for nonviolence in human relations. In this nation, families are the center of more violence than any other small community.

In family and other small communities, conflicts will almost inevitably turn into abuse and hurt—violence in action or word—unless these strong virtues are practiced. Without patience, anger takes over and without gentleness and kindness, hurt and harshness rule the day. Without humility, arrogance and domination contaminate the relationships and without compassion, selfishness leads to hurt and harm. Without these “strong” virtues, war usually ensues—either hot or cold war.

I am very acutely aware that consistent nonviolence is very difficult. I have been around long enough to realize that there are a lot of “difficult” people and that each of us is capable of being “difficult.”

Some defend themselves by saying, “I’m not violent. I don’t hit people.” Such persons sometimes forget that words and attitudes can be as destructive as actions.

A friend of mind once asked: “Father Bill, how can you love someone you can’t stand?” It’s helpful to remember that Saint Paul is talking about Gospel love called agape. Agape is more of a decision than a feeling. This kind of love does not demand that we like difficult people. It does demand that we abstain from hurting and continue to forgive and respect even people whom we do not particularly like. Agape calls us to

serve and help persons, even when we do not particularly like them. It also calls us to avoid hurting and to keep forgiving people. I suspect that Jesus did not like the people who crucified Him, but He did forgive them. That's agape.

Following are a few hints for avoiding violence in families and other face-to-face communities:

1. Face it! Negotiate
2. Forgive and forgive and forgive
3. Remember, the only person that I can change is myself.
4. Win/lose equals all lose. Win/win equals all win.
5. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
6. Think! Do I have the same faults?
7. Learn a safe, fair way to unload anger.
8. If you fight, fight fair—to express but not to hurt.
9. Laugh! A sense of humor gives perspective.
10. Pray, pray, pray—for self and people we find it hard to accept.
11. Remember! Violence is not only evil, it's stupid. The violator hurts him/herself.
12. Live humbly, compassionately, patiently, kindly, gently, and forgive, forgive, forgive.

I call these my twelve steps for recovering from violence in small communities.

EPIPHANY

Justice and Gift-Giving

Psalm 72: "Justice shall flower and profound peace..."

Matthew 2:1-12 Gifts, love and justice

"The angel said to Joseph, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt. ... Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.'" (Matthew 2:13)

The Crib and the Cross

The threat to the life of Jesus by Herod and the power establishment, and the exile in Egypt while He was still a crib infant are previews of the later rejection of Jesus summarized in the experience of the cross.

Given a world in which human power is an obsession, when greed is rampant, and violence too often prevails, the message of the Crib and the Cross is the only wisdom that can cut through the vicious circle of injustice and violence in our world. This is the absurd message: that the Son of God relinquishes all power except the power to heal, serve and save. No wonder Jesus was and is considered absurd by a world that worships wealth and seeks power by any and all means.

"The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."
(1 Corinthians 1:25)

This is the life-giving, liberating paradox of the Crib and the Cross. It is difficult to understand and appreciate this paradox, this absurd kind of wisdom except in story form.

In the Book of Exodus, it was the weak and powerless Israel that prevailed over powerful Egypt—by the wisdom and power of God.

It was the weakened and stripped Job who prevailed over the power of Satan through faithfulness to YAHWEH.

It was John the Baptist, an absurd figure in the desert who prevailed, in the long run, over King Herod. Herod's kingdom is long gone while the reign of God, which Christ proclaimed, whose way John prepared, is still alive.

It was the martyrs of ancient Rome who prevailed over the power of the Empire.

The Church rose over the ashes of the empire.

It was a Francis of Assisi, who divested himself of position and wealth and prevailed over the greed and power of a 13th century society—by the foolishness of the Gospel.

It was a Maximillian Kolbe, who, though as an apparently powerless Nazi Concentration Camp prisoner, prevailed over the arrogant, racist power of the Nazis' to bring new life to others through going down into the pit of death with Christ.

It was Mahatma Ghandi, a Hindu, but one who knew and believed in Christ Crucified, who prevailed in India over the powerful British Colonial Empire.

It was Jesus, Son of God, born in a barn and executed on the cross, who retained only the power to serve, heal, suffer, and die—who will prevail over all the Kingdoms of this world.

“We speak God’s wisdom, mysterious, hidden ... which none of the rulers of this age know” (1 Corinthians 2:7-8)

Would that the brokers of power in government, church and other segments of human society in today’s world had a deep appreciation of the absurdity of the “Crib and the Cross,” the wisdom of the foolish, the strength of the weak, and the foolishness of the Gospel. We would have a much less greedy and less violent world.

The Kingdom that Christ proclaimed is a Kingdom of the “foolish” and the “weak”—a Kingdom of the powerless.

“God chose the foolish of this world to shame the wise and God chose the weak of this world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing to reduce to nothing those who are something.”
(1 Corinthians 1:27-28)

See *“Beatitudes”* or *“Charter of God’s Kingdom”*

The manger crib in the stable cave held the body of the infant Savior; the Calvary Cross held the body of our Savior Lord, in the fulfillment of this Christmas mystery.

The crib and cross were made of humble wood, but they held the Lord of the Universe. We can also hold the Lord in us if our hearts are humble.

(Some of the thoughts for Epiphany were borrowed from another source and I cannot find that source to give credit.)

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Liberation Through Jesus

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 "Justice to the nations"

Acts 10:34-38 "...God shows no partiality."

This is the first of four "Servant of the Lord" songs in Isaiah.

"Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased." Jesus, baptized in the Jordan River, is called to be a servant of the people—indeed the Suffering Servant, "the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

He also makes it clear that his followers are to be servants of the people. What kind of service? Isaiah clarifies.

"A light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness." (Isaiah 42:7)

In this same reading, Isaiah states "he shall bring forth justice to the nations."

In the second reading for this festival (Acts 10:34-38) St Luke relates how Peter says:

"I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality. Rather the man (or woman) of any nation who fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to Him."

I would add that if "God shows no partiality, "we would be wise to act in the same way. Still, we know that there are many baptized persons who show a great deal of partiality by thought, prejudice and the "terrible sin" of racism. This kind of exclusion of God's people is unfaithfulness to the baptismal vows.

Peter's words above remind me of Paul's statement about Baptism:

"For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28)

Baptism is a covenant between God, the person baptized and the Christian community. A covenant is a solemn agreement and commitment between God and his

people. The baptismal vows assume that Christians listen carefully and do their best to follow Him, not only in his teachings that we find comforting, but also in His difficult demands—the taking up of our own crosses. Forgiving others is not easy and we often choose to be selective when it comes to issues of institutional violence such as poverty, war, wealth, capital punishment and abortion. It is the hard choices that test our faith, our baptismal commitment.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word sedagah (justice/righteousness) has a broader meaning than our word “justice.” It means right relationships within the covenant community. Sedagah should influence all of our relationships with all people, for all are God’s people.

* * * * *

“As his first gift to his followers, the risen Jesus gave his gift of peace. This gift permeated the meetings between the risen Jesus and his followers. (John 20: 29-29)

So intense was that gift and so abiding was its power that the remembrance of that gift and the daily living of it became the hallmark of the community of faith. Simultaneously, Jesus gave his spirit to those who followed him. These two personal and communal gifts are inseparable. In the spirit of Jesus the community of believers was enabled to recognize and to proclaim the savior of the world.”

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE, 52

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

The Church –The Body of Christ: Unity/*Anawim*/Jubilee

1 Corinthians 12:12-30 “You are the Body of Christ”

Luke 4:14-21 “Glad tidings to the poor”

Optional Theme: The Body of Christ/Good News for the Poor

“He (Jesus at Nazareth) unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.’”

Good News for the Poor

Early in his public life in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus gave his inaugural address as the Messiah, the Promised One of God. He very concisely presents the priorities of his messianic mission in a quotation from Isaiah. (Isaiah 61:1-2) Jesus is saying that the *ANAWIM* (the sick, the poor, the oppressed, the powerless ones) will be the highest priority in his ministry. All the people mentioned are *ANAWIM*—the poor, the slaves, the blind, and the oppressed. He ends with a proclamation of a jubilee year. The main issues of a jubilee year were works of justice for the *ANAWIM*. (Leviticus 25)

In this Old Testament, the *ANAWIM* most frequently mentioned were orphans, widows, and strangers. In the New Testament it was the sick, the lepers, the poor, the blind, the lame—always the powerless ones.

This same inaugural message of Jesus as the Christ is repeated in Luke 7:18-23.

If this is the priority of Jesus’ messianic ministry, then surely this should also be the highest priority of the ministry of the Church. Certainly, all the people of all social and economic levels are the concern of Jesus, but the ones most in need are first in priority.

Optional Theme: The Body of Christ/Good News for the Poor
1 Corinthians 12:12-30 "You are the Body of Christ"

In five of the biblical letters attributed to St. Paul, the author speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ. He uses this metaphor to help his readers perceive the Church more as an organism than as an organization. Paul wants us to understand the unity within the Church, unity among members and unity between the community and Christ to be similar to that of the organismic unity of parts in an organism. Paul views Christ as the head of this mystical body.

Some of the implications of this teaching are that:

We treat Christ according to the way we treat other members of the body, the Church. "Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers (or sisters) of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

We are committed to love one another as Jesus loves us.

"I am the vine, you are the branches Love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:5, 12)

Following are some questions to consider in the light of Paul's teaching about the Body of Christ:

1. What does this teaching imply about racism and prejudice? Health-care laws? The minimum wage? Violence? War? Execution of criminals? Forgiving others? Sex abuse? Exploitation of non-union workers in the third world countries? About the homeless people on the streets?
2. What is meant by the saying, "Christ is crucified today?"
3. What are my moral responsibilities as a citizen? Do my political responsibilities have anything to do with my relationship with Christ?
4. What does it mean to say that I am/you are another Christ.
5. What is meant by the phrase, "The Whole Christ?"

As I remember this news story, in 1954 Archbishop Rummel was the Archbishop of New Orleans. Outside New Orleans was a small Catholic Church in an all white community. The Mission Church had no resident pastor. On one weekend a black,

African American priest was assigned to offer the Mass in this church. When the priest walked in the people walked out. When the priest then came out, the people were courteous to him but told him that they insisted on having a white priest. Father responded by saying that he would relay their wishes to the Archbishop. This he did. The following week, Archbishop Rummel visited the Church and after some discussion with the people, explained to them the meaning of the Church as the Body of Christ with the explanation that if they would not worship with a black priest, they were unworthy to worship with Christ. I have forgotten how the story ended.

* * * * *

“The principle of social solidarity suggests that alleviating poverty will require fundamental changes on social and economic structures that perpetuate glaring inequalities and cut off millions of citizens from full participation in the economic and social life of the nation. The process of change should be one that draws together all citizens, whatever their economic status, into one community.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL 187

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Love

1 Corinthians 12:31, 13:4-13 "So faith, hope, love remains, but the greatest of these is love"

Optional Theme: "Agape and Pro-Life"

Is Social Service a Band-Aid?

Mother Theresa of Calcutta was criticized for focusing her social ministry on direct, charitable service to those who are destitute from poverty and sickness. Her critics say that she should have concentrated more on changing the social systems that cause injustice, poverty, hunger, illness and lack of privilege.

This critique highlights the oversimplified dichotomy between direct, charitable service to persons in need on one side (sometimes called Band-Aids) and social action (advocacy) to bring about systemic social change that gets to the roots and causes of injustice such as poverty, hunger, inadequate health-care, etc.

Dorothy Day and Peter Morin recognized that both justice and charity are essentials for Christian ministry and the good of the people. The Catholic Worker Movement started by Dorothy and Peter do both: serve the people directly, especially the hungry and homeless as well as work for social change, challenging government and society to change the social systems that cause injustice.

To dichotomize justice and charity is a gross oversimplification of the issues. Most works of social charity are spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Many are also acts of justice. If my neighbor's family is poor and in need of food, I have an obligation, not only in charity, but also in justice, to help that family to get food. Eating, like health-care and other necessities of human life, are human rights and rights are a matter of justice.

Some say that government agencies and large corporations will not help with service emergencies as well as social advocacy as long as the Church is moving into the gap and taking public agencies off the hook. There may be some truth to this, but I doubt the truth of this criticism. Before the Church and other volunteers took the initiative to start food shelves, food lines and homeless shelters, government agencies

were not helping enough. That's why the Church and volunteer groups took action.

The real problem is that it is easier to motivate Churches and groups to get involved with direct charity and social service projects than to take on the more difficult work of changing the social systems that are causing the problems. This latter activity is an even more important social justice ministry in the long run. As I have/will explain in another article, parishes must be involved in justice/charity ministry to be authentically Christian. However, parish groups need to go beyond their service projects to include educational and political system-change projects in their social scope and goals.

Finally, I want to suggest five reasons why direct service to individual persons in need should not be neglected in favor of broader and deeper social change ministry.

1. Direct acts of love to people in need are Gospel demands
2. Direct services help people grow in compassion for those who suffer, and compassion (along with anger at injustice) is a necessary motivator for sustained social work for social changes.
3. Social change advocacy takes a long time to accomplish. In the meantime, people are suffering intensely and need help now.
4. Relieving suffering is never a small thing. Love heals.
5. Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and helping people find the satisfaction of basic human needs are acts of justice as well as charity. These are human rights and human rights are a matter of justice. The so-called Band-Aids are usually demands of justice as well as of love.

Examples of direct service and social change projects:

Direct Service

- (1) Food Shelf
- (2) Homeless Shelter
- (3) Service to women in problem pregnancies
- (4) Death row visitation
- (5) Aid to poor persons
- (6) Visiting the sick

Social Change

- (1) Bread for the World
- (2) Political action to end violence
- (3) Right of life political advocacy
- (4) Advocacy to change capital punishment
- (5) Political action to alleviate poverty
- (6) Better health-care policies

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“The principle of participation leads us to the conviction that the most appropriate and fundamental solutions to poverty will be those that enable people to take control of their own lives. For poverty is not merely the lack of adequate financial resources. It entails a more profound kind of deprivation, a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one’s life. It means being powerless in a way that assaults not only one’s pocketbook but also one’s fundamental human dignity. Therefore, we should seek solutions that enable the poor to help themselves through such means as employment. Paternalistic programs which do too much for and too little with the poor are to be avoided.”

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 188

Optional Theme: Agape and Pro-Life

“So, faith, hope and love remain, these three,
but the greatest of these is love.”(1 Corinthians 13:13)

Agape is a Greek word for New Testament love: unconditional love/acceptance, love of service, a decision to help, forgive, to serve. Agape is not the same as other forms of love such as romantic love, friendship love and family love. Agape is not mainly emotional; it is a decision to serve and to forgive whether we like or not like the person loved.

Agape is the love that Jesus gave and recommended in the New Testament.
Pro-life actions are examples of agape:

1. Respect for the lives of unborn children. Abortion is not love; abortion is great sin. However, respect for children already born who are destitute, abused, hungry, homeless and neglected is also agape. The love of children already born is just as important as the love of children in the womb.
2. Respect for people trapped in poverty; “poverty is a weapon of mass destruction.” (James Forbes) Poverty accounts for the largest death count after abortion.
3. Respect for people who are ill, especially those who are seriously ill, such as people with AIDS and other serious diseases.
4. Respect for people trapped in the violence of war, such as those killed or wounded in Afghanistan, Iraq and Darfur, Sudan.
5. Respect for the lives of criminals threatened by capital punishment, including Alfonso Rodriguez and Saddam Hussein.
6. Care and forgiveness for one another in families and work places.

Besides these forms of pro-life under a consistent ethic of life, agape certainly also includes forgiveness by people who have been injured or offended - - the kind of forgiveness that Jesus offered his killers and the kind of forgiveness that Jesus recommended in his teachings.

Agape is a tough kind of love - - not tough on the one loved but on the lover who offers help and forgiveness to those who are unlovable or undeserving of love. This is

the kind of love that Jesus offered to his enemies.

Agape is Biblical love. Agape is a kind of love that Jesus recommended at the Last Supper in John's Gospel: "Love one another as I have loved you."

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Nonviolence/Love enemies

Luke 6:27-38 Sermon on the Mount “Love your enemies”

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”
(Luke 6:27-28)

If I am to love “an enemy,” I have to forgive that person. “I know that I must forgive, but how do I do it? I want to but I don’t want to. I can’t. My wounds are still raw. My hurt and anger are so deep. Am I barred from receiving Holy Communion? What can I do?”

These are feelings and questions that many people feel and ask themselves. When anger and loathing, and even hatred and desire to get even are deep, the feeling that “I can’t forgive” seems very real. The stress can become very acute when one knows that he/she must forgive and, at the same time, feels that it is impossible to do so.

The first step toward a solution is to realize that forgiving is not a once and forever experience. **FORGIVING IS A PROCESS.** The process may be a short one, or it may take a long time. The important thing for the present is that one needs to **START THE PROCESS.** Just asking the question: “what can I do?” may be a start.

“Does forgiving mean that I must learn to like a person who hurts me?” No! But it does mean that I will eventually be able to give up wanting to hurt the one who hurt me.

Besides learning that **FORGIVING IS A PROCESS**, a second important step is to understand that **FORGIVING OTHERS IS FOR MY GOOD AS WELL**—to help me be a happier, freer person. Refusal or inability to forgive keeps me angry and imprisoned in dark and hurtful thoughts and emotions. I may think that I am refusing to forgive because this refusal punishes and controls my enemy. In reality, it affects my enemy less than it does me. An unforgiving attitude punishes me and allows the original hurt, and hence, my enemy to still control me.

The third simple step in the forgiving process is prayer. I may not as yet be able to pray for the person who did me harm. I may not as yet be able to pray for the grace to

forgive. I may not even want to forgive. Then, I need to start praying like this:

“Loving God, I can’t seem to forgive. To be honest, I don’t even want to forgive. Please help me to at least start wanting to forgive. I need your help. I feel helpless in my anger and wanting to get even. Help me in my helplessness.”

If I can pray for help to want to forgive, I’ve started the process and I’ll probably eventually be okay because I’m on my way to forgiving and loving my enemies. Hopefully, I may be able to move, in this process, from praying for myself to praying for those who hurt me. If I pray for the person who hurt me, I am ready for Holy Communion.

In this homily, I have drawn heavily from The Process of Forgiveness, by William A. Meninger, a monk of St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, Continuum Publishing Company, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY.

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“It is to be hoped that individuals, social organizations and nations will join hands as brothers and sisters—the strong aiding the weak—all contributing their knowledge, their enthusiasm and their love to the task, without thinking of their own convenience. It is people who are motivated by their genuine love, more than anyone else, who pit their intelligence against the problems of poverty, trying to uncover the causes and looking for effective ways of combating and overcoming them. As promoters of peace, ‘they go on their way, holding aloft the torch of joy and shedding light and grace on the hearts of people all over the world; they help them to cross the barriers of geographical frontiers, to acknowledge everyone as friend and as brother and sister.’”

POPULORUM PROGRESSIO, 75

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Listen to Him

John 10:27 "My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me."

Luke 9:28-36 "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him."

"Listen to him!" It's not always easy to listen to Jesus. Living in a "trigger happy" culture of violence, the voice of the culture is often louder than the voice of Jesus or the Church. This is especially true in regard to institutionalized, legal violence. Many Catholics and other Church-going people are more strongly influenced by the culture than by the teachings of Jesus and the Church in attitudes toward money, maximization of profits, care for most vulnerable people (children, the poor, the sick, the handicapped, etc.) I am convinced that this is true in regard to war, welfare, and capital punishment, care of the earth-environment, abortion, and racism. Television is one of the strongest voices for young and old, expressing the values of our culture of violence.

How can we learn to "listen to Jesus?" Mainly through listening to and reading Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, prayer, and Holy Communion. To really hear Jesus is to read the Gospels prayerfully. By "prayerfully," I mean praying to the Holy Spirit to help us to hear Jesus, as the Spirit wants us to hear, and by praying after reading or hearing for the Spiritual help to live what we read and hear.

In Baptism, and especially in Confirmation, we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, understanding, knowledge, good judgment, courage, faithfulness and respectful fear of God. These are the gifts that we need in listening to Jesus.

"Let this mind be in you which is also in Christ Jesus" to think and live in harmony with Jesus.

When we love a person deeply, we try to listen to that person carefully—we allow ourselves to be strongly influenced by the ones we love. So with Jesus; as we develop or allow Jesus to develop within us a personal loving relationship with Jesus, it becomes easier to listen to him very carefully—and lovingly.

* * * * *

“The pattern of Christian life as presented in the Gospel of Luke has special relevance today. The first public utterance of Jesus is “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.” (Luke 6:24) Jesus adds to the blessing on the poor a warning, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” (Luke 6:24) He warns his followers against greed and reliance on abundant possessions and underscores this by the parable of the man whose life is snatched away at the very moment he tries to secure his wealth. (Luke 12:13-21) In Luke alone, Jesus tells the parable of the rich man who does not see the poor and suffering Lazarus at his gate. (Luke 16:19-21) When the rich man finally ‘sees’ Lazarus, it is from the place of torment and the opportunity for conversion has passed.”

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 48

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Sexual Injustice/Gender Injustice

John 8:1-11 "The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery."

The story is thought to be a later insertion to the Gospel according to John. However, the Church considers the passage to be canonical and inspired.

Even though adultery is a major theme in the story and even though adultery is an act of injustice against the spouse/spouses of those who committed the sin of adultery, adultery is not the main issue in the story. Abuse of authority and intervention to help the woman are the significant issues here.

The scribes and Pharisees brought and humiliated the woman in public in order to trap Jesus and discredit him. If Jesus allows the execution of the woman, Jesus will appear to the people to be discredited since he has been teaching compassion and forgiveness. If he advises against execution, he will be accused of ignoring the Law of Moses. Jesus' wisdom and compassion are too much for the scribes and Pharisees who abuse their authority in caring nothing for the woman while trying to use her (using people is violence) to silence and to discredit Jesus in the presence of the people.

Another important issue here is that Jesus forgives and affirms a woman who made mistakes, who sinned seriously. He also discredits the men who held power in the presence of the people. He upheld the value of one woman against a group of males who had no concern for the woman. To the scribes and Pharisees women and outcasts are expendable.

Recently (First Sunday of Lent, 2000) Pope John Paul II asked pardon for sins committed from within the Catholic Church and apologized for them to the world. Women were among those abused or neglected in history, for whom and to whom the Holy Father apologized. Women still are not being treated with equality and dignity as compared with men in both Church and secular society. [Will another Pope in another future generation need to apologize again for the sins against women still being committed in our generation?]

The sins that our Holy Father confessed publicly as sins of members of the

Church, usually done in the name of Christ, were sins of violence against people during the past 2000 years of our history. Most of this violence was instigated by the leaders of our Church who did not understand or who chose to not understand the kind of leadership taught and exemplified by Jesus—a leadership of service. It was Jesus who held out to his followers a leadership of relinquishment of power except to serve, heal, help and save. The leadership of domination is still too much within both Church and state.

* * * * *

“When we accept violence in any form as commonplace, our sensitivities become dulled. When we accept violence, war itself can be taken for granted. Violence has many faces: oppression of the poor, deprivation of basic human rights, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation and pornography, neglect or abuse of the aged and the helpless, and innumerable other acts of inhumanity. Abortion in particular blunts a sense of the sacredness of human life. In a society where the innocent unborn are killed wantonly, how can we expect people to feel righteous revulsion at the act or threat of killing noncombatants in war?”

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE, 285

PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY

The Suffering Servant of Yahweh

Isaiah 50:4-7 Third Servant Song

Philippians 2:6-11 The emptied Servant

Passion according to St. Matthew

“Let this mind be in you which is also in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself taking the form of a slave coming in human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-7)

The mind-blowing reality of this song of the early Church is that Jesus, who emptied himself for us, is the same Person, the Second Person of the Trinity who had all power and knowledge as God. He was Creator of the universe with the Father and the Holy Spirit. With them, he is owner of the earth. He was present as Creator billions of years ago when the spirit moved over the waters. As Jesus The Christ, He emptied himself of all power to dominate. He wanted only the power to heal, to help, to save and to forgive. Why did he empty himself of power? Because he knew that power and material wealth are almost always forms of leadership that harm, violate and often destroy those who are led. He knew that most humanly held power turns to domination, which is a form of violence in itself and almost invariably leads to other forms of violence. In other places in the Christian Scriptures, Jesus taught that his followers had to be suffering-servant leaders. In this same emptying servant song in Philippians, Paul says he took “the form of a slave ... he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death on a cross.” Jesus’ Apostles did not grasp much of this emptying of Jesus until after the first Easter and Pentecost. Finally, they got their own discipleship together and emptied themselves of their own expectations of earthly power and status.

When the Church was without wealth and earthly power during the first three centuries of its life, she was more in touch with the “mind” of Christ than she has been since the fourth century when the Church became aligned with the Roman Empire under Constantine. The Church leadership became enamored of and contaminated by the Empire’s wealth and power.

Today the people of the Church need to take Jesus’ form of leadership seriously

and empty itself of self-aggrandizement by “clinging to power” in its leadership. Hierarchy was not a dominant characteristic of the early Church. Today, we need more emphasis on lower-archy.

In Jesus, the Son of God became a child, born in a barn of a humble mother. Later he became a donkey rider, executed as a criminal, and his body was buried in another person’s tomb. The Incarnation expressed the reality of “emptying.” In the Eucharist, Jesus’ emptying moves from being a human child to becoming “bread—the Bread of Life.”

Our main claim to greatness is the same as it was for Jesus and the Apostles.

“Because of this (obedience to death on a cross—emptying) God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name ... Jesus Christ is Lord.” (Philippians 2:9-11) Jesus made it clear that we need to empty ourselves and take up our crosses.

Wealth and power-seeking is the main cause of violence in our world—our “culture of death.” For this reason, we probably will not find an end to violence until we as individuals, Church and nation; begin to “empty ourselves.”

I suggest that all leaders in the Church or government read Philippians 2:9-11 quite often.

HOLY THURSDAY

Do this in Memory of Me

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 "Do this in memory of Me"

See A Cycle, Appendix E Series: Eucharist and Economic Justice

GOOD FRIDAY

“Judas returned the 30 pieces of silver to the Chief Priests and elders, saying, ‘I have sinned in betraying Innocent blood’ The Chief Priests said, ‘It is not lawful to deposit this in the temple treasury, for it is the price of blood.’”
(Matthew 27: 3-6)

Blood Money

The Judas syndrome is still with us. Betrayal of Christ goes on today. All sins, in some ways are a betrayal of Christ but intentionally doing great harm to others for financial profit is especially the Judas betrayal syndrome. This is true when a person, a group, or a corporation exploits others for profit, especially when the exploited are poor and the exploiter is Christian. Jesus is again betrayed for “30 pieces of silver.” It was Jesus himself who said: “I assure you, as often as you do it to one of my least brothers (or sisters) you do it to me.” (Matthew 25:45)

The Judas syndrome is especially poignant when the betrayer, like Judas, is a friend of Jesus—one who claims to be his follower.

Today betrayal takes place when one who claims to be Christian makes a living and sometimes a great financial profit in a career that hurts people. Following are some examples of betrayal:

The U.S. is the largest weapons merchant in the world. This brings great financial resources to our nation. The people involved in this bloody business are betraying Christ for blood money “30 pieces of silver”. Jesus said: “Put your sword back in its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) Jesus teaches: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” (Matthew 5:9)

There seems to be some betrayal of “the least brothers and sisters” of Jesus in the fact that justice in our court system often depends on the ability of the defendant to afford to hire highly skilled attorneys. Jesus stated: “I was in prison and you did not visit me.” (Matthew 25:43)

Withholding a living wage from an employee in order to maintain an exorbitantly high salary for the employer or manager is betrayal of Christ because it harms the little people for silver. Jesus quoted Isaiah: “He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the

poor.” (Luke 4:18) Jesus asked: “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose one’s own soul?” (Luke 9:25)

Keeping people homeless on our streets and in shelters (children are the fastest growing segment of homeless people) is betrayal. “We the people” who have resources refuse to release enough to eliminate homelessness. This leaves Jesus homeless in our midst on our streets. This is betrayal for money. The betrayed Lord said: “I was a stranger and you gave me no welcome.” (Matthew 25:43)

Still other forms of betrayal by God’s people for financial gain are the following:

- Refusal of health care reform for the poor. Jesus said: “I was sick and you did not care for me.” (Matthew 25:44)
- Making money in the drug trade.
- Polluting the earth and destroying earth’s resources for financial gain.
- Refusing help for the 40,000 children who die daily in our world from malnutrition and other poverty related causes. “I was hungry and you gave me no food.” (Matthew 25:42)
- The American Holocaust of the aboriginal peoples of the Americas (Indian People) for silver, gold, and land. This is betrayal of Christ by Christians for profit.

According to John’s Gospel, the last two sentences of Jesus on the Cross were, “I thirst” and “it is finished.” Millions of people trapped in poverty on earth thirst for clean water and many die in this thirst. So Jesus still thirsts. His death on the cross did bring a “finish” to Jesus’ historical life on earth, but not to the suffering and betrayal that our sins still cause his “least brothers and sisters.” Jesus said: “I was thirsty and you gave me no drink.” (Matthew 25:42)

It is still betrayal of Christ to exploit his “least ones” for “pieces of silver.” “The price of blood.”

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER – Divine Mercy Sunday

Psalm 118: “His Mercy endures forever”

See A Cycle, Appendix B series: “Compassion”

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

The Good Shepherd

Psalm 100: "The Lord is good: his kindness endures forever."

Revelation 7:9, 14-17 "Never again shall they know hunger or thirst ... for the Lamb on the throne will shepherd them."

John 10:27-30 "My sheep hear my voice. I know them ... I give them eternal life ... No one shall snatch him out of my hand."

See A Cycle, Appendix B series: "Compassion"

MERCY

If we combine today's readings with Luke's version of the parable of the Lost Sheep, we have a beautiful picture of mercy—the Father's mercy and Jesus' mercy. The Good Shepherd is a merciful shepherd who loves and is kind to the sheep.

In November 1980, Pope John Paul II wrote his encyclical letter, Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy). In this letter, the Holy Father considers mercy as a defining attitude of Divinity. Mercy is characteristic of God. It is a defining quality in God. Pope John Paul uses the parable of the prodigal son and merciful father to exemplify the great mercy of God

Compassion, mercy and justice are three sides to a sacred triangle; Compassion is the inner, loving attitude and virtue that motivates merciful actions that often constitutes "doing justice" and avoiding violence.

* * * * *

"The resurrection of Jesus is the sign to the world that God indeed does reign, does give life in death, and that the love of God is stronger than death." (Romans 8:36-39)

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE, 125

"Only in light of the resurrection, the fullest demonstration of the power of God's reign, can Jesus' gift of peace—a peace which the world cannot give (John 14:27)—be understood. Jesus gives that peace to his disciples, to those who had witnessed the helplessness of the crucifixion and the power of the resurrection. (John 20:19, 20, 26) The peace, which he gives to them as he greets them as their risen Lord is the fullness of salvation. It is the reconciliation of the world and

God.” (Romans 5:1-2; Colossians 1:20)

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE, 51

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Equality and Unity

Galatians 3:26-29 "All are one in Christ Jesus"

Luke 9:18-24 "Who do you say that I am?"

All are Related

Sin divides. Human sinfulness divides even in thought and attitude. Along with sinfulness other human weaknesses divide people on earth: insecurity, fear, low self-esteem and the desire for power. The reality that "all are related" can be an antidote to the sickness of division and hostility. "All are related" is a summary statement of the unifying elements in human life and attitude.

Awareness of "all are related" reminds us of the unifying realities in human nature and the very nature of the earth and universe. Some of these realities are:

- We human beings all share the same nature, same species, same needs, same weaknesses, same evolution, same hopes, same fears, same sins, same sicknesses, same contingency, same vulnerability, same mortality, same loves, same earth, air, water, food, light, heat, cold, gravity, same universe and our bodies are made up of the same material element of earth and universe.
- We are all related to one another, all created by the same Creator, God. We can share each other's blood, organs and ideas. Irrespective of difference of skin color, intelligence, economic class, religious affiliation, or nationality we can reproduce ourselves through sexual union and we can learn to love one another in a truly intimate relationship.
- We drink the same water, eat the same earth foods, breathe the same oxygen, feel the same warmth, see with the same kind of eyes, and hear with similar ears. We all need to learn to walk, talk, read, swim, compute, ride bicycles, whistle and pray.
- We all need medicines and healing help when we are injured, and our

wounds heal in similar ways. Psychotherapy has become an art-form service applicable to all of us; we need it because we share the similar mental problems, illnesses and health potentials.

- We enter into earth-life only through the sexual cooperation of other people. Each of us has nothing to say about our conception and birth. We are all contingent organisms. We will have little to say about our exit from earth-life. We are all mortal. Between birth and death, we share the same vulnerabilities. We are never completely in control of our needs, health and life.

Since we are all related, it seems strange to me that we work so hard at dividing ourselves from one another. We also can share harmful stupidity with one another, working against relatedness. Almost all forms of division are stupid efforts to divide what God has united. Violence is working contrary to our shared values when we indulge in war, racism, sexism, economic exploitation of people and earth. Violence is also a shared experience. We all share the stupidity, the hates, and the divisions that bring about our shared violence. We forgive and reconcile in the same ways. We establish unity; oneness with the same fears and struggles. We are all related in sin and in reconciliation bringing back together, reestablishing an intelligent wise and healthy relationship and community out of our violent mistakes.

Out of a full and constant awareness of “all are related” it is possible for human beings to grow in compassion for persons and for the earth.

Compassion means appreciating our oneness, our relatedness enough to be able to feel with others, suffer with others, enter into the skin and minds of others, be with one another until it becomes obvious that division and violence are stupid and completely unhealthy and that reconciliation and oneness are possible, in spite of our shared stupidity and malice.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Freedom/Voluntary Poverty

Galatians 5:1, 13-18 "... you have been called to live in freedom--"

Luke 9:51-62 "... nowhere to lay his head"

Optional Theme: Jesus' Lifestyle – Voluntary Poverty

"Christ freed us for liberty. So stand firm, and do not take on yourselves the yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1)

Late in March 1997, members of a cult name Heaven's Gate participated in a group suicide. Unhealthy cults of this kind give religion a bad name.

I want to suggest three basic criteria (certainly not an exclusive list) that must be present for a healthy religious community. The three are LIFE, LOVE, and LIBERTY—three big "L"s. These characteristics of belief and living seem to have been missed in Heaven's Gate Community. I will enlarge only on LIBERTY—personal FREEDOM.

To be free means to be unbound by inner restraints that diminish responsible thinking, choosing and living. Inner freedom of choice is one of the main attributes that distinguish human beings from other animals. Personal freedom is one of the main qualities of Godliness, and, hence, an important part of the "image of God" in us.

For human beings, inner freedom is relative—never complete. All of us struggle in varying degrees, with the limitations of our nature, limitations imposed by embodiment, limited intelligence, education, illness, fear and compulsion. We are also limited in freedom by unavoidable pressures: the family need to make a living, maintaining our reputation, etc. However, most of us also have the potential to increase our freedom through education, spiritual and psychological maturation, increased self-esteem, love and counseling therapy.

The question is often raised: does not religion inhibit people—lessen personal freedom? Yes. There is a paradox about inner freedom. We need to limit our personal freedom in some ways in order to increase our freedom in more important ways. We need to discipline ourselves in those behaviors that can bring on addictions—behaviors that "lead us back into slavery." St. Paul lists some of these harmful behaviors in Galatians 5:19-20, in the context of his statements on freedom versus slavery.

"Immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery,

hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, fury, selfishness, dissensions, factions ... envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like.”

St. Paul then goes on to write in Galatians 5:22-23.

“In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These fruits of the Spirit are indications of spiritual maturity, inner freedom, self-discipline, and especially God’s grace.

Biblical Christian teaching does encourage strong self-discipline in matters of immoral behavior so that there can be freedom in matters of healthy, mature choices. In fact, religion cannot be genuine without encouraging inner freedom since such freedom is an essential dimension of human dignity. Actually, Christian faith and love, foundation virtues of the Christian life, are by definition free choices or they are not authentic human acts. There are some religious sects that do destroy freedom, but that fact indicates that those sects are lacking in psychological health and religious authenticity. Even the ordinarily healthy authentic religious communities are vulnerable to unhealthy inauthentic trends that aim at controlling members and diminishing their human freedom. Insofar as they give way to this trend, they are unfaithful to their divine call. To diminish a person’s personal freedom by indoctrination, emotional manipulation, or fear is a form of violence.

Optional theme: Jesus' Lifestyle – Voluntary Poverty

“As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.’” (Luke 9:57-58)

This is one of several indications of Jesus' chosen economic lifestyle of voluntary poverty. As we look at the gospels we also find that he was born in a barn, had an animal feeding manger as a crib and that his first visitors were shepherds who were members of a low socio-economic class in Palestine in his day. We also note that he rode on a donkey rather than a horse, associated with outcasts, was executed with criminals, and that his body rested in another man's grave.

What does Jesus' lifestyle have to do with our lifestyle today? What are Jesus' teachings about the lifestyle of his disciples, his followers? Do the Beatitudes shed any light on Christian lifestyle? How about Jesus' teachings about wealth? Does our economic lifestyle have a bearing on “love one another as I have loved you?” (John 15)

* * * * *

“This duty (of developing the human race) concerns first and foremost the wealthier nations. Their obligations stem from the human supernatural kinship of all peoples, and present a threefold obligation; (1) mutual solidarity—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations; (2) social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations; (3) universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others. The matter is urgent, for on it depends the future of world civilization.”

POPULORUM PROGRESSION, 44

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

The Cross/Lifestyle of the Disciples

Galatians 6:14-18 Meaning of the Cross

Luke 10: 1-12, 17-26 Gospel lifestyle

(Also appropriate for Good Friday and October 4, St. Francis of Assisi)

Brand Marks of the Lord

May I never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Let no one trouble me, for I bear the brand marks of the Lord in my body.” (Galatians 6:17)

These brand marks in Paul's body probably do not refer to the marks of Jesus crucifixion, the marks of the nails and spear. The brand marks in Paul are thought to be scars of Paul's illnesses and floggings. These, however, are the marks of Paul's “Crosses,” his suffering with and in Jesus.

We may not have the brand marks of Jesus in our bodies, but hopefully, we have the spiritual brand marks of Jesus in our hearts and soul—the brand marks of the nonviolent crucified Jesus who responded to the violence perpetrated against him by a violent world—a world sick with violence stemming from its arrogance, domination, selfishness and greed. The spiritual brand marks of Jesus are antidotes for arrogance, domination, selfishness and greed. These brand marks of Jesus in us are humility, gentleness, generous love (agape) and spirit of volunteer poverty. An outstanding example of this kind of marking would be St. Francis of Assisi. His relationship with the crucified Jesus carried Francis to a life of a consistent reverence for life. The nonviolent cross became an all embracing symbol and motivation in his life.

In our world, a culture of violence and death, still reeling from a century of holocaust, is not likely to change significantly in the near future. However, individual persons and communities can grow in nonviolence if we take the nonviolent cross seriously and deepen, through Holy Communion, our own brand marks of Jesus, for we were all branded with the mark of Jesus on our forehead at Baptism. We need to take seriously the cross and also our baptismal covenant commitment.

Even if I am not too optimistic about a significant growth in nonviolence in the secular world, I do expect that Christian people and, especially, Christian leaders will

overcome the violence of a domineering form of life and governance because of our Christian contact with the cross and with Baptism.

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

* * * * *

“This work of salvation came about through suffering and death on a cross. By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, humanity in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. We show ourselves to be true Disciples of Christ by carrying the cross and in turn every day in the activities that we are called upon to perform.

LABOREM EXERCENS, 27.2

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Cross/Agape/Good Samaritan

Affirming People

Deuteronomy 30:10-14 "Heed the voice of God"

Psalm 69: "The Lord heard the poor"

Colossians 1:15-26: "... peace through the blood of his Cross."

Luke 10:25-37 "The Good Samaritan"

"There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test him (Jesus) and said, 'Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'What is written in the law.' How do you read it?' He said in reply, 'You shall love the Lord your God, with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.'"

The Gospel continues with the lawyer's next question: "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. After both a priest and a Levite passed by the wounded man beside the road, a Samaritan was the person who stopped and helped the injured person. The significant reality here is that Samaritans and Jews were bitter enemies. Jews and Samaritans were deeply prejudiced against each other for both religious and ethnic reasons. The Samaritan would be the most unlikely person to stop and help a Jew.

If Jesus were living among us today, and he is through the Church, the Body of Christ, Jesus might relate this parable by having a black or Indian person stop to help a white person beside the road. Other candidates for this Samaritan mission today might be a Communist, Buddhist or Asian alien or some other person who is not privileged in the U. S. by race, nationality or economic class.

* * * * *

"When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus quoted the age-old Jewish affirmation of faith that God alone is one and to be loved with the whole heart, mind and soul (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and immediately adds: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:28-34)

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 43

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Doing justice—Hospitality

Genesis 18:1-10 Entertaining angels

Psalm 15 Doing justice

Colossians 1:24-28 We suffer with Christ

Luke 10:38-42 Prayer and action/equal privileges for women

In today's first reading (Genesis 18:1-10) Abraham and Sarah entertained God and angels without realizing at first just who their visitors really were. "Entertaining Angels" is the title of a film about the life of Dorothy Day who believed that in caring for "street people," she was caring for Christ.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote a classic meditation on "Room for Christ" in a December issue of the "Catholic Worker." In this piece she clearly develops the conviction that Christ is just as present to us now "disguised under every type of humanity," as He was present historically to his contemporaries in Galilee and Judea. When we make room for others, especially the hungry, homeless, and other needy people, we do really make room for Christ Himself. To Dorothy Day, this is the meaning of "the vine and the branches," and of the Church as the "Body of Christ," the "whole" Christ, in the world today. She writes:

"It is no use for us to say that we have been born two thousand years too late to find room for Christ Christ is always with us, asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that Christ speaks. With the eyes of store clerks, he gazes. With the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives, he gives."

When we give shelter or food to anyone who needs it, we give to Christ.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sources of Violence/Greed

Colossians 3:1-5,9-11 Baptism forbids racism and social class

Psalm 95: "Harden not your hearts..."

Luke 12:13-21 "Avoid greed in all its forms"

Optional Theme: Causes of Violence – Eucharist as Prevention and Antidote

See A Cycle, Appendix C Series: Money and Power, Part IV - "Wealth Addiction"

Nonviolence and Spiritual Maturity

"Brothers (and sisters), I could not talk to you as spiritual men and women but only as men (and women) of flesh, as infants in Christ ... but as long as there are jealousy and quarrels are you not of the flesh?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

After making the above statement about immature spirituality, St. Paul enlarges about his context. He pointed out the people's petty squabbles over whether they belong to Paul or to Apollo. Paul seems to be saying that petty divisions, jealousies and quarrels—all forms of conflict and violence—prevent them from maturing in their faith life.

In his letter to Galatians, Paul is more specific. In Chapter 5, Paul first offers a litany of sins of violence that render the spirituality of the people as immature.

"Immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, ... envy, drinking, ... orgies, and the like." (Galatians 5:19-21)

In contrast to the sins and forms of violence listed above, Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit as contrasting values of nonviolence, signs of fruitful mature spirituality.

It might be a growthful exercise for us, at times, to evaluate our own spirituality by checking ourselves in the light of these signs of maturity.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
(Galatians 5:22-23)

These fruits of the Spirit are all indications of nonviolence, signs of a maturing spiritually. Our reflections might spill over into a prayer such as the following:

Gentle God of kindness; help us to grow into you by being gentle and kind to one another, the earth, and all creatures. Loving God, send us your spirit to help us to be kind and merciful.

Optional Theme: Causes of Violence – Eucharist as Prevention and Antidote

Five most powerful causes of violence are: the need and desire for power and the arrogance of control that feeds power, greed, fear and ignorance. Violence seldom accomplishes any good and violence is stupid because it usually harms the violator.

A meaningful Eucharistic life can prevent violence by helping regular participants in Eucharist to grow in humility, to relinquish control and power, as did Christ, except the power to heal, to love, to serve and save. Furthermore, the Eucharistic mentality prevents violence by helping people to treasure Jesus and his gift of grace instead of money and stuff that money can buy. As a Eucharistic life continues to grow, people grow in courage and wisdom, overcoming fear and ignorance, finding hope, strength and meaning in a close relationship with Jesus.

In my opinion, the three most powerful antidotes to personal violence are:

1. Reading the Gospels and coming to know Jesus in Sacred Scripture
2. Prayer
3. Celebrating the Eucharist, including receiving Holy Communion.

These are also the main antidotes to systemic injustice/violence along with public work and even protest in the public forum. Lay-people might keep in mind, regarding legal and public violence, that Vatican II Council in the document about lay people, calls lay Catholics to bring the kingdom of God into the public forum, the workplace, the family, government, education, the professions, commerce—all the places where lay people live and work. Dealing with the evils of violence and injustice in the real world, is uniquely the work of lay men and women.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Treasure/Unexpected Arrival of Jesus

Luke 12:32-48 "Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be."

Parable of the Vigilant and Faithful Servants

"Be like people awaiting their master's return from a wedding, so that when he arrives and knocks, you will open for him without delay ... Should he happen to come at midnight or before sunrise and find them prepared, it will go well with them." (Luke 12:35-38)

At first sight, we might assume that Luke has the second coming of Christ in mind. However, at the time of Luke's writing about 80 A.D. the Christians had already given up the expectation that the end times were imminent. Some scripture scholars, like Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., interpret this passage as the coming of Christ in the persons and events of each day. Father Stuhlmueller writes:

"We must be waiting, always ready to open the door of our heart, of our time and of our other possessions should Jesus come even at midnight or before sunrise. Whatever happens anytime, anywhere, must be received as though Jesus were coming in person." (Biblical Meditations for Ordinary Time—Weeks 23-24, page 142-143)

This spiritual mentality informed the spirituality of people like Dorothy Day, Katherine deHuek Doherty, and Mother Theresa.

This understanding has also helped me to be more patient with people who call or stop at inconvenient times when I have been tired or not in the best mood. It has helped to remind me to offer a short prayer before answering the telephone or doorbell! It's a little easier to do if we remember that it is Jesus that we are serving. Jesus is our treasure.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Anawim, A Messianic Priority

Psalm 68 “orphans ... widows ... forsaken ... prisoners

Luke 14:7-14 “... beggars ... crippled ... lame ... blind”

Optional Theme: “Strangers, Aliens and Refugees”

Optional Theme: “Whoever Receives a Child in My Name ...”

Work and Justice

Reflections for Labor Day or other appropriate times.

The Catholic Church’s past 109 years of steady documentation about social ministry began in 1891 with an encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII entitled Rerum Novarum (Condition of the Working Man). In 1981, the 90th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, Pope John Paul II published another labor justice encyclical letter entitled Labor Exercens (The Nature of Human Work). In this document, Pope John Paul lists seven basic human rights of working people as laborers.

1. Adequate salary. By this right, the church means a living wage. A living wage means a wage that supplies the human needs of a family. This wage may vary according to the size and special needs of a worker’s family.

Comment. Most employers refuse to take family needs into account as determining pay for work. The Church is one of the offending employers in regard to a living wage. The minimum wage set by Congress has always been very inadequate, almost a joke for a worker with even one dependent. The minimum wage policy has been set more for the financial welfare of employers than for the employees.

2. Health-Care. This right usually includes adequate health-care insurance for the employee and his family.
3. Healthful working environment.
4. Sufficient rest for the employee’s good health.
5. The Right of Association. This right should entitle workers to come together in unions and other peer associations organized for the welfare of employees.

Comment. The labor unions in the United States were greatly disempowered during the 1980’s by the union

breaking tactics of President Reagan (traffic controllers) and by corporations such as Greyhound (bus drivers) and by American Linen Company. Labor unions have never fully recovered from these events.

6. The right to strike nonviolently.

7. Workers have the right to be free of exploitation.

Comment. U.S. Corporations take advantage of foreign unorganized workers in countries like Korea, China, Taiwan and others where workers manufacture products for U. S. corporations for unfair wages in foreign sweatshops. Some of the better-known unfair corporations are Gulf Western, Wal Mart and Nike.

The basic reason for the violation of workers rights is simply the greed of employers who want to maximize their profits any way they can. Pope John Paul II has condemned “liberal capitalism” as unjust. Liberal capitalism is a form of capitalism that is free of limitations that insure the common good. Such capitalism seeks the maximization of profit in a completely free market without restrictions for the common good of the people.

Human work is indeed, an immensely important part of human life. Good work experience can greatly enhance the good and happiness of persons and families. Poor work experiences can wreak havoc on people and families.

The following information is about labor from “Work Without Justice,” Arthur Jones, National Catholic Reporter, September 1, 2000, Vol. 36, No. 38. Statistics are from a report by Catholic Immigrant Network.

The report indicates that even though foreign-born persons make up only 10% of the U.S. population, they constitute 34% of workers in private households, 18.5% of workers in food and beverage serving jobs, and 12.8% of U.S. construction workers, and 81% of farm workers.

The report states: “they endure sub-minimum wages ... and do not earn enough to escape poverty.”

Since 1954, labor union membership has diminished from 39% of workers to 13% to the present.

The average U.S. garment worker is earning less than \$8,000 a year, the average farm worker, \$5.94 an hour, and the poultry production worker, \$7.82 an hour

My personal comment on minimum wages is that our U. S. Congress sets a gross injustice. What else might we expect from a Congress made up of very wealthy men and women who have been insulated from real poverty and most of whom are elected to represent the interests of employers who stand to lose some profit if wages were fair to employees.

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“This duty (of developing the human race) concerns first and foremost the wealthier nations. Their obligations stem from the human and super-natural kinship of all peoples, and present a threefold obligation:

1. Mutual solidarity—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations;
2. Social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations;
3. Universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others. The matter is urgent, for on it depends the future of world civilization.”

POPULORUM PROGRESSIO, 44

Optional Theme: Strangers, Aliens, and Refugees

Since immigration has been and is a major subject in the news I will write about it in the context of the Bible and Social Teaching of the Catholic Church.

A majority of our U.S. citizens, including the House of Representatives would like to see a “crack-down” on undocumented aliens. The House of Representatives would like to make illegal entry into the U.S. a criminal act—a felony. Other citizens who, in any way help to care for such aliens could also be charged with an infraction of the law under this plan. Under such law I could have been punished in the past as an administrator of a homeless shelter. I used to take in such homeless persons and give them temporary lodging. I would do it again. God’s law supersedes human law.

The Bible is quite clear about helping and even loving aliens and refugees. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

“For the Lord your God, the God of gods, now the Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome who has no favorites, accepts no bribes, who expects justice for the orphans and widows, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you too must befriend the alien, for you were aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).”

In the Book of Exodus we find:

“You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves.” (Exodus 22: 20)

In one of the most significant statements in the New Testament (Matthew 25:34) we find these words of Jesus:

“Come, you who are blest by my Father inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for ... I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

As I have often written, *the anawim* (the little people, the vulnerable the sick, poor and aliens) are considered to be the highest priority of Jesus in his mission on earth. (Luke 4: 16-22 and 7:18-23).

In the Catholic Social Teachings heritage, Pope John XXIII, in 1963 wrote about refugees, after exploring the reasons why people leave their own nation and become

refugees in another country. He writes:

“At this point it would not be superfluous to recall that such exiles are persons, and all their human rights as persons must be recognized since they do not lose those rights on losing the citizenship of the states of which they are former members.

... wherefore we publicly approve and commend every undertaking, founded on the principles of human solidarity and Christian charity, which aims at making migration of persons from one country to another less painful. (Pope John XXIII, Peace on Earth, paragraphs 105 and 107)

A third consideration in dealing with aliens and refugees is the ownership of land when we Americans become too restrictive about *our* land. We tend to forget that the earth and indeed, the universe belongs to God the creator of all things. When we speak of private ownership no human being enjoys absolute ownership of anything, especially the land. We should remember that we hold all we *own* in stewardship from God to whom we are responsible for use and care of what we say we own. The Bible, both the Jewish scriptures and the Christian scriptures are quite clear and consistent about the meaning of ownership. This means that only God has the final say about the use of land. If we make decisions about the use of *our* nation's land we must do so on God's conditions. Catholic Social Teaching is quite clear that the Earth is for all the people. Following is a very incomplete list of Biblical references about ownership of all things:

* * * * *

GOD OWNS ALL CREATION

1. “The Lord God placed the man in the garden to till and care for it.” (Genesis 2:15)
2. “Now, if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own people. The whole earth is mine, but you will be my chosen people.” (Exodus 19:5)
3. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants.” (Leviticus 25:23)
4. “The Lord's is the earth and the fullness thereof; the earth

and those who dwell in it. For he had formed it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.” (Psalm 24:1)

5. “I own the beasts of the forests, beasts in their thousands on my hills. All that moves in the fields belong to me. own the world and all it holds.” (Psalm 50:10-12)

6. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Optional Theme: "Whoever Receives a Child in My Name..."

"Jesus took a child and stood him in their midst, and putting his arms around him said, 'Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake welcomes me.'" (Mark 9:37)

"Whatever you did for the least of these brothers (or sisters) of mine you did it for me." (Matthew 25:40)

Children are the most vulnerable of all "the least brothers and sisters of Jesus. This is true whether we are considering the victims of poverty, war, disease, homelessness or abortion. In the United States every five or six children are born into poverty. The count is higher for African or Native American children. The numbers of arrested teenagers for drugs and other problems, and the numbers of teen suicides are increasing. The largest homeless population in the United States are single women and their children.

Churches and other humanitarian organizations are doing much to alleviate the victimization of children. However, the relief offered for victimized children is far from sufficient. On the world scene about 40,000 people die daily as a result of malnutrition, inadequate health care and polluted water. A majority of these victims are children. Neither the United States government nor the Churches are doing what they could do. Our government ranks 19th among the industrial nations in humanitarian aid. Our government nationally and in some states has recently cut back humanitarian aid to children in order to pay for deficits, especially for the very extensive deficits from war in recent years. The Catholic Church is not doing what it could if it were to implement the Church's own social teaching about the victims, especially children victims trapped in poverty and war. The Church has given the teaching but is not using its potential to organize action in parishes throughout the world. Very little of the Church's social teaching is even explained in American Catholic Churches. At the same time we seem to be finding plenty of money to fund the wars that we have taken on. The wars we are fighting are causing more victimization of children in the both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Returning to the scripture passages that I started with, what would be the conclusion to these statements of Jesus about children in need? If we do not receive

children in need in the name of Jesus or if we do not feed the hungry, as Jesus demands that we do, we are not being faithful to our relationship with Jesus and the people in need.

What is our parish doing about children in crisis, locally and in the world?

Do we consider the victim children in the way that we vote for our representatives in Congress and the White House?

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Slavery/Domination/Freedom/Cross

Philemon 9-10, 12-17 “no longer a slave but ... a beloved brother”

Luke 14:25-43 Disciples, the cross and possessions

(Also for Friday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time)

The Politics of the Cross

“Whoever does not carry his (her) own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27)

The Church has rightly turned the cross into a great symbol of honor and glory. It was not such when Mark wrote these words. At the time of Jesus and Mark, crucifixions were still taking place in the Roman Empire. The cross was still a symbol of ignominy, shame and utter dehumanization reserved for the execution of the Empire’s low-class violent criminals, slaves, and insurgents in the Roman provinces.

Jesus, through Mark, is telling them that to be his disciple they may have to deny their very lives if they, in following him, confront the evils of the Empire. In other words, originally, even in the Church, the cross had a strong political connotation. Denying oneself was making oneself vulnerable to death when confronting the civil powers in following Jesus. This is exemplified by the martyrs, who civilly disobeyed the Emperor in choosing Christ over the Emperor in Rome.

The Roman Empire used execution by crucifixion to maintain its power throughout the Mediterranean basin by discouraging any rebellion through fear and force. Expressing the power to kill has been, through the ages, the ultimate threat to maintain dominance over the people. This may still be seen as a brutal leftover from a barbaric past in our own culture as well as in other modern nations. Christ is still crucified today for political confrontation with civil authorities on the part of his followers.

The Eucharist powerfully and sacramentally remembers the passion, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus each time we celebrate Mass and Holy Communion. The Eucharist today is the power-center of the Church’s struggle with the violence of the kingdoms of this world—(abortion, war, poverty, capital punishment, racism, sexism, and all political oppressions). The Eucharist like the cross must not be overly spiritualized and domesticated by separating worship from real life, including

political life. This would be distancing sacramental life from the ongoing crucifixion of Jesus today by the violence of the kingdoms of this world against the people, the Body of Christ.

Ched Myers sums up these thoughts in the following paragraph.

“Jesus has revealed that his messiahship means political confrontation with, not rehabilitation of, the imperial state. Those who wish to “come after him” will have to identify themselves with this subversive program. The stated risk is that the disciple will face the test of loyalty under interrogation by state authorities. If ‘self’ is denied, the cross will be taken up, a metaphor for capital punishment on grounds of insurgency.”

(Binding the Strong Man—A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus. Orbis 1988, page 247)

Most of this article was taken from the ideas of Ched Myers and four other scripture scholars quoted by Ched Myers in Binding the Strong Man, quoted above.

* * * * *

“Had Jesus merely said that his mission was to set people free from sin and all forms of oppression, his words would have fallen on deaf ears. He had to work at this task of liberation. He not only talked about freeing the poor and oppressed but, undeterred by criticism, actually welcomed the poor and sinners to share at his table. Like Jesus, we must be able to accompany others in their suffering and be willing to suffer with them.”

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, 48

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 The golden calf is still around—wealth addiction

See A Cycle, Appendix C: “Wealth Addiction, Part IV

Exploiting the Little People

In the 32nd Chapter of the Book of Exodus, we find the story of the golden calf. Having left Egypt, the Hebrews were wandering through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Moses was delayed on the mountain where he received the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The people were fearful and restless at the base of Mount Sinai. They collected the gold jewelry of the people and constrained Aaron to make a gold calf which they acknowledged as their god and worshipped this image in an idolatrous way. God said to Moses:

“Go down at once to your people ... for they have become depraved. They have soon turned away from the way I pointed out to them.” (Exodus 32:7)

We might be inclined to judge this incident in the desert as a quaint expression of a naïve people. However, the golden calf is still around today.

Whenever people give their hearts to money, power, popularity, or pleasure rather than to God, they are worshipping the golden calf.

The increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots in the United States is a form of golden-calf worship because the rich are unwilling to share with people trapped in poverty.

Whenever the U.S. exploits poor nations, making exorbitant profits on weapon sales, cuts welfare for the poor while cutting taxes for the rich; whenever employers pay ridiculously low minimum wages to increase their own income; whenever a nation leaves its homeless on the streets to save public money, the golden calf is being worshipped. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.” (Matthew 6:21)

Whenever the Church makes buildings, especially expensively conspicuous monuments a greater priority than the poor, the golden calf is still around.

In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul writes:

“I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. For his sake I have forfeited everything; I have accounted all else rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth ...” (Philippians 3:8)

When we choose the “rubbish” in preference to Christ as our wealth, we are choosing the golden calf and not even recognizing that we are as naïve and depraved as the people in the desert at the foot of Mount Sinai. Whenever a country like the U.S. or a state like Minnesota debates what to do with surplus funds without even considering relief of the most destitute citizens—the homeless and hungry people—the golden calf is very much alive.

Jesus and St. Paul recognize the damage of “rubbish” worship. Jesus warned, “you cannot serve God and money.” St. Paul stated, “The love of money is the root of all evil.”

St. Paul’s priority of giving our hearts to Christ Jesus instead of to “rubbish” is also emphasized in his letter to the Romans 8:35 and 37:

“What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Money/Greed/Exploitation

Amos 8:4-7 "... you who destroy the poor..."

Psalm 113 "...from the dunghill he lifts up the poor..."

1 Timothy 2:1-8 Pray for civil leaders

Luke 16:1-13 "No servant can serve two masters..."

Wealth and Lifestyle

"Come now, you rich, weep and wail your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud." (James 5:1-4)

We must not excuse ourselves from this indictment. I am also a rich man. I enjoy all the necessities of life plus much more. Economically, I find myself in the upper 20% of the human race even though in U.S. terms, I would be classified as lower middle class or upper lower class. This biblical quote could also apply to people of low income if they have a strong desire for wealth. St. Paul wrote, "Love of money is the root of all evil."

It is my conviction that money obsession, dollar addiction, is the greatest single threat to a Christian spirituality in our land.

By economic lifestyle, I mean how we make our money and how we spend it; how and what we eat, how and what we drive, where we live, how we recreate, etc.

Following are eight principles for evaluating our economic lifestyle in the light of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church.

(1) Wealth is spiritually dangerous, selfish use of wealth can be spiritually fatal. (Luke 16:19-31; Mark 10:17-27; Matthew 25:31-45)

(2) In the Bible, ownership of property is stewardship; what we have is on loan from God who is the owner of the universe and all in it." (Leviticus 15:23; Psalm 14:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

(3) Gospel demands generous sharing of wealth; my surplus wealth (beyond my necessities) belongs to those who lack

the necessities of life. (Mark 10:17-27; Luke 3:10-14; 19:8-9;

(4) Poverty is violent and vicious; poverty kills more people than war. Over 40,000 people die daily as a result of poverty. (Matthew 22:34-40; Matthew 25:31)

(5) “Apathy in the face of relievable human misery is damnable (mortal) sin.” (Luke 16:19-31; Matthew 25:31-45)

(6) My attitude toward wealth is critical for my spiritual life; my attitude toward the *anawim* (the poor, the little people, the powerless ones, etc.) is crucial for my relationship with Jesus. (Luke 16:13-14; Luke 12:15-21; Mark 10:17-27; Matthew 25:21-45)

(7) Consumerism gluts the consumer and wastes the earth. (James 5:1-6; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; Luke 12:15-21)

(8) Gospelizing our lifestyle allows us to share more—to love more.

“Indeed, religion with contentment is a great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it. If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that. Those who want to be rich are falling into temptation and into a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.” (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

* * * * *

“The quality of the national discussion about our economic future will affect the poor most of all, in this country and throughout the world. The life and dignity of millions of men, women and children hang in the balance. Decisions must be judged in light of what they do for the poor, and what they enable the poor to do for themselves. The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is this: they must be at the service of all people, especially the poor.”

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 24

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Luxurious Lifestyle/Exploitation of the Oppressed

Amos 5:4-7 Luxurious lifestyle exploits the poor

Psalm 146 Justice for the oppressed

Luke 16:19-31 Lazarus and the rich man

“Jesus said to the Pharisees: ‘once there was a rich man who dressed in purple and linen and feasted splendidly every day. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. The dogs even licked his sores.’”
(Luke 16:19-21)

You know the rest of the story of this parable reading on the Twenty-Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time. Among other themes, this parable can certainly be applied today to welfare and to health-care. Lazarus was poor, hungry and sick; the rich man denied him food and medical-care.

This parable might be paraphrased in the following way in the United States today with hardly changing any of its message and meaning. Jesus says to us (U.S.)

“Most of you are rich people as compared with the rest of the people of history and of the world today. Many of you feast so splendidly every day that even your health is in danger of impairment from overindulging in too much and too rich foods. You also dress in imported “purple and linen”—in clothes imported from nations such as Korea and Taiwan where working women are exploited in sweatshops that pay unjust wages. Your children wear expensive designer clothes and warm-up jackets.”

“Lazarus is still at your gate, hungry and ill. Lazarus is every person in the U.S. and especially in the Third World who does not have the necessities of life including health-care, which is a basic human right. Lazarus should be your highest economic justice priority because Lazarus is most in need.”

The Gospel stands for a preferential option for the poor. In the Christian context, the most vulnerable people must be the highest priority in care giving.

If we were to make this principle a political reality, how could we balance the budget? My response is made up of more questions: Why do we not consider cutting

the military budget rather than increasing it? Why does Congress not consider increasing the taxes of the rich rather than giving them a tax cut at the expense of welfare, health care, Medicare, and Medicaid? Why not cut excessive subsidies (industrial welfare) to large corporations that overpay their CEO's? Why not also consider significantly reducing the pension plans for presidents, congresspersons and other public officials who receive large pensions for minimal years of work?

We know the rest of the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. If we continue to live so well, to eat so "splendidly," and to dress in "purple and linen" while we leave Lazarus uncared for at the gate, we will certainly, spiritually self-destruct.

There is another possible conclusion to this parable. If the rich man were to "see" Lazarus get up from his sumptuous table, care for Lazarus so that Lazarus might have a chance to recover, the spiritual outcome of the rich man would be far different.

October is Respect Life month. Revering life must include the needs and the dignity of the poor and the sick.

* * * * *

"As pastors we have seen firsthand the faces of poverty in our midst. Homeless people roam city streets in tattered clothing and sleep in doorways or on subway grates at night. Thousands are in line at soup kitchens because they have no other way of feeding themselves. Millions of children are so poorly nourished that their physical and mental development are seriously harmed. We have also seen the growing economic hardship and insecurity experienced by moderate-income Americans when they lose their jobs and their income due to forces beyond their control. These are alarming signs and trends. They pose for our nation an urgent moral and human challenge; to fashion a society where no one goes without the basic material necessities required for human dignity and growth."

ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, 172

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Health-Care

2 Kings 5:14-17 Healing of Naaman

Luke 17:11-19 Jesus heals ten lepers

In the Gospel according to St. Luke 14:1-24 is the story of Jesus' dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee. At this dinner, Jesus relates several challenging teachings to the host and guests. In this section of the Gospel, Jesus is concerned about communal meals and food, health-care (the man with leprosy), protest against the legalism of the Sabbath, food for the poor and the handicapped, and the invitation of the Gentiles.

As usual, these readings from Luke are very applicable today. The Pharisees self-righteously would not allow healing on the Sabbath nor were they concerned about food and fellowship for the hungry. Forty-four million people in the United States are without health insurance (Census Bureau). The health-care situation is much worse in the Third World. While children trapped in poverty are dying of malnutrition, we affluent are ill with obesity. Protest by civil disobedience over food was dramatically expressed by the sit-ins at lunch counters in Alabama in the 1960's, strikes by Hispanic workers in California about lettuce and grapes, and protests about Nestle products for exploited poor families through the sale of baby food in poverty stricken countries.

Now, the poor are exploited by inadequate welfare, unjust changes in welfare benefits euphemistically called welfare reform (See B Cycle, Seventeenth Sunday,) and unjust minimum wages for those not trained for better jobs. We have said nothing about the exploitation of the poor in food related situations involving corporations (example: Gulf Western) that take advantage of poverty stricken workers in other countries.

These readings in Luke 14 reach a climax in verses 12-14 where Jesus tells his host to invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." Jesus repeats this litany of the *anawim* to be invited into God's Kingdom in the parable that follows (Luke 14:16-21). In applying this banquet parable to us today, we might simply ask, who is invited to the banquet of life" in our time and place, and who is not invited?

In the celebration of the Eucharist, which is concerned with food, the Bread of

Life, the cries of the hungry are heard too seldom. Today, from within the Eucharist, we need to “speak the truth to power” as did Archbishop Dom Helder Camara and Archbishop Oscar Romero—both of whom became voices for the poor in El Salvador and Brazil. I believe that if the cries of the oppressed are not heard in our liturgies, Jesus is not effectively present to the people. (1 Corinthians 21, 27-29).

* * * * *

“This duty (of developing the human race) concerns first and foremost the wealthier nations. Their obligations stem from the human and super-natural kinship of all peoples, and present a threefold obligation:

- (1) Mutual solidarity—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations;
- (2) Social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations;
- (3) Universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others.

The matter is urgent, for on it depends the future of world civilization.”

POPULORUM PROGRESSIO, The Progress of Peoples 44

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Care for the *Anawim*/Honesty

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 "... the cry of the oppressed."

Psalm 34 The cry of the poor

Luke 18:9-14 Parable of Pharisee and tax collector

Optional Theme: Self-Righteous

Optional Theme: See *Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Agape and Pro-Life,*

Love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself

This saying of Jesus about Loving God and neighbor, found in all three synoptic Gospels is not original with Jesus. Jesus quoted the "Love God" statement from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and the saying about loving neighbor is quoted from Leviticus 19:18.

Jesus and the evangelists stress that both loves are basically one love and essential to Christian spirituality. Even though Jesus said that loving God is the first and greatest commandment, it is clear through the Christian scriptures that loving people is an integral part of loving God. (1 John 2:7-11 and John 3:11-16)

The Greek word for love in these passages is AGAPE. AGAPE is not the love we might call fraternal or erotic. It is not mainly an emotional experience. AGAPE is a loving, serving decision of the mind and will to do some kindness, service or forgiving whether the lover enjoys it or not. Often AGAPE is "tough" love—tough on the lover but not on the beloved. Examples of people practicing AGAPE would be Mother Theresa or Dorothy Day serving and caring for destitute, unclean, sick and even dying people on the streets of Calcutta and New York. Another example would be a grandmother in Red Lake caring for a mentally ill son along with seven grandchildren ages three to fifteen on a low income in an inadequate house. This was no picnic for grandma. It was AGAPE. Jesus practiced AGAPE by undergoing his passion and crucifixion. Visiting a sick, aging relative in a nursing home or caring for a sick baby in the middle of the night or giving some material aid to a person in need would be less dramatic and less drastic examples of AGAPE. Forgiving a person who has harmed you would be another instance of this kind of love.

In the Thirtieth Sunday Mass, A Cycle, Matthew's presentation of the "Love God" "Love Neighbor" is accompanied by a first reading from the Book of Exodus 22:20-26 when AGAPE and justice are intertwined in the reading.

"You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourself in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan."

Aliens, orphans or widows are the most often mentioned *anawim* in the Jewish scriptures. This list was greatly extended by Jesus. Government programs more often care for orphans and widows today. However, aliens are still neglected and even abused in the U.S. today. According to the attitude of the Bible and the social teachings of the Church, aliens are to be respected, loved, and cared for as our neighbors.

The above-mentioned reading from Exodus also has strong words for extortionists and exploiters who take advantage of poor people. We still have extortionists and exploiters today who are far from loving their neighbor as the revealed word of God demands. Among these abuses, I have in mind not only government agencies, corporations and industry employers who do not pay a just wage—a living wage. Minimum wage may be legal but not just. It seems to me that U.S. corporations are exploiting workers regularly and barbarously when they move their operations to the poor countries and take severe advantage of workers in order to maintain high profits.

October is Respect Life Month. A consistent ethic of life calls for loving our neighbor wherever we find him or her whether in the womb or close to the tomb, in a suburb or a ghetto, healthy or sick, rich or poor, woman or man.

Optional Theme: Self Righteous

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 Justice – equality – weak – oppressed

Psalm 34: "The Lord hears the cry of the poor"

Pharisee and Tax collector

Luke 18:9-14 Contempt for Outcasts/Pharisee and tax collector

If Jesus had been born in north-central Minnesota in the 20th century instead of in Israel in the 1st century, he probably would have told this parable in somewhat the following way.

Two men went to the Church to pray. One was a respected businessman and a lay leader in the local parish. He went up to the front and prayed with head and hands held high. I give you thanks, O God, that I am not like the rest of the people—grasping, greedy, crooked, unfaithful, and a drunkard, especially like that Indian person in the back of the Church. I go to Church every Sunday, I read the Bible every night and I contribute to the support of the Church.

The Native American in the back, a welfare recipient, beat her breast and prayed with head bowed: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." "Believe me." Jesus said, "this woman in the back went home forgiven and justified but the other did not. For everyone who exalts him or herself, shall be humbled while the person who humbles self, shall be exalted. Those who heap contempt on outcasts are not my disciples.

* * * * *

"Peoples and individuals aspire to be free: their search for full development signals their desire to overcome the many obstacles preventing them from enjoying a more human life."

SOLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS, 46

TUESDAY, THIRTY-FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Matthew 22:2 “The reign of God may be likened to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

The Banquet

In this parable of the banquet God is the inviter, the servants are the prophets, the original invited guests are the people of Israel, especially the leaders of the people, the banquet is the reign of God. The second group of invited guests are the Gentiles in Matthew and especially the “poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame”—the *anawim*: the little and powerless ones in Luke.

The meaning of the parable is that Israel was unfaithful to the Mosaic Covenant. The people fell into idolatry, injustice and violence. When they refused the invitation of God to attend the banquet, God invited the Gentiles and especially the *anawim* to the banquet—to the new covenant in Christ and to salvation.

The Gospel seems to make it quite clear that the *anawim* (the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, the children, the illiterate, the handicapped, the disabled, those oppressed because of race and gender, all the powerless, most vulnerable people) are the highest priority in the Messianic kingdom. (Luke 4:14-21; 7:18-26; 6:20-26; 16:19-31; Matthew 25:31-45)

“Jesus said to the host who invited him, ‘When you host a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind’ (Luke 14:12-13)

In reality, in the United States, who is invited to the banquet of life? Jesus and the Church, at least in its teaching if not always in practice, indicates that a civilized compassionate Christian community will make the most vulnerable members of the community its highest priority. Are these the ones especially invited to the banquet because they need it the most? I rather suspect that the banquet of life in our nation is mostly planned for and served to those who are well off rather than to those who need it most. Consider health-care insurance and the 44 million citizens who can’t afford health care insurance. Consider also that one in every five children in the U.S. is born into

poverty. Consider the recent welfare “reforms” that are causing more and more people to fall through the cracks. We, also, need to remember that about 40,000 people, not at the banquet of life, die each day in our world from the results of poverty, malnutrition, inadequate health-care, and contaminated water. Yes, in our society, the least vulnerable enjoy the banquet the most.

The banquet of this parable might also be seen as the Eucharistic Banquet of life serving the Bread of Life to the people. Some years ago, as I was serving the Bread of Life to some very low-income families, it struck me that the Church and I also need to help these families to have sufficient “bread” on the tables in their homes.

October is Respect Life Month. We need to especially respect the lives of the most vulnerable—including infants in the womb and the elders who are excluded from the copious banquet in the most affluent nation in the world.

* * * * *

“Had Jesus merely said that his mission was to set people free from sin and all forms of oppression, his words would have fallen on deaf ears. He had to work at this task of liberation. He not only talked about freeing the poor and oppressed but, undeterred by criticism, actually welcomed the poor and sinners to share at his table. Like Jesus, we must be able to accompany others in their suffering and be willing to suffer with them.”

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, 48

THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—CHRIST THE KING.

Nonviolent Suffering Servant King

Colossians 1:12-20 "...making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:35-43 "This is the King of the Jews"

Optional Theme: The Suffering Servant of Yahweh

(Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Good Friday of Holy Week)

This is the inscription on the top of the Cross-. Who in the world would want this kind of King? He was executed in the most painful and shameful form of execution that the proud Romans could concoct. Having been beaten, shamed and dehumanized before the world by the power structures of the Roman Empire and the Jewish power structures, he certainly appeared harmless.

"This is the King of the Jews." What a mockery! What kind of king is he, anyway? What kind of nutty kingdom could he rule? His enemies are really basking in their power and victory. They did it. His enemies finally silenced him as Jesus' body hung limp on the cross. The "savior" of others couldn't save himself. Eliza didn't show up to vindicate him.

Is this the man St. Paul is talking about in the second reading? It doesn't sound like that to me.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creatures. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible. Whether thrones or dominions, principalities or powers, all were created through him and for him. He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being." (Colossians 1:15-17)

Again, the domination system seems to have conquered and prevailed—to have made mockery of his claim to be the Son of God. His followers claim that he is the Messiah, the promised one who was to have succeeded King David.

As Paul's letter to the Colossians continues, Paul begins to unravel this paradoxical situation by writing:

"It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, everything, I say, both on earth or in the heavens making peace through the blood of the cross." (Colossians 1:18-20)

So there is meaning and hope here after all—“peace through the blood of the cross.” For thousands of years before Jesus crucifixion and for two thousand years since his death, kings, nations and other human power structures failed miserably in achieving peace and justice and goodness through “redemptive violence,” power and domination of people and nations. Jesus proposed, in teaching and life, that there is another way, a better way, a more effective way—the way of service, the way of agape, the way of nonviolent love. He said that he came not to be served but to serve, indeed “to give his life as a ransom for many.”

At first sight in the light (or darkness) of conventional wisdom this all sounds absurd. However, the wisdom of Jesus prevailed over the power of the Roman Empire and the power of all kingdoms and empires over the past two millennia. The cross of Jesus still rises over the former gardens of Nero. St. Paul has something to say about this too.

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Some of the ideas in this homily are borrowed from Gustavo Gutierrez book: Sharing the Word Through the Liturgical Year (Orbis).

Optional Theme: The Suffering Servant of Yahweh

“This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23-35-43)

Who was the Servant of Yahweh? We are not sure. Scripture scholars are of the opinion that the Servant was a personification of the people of Israel or an individual spiritual leader called by God to guide his people. The Suffering Servant is also strongly Messianic. Jesus identifies himself as the Suffering Servant. The rest of this article will be what the Suffering Servant means to our world and me.

We live in a world where the domination system is pervasive and deeply rooted in our whole way of living, relating and leading. It is the way of power based on wealth to build and maintain power to control people, communities and nations. The nations and the Church have bought into this system. So pervasive and so taken for granted is the domination system of leadership that the Jesus system, seems absurd and unreal.

Power is thought to be necessary and helpful whereas domination power almost inevitably leads to violence and to condoning what has come to be called “redemptive violence.”*

The power and the “powers” of the world and of our history that are deeply rooted in our culture usually lead to self-seeking and self-aggrandizement to the point of becoming violent in the methods of maintaining control over people.

The Jesus system of servant leadership is so rare in our world that we take for granted that it wouldn’t work. We don’t take Jesus seriously, nor the servant leadership that he strongly proclaimed.

Jurgen Moltman, in a book entitled, The Power of the Powerless, writes meaningfully about the impotence of conventional power and the potency for good in humble, serving leadership.

Jesus planned and practiced powerlessness in order to exercise great power for good of the people. He possessed all power as Creator and Lord. He relinquished all power except the power to help and heal, to serve and save others. He relinquished material wealth that buys and maintains conventional power as a trade-off for spiritual power in order to lead others toward values that last, eternal life.

For the same reason, St. Francis of Assisi relinquished family wealth and

practiced radical, voluntary poverty and in the process let go of the conventional power that wealth can bring.

The special virtues of any suffering servant under the plan and lifestyle of Jesus are voluntary poverty, loving gentleness, consistent nonviolence and hope engendered by the Way of the Cross.

Other Christ figures than exemplified suffering servant leadership in our times were Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Dorothy Day of New York.

At times we experience a paradoxical reality when non-baptized persons practice the Jesus system of Suffering Servant leadership while those who claim to be followers of Christ practice the conventional domination system. Sometimes the non-baptized are more the Christ figures than are those who claim to be followers of Christ. I have in mind Gandhi, the Asian Indian nonviolent, suffering-servant leader persecuted by the Christian English power-keepers, and Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indian people violently abused by U. S. Christian military and political leaders, another example of a non-Christian Christ figure.

*Redemptive Violence: Use of Violence Thought to be Helpful to Bring Something Good

EPILOGUE FOR THIS JUSTICE THEME SERIES

“The Church’s social doctrine provides the fundamental criteria for pastoral action in the area of social activity... in proclaiming the Gospel, the social dimension is an essential and unavoidable but not the only dimension.”

Compendium* (Para 526, P 231)

“Action on behalf of justice and participation to the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.(1971 Synod: “Justice in the World”)

The above quotations from official documents of the Church make it clear that the social teachings of the Church are essential to the proclamation of the Gospel, the evangelizing work of the Church, and moral theology. Since the Second Vatican Council, with the publication of Gadium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World), we have a growing number of books and media materials to aid us in this essential ministry in the Church. Most local parishes and Catholic education programs have not sufficiently implemented this basic ministry.

There may be several reasons why our local Churches and schools have not implemented this work. One main reason is that many of our pastors, deacons, teachers and other leaders are not aware that social justice teachings are a “constitutive dimension” of the life of the Church. It has been quoted by some that the Catholic Social Doctrine is the best-kept secret of the Church’s official teachings. Many of our leaders are not prepared to deal with this issue. This present set of books, Justice Theme Homily Aids for Sunday Liturgies are an effort in helping, priests, deacons and teachers to deal with these issues from the pulpits, classrooms and educational programs in the Church.

Over fifty percent of the Sundays in each Church year have readings, one or more, that contain definite justice or non-violent themes. These books are intended to help those who develop homilies and lessons for pulpits and classrooms to implement this whole essential ministry of social doctrine.

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; The U. S Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004

APPENDICES

These appendices include three articles and a book written by Monsignor Mehrkens. These series and readings are about some of the social justice issues that are appropriate as an enlargement of the themes included in C Cycle.

- A. Catholic Social Teaching—A rich Heritage of Documents
Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church
Importance of Catholic Social Doctrine
Catholic Social Teaching—A rich Heritage of Documents
Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church
Essential for Evangelization
- B. Environmental Spirituality
- C. The Gospel of Santa Claus—Meditations on Justice and Peace for Advent and Christmas

Also mentioned in this C Cycle are series of articles in A Cycle published in 2004 and B Cycle published in 2005 written by Monsignor Mehrkens. These articles are also about social justice issues and are appropriate as an enlargement of the themes and are available.

A Cycle

Appendix B	Compassion
Appendix C	Money and Power
Appendix C	Eucharist and Economic Justice

B Cycle

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Appendix A

Catholic Social Teaching—A Rich Heritage of Documents

Importance of Catholic Social Doctrine

How important is this rich heritage of documents making up the social teaching of the church for over the past century? These documents represent the official teachings of the Catholic Church in matters of social justice and peace.

In the minds of the top leaders of the Catholic Church (especially Popes and Bishops), this heritage is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, in the regular practice of the Church this series of documents on social teaching is seldom preached and taught in most of our parishes and schools (including elementary, and secondary school, college and even seminaries).

In 2005 a new Compendium* of the Social Teachings was authored in Rome by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In this article I am reviewing a part of chapter 12 of this Compendium, “Social Doctrine and Ecclesial (church) action.”

In answering the question, how important is this social teaching to the Church, the authors of this Compendium have drawn from over two dozen official documents of the Catholic Church, and about another 150 supporting documents and addresses.

1. “The Church’s social teaching is the indispensable reference point that determines the nature, modality, articulation and development of pastoral activity in the social field.” (Para 524, p.230) This paragraph continues: ‘the Church’s social pastoral ministry is the living and concrete expression of the full awareness of her evangelizing mission in the social, economic, cultural and political realities of the world.’”

Comment: In simple terms this is the official social teaching of the Church and it is an essential part of her evangelizing ministry.

2. “The social message of the Gospel must guide the Church in her two-fold pastoral activity; that of helping men and women to discover the truth and to choose the path that they will follow, and that is of encouraging

Christians to bear witness to the spirit of service to the Gospel in the field of social activity.” (Para 525, p.230)

Comment: Once again, in simpler terms, action for social justice on the part of Christians is a more powerful form of evangelization than simply stating the social message in words.

3. “The Church’s social doctrine provides the fundamental criteria for pastoral action in the area of social activity ... in proclaiming the Gospel, the social dimension is an essential and unavoidable but not the only dimension.” (Para 526, P231)

Comment: The Church is saying here that the proclamation of the Gospel (pastoral preaching) must apply the Gospel to social problems and public needs.

4. “The Church’s social doctrine is an indispensable reference point for a totally integrated formation ... this is especially true for the lay faithful who have primary responsibility in the secular world for applying the Church’s social doctrine in social and public life.” (Para 528, P231)

Comment: The lay people in the Church have this special ministry in the world to do the social justice action in the world of work, commerce and the professions. Lay people in the Church especially need the guidance of the Church’s social teaching for this special ministry to bring social justice activity into the workplace. The Second Vatican Council made it very clear that the social ministry in the world is the unique responsibility of the lay faithful.

My question is: How can the laity carry out this ministry if they are not knowledgeable about the Church’s social teaching? How can the lay faithful be knowledgeable about social doctrine if they are not being informed and prepared by pastors and teachers from the pulpit and the classrooms in our schools?

Chapter twelve of this Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church goes on to point out that all Catholic institutions, including colleges and seminaries have the responsibility of forming and preparing people for this special ministry.

The Church’s Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome has published a

document entitled Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests. I don't remember ever seeing this document. I am looking for one now. I am wondering if this document is being used in seminaries, religious orders and dioceses in the United States.

My concluding questions:

- Why is an essential part of Catholic moral doctrine and ministry practically ignored in Catholic life?
- Why is this social doctrine so well developed and so poorly implemented?
- Why do pastors and teachers remain relatively uninformed of this teaching?

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Washington, D.C. 2005.

Available USCCB Publishing, 3211 Fourth Street NE, Washington D.C. 20017. Also available at www.usccb.org/publishing.

Appendix A

The Catholic Social Teaching—A Rich Heritage of Documents

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

Essential For Evangelization

This article is a review of Chapter Two of the Compendium* that I have been reviewing recently. The theme is “Evangelization and Social Doctrine”. Many people will be surprised to read that the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church are an essential part of the ministry of evangelization, especially since most Catholic people are quite unaware of Catholic Social Doctrine. Catholic evangelization ministry would be incomplete without the inclusion of the social teachings of the Church. Pope Paul VI wrote a major document of the modern Church on evangelization. In the edition of this document that I read and studied included 16 pages devoted to the social doctrine of the Church.

The Compendium that I am reviewing in this article, includes the following statements and teachings:

1. “By means of her social doctrine, the Church takes on the task of preaching what the Lord has entrusted to her. She teaches people the demands of justice and peace and conformity with divine wisdom.” (Para 63, P 28)
2. “With her social doctrine not only does the Church not stray from her mission (evangelization) but she is rigorously faithful to it.” (Para 64, P 28)
3. “The Church’s social doctrine is an integral part of her evangelizing ministry. Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take into account the mutual demands continually made by the Gospel and by the concrete, personal and social life of man.” (Para 66, P 29)
4. “The Church’s social doctrine is itself a valid instrument of evangelization. In effect, to teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church’s evangelization mission and is an essential part of the Christian message.” (Para 69, P 30)

Without using the quotes above I would not be able to sufficiently report the full importance of the social justice message of the Church. These quotations from the official teachings of the Catholic Church are saying that the social justice work of the Church's teaching/action ministry are essential to Catholic education, Catholic evangelization and faith life, for all Catholics and not just for limited interested segments of the Catholic faithful.

Coincidentally, with the new current Renew program entitled "Why Catholic?" a segment of the social doctrine of the Church is included in the program.

Chapter two of the Compendium that we are reviewing continues to explore the nature of Catholic social teaching. The roots and content of Catholic social teaching are found in the Bible, Catholic theology, human reason (natural law) and from contributions from all brands of knowledge, especially philosophy, the social sciences, politics, economics and others.

"Insofar as it (Catholic social doctrine) is part of the Church's moral teaching, the Church's social doctrine has the same dignity and authority as her moral teaching." (Para 81, p 35 Compendium)

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004

Appendix B

Environmental Spirituality

Two subtitles that more clearly describe environmental spirituality would be: Biblical and Church Foundations for Earth-Care; Earth-Care is an Essential Part of Christian Spirituality. This article states eight basic principles of environmental spirituality.

1. The Earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24)
2. The Earth is sacred.
3. The Earth within the universe is our home.
4. The Earth, created by God is for all.
5. Biblical faith calls for Earth-care.
6. Greed desecrates the Earth.
7. Violence against the Earth harms or destroys people.
8. Earth-care is part of Gospel love for God and people.

This article will briefly summarize the meaning of these eight principles.

1. The Earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24):

God the creator owns the Earth and all that is on it and in it. When the Church speaks of private ownership this is in no way absolute ownership. Ownership of any part of creation includes the right to use the land. This kind of ownership is stewardship for some part of the Earth. We may not do as we please with what we only claim to own. There are moral responsibilities that go with stewardship. Also see Leviticus 25:23; Deuteronomy 10:14; Genesis 2:15; Exodus 19:5; Psalm 50:10-12; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

2. The Earth is sacred.

The Earth and all that is contained in it and on it is created by God and is God's property. By polluting the Earth and destroying its resources we have been desecrating what is sacred instead of reverencing it.

3. The Earth is our home.

“Christian spirituality has as much to do with how we stand on the Earth as how we experience heaven. It is crucial that we re-establish a sense of groundedness of place, of connection to a story of land.” (Ched Myers, Say to This Mountain, Orbis Press, pp 45-46.)

4. The Earth is created for all.

The Earth is not just for the rich and the powerful. “God destined the Earth for all people so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.” (Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, para 69) To restrict the use of the land to only those who can afford to buy a claim for the land is a terrible injustice. Poverty is not only lack of privilege but also destruction of people.

5. Biblical faith calls for Earth-care.

“The Lord God placed the man in the garden to till and care for it.” (Genesis 2:15) At the present time we are still polluting the Earth and continuing to destroy the Earth’s resources unnecessarily in a down-degrading spiral for reasons of convenience, greed and conspicuous consumption.

6. Greed pollutes and destroys the Earth.

Greed is the main cause of the desecration of Earth and its main resources. Earth-care is not just another optional interest for authentic Biblical Christians. Earth-care is a moral requirement of Christian faith—a part of our faith-relationship with God the Creator.

7. Injustice/violence against the Earth and its people insult the Creator.

This violence destroys living things, including human life. This violence against the Earth is not just a political, scientific, or economic problem; it is a faith problem

8. Earth-care is part of Gospel love for God and for people.

Earth care is not just an optional choice of interest for authentic Biblical

Christians. It is required for a genuine relationship with God the Creator and the Cosmic Christ. The Churches must take leadership for Earth-care and environmental spirituality. Most Churches are not carrying this responsibility at present.

(Since there is no environmental theme article in this cycle, this article is included in case a reader needs this kind of them for some special occasion.)

Appendix C

The Gospel of Santa Claus

Meditations on Justice and Peace for Advent and Christmas

Jesus, the Messiah, is the real paradoxical Christmas person.

He was born in a barn, but angels announced his birth.

He was born into a poor family, but kings visited and gave expensive gifts.

He preached love, but died of hate.

He claimed to be a servant, but was acclaimed a king.

He was sinless, but was executed as a criminal.

He created the universe, but did not have a house of His own.

He suffered death to give life.

He died on a garbage heap, but rose as Lord of all life.

He is the Son of Mary and the Son of God.

This book is a collection of Advent and Christmas reflections prepared for readers who are looking for ways to bring Advent alive in families, parishes and other communities. It is the fruit of the author's efforts over many years to integrate Gospel love and justice with Advent liturgy and life. Advent corresponds to a time period in the American year when economic self-interest and exploitation reaches an obscene crescendo. The author is a pastor who has used the included ideas as homilies and parish programs. The ideas presented here cannot all be used and implemented in one Advent-Christmas season. The author has presented this material on one or two Sundays each Advent (or pre-Advent) as different chapters of The Gospel of Santa Claus.

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CHRISTMAS BLUES

The celebration of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day seldom fulfills the expectations built up in people over two months preparation. For the reality to live up to the anticipation is usually an impossible project.

Through the centuries the festival of Christmas has taken on an aura of magic and emotion that is incomparable in human ritual—set forms of community communication. It may or may not be a strongly religious experience. It is definitely familial but not necessarily a religious phenomenon. Children easily enter into the spirit of Christmas magic from earliest years—the gestalt experience of Christmas trees, colored lights, decorations, gifts, cards, vacation from school, special poignant music, parties, special foods, along with symbols of the Santa Claus myth, etc., etc. As adults we try to do this through our own children, and so the highly charged magic of Christmas rituals is perpetuated.

A part of this magic is the feeling that everything should be just right in our lives and family relations at Christmas time. And of course, life is seldom just right with everyone all of the time.

I certainly am not saying that people should not have emotionally highly charged celebrations. I am saying that the Christmas experience is so unrealistically anticipated, that we set ourselves up for an almost inevitable let down. Personal relations in the family are never perfect but the weaknesses and failures and hostilities are accentuated at Christmas within the perspective of unreal expectations. Our children are indoctrinated with this anticipation with songs like:

“You better watch out, you better not cry”

Instead of all the expectations being fulfilled people get the flu—or at least indigestion. Others may drink too much, still others are disappointed in the gifts received, Johnnie pouts and Aunt Susie blows up at Uncle John. And then someone inevitably cries out: “Please not on Christmas!” So we start over by repressing the hostilities and disappointments, but inside we obviously know that, “Christmas is wrecked.”

Furthermore, unpleasant shadows are a part of each person’s life. The shadow

may be death, a divorce, a broken friendship, alienation of a family member, an accident, a serious sickness, etc. Our shadows are accentuated at Christmas, a time that is supposed to be a time of unalloyed happiness. The shadow is especially poignant if it stems from an event that took place during a previous Christmas season.

The Christmas blues need not destroy the joy of the season, but some changes in perspective and mode of celebration may be necessary to render the expectation more real and attainable and to prevent the shadows from taking over.

The first step could be to position our celebrations in relation to the Christ-mystery of the festival. After all, it is His birthday that we should be celebrating. As we review the Christmas stories in the Gospel we are reminded that the joy expressed by the angels, the shepherds, and the magi was not unmixed. The Gospel narratives in both Matthew and Luke vividly express rejection, poverty, conflict and violence—clearly anticipatory of the real mission of the Messiah. These elements should not be repressed in our meditations about the birth of Jesus.

Our expectations are more likely to be realistic and spiritually genuine if we appreciate Christmas, not as a time of complete perfection, love, and untainted happiness, but a time of forgiveness and reconciliation—a time to remember God's unconditional love for us in spite of our weakness and failures. This is a time to become aware of our human limitations and vulnerability, a time for humility, and a childlike acceptance of God's love. This love is far different than the love embodied in the Santa Claus myth. Santa's love is conditional. He rejects "bad" children.

Finally, our Christmas plans and celebrations are more likely to bring a deeper joy and help us to avoid the "blues" as our Christmases become filled with Gospel outreach concerns of Christ—concerns for the anawim: the poor, the elderly, the oppressed, the hurting, not only within our own circles but beyond our personal circles of association. Love transforms not only the beloved but also the lover.

We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him. I John 4:10

If God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another. I John 4:11

PREPARE THE WAY

“Prepare the Way” because Santa Claus is coming to town.”

It is the First Sunday of Advent. There are only 22 shopping days until Christmas. Last Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, Santa Claus made his first appearance of the season in the shopping centers and department stores. The downtowns of America are already fully decorated for Christmas. The first appearance of Santa Claus has been well prepared for; the process began right after Halloween. Yes, the spirit of Santa Claus is abroad.

In the month of December Americans will do billions of dollars worth of business—in some businesses, 50% of the annual profits will be made this month. Most of the spending will be for the enjoyment of our own and ourselves—relatively comfortable, well-housed, well-fed, well-educated, well-medicated, well-entertained people. These are not bad things. God wants us to enjoy life. The problem is that during December over 1.5 million people will die of starvation or malnutrition. The tragedy is that most of us who are enjoying the Christmas holidays are not even aware and do not want to be aware of the suffering people. This situation seriously raises questions about the authenticity of our American way of Advent and Christmas. This situation leads some to the conclusion that the American way of Christmas is diametrically opposed to the Gospel of Christ—that another Gospel has emerged in our midst without our realizing it. It is this “way, truth, and life” that I have here designated the Gospel of Santa Claus.

Advent means “coming”—the coming of the Messiah, the anointed promised one, as the vulnerable, suffering servant and His return as Lord and King in his final coming. In this season the Church reminds us to “stay awake,” “to look,” “to watch” for His coming. In reality, Santa Claus has upstaged the Lord, and Advent is now more the coming of Santa Claus.

Paraphrasing the famous editorial in the New York Sun of September 21, 1897 entitled, “Is There A Santa Claus?” I would say:

“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus!” There must be! For six weeks before Christmas his name is on the lips of our children more than any other name. In the name of Santa

Claus, celebrations are held, cities are decorated, songs are composed, children are indoctrinated and motivated, and the national economy is saved for another year. Indeed, Virginia, many who do not know Jesus Christ, know and believe in Santa Claus. Frankly, Virginia, as a proclaimer of the Gospel of Christ, I'm jealous. The Gospel of Santa Claus is openly proclaimed from the housetops, the market place, and the mass media. Indeed, his Gospel has even infiltrated the Sunday Schools and Church parties. Yes, there is a Santa Claus! For a jolly, little old fat man with a white beard and a red suit, he really has power. His miracles are something else! With reindeer for thrust on a little, old-fashioned sleigh, he travels faster than sound. I'll never know how he gets down those chimneys without ever getting dirty—and being so chubby and all. Of course, he's not perfect. He has his own hang-ups. He can seldom find the houses of children in impoverished sections of town. Yes, Virginia, we have great faith in good ol' Santa. When it comes to faith, actions speak louder than words. In six weeks we spend more money in his name than we spend in a year's time on Christ's poor people. Truly, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus and he has captured our hearts, for where our treasure is, there also will be hearts."

WHO IS HE?

“He was in the world and through Him the world was made, yet the world did not know who He was.” John 1:10

Our American way of Advent and Christmas indicates that we are still confused about who He is. Advent, a time of waiting, watching and hoping, is the celebration of the first coming of the vulnerable Servant-Messiah, and the expectation of His second coming as Lord to bring His Kingdom to completion.

Who is He? John’s disciples asked the same question:

“Are you ‘He who is to come’ or are we to expect someone else?” ... Jesus gave this response: “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them.” Luke 7:20-23

Care for the *anawim*—that is His mission. The *anawim* are the powerless people, “the least brothers” and sisters, the sick, the handicapped, the children, the “orphans and widows and aliens,” the poor and the sinners. These are the first concern of the Messiah.*

Earlier in Luke’s Gospel Jesus clearly identified Himself with the “anointed one” of Isaiah and He again designates His mission as a ministry especially to the *anawim*. Quoting Isaiah Jesus says:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives. Recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners. To announce a year of favor from the Lord. Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke 4:18-21.

In our Advent-Christmas observance it is easy to lose track of the real Messiah and His priority concerns. If we sentimentally concentrate too much on the cute infant in the manger we forget that He came to serve, to liberate, to save. If we celebrate—as most of us do—only with our own comfortable friends and families, we lose sight of the *anawim*. If we lose sight of the real Christ and the *anawim* we miss the whole meaning of the first coming.

For the past fifty years we have had a campaign “to put Christ back into Christmas.” We have lost ground in this effort to re-Christianize Christmas because the slogan and the effort have missed an essential point. Christ never left Christmas; we did. To have Christ genuinely in our Christmases we have to put ourselves back into Christ and His concern for the *anawim* into our liturgies and lives—into our Advent and Christmas. This calls for Gospel-conversion and not just changing the pictures and verses on the Christmas cards.

Advent-Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation, of Emmanuel—God with us. “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us” John 1:14

St. Paul grasped the meaning, the beauty, and the power of this mystery when he wrote of Christ:

“... He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. ..He humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross. Jesus Christ is Lord.” Philippians 2:7, 8, 11

The “infant in the manger” image of Christ is comfortable and safe. The cross, however, and the teachings of the adult Messiah are frightening and challenging. It is understandable that we prefer to remain locked into the manger scene rather than the Calvary theme. This is very possible to do if we do not understand the infancy narratives as theological previews of the adult mission of Jesus Christ, the Servant Lord, the suffering Savior.

*Hebrew for “anointed one;” Christos in Greek.

MY STORY

Awareness of the “Gospel of Santa Claus” began to take shape in my mind in the mid-1960’s while I was pastor of two parishes in an economically depressed area in Minnesota. I realized that the poor needed the “good news to be proclaimed to them because “not on bread alone do people live but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” But it also became clear to me that people can’t live without “bread” and that a part of the proclamation of good news to the poor is helping them find bread and housing for their families. Shortly before Christmas in 1965, I met with my family (my family was economically comfortable) and discussed with them my plan to no longer go through the ritual of trying to buy them Christmas gifts. We all had what we needed. I told them that I would prefer to channel the gift money that I had been using for gifts for them to the people in real need of the necessities of life. No one expressed any objection to the plan. In fact, my parents and sister continued to send me money at Christmastime, fully aware that I would consider their monetary gift as a gift to be used for a family or person in need.

This was the beginning of alternative Christmases for me. This was also the beginning of the Advent-Life Fund—a parish Advent-Christmas fund for sharing with people in need in our own community to be used throughout the year.

It was about this time that I began suggesting to families in my parish that those who were better off financially cut in half their own Christmas spending on themselves and share the other half with a family in need or with the Parish Advent-Life Fund.

One of the most beautiful and gratifying experiences of my ministry happened as a result of this suggestion. Dan and Susan were the only professional people in our parish. They were financially quite capable of significant sharing. About two weeks before Christmas, Susan called me one morning and informed me that they had had a family meeting (three teen-age children) the previous evening and had decided to reduce their own inter-family Christmas spending and that they would share \$500 with people in need.

Susan also informed me of a family in the parish who had really come upon hard

times (parents and 5 children) and had no resources for adequate winter clothing. Dan and Susan wanted to channel \$500 anonymously to Jim and Margaret and their family.

Could I be the go-between and arrange it? I then talked it over with Jim and Margaret. Yes, they would accept the gift gratefully. On Christmas Day, when Jim and Margaret and their children came into Church with new and adequate winter clothing, there were tears in the eyes of Dan and Susan. Later they told me that this was their best Christmas ever.

There is an epilogue to this story. Two years later Jim stopped at the rectory a few days before Christmas, handed me \$50 for the Advent-Life Fund. He told me that they were getting along much better financially and they wanted to share their blessings with others.

When I became the pastor of a larger parish in the early 70's the alternatives to a Santa Claus Advent and Christmas multiplied and the Advent-Life Program greatly expanded. The fund became a resource for a year-round food and clothing dispensary, and for the work of a part-time volunteer advocacy and family counselor. The Social Service/Social Action Committee of the Parish Council administered the fund and helped develop and carry out programs of service throughout the year. Holiday dinners were served at the rectory on Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving for all who were in need of food and/or fellowship. Also, gifts were provided to people in nursing homes as well as children of poverty families in the community. Families were also encouraged to adopt other families in need, and elderly people were invited to parishioners' homes to celebrate Christmas and other holidays.

Through the Advent-Life Fund, the parish also made special donations during the year to other important LIFE-supporting programs such as Birthright and Sheltered Workshops.

Through the years many people in different ways and in varying levels of participation have moved away from celebrating Christmas according to the Gospel of Santa Claus and have come to better appreciate the Gospel of Christ. For some this experience has been not just a change at Christmastime but a continuing conversion throughout the year. Those of us who have changed our observance of Christmas do

not "celebrate" less. However, the mode and quality of our celebration has changed significantly. We have simplified our celebration not to take the joy out of Christmas but to add greater joy for many others and ourselves.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:

FOR FAMILIES

- ◆ Make decorations for home and Christmas tree. -Plan a family liturgy.
- ◆ Make gifts --crafts, plants, or food (bread, fruitcake, cookies). -Make or plant a tree instead of cutting or buying one.
- ◆ Make a piñata for family fun.
- ◆ Offer gifts of personal service to one another.
- ◆ If gifts are purchased, set some guidelines.
- ◆ Invite a stranger for dinner. (For example, an older couple or a rest home resident that has no family left).
- ◆ Go Christmas caroling.
- ◆ Adopt another family in need or person in nursing home.
- ◆ Visit a nursing home with simple gifts.

FOR INDIVIDUALS (OR FAMILIES)

- Volunteer to help with a Christmas project for poor families.
- Buy gifts that promote fun and growth such as books, Bibles, games, creative toys.
- Buy gifts that do not support war industries.
- Make donations as alternative gifts that help, enhance or save human lives.

SUGGESTED RECIPIENTS OF ALTERNATIVE GIFTS

Parish Advent -Life Fund
Birthright
CROP
OXFAM
Emergency Food Pantry
Catholic Relief Services
Campaign For Human Development
Bread For The World
Medical Mission Sisters
Adopt-A-Missionary
Amnesty International

(Many of these suggestions are taken from the Alternative Celebrations Catalog)

TREE OF LIFE

A profound reverence for human life is the Biblical and theological foundation for all the Church's involvement in social justice and concern for peace. The sacredness of human life encompasses the lives of the unborn, the elderly, the young, the terminally ill, the handicapped, the imprisoned, the poor, the racially different, friends and enemies, the oppressed and oppressors.

The Advent-Life Fund continues to provide financial resources for our parish Social Service/Social Justice programs. The Advent Tree of Life provides a symbol of Advent-sharing and a vehicle for gathering the funds to be shared. The tree is a sign of life--of reverence for life, a reverence rooted in our Incarnation-faith. We believe that God became one of us in the person of Jesus. The Incarnation is God's great affirmation of human life—all human life. Especially it is affirmation of the *anawim*, the powerless people, the little people.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”
John 1:14

“God's love was revealed in our midst in this way: He sent His only son to the world that we might have life through him. Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us and has sent His son as an offering for our sins. Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another.” 1 John 4:9-11

The tree is placed in the sanctuary on the First Sunday in Advent. It may be carried in during the entrance procession. Colored envelopes with attached violet ribbon hangers are set beneath the tree, and the people are encouraged to decorate the tree throughout the Advent Season with their gifts to the Advent-Life Fund (or other designations if they so choose.) A few people are invited to begin the decorating with gifts during the offertory procession on the First Sunday of Advent. On Christmas Eve the large violet ribbon at the top of the tree is replaced with a white ribbon or star and the Advent Tree of Life becomes our Christmas tree.

The Tree of Life is a sacramental reminder that Advent is the coming of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, Immanuel. It is also a sign in our midst that Jesus' first concern was for the *anawim*—“the least brothers” and sisters. It is a symbol calling us to

place ourselves into a Messiah-centered Advent rather than remain trapped in an Advent dominated by the Santa Claus myth of selfish consumerism.

The Cross is THE Tree of Life. The Advent Tree of Life contains, like the Christmas narratives in the Gospels, a subtle hint about the Cross, the ultimate Tree of Life.

NO ROOM IN THE INN

“And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:6

The infancy narratives in both Matthew and Luke contain stories of conflict and rejection that prefigure the climactic conflict and rejection of Jesus in Jerusalem thirty some years after his birth. In the Gospel according to Matthew, King Herod highlights this rejection in the narratives of Egyptian exile and the massacre of the infants. In Luke’s narrative we find the theological preview of conflict and rejection in the narration of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple.

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother: “This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed” Luke 2:34

Even though the “no room in the inn” phrase may not have been intended by Luke as one of the signs of rejection, nevertheless the poetry and the preaching through the ages have been seen in this phrase a poignant symbol of rejection.

Hospitality, especially to strangers, is a recurring theme in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus includes this work of mercy in his famous litany of love in the judgment parable in Matthew, Chapter 25: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Matthew 25:35

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote a classic meditation on “Room for Christ” in a December issue of the “Catholic Worker.” In this piece she clearly develops the conviction that Christ is just as really present to us, now “disguised under every type of humanity,” as He was present historically to his contemporaries in Galilee and Judea. When we make room for others, especially the hungry, homeless and other needy people, we do really make room for Christ Himself. To Dorothy Day, this is the meaning of “the vine and the branches,” and of the Church as the “Body of Christ,” the “whole” Christ, in the world today. She writes:

“It is no use for us to say that we have been born two thousand years too late to find room for Christ Christ is always with us, asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that Christ speaks. With the eyes of store clerks, he gazes. With the hands of office

workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives, he gives.

When we give shelter or food to anyone who needs it – we give it to Christ.”

At least in the northern hemisphere, the need for housing and heat becomes a critical need during the Advent and Christmas season, for this time of year introduces the winter season of cold weather. This is a good season in which to reflect and act on our justice concerns.

Santa Claus is very status-conscious. He has little difficulty finding the homes of affluent children in comfortable neighborhoods. He lavishes his most expensive gifts on these children. He has great difficulty in finding the homes of the poor, and he completely misses the most destitute. Even when he finds the poorly heated homes of the poverty-level families, he usually leaves the leftovers from Christmases past. Those people who experience themselves as the outcasts, the rejects of society, are in good company—in company with Him for whom there was "no room in the inn. "

People who are endeavoring to improve the housing of people in poverty are certainly making "room for Christ. "

It was customary in early Christian communities to keep a “stranger's room" vacant and ready in every home for any stranger who might need hospitality. Of this room Dorothy Day wrote: "... nor did they keep the room because the man or woman who used it would remind them of Christ. No, plain and simple and stupendous, it was because they knew that person was Christ." We cannot all afford a "stranger's room" to be kept vacant and ready but we could all furnish a stranger's place at our family table.

It is very questionable that Christ can be found in the Christmas cribs, in the family celebrations, or in the Churches if those looking for Him do not also find Him, in disguise, in all the "little" people whom they meet in life. If we pass them by, we have passed by the Living Christ—EMMANUEL—God with us.

GOSPEL LIFE-STYLE

A group of students of the Newman Center at North Dakota State University began their life-style assessment with an evaluation of their Advent-Christmas celebration-style. Advent is an appropriate time to begin a life-style assessment because American consumerism reaches its peak in this season.

The Gospel according to Luke is rich in the sayings of Jesus about money, wealth, and life-style attitudes. In the following section from Luke we will list several significant sayings of Jesus without immediate comment.

Blessed are you poor; the reign of God is yours. Blessed are you who hunger; you shall be filled. (Luke 6:12)

But woe to you rich, for your consolation is now. Woe to you who are full; you shall go hungry. (Luke: 6:24-25)

The seed fallen among the briars are those who hear, but their progress is stifled by the cares and riches and pleasures of life and they do not mature. (Luke 8:14)

Avoid greed in all its forms. A man may be wealthy, but his possessions do not guarantee him life. (Luke 12: 15)

"You fool! This very night your life shall be required of you. To whom will all this piled-up wealth of yours go?" That is the way it works with the man who grows rich for himself instead of growing rich in the sight of God. (Luke 12:20-21)

Stop worrying (about food, clothing, material security). The unbelievers of this world are always running after these things. Seek out instead his kingship over you, and the rest will follow in turn. (Luke 12:29-31)

Do not live in fear, little flock. It has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms. Get purses for yourselves that do not wear out, a never-failing treasure with the Lord which no thief comes near nor any moth destroys. Wherever your treasure lies, there your heart will be. (Luke 12:32-34)

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other or be attentive to the one and despise the other. You cannot give yourself to God and money.

(Luke 16:13)

There is one thing further you must do. Sell all you have and give to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. (Luke 18:22)

How hard it will be for the rich to go into the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. (Luke 18:24-25)

I assure you, this poor widow has put in more than all the rest. They make contributions out of their surplus, but she from her want has given what she could not afford--every penny she had to live on. (Luke 21:3-4)

Some of Jesus' statements may be exaggerations for emphasis. Nevertheless, for those who take the Gospels seriously, some clear conclusions do emerge from Jesus' teachings:

- Wealth is very dangerous.
- Greed (wealth addiction) could be spiritually fatal.
- People may not exercise absolute ownership; God is owner; people are only stewards.
- Those who have more than enough for necessities and quality life have an obligation to share generously with those who do not have enough for necessities (food, clothing, housing, medicine, education, and some recreation.)
- One's attitude toward wealth is a crucial dimension of one's spiritual life.
- One's attitude toward the *anawim* (the powerless, the poor, the sick, the hungry, the helpless, the oppressed—the little people) is crucial to one's relationship with Christ.

Jesus' parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" has held real significance for me

for some years. Both the Rich Man and Lazarus are still with us – and I am the Rich Man at least as far as material advantage is concerned. I have never known a day without sufficient food, good clothing, and comfortable housing. I have a floor in my home, a refrigerator with plenty of food for storage, a comfortable bed, adequate furniture, plenty of fuel for northern winters, a TV set, hot and cold running water, a hair dryer, and even an automobile. I have sufficient funds for medical care, books, and recreation. Last, but certainly-not least, I have had a good education that I highly appreciate. These gifts and advantages place me among the highly privileged minority of people on the earth.

These reflections also remind me that we Americans make up about 6% of the world's population while we use about 70% of the world's wealth. When we consider that the people of developed nations make up about 20% of our Earth's population and that we use and have access to about 70% of the world's wealth and resources, we become aware of the fact that the developing world—Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 80% of Earth's people, have access to only 20% of the goods and services. They are literally left "holding the bag,"—a nearly empty bag.

With awareness of these realities, a small but growing minority of American Christians and others are seriously endeavoring to change their life-style as a matter of personal conviction in conscience. Reasons for change are four-fold:

1. Personal spiritual integrity and growth;
2. Witness to our faith in Jesus Christ as Servant Lord;
3. Practice of social justice with more to share; and
4. Better ecological stewardship of the earth and its resources.

We have been pleasantly surprised to find that the process of simplifying—of "gospelizing" our life-style has brought not suffering but greater joy, creativity, and freedom.

We have found that the Shakertown pledge—I prefer to call it "covenant"—has been a good framework for our learning, growing, and living. A slightly modified version

of the Shakertown pledge is included at the end of this section.

The Christmas Gospel narratives contain very meaningful expressions and symbols of lifestyle: Christ was born into a working family, in an animal barn, with a manger as his crib, and his first visitors were simple people—the shepherds. These expressions are premonitions of later events. Having been born in another man's barn, Jesus was buried in another man's tomb. Forced into Egyptian exile by the powerful, so was He later condemned by the powerful of this world, with only a few simple folk to stand with Him in dying.

The crossed wood of the manger was exchanged for the later wood of the Cross. Born vulnerably naked like the rest of human beings. He was also stripped naked again before execution.

During His public life when someone came up to Him and said, "I will be your follower wherever you go," Jesus warned him, "the foxes have lairs, the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Luke 9:58) There is something quite poignant in the realization that the Son of God, who shared in the work of creation and who owned the universe, chose to identify with the *anawim*—the little people, in His lifestyle.

The Santa Claus mythology is partly rooted in the St. Nicholas legends of anonymous gift giving to the poor. The modern dimensions of the myth are not *anawim* related, and are certainly not associated with simple lifestyle. The "good" life in the Gospel of Santa Claus is the materially abundant life of high consumption.

CHRISTIAN LIFE-STYLE COVENANT (Modified Shakertown Pledge)

Recognizing that the earth and the fullness thereof is a gift from our gracious God, and that we are called to cherish, nurture, and provide loving stewardship for the earth's resources, and recognizing that life itself is a gift, and a call to responsibility, joy, and celebration, I affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the universe and all life.

Furthermore, I make the following declarations:

1. I declare myself to be a world citizen.

2. I commit myself to lead an ecologically sound life.
3. I commit myself to lead a life of creative simplicity and to share my personal wealth with the world's poor.
4. I commit myself to join with others in the reshaping of institutions in order to bring about a more just global society in which all people have full access to the needed resources for their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth.
5. I commit myself to occupational accountability, and in so doing I will seek to avoid the creation of products which cause harm to others. I affirm the gift of my body and commit myself to its proper nourishment and physical well-being.
6. I commit myself to examine continually my relations with others, and to attempt to relate honestly, morally, and lovingly to those around me.
7. I commit myself to personal renewal through prayer, meditation, and study.
8. I commit myself to responsible participation in a community of faith.

GOSPEL OF SANTA CLAUS

The Santa Claus Myth had its source in the St. Nicholas tradition. St. Nicholas was the Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor; he died about 350 A. D. Indeed, Santa Claus got his name from the Saint. Through the years in the United States, the Santa Claus Myth has become almost completely prostituted to the maximization of profit; the image is probably unredeemable.

The good news of Santa Claus is for the affluent.

Santa's mission is mainly to the healthy, wealthy and successful.

The Heralds of Santa Claus proclaim self-satisfaction.

Pleasure is a dominant theme of Santa Claus. No room for self-denial and the cross.

To stimulate business: "Let him who has a coat, get another."

Blessed are the wealthy -----
Blessed are the powerful-----
Blessed are the comfortable-----
Blessed are the satisfied -----

Love your own -----
Love your friends -----

Befriend the full,
the healthy,
the well housed
the respectable,
friends.

He comes that they may have things more abundantly.

GOSPEL OF CHRIST

The "myth" is no longer a cute tradition but has become a harmful influence on children. It is much easier to interest children in the "gospel" of Santa Claus than it is to teach them the Gospel of Christ. The gospel of Santa Claus feeds into the human tendency toward greed, a weakness in children as well as in adults. The Santa Claus indoctrination in its present form is a powerful attitude influencer that works contrary to the meaning of Christ's coming. The comparison below is a serious effort at highlighting the differences in the two Advent-Christmas Gospels.

"Report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead men are raised to life and the poor have the good news preached to them." Matthew 11.

John the Baptist, the Herald of Christ, proclaimed the Advent theme of repentance. Mark 1:4.

"If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps." Mark 8:34.

John the Baptist said: "Let the man with two coats give to him who has none. The man who has food should do the same." Luke 3:11

Blessed are the poor in spirit -----
Blessed are the meek -----
Blessed are the sorrowful -----
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice -----
Matthew 5:3-6.

Love your neighbor.
Love your enemies.
Matthew 5:44

Befriend the hungry,
the naked,
the homeless,
the prisoners,
the strangers.
Matthew 25:31-46

LIFE IN THE WOMB

The womb is a strong Advent-Christmas theme and symbol. The very season of Advent is a womb-season, a time of waiting for the “fullness of time” when Life for the world is brought forth.

When the Angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah (father of John the Baptizer) that his wife Elizabeth would conceive a son in her old age, the Angel said “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb.” (Luke 1:15). Then the same Messenger from God told Mary that she would also “conceive a son.” Mary immediately went to visit Elizabeth, her relative.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Most Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to Me?” Luke 1: 41-43

In Sacred Scripture there is an awareness of the womb as a place and symbol of God’s providential design and care for his people. The significance of the womb as expressed in the first chapter of Luke can also be found in the Old Testament. In the call of Jeremiah the “word of the Lord” is stated this way:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nation I appointed you. (Jeremiah 1:5)

In Psalm 139 the psalmist is overwhelmed by his realization of God’s personal care in the human person’s creation and development.

Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works. (Psalm 139: 13-14)

This same theme is also found in Psalm 22:10-11.

Furthermore, according to Dr. Phyllis Trible, a feminist protestant scripture scholar, a deeply held belief through the Old Testament is the idea that “the womb belongs to God; it is God who opens and closes the womb.” Indeed, the Hebrew word for womb becomes the word for “merciful compassion” in Hebrew usage. The biblical

thought-pattern moves from a unique “female organ to a mode of being: self-less participation in life.”

It seems to me that Sacred Scripture consistently assumes human personhood for the living being in the womb—a being filled with the Holy Spirit,” called and dedicated before birth.

Scripture also not only assumes, but also states that neither woman nor any man has the right to control her or his own body. Not only does the womb belong to God, but also the whole person is God’s. (Romans 14: 7-8 and 1Cor.6:20)

When we recall that the Hebrew word for “womb” came to also mean “merciful compassion,” it is ironic and significant that today the womb is no longer a very safe place in which one might find security and compassion. In the U. S. one in every three pregnancies is aborted.

In reflecting for many years on the varied faces of violence and injustice in our world, I have come to the conclusion that the varied forms of violence are interrelated and are forming a perceptible pattern. In my opinion, the most significant forms are abortion, armaments, war, hunger, racism and sexism. The pattern of violence interwoven in all the various expressions of injustice includes:

1. Depersonalizing and hence de-valuing of life;
2. Institutionalizing (legalizing) of violence;
3. Maximizing of profits (personal and corporate greed);
4. Denial of personal and corporate responsibility;
5. Euphemizing of the language of violence;
6. Seeking instant solutions—quick fixes for complex human problems; and, related to all of the above,
7. Seeking a hedonistic way of life that necessarily excludes the way and meaning of the cross.

One last and very important element in the pattern is the myopic vision of good people who are in one or more ways, advocating justice and non-violence. I will try to

place this last point in personal terms. Even though I consider myself a pacifist and a feminist, I am not comfortable with most people in the peace movement and the women's movement because a majority are also pro-choice in their attitude about violence to the unborn. Even though I consider myself to be strongly pro-life for the unborn, I am uncomfortable with most pro-life people because a majority are anti-life when it comes to armaments and military "security" and the violence of sexism. Many are apathetic about the violence of hunger.

As we have been noticing throughout this series of essays on Advent and Christmas, the patterns of violence interwoven in our modern societal life-style unconsciously constitute the premises of the Gospel of Santa Claus. This philosophy and life-style tends to aggrandize "number one" and to devalue the *anawim*. The Gospel of Christ places the *anawim* in the position of highest priority. I place the unborn in the position of the most powerless of the *anawim*.

The last days of Advent commemorate Jesus' life in the womb. Christmas memorializes His birth. If Advent is a womb-season, Christmas is a child-season. I consider the unborn to be among our children. I am reminded of Jesus' words: "Allow the children to come to me; the kingdom of God is for such as these."

Advent-Christmas is about Incarnation. The Church has assumed for centuries that the Incarnation—God becoming human—took place at the time of Jesus' conception.

MARY: RADICAL WOMAN

“God who is mighty has done great things for me. ... He has shown might with his arm; he has confused the proud in their inmost thoughts. He has deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. The hungry he has given every good thing, while the rich he has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:49-53)

These are striking and jarring words when spoken by a teen-age woman, especially when that young woman has the image of one who is prayerful, naive in the ways of the world, docile, sweet, and non-assertive. These words are part of the “Canticle of Mary,” praising God when she visited Elizabeth during the pregnancy of both women. This canticle, reflecting the “Canticle of Hannah” (1 Samuel 2:1-10), expresses Mary’s concern for and solidarity with the *anawim*, God’s powerless ones.

Mary was a radical woman—radical in the sense of deeply rooted—when we consider that women of her time and place were practically without human rights, and expected to be completely subordinate to their fathers and husbands. Mary was a prayerful, reflective woman (Luke 2:19), a woman of courage who questioned the Angel (Luke 1:34) and who followed her Son to Calvary. She was also a woman of decision (Luke 1:38; John 2:3-5), internally liberated, and committed to the liberation of the oppressed.

Mary experienced solidarity with the oppressed among her own people. She was a Jew who identified with her people, singing in her canticle: “He has upheld Israel his servant” (Luke 1:54). Being a woman in a completely patriarchal culture, probably poor, once exiled, Mary could identify with the *anawim*. Indeed Mary even identifies with slaves, the most powerless of the *anawim*.

Raymond Brown, the scripture scholar writes:

“Mary’s understanding of the Christian message, as Luke presents it, is extremely radical. The angelic message to Mary identifies Jesus as Son of David, Son of God; but then she goes forth and explains her interpretation of it in a hymn, the ‘Magnificat.’ ‘... He has regarded the low estate of his slave woman ...’ Mary speaks of the female slave. For Mary, the news about Jesus means that God has put down the mighty and He has exalted the lowly. He has filled the

hungry. ...”

(Mary in the New Testament, America, May 15, 1982, p. 378.)

Mary was a radical woman because she understood at the root level, the counter-culture of this Son, especially His concern for the little people as He expressed this in His Beatitudes (Matthew 5 and Luke 6). Mary was the first and most radical of the disciples of Jesus. She was the one who understood the word most deeply, and lived it most completely (Luke 8:21). Mary stands for liberation from every form of oppression.

ADVENT PILGRIMAGES

West Acres is one of the finest shopping centers in the upper Midwest. Positioned on the western edge of Fargo, North Dakota, people from Fargo, Moorhead, Minnesota, and from areas many miles from Fargo flock to West Acres to do their Christmas shopping. Five students and I made an early Advent pilgrimage to West Acres one Friday evening not to shop but to pray. We sat, separately, around the central area fountain reading privately, Chapter IV, from Cry Justice –The Bible on Hunger and Poverty, edited by Ronald J. Sider. Chapter IV is entitled: "Property and Possessions". Having meditated on Scriptural passages about wealth, greed, and dependence on "things", each of us prayed silently for ourselves and for the shoppers passing the fountain—children, young couples on shopping dates, families, and elderly people enjoying the company of their grandchildren. We prayed that we and the people passing by would be protected or freed from a dangerous addiction to wealth and over-dependence on possessions. We prayed for those who appeared agitated, depressed, angry, or just tired. On this evening pilgrimage we did not pray for poor people because we did not see any poor people.

There was an aroma of newness in the wide aisles as we walked past the hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of new cars on display in the center of the aisles, and of tons of new clothing on display in open shops. This aroma of newness also had a hint of the odor of death since we knew that American affluence is partly achieved through the exploitation of poorly paid workers in Third and Fourth World countries. We did then pray for those who have "suffered and died" that we might have an abundance of affordable possessions. Before leaving West Acres we gathered in a small circle in the heated entryway, continued to lick our ice cream cones and prayed together "Our Father ... Thy Kingdom come ... Lead us not into temptation ... Amen."

Surely, Christ is present at West Acres, but His Kingdom is not much in evidence. The kingdom of Santa Claus is the influencing power at West Acres.

The following evening two University students made another Advent pilgrimage with me—this time to NP Avenue, Fargo's skid row. We walked the street for a time, and then entered one of the bars, took a booth, and ordered 7-Up. We have no aversion to

beer, but we planned to worship later in the storefront mission. Sipping our pop we prayed our spontaneous prayers together. This time we prayed for the poor, the destitute, the alcoholics, the hopeless—the *anawim*. We thanked God for our gifts, our health, our faith, and our hope. Others in the bar thought that we were simply carrying on an ordinary conversation; it was a conversation, but somewhat extraordinary for a skid row bar.

What if some acquaintances of ours had been driving by and observed a priest with two students, entering a bar on NP Avenue? Would it have been a scandal? People were scandalized at Jesus because He ate and drank with outcasts. No one would ever be scandalized at seeing a pastor at West Acres.

Later we attended the service at the storefront "Miracle Mission". I was honored to be invited to offer the opening prayer. Besides the three of us the congregation consisted of three local "missionaries" and six other people off the street. In some ways this worship service had more Gospel authenticity than many of the fine liturgies that I celebrate with our comfortable, respectable, middle-class communities. I became aware again that evening that if the cries of the oppressed are not heard in our comfortable assemblies, then it is questionable if the presence of Christ is effective in those liturgies.

Indeed, drug addiction is a frightening, degrading sickness, but probably not as dangerous and destructive as dollar-addiction. Yes, there was also the odor of death on NP Avenue, but the odor of unwashed bodies, cheap wine, and stale beer was, to me, less indicative of death than the smell of newness at West Acres. For me, Christ's presence was more intensely felt on NP Avenue than at West Acres. Here were obviously present the *anawim*: the sick, the strangers, the hungry, and the oppressed.

One thing is certain; the Gospel of Santa Claus has no sway here.

VIOLENCE IN BETHLEHEM

“He (Herod) ordered the massacre of all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and its environs ...”
(Matthew 2:16)

The infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke when sentimentally interpreted do an injustice to Christ and inhibit the spiritual growth of readers and listeners. These narratives are theological statements that preview the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. They portend the conflict, rejection, violation, and triumph of the Savior.

In Matthew's story of the Magi and Egyptian exile we read of the brutal massacre of children by an arrogant, power-crazed despot to protect his own position and self-interest. This event is a premonition of the ultimate conflict of Jesus with the leaders of the established church and state who were also fearful of losing their own position, power, and privileges.

The children died. They died because an insecure but arrogant King relied on his sword and not God. This Christmas, and for many Christmases past, the children have been dying of starvation and malnutrition because the peoples of the nations shaken with insecurity are relying on their bombs rather than the Lord.

This year, as we celebrate Christmas, there are still enough nuclear weapons (including strategic and tactical weapons) poised to destroy hundreds of thousands of children on planet earth. The children would die a terribly painful, burning, searing death because insecure but arrogant "grown-ups" trust their bombs more than God.

Matthew's response to the massacre of the children was to quote Jeremiah: "A cry was heard at Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentations. Rachel bewailing her children; no comfort for her since they are no more." Rachel's grief at Ramah would be like a picnic compared to a nuclear holocaust.

There is still time and hope. The children will not die this way if we take Christ—His teaching and His life—seriously. In His passion, Jesus was treated most violently. His non-violent response was silence, forgiveness, love, and the acceptance of death, rather than the use of retaliatory power to harm or destroy His violators. In short, He

lived a non-violent, suffering love. He willingly accepted death in His commitment to His Father's will.

If He had "put down" His "enemies" whom He loved and forgave, it is not likely that the Centurion would have been able to say: "Indeed this was an innocent man! Indeed this was the Son of God!" Nor would the people who came to see a spectacle have returned home beating their breasts with no sense of victory. Jesus was the Messiah-King, the Son of God. He was co-creator with the Father. He was Lord of the Universe! He allowed His creatures to insult Him and to destroy His human life rather than use His power in violent human behavior—even in self-defense.

There is still a Christmas hope, but only through an Easter faith. "Out of Egypt have I called my Son." God brought His people out of the slavery of Egypt. God called His Son from the death of the Cross-to the new life of Easter. Only reliance on this same Christ can change us enough to bring about our liberation from fear of "The Bomb" to a new life for our children and us. Jesus, the infant in the manger, the exile in Egypt and the Savior on the Cross-allowed Himself to be completely non-violently vulnerable for our healing and liberation.

The proclamation of Christmas begins with these words at the Midnight Mass:

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light:
Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has
shone." (Isaiah 9:11)

We still have the option of choosing Christ, the suffering, loving, serving "Light of the World." We still have the option of finding this saving Light by following the Magi's star of faith. If we do not choose this option we may be choosing the blinding, burning light of nuclear destruction and again the children will die.

PERSONAL DISARMAMENT

“Glory to God in high heaven, peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:14)

An appropriate song for the Christmas season is the song that begins with "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." If peace does not "begin with me" it is not likely that it will be achieved by nations. If non-violence does become a real part of my own faith-life then I shall have-become a more integral person, a more authentic disciple of Christ even though peace is not attained at the international level.

Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychologist, published a book entitled The Violence Within. Tournier convincingly argues for the universality of violent aggressive tendencies in people and he develops his conviction that violence is progressive and escalatory unless checked. However, violence is not the bottom line for Tournier; it is power desired for self-interest. He is convinced that bluntly or subtly, most of us—maybe all of us—trap ourselves in power-games, through the pursuit of wealth, status, popularity, and achievement in competition. This happens to people in families, in commerce, in nations, as well as in the Church. To Tournier's "power" I would add "fear" as a dominant root of personal violence—fear arising from threatened self-interest, fear of powerlessness and vulnerability.

According to Tournier, voluntary relinquishment of power and control is an essential step if we are to move toward a non-violent way of life. The author sees Jesus' non-violence as voluntary relinquishment of power under personal attack. In the Gospel Jesus did not let go of His personal power when love and the welfare of others called for a power response. He did abandon power responses when power would have been used for personal aggrandizement.

As I indicated above, fear is as much a source of violent behavior as is power. If we are to grow in Gospel non-violence, we need to shift our security base from one of self-protection to trust in Christ. This kind of shift is a process involving Gospel meditation, prayer, and Christ's healing grace. It took the apostles some time, struggle, and the coming of the Spirit to make this shift.

In Chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel James and John sought position and power. The

Apostles did not understand Jesus' reply:

“Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first must serve the needs of all. The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve—to give his life in ransom for the many.”
(Mark 10:43-45)

Henri J. M. Nouwen also deals with this personal violence in his book: Intimacy, Chapter 2, “The Challenge to Love.” Both authors point out how Jesus voluntarily renounces power—all power that aims at self-aggrandizement—and allows Himself to be completely vulnerable, out of love, in the incarnation and crucifixion. Henri Nouwen develops his thesis that mature, deep love is only possible within the fellowship of vulnerability—the fellowship of the weak.

In this meditation Nouwen sees the Incarnation, visualized in the manger scene, as God's expression of love for us—His risking vulnerability to be with us—to be one of us. The risk was real for we know that it brought the disarmed, vulnerable Jesus to the wood of the cross. We also know from the Gospel that we are called to the same personal disarmament and to the fellowship of the “weak”. Jesus said:

“If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps. Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will preserve it.” (Mark 8:34-35)

The Gospel of Santa Claus extols strength, power, and affluence. The loving fellowship of the weak “servants” so admirably summarized in Jesus’ Beatitudes is unknown—indeed, considered absurd in the Gospel of Santa Claus.

A friend of the author, Kim Louise La Vine, has beautifully expressed this contrast in an original Christmas song entitled, “Christmas In The City.” In this song Kim sings:

*Christmas time is coming to the city
People buying Christmas toys and trim
But does anyone remember it's His birthday.
Have you thought of what you're going to give
to Him?*

Jesus came so he could give us freedom
His birth that night caused heaven's bells to
ring

So what's a better time than at Christmas?
To give glory to our Savior Lord and King

Santa Claus never died for anyone;
he didn't show us how to love.

The birth of our Lord is what it's all about.
So why not teach the children just what
Christmas is for?

ADVENT AND DISARMAMENT

“For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful ... “(Isaiah 9:5-6)

Advent is about the Prince of Peace. In the liturgy for the very first weekday of Advent the disarmament theme is set forth in one of Isaiah's often-quoted metaphor 's.

“He shall judge between nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another nor shall they train for war again.”
(Isaiah 2:4)

Lest there be any mistaken idea about the intensity of the non-violence theme in Advent, the Church continues the theme of peace in the Mass for Tuesday of the first week of Advent. The completely non-violent dimension of the Messiah's reign is stated in language that seems incredible to people conditioned to a violent world:

“Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea.”
(Isaiah 11:5-9)

During Advent, 1997, each day about 40,000 children died of starvation or the results of malnutrition in our world. Also during each day of Advent we people of the U.S. spent about \$704 million on armaments and other military projects. Just half of our military budget would buy a lot of bread for those who are hungry; a lot of houses for the homeless; a lot of medicine for the sick; and a lot of education for the illiterate.

In the Book of the Prophet Joel, Isaiah 's disarmament metaphor is reversed in a statement of intended irony: "Beat your plowshares into swords and you pruning hooks into spears." (Joel 4:10) The United States and the Soviet Union, along with other

smaller nations, are literally living out this reversal with proposals to escalate the already out of control armaments contest.

In 1978, in a statement to the United Nations, the Holy See wrote:

“The Armaments Race: it is to be condemned unreservedly. ... It is in fact ... an injustice. For it constitutes ... a form of theft. The massive budgets allocated to the manufacture and stockpiling of weapons is tantamount to misappropriation of funds by the "managers" of the large nations or favored blocs.”

The armaments build-up is not just a political question; it is a critical faith-problem. During Advent we prayerfully await the Prince of Peace; during the Christmas season we worship the vulnerable “Word made flesh,” who rebuked Peter for relying on a weapon:

“Put back your sword where it belongs. Those who use the sword are sooner or later destroyed by it. Do you not suppose I can call on My Father to provide at a moment's notice more than twelve legions of angels?”
(Matthew 26:52-53)

Do we believe that Christ is the Cosmic Lord? Would it be unrealistic to take His words seriously? Is not faith a matter of trusting God to the point of placing our destiny and ourselves in His hands? Can we believe and trust in such a way that we can risk letting go of our wealth and our violence—two resources for trying to control our own security?

Most will say non-violence is unrealistic or even absurd. Yes! St. Paul recognized this when he wrote:

“We preach Christ crucified... - an absurdity to the Gentiles; but to those who are called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's folly is wiser than men, and his weakness more powerful than men.” (I Corinthians 1:23-25)

Indeed, in the light of human wisdom, the Cross is absurd, the teachings of Jesus on wealth and violence are absurd, and the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel are the most absurd statement of values in all of literature; or are they the wisest?

Wealth and violence are closely intertwined in human history. People resort to

violence to gain wealth or to protect their acquired assets. We Americans are no exception to the vicious circle of root-sin: selfishness and arrogance leading to greed, power, and violence. One does not popularly associate Santa Claus with violence. However, any value system that over-emphasizes material gain is potentially very violent. We Americans insist on maintaining a life-style of economic privilege unknown anywhere else or at anytime, a lifestyle climactically expressed in Advent spending, ostensibly and ironically in the name of Jesus, whose nativity we plan to celebrate. We will cling to our privileged standard of living and protect our "way of life" by any violence necessary—including the continued threat of nuclear holocaust, and expect the Prince of Peace to help us.

P. S. We spend more on military projects than any other nation while we rank seventeenth among the nations who have foreign aid programs for humanitarian purposes. These facts do not square with our self-concept of being Santa Claus to the rest of the world.

ADVENT-CHRISTMAS SHARING

Jesus said: "When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not ask your friends, brothers, relations or rich neighbors, for fear they repay your courtesy by inviting you in return. No; when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind..." (Luke 14: 12:13)

Christmas is the grandest "party" time of the year. People have more parties and dinners than at any other time. An exchange of gifts is an assumed part of these celebrations that take place throughout December. Preparations begin in October and continue to Christmas Eve. Shopping dominates Advent—by those who "have plenty" for others who also "have plenty" with little thought for the "poor and the crippled, the lame and the blind." Our gift giving has lost touch with the spirit of Advent and Christmas. During Advent the liturgy of Santa Claus has all but replaced the Messiah-liturgy. Christmas gift giving began as a birthday celebration for Jesus. We gave gifts to one another because Jesus indicated: "I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers (or sisters), you did it for me."

But now our Advent shopping has little or nothing to do with His "least brothers" or (sisters). This year while we are celebrating our Christmas, from Christmas Eve to Christmas night, 40,000 people in the world will die of starvation or the results of malnutrition, 75% of which will be children. During this whole preparation and celebration time, most of our children between the ages of 3 to 7 will be far more conscious of Santa Claus than of Jesus. Furthermore, our children will have been conditioned to judge the success or failure of the whole endeavor by whether or not "I got what I wanted."

This situation is not at all hopeless. Many people, families and groups, including whole parishes, are drastically changing their Advent-Christmas Season to a genuinely Gospel-Messiah based celebration, and are actually happier than they were when trapped in the compulsive consumption rituals of the past.

Nor is the situation hopeless for the larger numbers of destitute people in the world—provided that those of us who "have" take the Gospel seriously and begin to

share our wealth (we are only stewards, not owners) not just tokenly but significantly. We should continue to joyfully celebrate Christmas but we need to invite more people to the table of celebration.

We might consider this practical suggestion: to cut in half our Advent-Christmas spending on ourselves, and share the other half with the "least brothers and sisters" of the Lord. Furthermore, some of us could literally bring to our family tables some of the poor, lonely, or elderly people from local nursing homes. American spending during Advent in 1981 was over \$50 billion. Half of that would buy a lot of "bread." Some will respond: "But most people won't share this much so what good will it do for me to share?" If I have room and resources for only one of the "least brothers or sisters" at my table and do not invite that person, then I have passed Christ in the night—and missed Christmas because Christmas is about LOVE.

"If a man who was rich enough in this world's goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him? My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active." (I John 3:17-18)

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GIFT GIVING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

"If you bring your gift to the altar and then recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

In reply he said, "Let the man with two coats give to him who has none. The man who has food should do the same." (Luke 3:11)

"Give, and it shall be given to you. Good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over, will they pour into the fold of your garment. For the measure you measure with will be measured back to you." (Luke 6:38)

I have always pointed out to you that it is by such hard work that you must help the weak. You need to recall the words of the Lord Jesus himself who said, "There is more happiness in giving than receiving." (Acts 20:25)

Everyone must give according to what he has inwardly decided; not sadly, not grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7).