

"Christmas, 2011"
Week of December 19, 2011
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Last Christmas I was too ill to write my annual Christmas meditation. In fact, for the first time in the then-44-year history of the column, I had to suspend it for some three months.

During my absence the *National Catholic Reporter* kindly published on-line a selection of my previous columns. I resumed writing the column in mid-January of this year and the first column appeared once again in early February.

As I wrote in 2009, the annual column at Christmas always runs the risk of lapsing into boiler-plate rhetoric. What can one say about the mystery of the Incarnation that is truly new year after year?

Christmas is a time when people are supposed to have warmth in their hearts and a generous spirit to match. But even in this richest of countries, many are below the poverty line and many more, having lost their jobs, are experiencing poverty for the first time.

Charles Dickens famously wrote in his *A Christmas Carol* that it is at Christmas that want is most keenly felt. To be sure, he was writing in the context of a newly industrialized England in the 19th century, but his observation has relevance even in the United States and Canada today.

Yet when then-President George W. Bush launched the war in Iraq, he made no call for sacrifice on everyone's part. In fact, he gave an enormous tax cut to the wealthiest of American citizens. For the rest, he urged us to go shopping.

Older readers will recall the real sacrifices that were endured during the Second World War. There were no cars to buy even if you could afford one; there were ration buttons for such basic products as butter and sugar; there were signs over grocery store entrances, "Oleomargarine sold here."; stickers had to be placed on car windows for the purchase of rationed gasoline; there were paper and tire drives, blackouts, wooden parts on buses and trolley cars to replace the steel needed in the war effort, the draft in full vigor, and gold stars in a neighbor's window, proclaiming the grim news of the death of a son in battle.

That was *real* sacrifice. Unlike the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, almost every family was touched by the Second World War, rich, middle-class, and poor alike.

There were few draft deferments in the Second World War. Former Vice President Dick Cheney couldn't have obtained five deferments, as he did during the Vietnam War, to pursue "more important" matters. Nor could any of the well-off in today's all-volunteer Army.

In the current economic climate, the last thing a committed and financially comfortable Christian can say is: "I'm up, pull up the ladder." Those are our brothers and sisters down there, at the bottom of the ladder.

Especially at Christmas, those of us who are financially comfortable must reach out to those in need in the spirit of real, not phony, sacrifice.

But some do remind us that we need to walk the walk rather than only talk the talk. Christian faith demands the former. It is a faith, as the worldwide Jesuit community proclaimed several years ago, "that does justice."

In a time of economic downturn for many millions, however, such values as these are placed at serious risk.

An earlier column of mine wrote of "family reunions but not for the homeless...of special feasting, but not for the hungry...of lavish gift-giving, but not for the poor."

Another column pointed out that the giving of gifts at Christmas affords us all an opportunity to practice what Jesus urged us to do—but not at Christmas time alone. In fact, Jesus never mentioned

Christmas.

But he did say what you do for the least of my people, you do for me. And what you fail to do for them, you fail to do for me (Matthew 25:31-46).

At Christmas time we profess our allegiance to the Prince of Peace (those of us who are not totally distracted by the secular aspects of the season), but more than one recent pope has reminded us that peace is the work of justice.

“Each Christmas,” I wrote in 2009, “we hear familiar biblical readings, are heartened by familiar sanctuary decorations, and sing familiar carols. But we are always at a slightly different stage of our lives each year, and so is our country.

“Christmas itself does not change. It is we who change, and the nation and the world in which we live.

“That is why we have an opportunity to practice Christian discipleship anew—this year and every year after it.”

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"The New Translation of the Mass"
 Week of December 26, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

There used to be an anti-liturgical joke circulating that said that the only difference between a terrorist and a liturgist is that you can negotiate with a terrorist.

By the same token, there is a seriously mistaken impression abroad that the new translation of the missal was inspired and promoted by liturgists. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The great majority of liturgical scholars were opposed to the new, literal translations. Those who favored the changes were adherents of the so-called "reform of the reform."

In other words, the changes were inspired and promoted, not by liturgists, but by traditionalists in the hierarchy and a minority of ultra-conservatives within the Catholic Church generally.

Such Catholics were never supportive of the liturgical reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council: turning the altar around so that the priest would face the congregation during Mass, receiving Holy Communion in the hand, celebrating the Mass in the vernacular, having altar girls as well as altar boys, and so forth.

In the extreme, they attended Latin Masses wherever they were available. Their celebrants continued to wear the so-called fiddle-back chasubles and birettas. A Catholic Rip Van Winkle awakening from a long sleep beginning sometime in the 1950s would assume that nothing had changed in the meantime.

To be sure, the advocates of the "reform of the reform" have won only a partial victory with this new translation (for example, "I believe..." rather than the more communal "We believe..." in the *Credo*). But the Mass is still in the vernacular; the altar is still turned around, the great majority of people receive Communion in the hand, and there are more likely to be altar girls in the sanctuary than boys.

Such changes as these are anathema to traditionalist Catholics, who continue to receive Communion on the tongue (as is their right), grit their teeth when they see girls serving Mass, and attend a Latin Mass from time to time.

But they are happy nonetheless to see so many of their fellow Catholics out of sorts because of the new translation of the Mass. They know that it galls Catholics for whom Pope John XXIII is a hero and Vatican II was a great event.

I've heard Catholics say that their pastors, although not conservative, have praised the new translations. Either their pastors are not being honest because they don't want to be reported to their bishop, or they are deep-down right-wing in their thinking.

A retired pastor that I heard prepare his congregation the week before the changes were to go into effect, had them practice giving the simple response, "And with your spirit." But he said by way of introduction that the "what" of the changes he and they could handle; the "why" he would leave to the Holy Spirit.

I suspect that many older priests had the same reaction. Only some of the younger (or not-so-young), conservative priests, ordained during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, would more likely be in favor of the changes than opposed to them.

But what good would come of outright opposition? A well-respected priest in Seattle led a movement recently to have the U.S. bishops slow down the process until all the kinks could be worked out, but that movement, although it gained thousands of supporters, fizzled and died in the end.

The Vatican had already made up its mind, and the largely conservative U.S. hierarchy would not buck the Vatican, even if it were disposed to do so.

Some Catholics may continue to say “And also with you” rather than “And with your spirit,” or “We believe...” instead of “I believe...” in the Creed, or “one in being with the Father” instead of the highly technical and indecipherable “consubstantial,” also in the Creed.

Presiders at Mass will have the most difficult time because there have been many tongue-twisting changes in the texts of the Eucharistic Prayers.

Those priests who have been reciting these prayers for many years will inevitably stumble over the new wording, and those priests whose eyesight has failed them and who have memorized unchangeable parts of the Mass will continue to recite the words with which they have been long familiar. At least that is what I would advise them if they were silly enough to ask.

This column will return to this subject a number of times in the future because it affects us all. In the meantime, I wanted to dispel a few of the most common misunderstandings about the new translations and their origin.

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