

EDITORIAL

MISSIONARIES occasionally relate tales of backward mountain tribes which, although priestless for decades or even centuries, retain by folk tradition traces of Christian ceremonial. Very few primitives, after being introduced to holy water or lighted candles, forget the spiritual usage of such vivid natural symbols. They may not remember the Trinitarian formula of the sign of the cross or the Christ-symbolism of the lighted candle; but they use the water and the candles nonetheless.

It would be unrealistic to say that something similar does not occur among us educated, Christian sophisticates. At this time of the year it might well prove embarrassing to initiate an examination of hearts to discover which package of thoughts sits highest on the totem: the swirl and grandeur of Christmas party and pageantry, or the quiet overflow of the mystery of the birth of a divine Saviour. It might have to be said that the usage of Christian pageantry belongs to us only in the same way as the holy water and the candles belong to the mountain folk, as a pretty wrapping for something long since gone. But even if the case is not as serious as all this, the loss—even small—is all the more regrettable for us since it touches the life-giving center of our Catholic lives.

There are always new perspectives to be gained of the mystery of God's coming among us in the flesh of a man. And this Christmas story is something to think about, since it forms the beginning of the central plan of our return to God. God made us for Himself, and came to earth in our own human flesh to lead us back to Himself. This divine tryst is not just another important truth to be believed; it holds the whole meaning of day to day living. The celebration of Christmas is the celebration of our V-day: the coming of our victorious Saviour.

Some aspects of a contemporary Christmas celebration could be misleading. The fragility of the plaster Christ child in the crib and the emphasis on the Madonna and Child force us to concentrate on the romantic idea of God in the arms of a human mother: the condescension of God, the "emptying of Himself," the humility of His nativity. This is as it should be as long as it does not exclude the organic purpose for Christ's coming.

St. Thomas Aquinas, and most theologians, teach that you cannot separate the Incarnation from the Redemption. This means you cannot allow yourself to forget that the Christ in the crib had to be the Saviour of the world. The fact that Christ came and the fact that Christ redeemed us are

not two unconnected things. Rather the Incarnation is a redemptive Incarnation having its meaning in the saving sacrifice of the Cross. This is plainly shown in the Credo of the Mass: *propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis*: "on account of our salvation, He came down from heaven."

Spiritual writers delight in applying this doctrine to the life of the Christian. The Incarnation becomes a symbol of the contemplative life and the Redemption a symbol of the active life. The value of the comparison is seen when we realize that just as the Incarnation is not to be separated from the Redemption, the contemplative side of a Christian's life must not be separated from his activities in the world. For Christian action flows from knowledge and love of God in much the same way as the redemptive act of Christ, His death on the Cross, flows from His birth in our flesh.

The Christmas season seems a good time, then, to point up this two-fold operation of the Christian. We would be wrong, even at this season, to be exclusively absorbed in the "contemplative" side of the Incarnation. True contemplation overflows into activity, into the works and activities of virtue and mercy so needed in the world today.

With all this in mind, it seems entirely fitting to mention that the Holy Father, Pope John XXIII, has recently given us a charter which outlines Christian activity for the modern world. The encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, dated May 15th of this year, is a signally important document. It declares the mind of the Church most explicitly with regard to problems which loom large in the world at present.

Some critics of the encyclical have complained that what the pope has to say here is already behind the times and outdated, while others (calling themselves "conservatives") have brashly dared to insist that the pope has no right to speak on social questions and that someday the Church shall be embarrassed by *Mater et Magistra* as "an exercise in triviality."

Any sincere Catholic who has read *Mater et Magistra* will certainly swallow hard at the sight of these charges. To maintain that papal teaching is behind the times is to mistake conditions in our own country for prevailing conditions in the world and to substitute a supposed reality for what, in many cases, merely exists as political oratory. To charge, on the other hand, what William Buckley and his self-styled conservatives charge, is to close the mind to logic in favor of some preconceived notions, abandoning at the same time the teaching authority of the pope as the Common Father of men.

The prevalent ignorance and occasional contempt of papal teaching in the encyclicals of the modern popes is deplorable. The fact that there is such ignorance seems generally acknowledged in the Catholic press. But

the significance of this state of affairs is obvious only the minority who do know the popes' writings.

The social encyclicals, beginning with the still important *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII, are practical teaching on the everyday matters of social and economic life. They concern problems in this real world we walk around in day after day. It's time to ask ourselves if we can afford to ignore the teaching of the Vicar of Christ. We listen to debates on labor laws and social organization, public housing and agricultural subsidies. Perhaps we raise an eyebrow; perhaps we yawn. Family traditions frequently form decisions ("My grandfather was a democrat"); but what about Christian tradition? Whether it surprises us or not, the Church *does* have something to say about all these things, and something important. For the Holy Father doesn't just make a good guess. He *teaches* with the authority of Christ according to the divine law founded in nature and announced in the Gospels.

A Catholic may call himself a conservative and may not "believe" in social security or understand "wasting" billions of dollars to feed starving foreigners. But before he starts objecting that all that is socialism and therefore the same as Communism and therefore condemned by the Church, someone should ask him where he's been all these years.

Mater et Magistra clearly distinguishes between socialism and socialization—an important thing to remember in view of what Pope John has to say:

One of the typical aspects which characterize our epoch is socialization, understood as the progressive multiplication of relations in society, with different forms of life and activity and juridical institutionalization. . . . It makes possible the satisfaction of many personal rights, especially those called economic-social. . . . So long as socialization confines its activity within the limits of the moral order, along the lines indicated, it does not of its nature entail serious dangers of restriction to the detriment of individual human beings. Instead, it helps to promote in them the expression and development of truly personal characteristics. It produces too, an organic reconstruction of society which Our predecessor Pius XI in the encyclical "Quadragesimo Anno" put forward and defended as the indispensable prerequisite for satisfying the demands of social justice. . . . [moreover] it is obvious that the obligation to help those who find themselves in want and misery, which the Church has always taught, should be felt more strongly by Catholics, who find a most noble motive in the fact that we are all members of Christ's Mystical Body.

With plaintive urgency the Holy Father continues: "We reaffirm strongly that the Christian social doctrine is an integral part of the Christian conception of life. . . . We feel urged to exhort that such teaching be extended by regular systematic courses in the Catholic schools of every kind, especially in seminaries. It is to be inserted into the religious instruction programs of parishes and of associations of the lay apostolate."

Mater et Magistra contains what Pope John calls "a review of modern social life." It embraces thorough and detailed teaching on human activity in every area of our vast international society. It is clear that the pope begs his children—*us*—to study, to understand, and to take courage to fulfill his charter for "the realization on earth of the Kingdom of God."

This is the deeper view of Christmas which we can't afford to neglect. We are called, by the Voice of Christ on earth, to share in the redemptive work which is the fruition of His redemptive Incarnation.