



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS

185 St. Thomas Drive
Ojai, California 93023

January, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

"Here comes everybody" is how the writer James Joyce once described Catholicism. It is an apt description. The Church is indeed a motley crowd. Worldly popes and ascetic hermits, radical activists and withdrawn mystics, gentle pacifists and fierce conquistadores, the tepid and the ardent, the awesome and the awful, over the centuries have all found a perch somewhere in the widespread branches of the Church.

For those hoping to become "somebody" through belonging this can be a problem. Those outside hesitate to join such an unexclusive group. Those inside sometimes try to find status and assurance in a more select membership - clergy or religious community, charismatic movement or prayer group, a more observant or a more progressive element.

One of the aspirations almost everybody on the new parish council expressed is the desire to bring the parish more closely together. The basis for any such unity is acceptance of our diversity and awareness that baptism has given us all equal membership and full rights. Here is where everybody should feel accepted and at home.

In Christ,



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February, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The Irish Augustinians often exchange among themselves a saying picked up in the Nigerian missions: "When God made time, He made lots of time." While it may be true that God created time with characteristic lavishness, He obviously did not distribute it evenly. Why there should be plenty of time in a small country like Ireland and such a shortage of it in a large, important country like ours I do not know. I remember two young Polish seminarians returning to Rome from their first visit to the United States. I expected them to be awed by the vastness of our spaces, the abundance on our shelves, the affluence in our homes. Instead, they came back appalled by the scarcity of time they had found, with natives everywhere showing signs of prolonged and severe deprivation - impatience, harried looks, frantic movement.

With all there was to be done, how did Jesus spend so much time at parties and with the sick, two activities I am finding it increasingly difficult to get in? I didn't make a New Year's resolution yet this year. January slipped by before I got around to it. If I ever get to working on one, I think it will have something to do with stewardship and time.

In Christ,

Pat



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March, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Misunderstandings can arise even among saints. A classic example is one between St. Augustine and St. Jerome. Augustine had written to Jerome questioning one of the great biblical scholar's interpretations of a passage in scripture. Jerome being as sensitive as he was that in itself was risky. To make matters worse, the letter got waylaid in transit and was widely read and discussed before it ever reached Jerome. Jerome was furious and there followed a less than friendly correspondence between the two men. An apology and much conciliation finally won over the older man and Jerome penned a tribute to Augustine: "You are undoubtedly a great man; you have made all the right friends and all the right enemies." To crotchety old Jerome, the second part of the criterion was just as important as the first.

As we end a month that contained both Valentine's Day and the Presidential Primaries it may be helpful to recall that the Christian challenge is to love everybody not to be loved by everyone. The issue is not so much whether or not we have made enemies as who they are and why they are against us.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. Pat".



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
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May, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Easter was celebrated in California this year with an execution afterwards as well as before. It may seem sacrilegious to put the death of Robert Harris and the death of Jesus together but the Pascal event does unite them and not just in time.

Except for the fact that both died violent deaths as criminals there is little similarity between the two men. Jesus is Son of God, born miraculously of the immaculate womb of the Virgin. Robert Harris, already contaminated with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, was literally kicked from his mother's womb by a brutal father. Jesus went about doing good, curing all sorts of illness and casting out devils. Robert Harris was trouble from the start, in and out of prison, ending a career of crime with a double murder. Jesus was innocent, Harris undoubtedly guilty.

Jesus and Harris are about as far apart as men can be. But in the Incarnation Jesus took to himself all of humanity, embracing it in saving forgiveness on the cross. Harris may well be the least of his brothers. It is frightening to remember he said what we do to just such a one we do to him.

In Christ,

Footnote: I think (but haven't verified) it was the San Francisco longshoreman-turned-philosopher Eric Hofer who wrote that every society is to be judged not by how it rewards its heroes but by its concern for the least desirable of its citizens. On the same day we gassed Robert Harris the Los Angeles Times had a front page article in which the governor pronounced it "certainly a moral obligation" that we add \$857,000 to the UC President's already hefty retirement package.



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June, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

A priest is sometimes said to be married to the Church. That notion may help, for one thing, to explain celibacy. The imagery is often used at Engaged and Marriage Encounters to relate the priest's experiences to those of the couples he is with. This month I have been married to the Church for forty (40) years.

Probably more than most women, the Church has changed over those years. She doesn't look the same nor always act the same as when first we wed. As I have taken on the gravity of years, she seems to have grown less solemn. From sonorous Latin she now speaks colloquial English, from being clearly "different" she now often looks mainstream American, from a stately immutability she has taken on a sometimes disconcerting changeableness.

And as father's role in the home has changed, so has Father's in the church. Neither has quite the prestige, unquestioned authority nor exclusive wisdom of 40 years ago.

With every marriage not every day captures the rapture of a honeymoon. Love and commitment only mature through much routine, in the lows as well as the highs. But in a good marriage through all the changes the love grows and the conviction gets stronger that the choice is the right one.

Looking back, it's not the achievements but the opportunities that come to mind - the awesome moments of actualizing Christ at Mass, in the sacraments or through preaching; the precious times when in peoples grief or joy or need the priest was to them the presence of Christ and the Church. It has been a happy marriage.

In Christ,



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August, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

By a discernment process I do not understand but did not question, the frequent flyer people determined that I not only fly to Rome free but that I go first class. Such up-scale living is new to me and may be unfamiliar to some of you so I pass along some of the insights I garnered.

Granted the nose of the plane sets down a moment or two before the tail, it takes as long to get there in first class as in coach. As a matter of fact, plied as they are with fancy food and expensive liqueurs from take-off to landing, the rich tend to debark after hurtling through a sequence of time zones slightly more dazed and disoriented than their poorer, less pampered fellow travellers in the rear.

Upper class people are not always easy to spot. I went over beside a distinguished looking type who might easily have been an ambassador or corporate tycoon. Lest he be scandalized by the extravagance of the clergy, I hastened to assure him that I was a charity case. One confidence led to another and he confessed he was himself a teacher bumped up by bonus miles. Coming back I sat with a young man in split jeans and T-shirt who had been running with the bulls in Pamplona and was picking up a motorcycle for a cross country run to Santa Monica. The gold chain around his neck, he explained, was a bargain he had picked up in Rome for \$684. It got to be interesting trying to distinguish the freeloaders like myself from the truly rich and famous.

Wider seats do take better care of the body but the mind goes the same commercial level. Sitting back in steerage reading my paperback novels I used to imagine the movers and shakers up front pouring over data printouts and memorizing confidential reports. Not so. Going over we all watched "Beethoven" and coming back were treated to "My Cousin Vinnie." Complimentary earphones didn't add a whole lot.

What occasioned my visit to the Eternal City was a workshop at the Augustinian headquarters to develop a written guideline for forming Augustinian religious. There were people there from all three "worlds" and all five continents, speaking a number of languages and living in widely different cultures and classes. Not surprisingly the document wasn't finished when the two weeks were over and the participants took off again in all directions. It was, though, a reminder how the Church and religious communities within the Church century after century witness to the truly catholic family God calls the world to be.

In Christ,



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September 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Watching the Olympics this past month has left me with reflections not about sports but about TV. "The medium is the message", Marshal McLuhan has assured us and the TV message is disturbing.

TV gives a false view of the world around us. How many times did we hear about the wonderful, thousand year old Catalan culture of Barcelona? Nobody mentioned that that culture is a thoroughly Catholic one. How many times did we see the famous towers that became almost the logo of the games? Nobody mentioned that they belong to a church, the Sagrada Familia. The camera can't catch God and TV gives the impression He isn't there. The truth is that there has never been a great culture without religion and the vast majority of people experience the pull and presence of God.

TV gives a false view of people. In sitcoms and soaps characters face terrifying challenges but never the big questions real people have to answer: why am I here? where am I going? what's it all about? Interviews with athletes and coaches uncovered how they win but not how they live, how to be successful not how to be good. Magic Johnson is a charming, engaging personality. It would be interesting, maybe inspiring, to probe how he makes moral judgements. We will never learn from TV.

TV gives us a false view of ourselves. The games seemed an American showcase. It was a surprise at the closing ceremonies to find how many thousands of others had participated. One had to read the newspaper to discover that another team, remnants of our old archenemy the USSR, had actually won more medals than we did. Watching ourselves hour after hour, day after day leads to the false conclusion that we are central and normative in a way that we are not.

It's not so much that TV gives misinformation. It's that all the most important information is missing.

In Christ,



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October, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

For the first nine months of our life we are unacknowledged and unprotected by the society we will grow to be a part of. Whether we live or die is up to our mother. The state has declared the choice no concern to itself.

Proposition 161 on the November ballot would extend a similar public disinterest in our fate to the final six months of life. Once again whether we live or die is simply a matter of private choice.

A society's regard for its citizens must be measured by how it protects the most basic rights of its weakest members. What makes abortion such a heinous crime is that those with no defense are killed in the place that nature itself has designed to nurture them by those called to be their protectors. Euthanasia removes public protection of life from the elderly, the frail and the desperately ill. Hospitals and sick beds become not sanctuaries of care but potential killing fields. Doctors, sworn to heal and protect, become dispensers of death.

In our Catholic tradition the final days on earth are especially sacred and significant. "Live each day as though it were your last", we are admonished. How many faced with approaching death have found the time remaining an invaluable grace for conversion and preparation? How many families have been brought together as never before in the months knowing a loved member was to die? Time with death imminent can indeed be quality time.

The victims of abortion and euthanasia are not only the unborn and the terminally ill. The victims are all of us whose lives are thereby declared not inherently and always sacred but only sometimes and under certain conditions. Society itself becomes a victim when the times and conditions are set by majority vote.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Fr. Pat.", written in dark ink.



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November, 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

I read recently an article describing how Americans have come to approach religion as consumers. We live in a society driven to acquire. More and more we have made ourselves the center and standard of everything. It is not surprising, then, that we should come to regard religion primarily as a service or commodity. People shop around for what fits and, like all good shoppers, look for the best return on the least investment.

This is far different from how the Scriptures look at religion. There God is the primary focus and to worship, praise and serve him the aim. Not so much what satisfies us as what pleases him is the concern.

The Stewardship Program which we will renew next month is an attempt to get more into the attitude of Scripture. We are asked to look at our resources of time, talent and treasure and prayerfully consider how best to spend these as stewards of God's gifts. In view of God's bounty to us are we making fitting return to him?

In preparation for Stewardship we will be presenting a State of the Parish report which will contain a review of what is happening through the various ministries and programs as well as an account of our income and expenses. It will of necessity be incomplete. All the time, talents and treasure expended for the Kingdom are not channeled through parish programs and activities nor registered in parish records.

The report and Stewardship itself should get us thinking not so much whether we are being well served (although I hope you will find that so) as how better individually and as a community we might serve God and further his Kingdom.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "K. Pat."



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December 1992

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

I already received my first Christmas card. It arrived about halfway between Halloween and Thanksgiving and was from somebody I have not seen for almost 20 years.

Why me? Why now? How long, I can't help wondering, would the sender's mailing list be if my name is on it?

For many of us, at least many of us adults, the exchange at Christmas is a pretty calculated affair. The card list is pruned of names that don't reciprocate. Price and quality of presents we buy reflect the present we expect to get.

How different God's gift of self the feast commemorates! What had we done that God should favor us? What could we possibly send back to God as a worthy exchange for his own Son?

And how often God continues to show His love for us through the unexpected, undeserved kindness of people who owe us nothing.

I sent my first card today. It was to somebody I have never sent one to before whom I haven't seen in over 20 years. Maybe it will get somebody else thinking about what Christmas really means.

In Christ,