



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS

185 St. Thomas Drive
Ojai, California 93023

January, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Holidays are a colorful time, red and green for Christmas, white for Easter, the autumn tones for Thanksgiving. They can also be a time for the blues. Sometimes in the midst of all the general merriment, sadness finds us most vulnerable.

The holidays put such demands on us to be joyful. There can be so much anticipation that we feel let down when the great day comes and proves to be less than delightful.

Often, too, the holidays remind us of those absent and there is grieving. We remember holidays past and the present seems pale by comparison.

For many the holidays are the worst time of the year. There are those who feel in their heart Scrouge's loneliness and the Gringe's envy.

If this holiday season you were not as elated as you wish, it doesn't mean you are bad, neurotic or irreligious. It may just come from being human.

We are moving back again into Ordinary Time, with its ordinary ups and downs. A good resolution might be to admit our moods, face them honestly and try our best to make sure we don't impose them on others.

In Christ,



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February, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

From Martin Luther King's birthday, January 15th, until Diversity Day, February 27th, Ojai Valley has been observing Six Weeks of Peace, a program sponsored by the Ojai Youth Foundation. Since Diversity Day, which brings together students from the various schools of the Valley, is held in Aquinas Center, the parish has a visible and important part in the commemoration.

Our contribution, though, should be more than just a matter of rented space. Dr. King's dream of a nation of fairness and harmony was rooted in the scriptural vision of a society under God built on righteousness. The imperative to end racism and treat all with equal dignity was based not so much on the Constitution and democratic principles as on the Bible and the will of God. Even before people are seen as citizens equal before the law, they have to be seen as children of God equally loved. Religion has the final word on who is our neighbor and how we are to treat the "other": it is always Christ, our brother.

Our Church, more than any other institution, reaches across the globe embracing peoples of every nation, color and culture. The Archdiocese is a model of that universality, speaking dozens of languages, responding to a multitude of customs and backgrounds. The parish, whatever its actual composition, must also be Catholic, serving the full range of human needs and circumstances.

Martin Luther King's vision of the common worth and dignity of each person beneath the individual differences is the basis and hope for universal peace. It is a dream worth committing to.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Pat".



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
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April, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

"We are Easter people and Alleluja is our song" wrote St. Augustine centuries ago.

We are not Christians because we believe in sin, in suffering and death but because we believe in pardon, in joy, in the Resurrection, and in life.

God can do for us what we cannot do ourselves, - make us happy and let us know a life that we would wish to continue for all eternity. Resurrection is not about a future life but about life eternal. If it is eternal, it has already begun and we are to be living it now.

The question is not so much do we believe in the Resurrection of Christ as do we believe in our own resurrection and have we experienced it. There can be no Easter for us unless we are willing to die in a portion of ourselves where we are only too much alive - in our fears, our worries, our selfishness. And also if we do not consent to rise in a portion in which we are too dead - to peace, to faith and hope, to pardon, to love, and to joy.

We only understand the Resurrection of Christ by experiencing our own. The proof that Christ is risen is that He is now living in us and that His love is still alive in us and our communities. We ourselves must be the proof that Christ is risen.

(Adapted from a work by Louis Evely)

In Christ,

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



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May, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The Virgin Mary appears to people through the lens of their own experience. To the recently conquered nations of the New World she came with a complexion blended from the new and the indigenous peoples, dressed in the trappings of the native religion. In Asia she is venerated with oriental features, dressed in the elaborate costumes of the East. Western art pictures her as a beautiful European lady.

There are almost countless apparitions, titles and devotions each with its own history and appeal. In our parish church we have images for two of these, Our Lady of Guadalupe and Our Mother of Good Counsel. Why the first, should be obvious. The second is a particular Augustinian devotion.

It's history goes back to the early days of the Order. In the 14th century the Augustinians were given care of a church dedicated to Our Lady in the tiny mountain top village of Genezzano outside the city of Rome. The building itself went back to the 4th century and had become little more than a ruin. In time, a widow in the town, herself a Secular Augustinian, took up the work of restoration and dedicated her life and her limited means to the project. At one point in the slow, halting work the surface of one of the walls was removed and there was discovered a very ancient portrait of the Madonna and Child, a likeness which would come to be known as Our Mother of Good Counsel.

Numerous legends grew up about the picture: it was painted by St. Luke the Evangelist, it was miraculously transported to the site from across the sea, it is miraculously suspended. What is certain is that Mary had joined the Augustinians in her own way and her own form.

And the Augustinians have welcomed her as one of their own. Few visit Rome without a side trip to Genezzano. No Chapters or major meetings disperse without the thirty or so mile bus ride to pay respects.

The little church commemorates no historic event, no message was delivered there and it is not famous for miracle cures. Even Mary's title there is unassuming. Counsel pertains to right judgement in ordinary, practical affairs. In all the intimate events of our lives, Mary has shown us she wants to be with us guiding us in the ways of her Son.

Even if I were not an Augustinian, I think "Mother of Good Counsel" might be my favorite Marian title and devotion.

In Christ,



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June, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

June is the month of graduations and stirring commencement addresses. The talks are generally aimed at convincing an emerging generation that they are destined to change the world and that the schooling just completed has prepared them well to meet the challenge.

That each of us is meant to make a difference is not just a pep talk platitude but a truth good to remember whether we are young or old.

One of the topics Pope John Paul II has spoken and written much about is work. Having experienced first hand what life is like in a communistic worker-state, he is especially motivated to articulate a Christian, truly human understanding of work and the dignity of workers.

In the Bible, the drudgery of labor is seen as the result of sin but there is also another dimension and another view. God is creator, so himself a worker. In fact, creation is the great work, substantially finished in six days but still to be perfected.

Each one of us is invited to be co-creator, co-worker with God. Whatever our job or career, it is part of his single work. Some till the earth or tend the environment; science and technology advance understanding and well being; professions, arts and services enrich cultures; some are called to minister to spiritual needs and build up the Church.

It is not just the current graduates who are supposed to make a difference. Each of us is invited every day by God to work with him in perfecting the world.

In Christ,



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July, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Freedom has many aspects and many levels. We sometimes see it as simply the ability to do what we choose. There are all kinds of factors that impede us from doing so. Legally, I am free to go where I please. But if I do not have a car, or the money to buy transportation, that freedom is limited. If I am married or have a job my freedom of movement will also be hampered.

Even more importantly, choosing may itself be less than free. If false advertising has convinced me that I need a Club-Med vacation, taking one is hardly a perfectly free decision. As a matter of fact, our choices are constantly being affected from the outside by various pressures and on the inside by fear, ignorance and the emotions.

This month we celebrate our civic freedom. Our Founding Fathers crafted a state based on the innate dignity of each individual and rights guaranteed by law. They left us an inestimable heritage never to be taken for granted. Just as the nation was born out of struggle and hardship, it has been preserved by the sacrifices of succeeding generations and continues through the dedication and good will of all citizens.

The Constitution and the Bill of Rights give us the framework for a great nation. It is wise choices, compassionate and looking toward the common good, that make us a worthy society. Only Jesus gives us the kind of inner freedom that enables us to make such choices.

In Christ,



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August, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The priest who gave the Augustinian retreat this year was director of a Peace and Justice Committee so peace and justice was sort of a theme for the week. There are enough issues there to cover a year-long graduate course much less a week retreat but two points are especially worth remembering whether for a religious community or a parish.

Justice and charity are both necessary but very different virtues. Charity responds to present distress and tries to bring immediate relief. Justice tries to get to the root of the problems and provide long term solutions. With all the resource in the world, do 40,000 children have to starve to death every day? In the richest country of the world why so many children in poverty? so many workers without health insurance or available health care? Why do a few have so much and so many so little? Generally we are better at doing charity than striving for justice. The Church has an impressive array of soup suppers, homeless shelters, emergency relieve operations. Her authoritative teaching on social justice remains largely unstudied and not acted on.

Justice and charity are both integral to the Gospel. The prophets in the old testament and Jesus in the new demanded fairness, right treatment of foreigners and the weak, equitable distribution of riches. To think that the Church should not preach about political or social issues is to want not to hear most of what Jesus talked about.

The American bishops have said it well in their pastoral letter "Communities of Salt and Light":
"Catholic social teaching calls us to serve those in need and to change the structures that deny people their dignity and rights as children of God.
Service and action, charity and justice are complementary components of parish social ministry. Neither alone is sufficient; both are essential signs of the gospel at work."

In Christ,



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November, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

November is a month traditionally given to remembrance of the dead and prayers for those in purgatory. Prayers for the dead that have a special place are the Funeral Rites.

As St. Augustine observed a long time ago, funeral rites are aimed primarily at the living, those who remain. That does not mean our prayers do not help the dead but the texts, the readings, the rites are put together for our instruction and edification, not theirs. Each time we come together at a funeral, we express again our belief in death as an entrance into eternity, our hope in a resurrection. We profess the value of prayer for the deceased, a reverence for the body which remains, and a sense of the mystery and sacredness which surrounds death

The complete rite includes three parts, each significant: the Vigil, the Mass of Christian Burial and the Graveside Service.

The Vigil is a gathering of family and friends the evening before the funeral to pray, to celebrate and remember the deceased and to console the bereaved. The Rosary is often used but there are other prayer forms as well.

Because the Eucharist is the central prayer of a Catholic during life, it is most appropriate that the Mass be offered at the time of death. The Mass, celebrating as it does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, now celebrates the deceased's sharing in that victory. If the family and mourners cannot come together immediately after death, a Memorial Mass may be said at a later time.

The final service is the Rite of Committal celebrated at the place of burial. Even cremated remains are to be placed in a consecrated site. It is true God can find us scattered on the hillside or in an urn on the mantle but the committal expresses beautifully our belief that the body is awaiting its final resurrection.

Through the prayers and services of the Church, the time of grieving can also become a time of great comfort and hope.

In Christ,



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December, 2001

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The Christmas message of Peace on Earth may seem more unreal this year than ever. Violence and fear have invaded our homeland and effected us all. Is a world at peace, after all, just a hollow dream?

Although we are in a particularly dark moment of history, I think we can still see signs of progress, reasons for hope. Gang rivalries and violent crime are a sad reality in our cities but we enter into the incessant tribal warfare in Afghanistan with a sense of something not only geographically and culturally but historically distant. Granted, the history of Christendom is blighted by crusades, conversions by the sword, death and destruction in the name of God. When we hear talk of a jihad or Holy War, though, have we come at least to the point that we know we can never do that again and claim to be Christian?

Every crusade and Holy War is fought with the battle cry "God wills it!" Christmas reminds us that what God really wills is "Peace on Earth." That may be still only a wish or a dream but if enough people share the dream, it eventually becomes a reality. May we all share and work on God's vision of a world at peace!

In Christ

Ch. Pat