



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS

185 St. Thomas Drive
Ojai, California 93023

January, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

As we come to the end of the year, we look back on events that profoundly changed our lives, our society and, probably, the world itself. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon struck at precisely the two bastions we thought made us invincible: our military might and our economic dominance. It is doubtful if we will ever be as carefree or feel as secure again.

The long term response can take two forms. The world can become even more divided. We see ourselves under siege and take ever more drastic measures to achieve security. It is not just "us" against "them" but good against evil, light fighting the darkness. On the other hand, we can sense ourselves as experiencing as never before the conditions that so many of our brothers and sisters have been caught up in for so long: seething resentments, disdain for human life, pervasive violence. It is a world for which we are not solely responsible, yet one we have had a hand in creating. Making America safer is not the same as making the world better but more justice in the world will tend to bring peace everywhere.

In those end-time scriptures that predict the trials and tribulations that are bound to happen, we are told to "watch and pray." As we begin this new year, those make good resolutions: to be more alert to God in our neighbor and our circumstances and more attentive to Him in our hearts. Quiet hours with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament are invaluable and this a good time to commit to a time of weekly adoration. As St. Francis knew so well, peace on earth begins with a heart at peace in God.

In Christ,



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February, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

This month we will be entering into the liturgical season of Lent. Most of us associate Lent as a time of mortification getting ready for the celebration of Easter. The readings in the Masses for the six weeks, though, take a somewhat different approach.

The readings are clearly divided into two periods. The first three weeks are from the Gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke and call us to conversion. We are urged to the traditional works of prayer, fasting and almsgiving; to love and the forgiveness of enemies; to justice and holiness.

The readings from the fourth week on are all from the Gospel of John and center on the person of Jesus. Jesus is presented as healer and life giver, the one who through his death gathers into one the scattered children of God.

The division and sequence are not accidental. The early gospels are meant to present us with demands and a way of life which experience convinces us are quite beyond us. Jesus is then discovered as the one who saves, who is himself our strength.

Lent is, therefore, not so much a self-improvement program getting us in shape for Easter as a mini-course on human frailty. It is only when we know that we cannot do it ourselves that we are ready to be healed and made whole by Jesus.

In Christ,

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



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March, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

"Farewell to Christendom" a recently published work by Bishop Curry brings up some issues that are not only interesting but very timely. The book is a study of the first amendment to the American Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion. It is the bishop's thesis that the Framers' intention and the clear meaning of the text is not to assure an even handed or neutral approach of government to religion but the more radical stand to make government powerless in matters of religion. Religious liberty is seen not as a right granted by the state and regulated by the state but a personal, God-given right. The state has no competency to judge or act in matters of religion.

With the American Constitution and its Bill of Rights, the centuries-old partnership of Church and State was dissolved. Official Catholic teaching, however, continued to proclaim the State's obligation to combat error and promote the true faith. It was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Church, moved in large part by the American experience and arguments of American bishops and theologians, proclaimed on its part an end to the alliance. The Declaration of Religious Freedom issued by the Council focused not on the relative claims of truth and error but on the dignity of the individual person, a dignity that demands the right and freedom to seek religious truth.

When we talk about religious wars or fundamentalism or try to understand the nature of Islam it is important to know and appreciate the notion of religious freedom in our Church and society. It is good to realize, too, the long history and development of that notion. We should be aware also that both the First Amendment and the Declaration of Religious Freedom are not so much conclusions but positions from which ongoing judgements are to be made.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. P. O'Connell".



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
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April 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

We keep hearing in Church these days the irritatingly foreign word "Triduum." While everybody else is getting ready for familiar Easter, Catholics are preparing for the three-day observance of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

What the Church is trying to teach is that Easter, the victory, cannot be separated from the dedication and the struggle that won it. It is not the suffering itself of Good Friday that brought about the glory of the resurrection but the filial love of Jesus, obedient to death, even death on a cross. For us, too, loving obedience to God's will is the only way to final and full happiness.

Maybe we need the Good Friday-Easter Sunday reminder more than ever this year. September 11 revealed in all its fearsomeness the face of evil. We know the depth of rage, the contempt for life and freedom, the despair and the hatred that are loose in the world. We need the assurance that God is greater than all this, that good does in the end triumph. Easter is that guarantee - Christ's victory over all that is death-dealing, won for all of us.

The evil to be overcome is not all foreign and in others. The Enron scandal, still unfolding, was not an isolated, uncharacteristic event. Advertising continually promises that wealth and the things that money can buy will make us happy. Greed, not God's will, becomes the motive and driving force of life.

The Cross to Resurrection reminds us, too, that Christ, our model, rejected power and domination. Force may sometimes be necessary but the way to peace is the long, arduous promotion of justice. War never achieves peace.

The Triduum celebrates the good news that our destiny is not death but eternal life, that suffering and loss and sorrow will all eventually be gone. It is also a reminder that there is no cheap victory. It is Christ's victory we share and only his way brings us there.

In Christ,

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



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May 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Those with a long memory may recall that at the Second Vatican Council a debate arose about how the Church's understanding of Mary should be presented. Some felt a separate document was called for, others considered it more appropriate that she be treated within the study of the Church. The latter position prevailed and the chapter "The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church" completes the pivotal document "The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church." To recognize May as Mary's month, I quote a small section of that chapter.

"Let the entire body of the faithful pour forth persevering prayer to the Mother of God and Mother of men. Let them implore that she who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers may now, exalted as she is in heaven above all the saints and angels, intercede with her Son in the fellowship of all the saints. May she do so until all the peoples of the human family, whether they are honored with the name of Christian or whether they still do not know their Savior, are happily gathered together in peace and harmony into the one People of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity."

The message, written almost 40 years ago, is a timely reminder of Mary's role as powerful intercessor in the struggle for peace among all peoples. In a special way, her prayers should be sought to end the bloodshed and violence in Palestine, her own native land.

In Christ,

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



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
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June, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

As of May 31st, I have been a priest for 50 years. Back in 1952 when I was ordained, I thought I knew pretty well what I was getting into and expected things to remain pretty much the same forever. How wrong I was!

A half century ago the Church and the world were in an altogether different era. Before the major shifts of the Vatican Council, in the 1960's, the Church had seemed to be immutable. She did and taught as she had always done and taught. Mass was said facing the wall in Latin, Catholics never ate meat on Fridays, there was little, if any, dissent. It was a time of enormous confidence and pride. Seminaries and religious houses of formation were overcrowded, with ever larger ones being built. Catholics attended and supported their own schools, still staffed mainly by religious sisters, brothers and priests. The priest, typified in the movies by such stars as Bing Crosby and Spencer Tracy, was a much loved and respected figure.

As a friend of mine used to say, "Everything was so different before it all changed." The Church today seems caught up in change. There is open dissent and controversy. Priests, sisters and brothers are few and aging while seminaries and formation programs are almost empty. The current image of the priest is so bad that some hesitate to wear the collar in public.

Ordination, like marriage, is a commitment in faith. More than most wives, the Church has changed these past 50 years. Just as a husband or wife must be faithful in ever changing circumstances, the priest has had to commit each day to serving the Church and the people "in good times and in bad, for better and for worse."

For me, the good times have been plenty and the bad, few. I can't say each day was better than the last but I'm not so sure the present, with all its problems, is really any worse than the old days that memory has made good. It has been 50 years of deep happiness, much opportunity to serve, countless blessings. I am thankful to God and all who have supported me in my vocation.

In Christ,




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July, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Much can happen in the time lag between when this letter is written and when it arrives in the mail but, as of the writing, what appears to be the major event in July is the Teens Trip to Toronto. Two years of car washes, bake sales, dinners, rummage sales, raffles, candy sales, auctions, religious goods sales, waiting tables and helping out has accumulated the necessary funds. There have been preparation retreats and meetings and outings. The kids are ready to go off to meet the pope and see a bit of Canada.

World Youth Days are a relatively new phenomenon introduced by the present pope, a sign of his love of and hope for young people. Pilgrimage, though, is almost as old as the Church itself and expresses something deep inside the Catholic soul. From the earliest days, pious Christians traveled to the land of Jesus to see the sacred sites of his life and death. When the Holy Land was conquered by the Muslims and became inaccessible, the shrines of martyrs and saints became the destinations sought.

Pilgrimage, traveling to a holy place, is a living allegory of our real life experience. On earth, we are "strangers in a strange land", sojourners on our way to Heaven, our true home. Those who made the short millennium pilgrimage to the Old Mission a few years back remember the unique experience. All are in the trip together. It is a time for swapping stories with old friends and making new ones. Walking sets a pace for observing and enjoying the surroundings. Excess baggage tires and holds back.

Pilgrimage is a Catholic thing in that it brings together diverse cultures and peoples. In Rome or Assisi or Jerusalem or Toronto one sees the Church in all its faces and colors and customs. Our young people will be with thousands of their counterparts from all parts of the world; Asia and Africa, North and South America, Europe and Oceania. So much diversity, one faith!

The whole parish has been involved in getting our representatives to World Youth Day. Through them may we experience some of the joy and shared faith of this great occasion!

In Christ,



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August, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Whom can we trust? Sex scandals and charges of cover-ups have rocked the Church and weakened confidence in the hierarchy. Continuing revelations about unbridled greed and malfeasance in prestigious financial corporations fill the news. Incompetence and bungling in the most essential government agencies have left us exposed and vulnerable. It is so easy to become cynical and wary.

But distrust is a poisonous climate. We do not grow if we are not trusted and have not matured unless we can trust. Trust makes it possible for the young to become themselves and chose their own way in life. Trust is an indispensable element of love by which two people are totally open and present to each other, even if, as a consequence, totally vulnerable to the hurts that may be inflicted. Trust allows us to see others as separate from ourselves and makes it safe for them to be themselves with us.

Trust also upholds our public and political life. Investments, contracts, treaties all work only to the extent that people can be counted on to keep their word. The financial world, the whole educational endeavor, our system of government, the Church function only because people put faith in one another.

Much has to be done before our institutions and the people in them regain the confidence they once had. While the reforms and changes are going on, trust will be risky but necessary. Christians are to be the leaven of society. In a time of suspicion and mistrust, may the Spirit help us to be open and hopeful.

In Christ,



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November, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Going back at least to the time of St. Augustine, the Church has struggled with the notion of a just war. From the beginning, there seems to have been a thread of pacifism, the position that the Gospel rules out violence and that war is never justified under any circumstance. Alongside that extreme view, there developed a more widely accepted stand that there are certain limiting and observable conditions such that when all are present, war is justified. It is questionable whether the Just War Theory actually prevented or limited wars but it did lead to a Christian consensus that war is not a glorious adventure but a morally questionable activity permissible, with regrets, only as a last resort.

Although the current War on Terrorism is a new challenge not exactly conforming to the rules of conventional combat, there are some principles that apply:

1. In a democracy, people have not only the right but the duty to engage in informed and critical debate about public policy. In a democracy there are no "betters" who know what is best for the rest. As Christians, we have an additional responsibility to speak out boldly on moral issues.
2. Decision making is not aided by demonizing the enemy and canonizing the self. The crusades were a deplorable mix of religious zeal and political opportunism. We should avoid anything that smacks of a holy war
3. All options short of war must be tried first. War is the last, not the first response.
4. The long-term goal must be a world governed by laws that all nations accept and to which they can be held accountable. Vigilante justice is not right just because we happen to be the biggest and the strongest.

In a recent letter to President Bush, the U. S. bishops wrote that any "pre-emptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq" cannot be justified at this time. As a citizen and a Christian, I add my vote.

In Christ,

p.s. There is a long delay between the writing (10/1/02) and the sending (10/30/02).
Events between could change the sentiments expressed.



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December, 2002

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Any short list of the top religious stories of the past year would probably contain the report of an ancient receptacle for bones come to light last spring near Jerusalem with the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." If the bones can be authenticated as those of James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, the find will be one of the major archeological discoveries of the century.

The excitement over Jesus' name on someone else's ossuary is a reminder of what little impact he himself had on the news and events of his day. There are no monuments, no tributes, no reports in the chronicles of the times. Msgr. John Meier's book "A Marginal Jew" puts it bluntly: Jesus was at most a "blip" on the radar screen of his times.

Jesus was anything but a celebrity. The better part of his life was spent as a handyman, the son of a handyman, in a tiny village called Nazareth in the back country of Galilee. Most of his public ministry took place in small fishing towns around the Sea of Tiberius, far from the centers of power and influence. He died abandoned by his disciples, condemned to crucifixion, a shameful death reserved for those who had no rights or standing.

The way of the world is to operate with maximum publicity and exposure. God prefers to work in secret. The things that really matter to God seldom take place in public.

In Advent, we are called to reflect on and to imitate this hidden, unobtrusive way of God. Jesus, eternal Son of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at but emptied himself and came without fanfare not to do his own will but the will of his father. Advent calls into question all false standards of success and importance. With Mary and Jesus we trustingly put ourselves in the Father's hands knowing he is at work even in the most ordinary events, bringing about his glory and our good.

In Christ,