



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH  
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS

185 St. Thomas Drive  
Ojai, California 93023

January, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Sometime in the weeks before Christmas, I came across a Posada ceremony that had been adjusted and up-dated. As you know, the Posada is a Hispanic tradition that re-enacts Mary and Joseph's search for shelter and harsh rejection as they try to find a place for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. In this Posada, Maria and Jose are a young Mexican couple seeking a life for themselves and their expected child in the United States. They, too, are not welcomed.

How we welcome the stranger is up for consideration as we observe National Migration Week, January 4-10. To provide the underlying Scriptural reflections and the principles of Catholic social teaching appropriate to that consideration, the bishops of Mexico and the United States have recently issued a joint pastoral letter, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope."

The challenge of migrants and refugees throughout the world is immense. There are over 13 million people displaced or on the move, most surviving in desperate circumstances. Sadly, many fail to survive at all.

With the pervasive anxiety about our national security and the concern about a fragile economy, it is tempting to give in to our fear and retreat into the mindset of fortress America. As Catholics, however, this is not an option. Countries have the right to regulate their borders and protect their own well being. Even so, as the world's richest and most powerful nation, founded by seekers of freedom and a better life, proud of its tradition of openness and diversity, we have a responsibility to respond with compassion and generosity to those desperately seeking a decent living for themselves and their families.

As Jesus reminds us, "What you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me." "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Pat". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the words "In Christ,".



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February, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

With the beginning of Lent, we will implement changes in the Liturgy called for by the new General Instruction of the Roman Missal. For some people that will take care of making it a season of mortification. Most of us are uncomfortable with change and in our prayers, especially, we prefer the tried and familiar.

The General Instruction is a comprehensive and detailed guide. There are 399 numbered paragraphs, each with some bit of information or instruction on the celebration of Mass. Most of these reaffirm what we have known or what we have been doing all along. It would be impossible to comment on each and every part but there are some general themes that are emphasized over and over again.

There is an effort to enshrine the full traditional understanding of Eucharist and the Eucharistic celebration. Reverence and awe are appropriate responses in the presence of the inexpressible mystery.

The celebration is to be planned to bring out the conscious, full and active participation of all present: priest, assembly, lectors, ministers, servers, musicians.

Granted some place for local or individual adaptation, there should be a level of uniformity in each celebration and with the universal Church. What may seem novelty to us may actually be coming into line with what most others are already doing.

I think we already have effective, prayerful liturgies. We can be grateful for an informed Liturgy Committee, talented musicians, prepared lectors, trained servers, conscientious Eucharistic ministers, fitting ambiance. The new General Instruction is meant to give us even greater appreciation for the treasure we have in the Mass and bring us into fuller participation. Implementing the instructions through Lent should prepare us for the glorious feast of Easter which we celebrate each time we gather for Eucharist.

In Christ,



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March, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

All the hype and controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" should guarantee that the venture is a financial success. The only reports I heard from those who have actually seen the film also describe it as a moving artistic achievement. Because of the subject matter, though, the movie must also be judged by other standards. Some Christian leaders have expressed high hopes that the graphic depiction of the suffering of Jesus will move people to faith in His redemptive mission. A number of Jewish leaders, on the other hand, have seen implications of racial blame for the crucifixion and fear an excuse for anti-Semitism.

To those fears it is not enough to answer that the film is faithful to the scriptures and "shows it as it was." Through the centuries it was precisely the reading of the scriptures which fueled hatred of the Jews as "Christ killers" and occasioned pogroms of violence and persecution. We have to remember that Christianity emerged as a break-off movement from Judaism and, like most such separations, the severance was not amicable. Catholic and Protestant writings of the sixteenth century reveal not only the theological arguments that occasioned the Reformation but the heat and the bitterness surrounding the split. Jewish and Christian writings of the first century give us the case for and against Jesus but also convey the hurt and resentment accompanying the birth of the Church.

Certainly in the documents of Vatican Council II and in the pronouncements of John Paul II, the Catholic Church has clearly and forcefully rejected the notion that the Jews as a nation or a people bear guilt for the death of Jesus. To the question "who killed Jesus?", the only answer theologically correct is "I did." It is our sins that made it happen and we all carry the responsibility.

If the new movie helps us to see more vividly the consequences of our sins and the immensity of God's love it will be a most valuable contribution to Lent. As St. James reminds us, though, faith without charity is dead. Certainty without tolerance is deadly. If the picture results in an increase of both belief and bigotry, it will be a mixed blessing at best.

In Christ,



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April, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

One of St. Augustine's more often cited passages is: "We are an Easter people and 'Alleluia' is our song." It is belief in the resurrection that makes us Christians and proclaiming that he who was dead is now alive is the core of the good news we are to witness. Baptism associates us with the dying and rising of Christ. Eucharist renews in us that pattern of life through death, letting go in the faith that further life will follow. Our ministry is always on the side of life, serving him who came that we might have life and have it to the fullest.

In a world of cynicism and skepticism, we are to be messengers of hopefulness. It is the constant theme of the pope and the basis of all Catholic social teaching that the world can be changed. The future is determined not by our past mistakes and sins but is offered to us from the hand of God. The Church is servant of him who says "I came to make all things new."

But we become Easter people, full of hope, willing to die to self that others might live only through personal, intense contact with the Risen Christ. We must make our own the yearning love St. Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians:

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

In Christ,

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June, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Abortion, presidential candidates' stances on abortion and the Church's response to presidential candidates' stances on abortion are much in the news.

In the controversy it seems that ends and means sometimes get interchanged.

It is Catholic teaching that human life begins with conception and that abortion is a grave moral evil. All Catholics must work to limit or prevent it. The position "I am personally against abortion but would not let religion dictate my political decisions" is a cop-out. Religion, as a guide to what is right or wrong, should influence every public decision. How to work against abortion, though, is a further consideration. Is there also Catholic teaching on that?

A frontal attack on abortion would be to overturn Roe vs. Wade and get a constitutional amendment protecting life from conception. Does every Catholic politician have to identify with and promote that campaign? If so, it would seem there cannot be a Catholic Democratic candidate for president.

A while back when he was a Catholic governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, in a speech at Notre Dame University, tentatively probed options a Catholic politician might have in dealing with abortion within the current American legal system. The talk was dismissed as more of the old "privately I oppose but publicly I will support" double talk. Maybe it bears a second look.

Some people think that criminalizing drugs is a mistake. Efforts to jail suppliers, they claim, should instead be focused on discouraging and rehabilitating users. I don't agree but, at the same time, don't think that everybody who holds that position is necessarily pro-drugs.

Fornication is a grave sin. I don't think it should be illegal but I do agree with legal restrictions. The Supreme Court has not yet declared intercourse-on-demand everybody's constitutional right. Rape is a crime as well as sex with a minor.

It is clear Catholic teaching that abortion is a grave moral wrong. Is it also Catholic teaching that it must always be a felony?

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July, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

When the recent Archdiocesan Synod made catechesis, the dissemination of the Faith, one of its primary goals, it was echoing the concern of all the modern popes, of every parent and of every parish. In a world that is becoming increasingly disinterested, if not hostile, how do we communicate to others what it means to be a Catholic? While the problem has long been recognized and numberless workshops, courses, and publications been devoted to it, there has been no consensus about the answer.

A framework of responses, though, is now being proposed called Whole Community Catechesis. There is nothing new in the approach but it does bring together a number of insights and methods.

First, while information is important, being well-informed is not the goal of catechesis. We should all know our religion and be able to explain it in an intelligent way but faith is ultimately a response to a person, Jesus Christ. Catechesis must lead to knowing Jesus and committing one's self to him through the Church. Classroom instruction is an essential part of Whole Community Catechesis but a range of other methods and techniques are used as well. The old adage is true, faith is "caught" not "taught."

Parents are the primary teachers and the home is the first church. Accepting this, Whole Community Catechesis enlists parents into the process and makes available to the home the resources of the parish.

The Sunday Liturgy is the source and summit of all parish life. Our formation at every level and every age, is rooted in the shared Word and Eucharist. Whole Community Catechesis recognizes the role of liturgy and extends it into the whole process.

This coming year we will be using the Whole Community Catechesis approach in the Confirmation/Youth programs and will be developing plans for adoption elsewhere. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a whole parish to form a disciple.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Bat'.



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August, 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Summer is the time the entertainment industry brings out the blockbusters. Heroes are bigger than life and villains are the very personification of evil. Plots are neither subtle nor complicated and, in the end, goodness clearly triumphs over evil.

In the Church year, August brings us the feast of the Assumption of Mary. In its own way, this, too, is a blockbuster celebration. Mary, without sin, has overcome the tempter and crushed the Serpent's head. Through the grace won by her son on the cross, she is taken body and soul into God's presence. A personal triumph for Mary, it is a pledge and assurance to us. What is completed in her, is still at work in us. Where she is now, we hope some day to be.

In the lazy days of summer when life may seem boring or heading nowhere, it is good to be reminded of the epic tale we are part of: the boundless love God has for each of us, the death Jesus has died for us, the glory that awaits us.

In Christ,

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November 2004

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

What would have been the wildest science fiction a few years ago is today on the ballot for a public vote. Shall we create human embryos in the lab for the sole purpose of destroying them to reap stem cells?

The proposal brings together a mix of scary scientific know-how, unfounded medical expectations and faulty moral reasoning.

Stem cells are primitive cells that will develop into the different kinds of cells that make up the human body. They are found in embryos but exist also in the placenta, the umbilical cord and in adult brain, bone marrow and skin. Experiments with stem cells point to possible break-throughs in a number of ailments including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and spinal cord injury. There is no problem using stem cells not taken from embryos.

But some scientists claim that cells taken from the embryo have more potential. There has been no evidence of this. Some scientists also claim that creating embryos in the lab would provide an abundant and controllable source of stem cells. The Church teaches that playing God by "creating" human life in a test tube is morally wrong. Removing the stem cell from the embryo destroys the embryo. So these embryos would be immorally begun and immorally ended.

Proposition 71, the one under discussion, is an occasion to review the Catholic teachings involved:

Human life is always to come from the union of a man and a woman.  
Human life begins at conception.  
Human life is always sacred from beginning until natural death  
Innocent human life must never be destroyed for some "greater" good.

In Christ,





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December, 2004

Dear members of St. Thomas Parish,

Only 25 days left before Christmas! Lest we forget for a second, everywhere we look there will be decorations, the air will be filled with carols, shopping will be non-stop. By the 25<sup>th</sup> people will be tired of the hype but still complaining "It just doesn't seem like Christmas."

How different in the Church year is the season of Advent. Instead of busyness, there is an emptiness waiting to be filled. Instead of hectic preparation, there is quiet openness to God's initiative. Instead of lavish spending, there is poverty needing God's benevolence.

The three great figures of Advent are the prophet Isaiah, Mary and John the Baptist. More than any of the prophets, Isaiah kept alive the promise and hope of the coming savior. Mary by her personal consent to God's request changed the history of the world. John the Baptist announced the arrival of Emmanuel, God in our midst.

The message of Advent is always the same: God's only begotten Son becoming one of us that we might become one with him. This year more than most, we need to hear the angel's glad refrain: "Do not be afraid; for behold I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." In a world plagued with fear, we have the angel's assurance there is no reason for fear. God has come amongst us as savior and brother.

In Christ,

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