**Christmas Reflections 2022 Vol 45 No 3**

*Dear Friends and Readers,*

*I offer the Reflections article below as my Christmas greeting to you. May Christ, “God’s greatest work of art,” guide and inspire us during the Christmas season and beyond.* Fr. Jim Bacik

On Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the promised Messiah, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the world. The infant in the crib grew to manhood in the obscurity of his small hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. In his early thirties he traveled south to Judea where he was baptized by the great Jewish reformer John the Baptist. Shortly after, he began his own public ministry proclaiming the presence and imminent fulfillment of the “Kingdom of God.” His provocative words and actions threatened the religious and political establishments, and he was executed by crucifixion probably in the year 30. Three days later, he appeared to his close disciples, beginning with Mary of Magdala, greeting them not with recrimination but with a compassionate, forgiving “Peace be with you.” These totally dispirited disciples were immediately transformed into courageous, inspired proclaimers of the good news that God raised the crucified Jesus to life and constituted him as Lord of all.

In the second half of the first century, the New Testament writers, not themselves eyewitnesses to the public life of Jesus, found various ways to express the unrivalled greatness and universal significance of the crucified and risen Christ. He is “Emmanuel, God with us” (Matt 1:23); the “Light of the World” (John 8:12); and the “Lord of Lords and the King of Kings” (Rev 19:16). The classic expression of the preeminence of Christ is found in the Letter to the Colossians (1:15-18). Scholars tell us the passage is an early Christian hymn adapted to demonstrate the absolute superiority of Jesus over all earthly and heavenly powers.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent.

Throughout Christian history, theologians have found ways to express the preeminence of Christ in new ways. For example, Augustine of Hippo (d.430), the father of all western theology said, “Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all.” Thomas Aquinas (d.1274), who drew from both Augustine and Aristotle to produce his great *Summa*, praised Christ as the “Sublime High Priest” whose sacrifice opened up the possibility of salvation for all people. The great 16th century mystic and Doctor of the Church, Teresa of Avila spoke affectionately of Christ as her Good Friend, Brother, Bridegroom and Spouse.

Among contemporary theologians, the German Jesuit Karl Rahner often wrote abstractly of Christ as the Definitive Prophet and Absolute Savior and later in his life spoke more concretely about “throwing his arms around Jesus as an expression of love.” One of the most powerful theological expositions of the centrality of Christ comes from the outstanding Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the first part of his multi-volume trilogy, entitled *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar argued that “glory” is the most divine of God’s attributes and that divine glory is definitively and concretely manifested in the human form of Jesus Christ. Jesus is uniquely attractive, the most integrated of all human beings, the true vehicle of God’s grace and the epiphany of the Father’s love. As truly human, he is “the perfection of creatureliness” and “the archetype” of fulfilled humanity. As the God-man, he is the inner norm of history and the unique source of ultimate meaning. Balthasar described his great trilogy as a “kneeling theology” designed to help believers fall in love with Christ, “God’s greatest work of art.”

The first century Gnostic false teachers who seemed to make angels superior to Christ were precursors to misguided efforts throughout history to supplant the preeminence of Christ with some finite idol. One of the more striking examples of idol making, occurred during the French Revolution, when on Nov. 10, 1793, radical Jacobins installed a Statue of Reason in the great Catholic Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, turning it into a Temple of Reason. The radicals argued that reason would liberate people from the dehumanizing control of the Church that prevents citizens from achieving true liberty, equality and fraternity.

Today in the United States, we are dealing with a more subtle form of idolatry which we can name “radical partisan politics.” Some commentators have called politics the “new religion,” a recent development which provides true-believing partisans with a sense of devotion, belonging and moral certitude.

Partisan politics, however, is an elusive idol. There are no statues representing it; no manifesto defending it; no organized movement promoting it. It exists mostly unconsciously and in various degrees in the minds and hearts of Americans. It is revealed in a series of typical tendencies: to see compromise as weakness: to put partisan politics above the common good; to make moral judgements on public policy based not on religious values but political expediency; to oppose some otherwise laudable legislation because it will give a political victory to the other side; to associate exclusively with one’s own political tribe; to turn political heroes into messiah figures, who, though flawed, carry out God’s will in the world; and to view members of the other party as dishonest, narrow-minded and immoral.

Some of these typical tendencies are widespread in the United States. For example, a recent Pew survey shows that 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats think members of the other party are more immoral than other Americans. These tendencies can be found among regular church-goers and those with no church affiliation. For all of us the list is better used for self-examination than finger pointing.

Years ago, the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (d.1917), identified a number of distinctive social functions of the world religions which are still helpful today. In general, they give meaning and purpose to life; reinforce social unity and stability; to motivate citizens to work for positive social change; provide norms for acceptable social behavior; promote physical, emotional and spiritual health; and encourage common practices that forge deep bonds among believers.

Radical partisan politics, masquerading as a religion, is totally incapable of functioning like a true religion. As a composite of typical tendencies, it is one-dimensional and inner-worldly, without any sense of the transcendent meaning and larger purpose human beings need and seek. It has not enhanced but undermined the social unity and stability needed for a functioning democracy. It motivates tribal members to work for change that subverts our national ideal of creating a more perfect union. It rejects traditional social norms, replacing them with capricious self-serving approaches. It fosters groupthink which impedes individual creativity and authentic personal growth. Finally, radical partisan politics motivates citizens to seek their own advantage instead of the common good.

Christmas is such a beautiful, inspiring Christian celebration with a remarkable capacity to gladden the heart, expand the imagination and concentrate the mind. We can absorb more of the beauty and power of Christmas by focusing on the preeminence of Christ. Our gift giving is a way of honoring Christ, God’s greatest gift to us. In the Christmas liturgy we encounter the Incarnate Word present in the joyful assembly, in the scriptures that illumine his birth and the Eucharist that nourishes us for the journey. Christ is the supreme protagonist, the main character in the grand drama of salvation that began with his conception and birth, led to his death and glorious resurrection, and will reach its triumphant conclusion when Christ achieves his fullness and God is all in all.

Celebrating the preeminence of Christ on Christmas not only alerts us to the dangers of idolatry and helps us mine the riches of the Liturgy, it also invites us to find ways to make Christ more influential in our lives in the days ahead. Consider some possibilities. We could follow the Church year and continue our celebration of the manifestation of Christ through the feast of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord. We could prayerfully meditate on the New Testament passages that express the superiority of Christ, for example Colossians 1:15-18. We could do an honest self-examination to discern idolatrous tendencies in our own lives. We could try to reconnect with a politically estranged relative or friend. We could draw on a particular teaching of Christ to help guide us in making a difficult moral decision. We could look for more generous ways to practice Christ’s command to love our neighbor. We could participate more effectively in the political process by supporting policies that serve the good of the country as a whole. We could avoid demonizing or demeaning our political opponents. We could vote against candidates who express radical partisan positions. Finally, we can all pray that the preeminence of Christ and his teachings and values will become more evident in our world today and tomorrow.