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When want is most keenly felt

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

An annual column at Christmas always runs the risk of lapsing into boilerplate rhetoric. It is the time of the year when people are supposed to have warmth in their hearts and a generous spirit to match.

But this is not a happy time for many families, even in once prosperous lands. Although there are tentative signs of an economic recovery, at least in comparison with last fall, unemployment continues at a high rate and young people are finding that even seasonal jobs are scarce.

Two common elements of the feast of Christmas are lights and gift-giving. Some people may have to cut back on traditional lighting to save on their electric bills, but the real pinch will be felt in gift-giving, especially for one's family.

Charles Dickens famously wrote that it is at Christmas that want is most keenly felt. To be sure, he was writing in the context of a newly industrialized England in the 19th century, but his observation is not without relevance for our own time and place.



This Christmas offers those who have not been negatively affected

by the economic downturn an opportunity to practice Christian discipleship anew.

When the war in Iraq was launched in 2003, there was no realistic call for sacrifice. Indeed, the only "sacrifice" that then President George W. Bush mentioned was that we should all go shopping.

Older readers will recall the real sacrifices that were endured during the Second World War when there were no cars to buy, ration buttons for such products as butter and sugar, stickers on car windows for the purchase of rationed gasoline, paper and tire drives, blackouts, wooden parts on buses and trolley cars as replacements for steel needed in the war effort, the draft in full vigor, and gold stars in a neighbor's window, announcing the grim news of the death of a son in battle.

In today's economic climate, the last thing a committed Christian should be tempted to say is: "I'm up, pull up the ladder."

We are, after all, our sister's and our brother's keeper. We have an obligation to reach out to those in need, especially at this time of the year when, as Dickens put it in *A Christmas Carol*, want is most keenly felt.

Too much of the rhetoric about health care reform one reads nowadays in newspapers and magazines or sees in advocacy ads on television seems to appeal to our baser instincts rather than our generous impulses. We are warned that doing something about the millions of uninsured will cost too much or perhaps jeopardize the economic security that many already have -- or assume they have.

By contrast, we sing carols at Christmas that appeal to our better spirits. We extol the Prince of Peace and the display of goodwill toward all.

Others, however, remind us of the need to walk the walk rather than only of talking the talk. Christianity is a faith that demands the former. It is, as the worldwide Jesuit community proclaimed several years ago, "a faith that does justice."

This column has previously focused on loneliness as "the dark underside of Christmas merriment." Loneliness and bitterness grow like weeds overnight in the Christmas patch because Christmas is, at root, about relationships, communities, homecomings.

In a time of economic downturn such values as these are placed at serious risk.

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A later Christmas column wrote of "family reunions, but not for the homeless ... of special feasting, but not for the hungry ... of lavish gift-giving, but not for the poor."

Another column pointed out that the giving of gifts at Christmas affords us all an opportunity to practice what Christ urged us to do -- but not at Christmastime alone. What we do for others at Christmas is supposed to set the tone for all 12 months of the year.

At Christmas we celebrate the Prince of Peace, but more than one recent pope has reminded us that peace is the work of justice. Unfortunately, when justice knocks at our parish, school or diocesan doors, it too often receives about as warm a welcome as Mary and Joseph received at the inn at Bethlehem.

Each Christmas we hear familiar biblical readings, are heartened by familiar sanctuary decorations, and sing familiar carols. But we are always at a slightly different stage of our lives each year, and so is our

country.

Christmas itself does not change. It is we who change, and the nation and the world in which we live.

That is why we have an opportunity to practice Christian discipleship anew, this year and every year after it.

[Fr. Richard McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.]

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