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The Christmas mystery and theology

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

[**Editor's Note:** Fr. Richard McBrien is recuperating from back surgery. Until he fully recovers, which we expect by early next year, we will be running "encore presentations" from Fr. McBrien's column archives. This column dates from December 1975.]

We admire balanced people -- those who have the capacity to see both sides of an issue and to give a fair measure of consideration to each.

Balance is especially important in the doing of theology because at the root of every major theological issue lies the problem of the relationship between the divine and the human.

It is only by balancing and integrating the demands of each that one can formulate responsible theological judgments.

The feast of Christmas reminds us of this, in a particularly dramatic way.

The mystery of the Incarnation is at the very heart of Christian faith. The Christian believes that God became man, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Indeed the earliest doctrinal controversies in the Church had to do with the Christian community's understaking of this fundamental relationship between the divine and the human in Jesus Christ.

There were heresies in the beginning which so emphasized the divinity of Christ that his humanity was all but lost. And there were corresponding heresies which reversed the equation and made Jesus reductively a man among men.

For those who have not learned the enduring lesson of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), for example, discussions not only about Christ but about every other major theological issue will always be out of balance.

The divine-human relationship is at the core of our theological discussions regarding the Church, nature and grace, the meaning of revelation, the connections between faith and reason, providence and free will, law and Gospel, the Kingdom of God and human enterprise, and so forth. Historically and actually many Christians have consistently stressed the one side over against the other on issue after issue.

Take the question of the Church. There are some Christians today who so emphasize its divine character that they can see no basic structural or personal flaws requiring thorough and systematic reform and renewal.

They talk about the Church as if it were somehow exempt from all the sociological, psychological, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape human experience and the human situation.

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Other Christians speak and act as if the Church were no more than an instrument of social change or an encounter group. They judge the Church in exactly the same fashion as they would judge General Motors or the United States Government.

And the same is true in other cases. Many Christians on the right always come down on the side of grace over nature. They don't like to hear talk of the importance of natural qualities of leadership, for example, in the Catholic priesthood or the episcopate; nor are they ever comfortable with scientific evaluations of things they consider to be purely and simply "supernatural."

They think and speak about revelation as if it were almost self-evident that God has "spoken" to us and that his "words" are available in unalloyed form in the pages of the Bible or, to some extent, in the official formulations of the Church.

These same Christians are suspicious of the workings of reason in matters of religious belief. To criticize a traditional interpretation of a doctrine is to undermine faith itself, in their eyes.

So, too, there are many Christians on the left who always seem to come down on the side of nature. They talk as if there are no other considerations but what can be scientifically identified and measured. All appeals to the "supernatural" or to the realm of the spiritual are discounted as irrelevant or diversionary.

They write and speak as if revelation is just another word for what we can, and do, discover about ourselves and our world.

They imply that reason alone must bear the burden of establishing the "credentials" of Jesus and the Lord of history.

Meditating on the mystery of Christmas will not suddenly resolve the problem of balancing the divine and the human in Christian faith. But it can make us all more aware of, and sensitive to, that dialectical dimension of all theological reflection.

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