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Real sacrifice should be remembered this Christmas

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Last Christmas, I was too ill to write my annual Christmas meditation. In fact, for the first time in the then-44-year history of the column, I had to suspend it for some three months.

During my absence, *The National Catholic Reporter* kindly published online a selection of my previous columns. I resumed writing the column in mid-January of this year and the first column appeared once again in early February.

As I wrote in 2009, the annual column at Christmas always runs the risk of lapsing into boiler-plate rhetoric. What can one say about the mystery of the Incarnation that is truly new year after year?

Christmas is a time when people are supposed to have warmth in their hearts and a generous spirit to match. But even in this richest of countries, many are below the poverty line and many more, having lost their jobs, are experiencing poverty for the first time.

Charles Dickens famously wrote in his *A Christmas Carol* 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 has relevance even in the United States and Canada today.

Yet when then-President George W. Bush launched the war in Iraq, he made no call for sacrifice on everyone's part. In fact, he gave an enormous tax cut to the wealthiest of American citizens. For the rest, he urged us to go shopping.

Older readers will recall the real sacrifices that were endured during the Second World War. There were no cars to buy even if you could afford one; there were ration buttons for such basic products as butter and sugar; there were signs over grocery store entrances, "Oleomargarine sold here." Stickers had to be

placed on car windows for the purchase of rationed gasoline; there were paper and tire drives, blackouts, wooden parts on buses and trolley cars to replace the steel needed in the war effort. The draft was in full vigor, and gold stars in a neighbor's window proclaimed the grim news of the death of a son in battle.

That was *real* sacrifice. Unlike the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, almost every family was touched by the Second World War, rich, middle-class and poor alike.

There were few draft deferments in the Second World War. Former Vice President Dick Cheney couldn't have obtained five deferments, as he did during the Vietnam War, to pursue "more important" matters. Nor could any of the well-off in today's all-volunteer Army.

In the current economic climate, the last thing a committed and financially comfortable Christian can say is, "I'm up, pull up the ladder." Those are our brothers and sisters down there, at the bottom of the ladder.

Especially at Christmas, those of us who are financially comfortable must reach out to those in need in the spirit of real, not phony, sacrifice.

But some do remind us that we need to walk the walk rather than only talk the talk. Christian faith demands the former. It is a faith, as the worldwide Jesuit community proclaimed several years ago, "that does justice."

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In a time of economic downturn for many millions, however, such values as these are placed at serious risk.

An earlier column of mine 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 Jesus urged us to do -- but not at Christmastime alone. In fact, Jesus never mentioned Christmas.

But he did say what you do for the least of my people, you do for me. And what you fail to do for them, you fail to do for me (Matthew 25:31-46).

At Christmastime, we profess our allegiance to the Prince of Peace (those of us who are not totally distracted by the secular aspects of the season), but more than one recent pope has reminded us that peace is the work of justice.

"Each Christmas," I wrote in 2009, "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."

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