



# FAITH & REASON

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## EDITORIAL: ADULT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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SOME TIME AGO I WROTE THE BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE WHERE I LIVE REGARDING PUBLISHED accounts of his recent ad limina visit to Rome. My letter was prompted by various remarks, attributed to the Bishop, which suggested that the Holy Father did not understand the ecclesiastical situation in America, and that his presentation of Catholic sexual morality, especially *Humanae vitae*, was inadequate. The Bishop's reply to my letter was polite, and he even apologized for the "cynicism" and "negativism" displayed in his interview with the journalists. He was adamant, however, in his insistence that the teaching of *Humanae vitae* must be made more palatable for Americans, and not just repeated again and again. Repetition, he added, is the way to teach children, but not adults. Now I was not altogether certain how the Bishop thought adults ought to be instructed, but I think that I have an idea since receiving a U.S.C.C. document distributed in my parish after Mass on the first Sunday of Advent, 1983.

"Celebrate His Coming" is a leaflet published by the Campaign for Human Development. With its subtitle, "Getting Ready for Jesus' Birthday," it is explicitly educational ("Prepared by CHD Education Staff"). The most prominent feature of the leaflet is a "Calendar of Events to Celebrate His Coming," which lists recommended activities for each day of the Advent season. Since the calendar claims to have something for "all the members of the family," then we should find here an example of how the U.S.C.C. (and presumably the bishops) think that adults should be taught. This in turn should give some idea of the Church bureaucracy's view of the American faithful.

The suggestions on the calendar are generally admirable. For example, on Monday, November 28, they are simply splendid: "compliment a member of your family. / Write a friend to whom you owe a letter." Miss Manners herself does not give better advice. In fact, the Campaign for Human Development has Mother Church devoting most of the first week of Advent to good manners. On Tuesday we are advised to "phone a friend" (apparently writer's cramp has set in after Monday's heroic effort) and to "spend a little extra time with the family at dinner." On Thursday we are asked to compliment a co-worker and adjust our schedules for the convenience of our families. Clearly this will all edify and inspire Catholic adults to contemplate the Coming of Christ.

In the second week etiquette is blended with social consciousness. On Monday, December 5, we are given the following instructions: "Plan to visit a nursing home. / Let someone go ahead of you in a line." (If you are lucky, there will be a line into the nursing home, and you can kill two birds with one stone.) Then on the following day: "Look for a news account about an injustice. / Hold open a door for someone." (If we could just get Central Americans to start holding doors for one another!) In the third week social consciousness turns into social studies. I felt as if I were back in Miss Bulletin Board's sixth grade: "Monday, December 12: Read today's lead editorial. Do you agree with it? / Prepare box of food for local charity. Tuesday, December 13: Write the editor about yesterday's editorial. / Look for a news account of an injustice corrected." Surely we have here the makings of a good scrapbook as well as an inspiration to Christian zeal.

Of course no one should get the idea that there is nothing spiritual on the calendar. All four of the Fridays we are advised to fast and abstain for justice and peace, and on two of the twenty-eight days we are even told to pray. The Thursdays of the second and third week are to be devoted to reading the Bishops's Pastoral on peace-and you thought harsh penances were a thing of the past! On the other hand, there is nothing here that smacks of preconciliar stuffiness, nothing unecumenical. Although the Thursday on which we are enjoined to read the first half of the Peace Pastoral happens to fall on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, there is no mention of the latter. In fact, the faithful are guarded against any temptation to Mariolatry by the conspicuous omission of any reference to Our Lady on the entire calendar. After all, what does she have to do with Jesus' birthday? Similarly, although Wednesday, December 14, is set aside for a "visit to church" in order to pray for justice and peace, there is no awkward suggestion that we adore the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Nothing here to make our separated brethren uncomfortable.

The social justice concerns are likewise carefully selected in order that the faithful not be involved with anything *gauche* (in the social sense of course; in the political sense it is all very *gauche*). The calendar recommends, for example, that on Friday, December 16, we "spend an hour in a welfare center." (What do you suppose we should be doing? Looking out for incidents of welfare fraud?) We are not advised to spend an hour praying the rosary at an abortion clinic (in fact, we are never advised to pray the rosary anywhere). For Tuesday, December 20, the CHD Education Staff recommends that we "write a legislator about improving conditions for the poor." The

Staff does not encourage us to mention the Human Life Amendment or Tuition Tax Credits in our letter. As you can see there is nothing here that would not be perfectly acceptable to a *New York Times* editorial writer. To be sure, that fast and abstinence business on Fridays is a bit heavy, but I think that we can get around that by calling it a hunger strike.

Well, there it is: the adult approach to religious education-witty, profound, mature. Certainly Pope John Paul II has a great deal to learn from *Celebrate His Coming*. When have you ever heard any of those outmoded Curial types give the sort of deep spiritual counsel that the CHD Educational Staff renders for Saturday, December 10: "Smile at a salesperson." During the last week we are urged to love our enemies as well as sales personnel. We are asked to "find a good quality in a person [we] dislike" and to "compliment the person." There is the suggestion to "make an effort to do something for a person you find difficult" (is it the person or the "something" which is difficult?). Finally, there is advice to "send a Christmas message to someone you think of as 'an enemy';" and to "take a step to patch up a quarrel." I think these are truly excellent counsels, and I trust they were acted upon by all who read them. Doubtless the 1983 Christmas season has seen the office of the *Wanderer* flooded with Christmas messages and compliments from certain members of the American hierarchy. Who knows? If this spirit persists, perhaps they will even send Christmas cards to Cardinal Oddi and the Holy Father next year.

R. V. Y.

