

You Are the Light of the World

CURRENT ISSUES

In the world, yet not of the world. That's how we view ourselves as Christians. Jesus used different metaphors to describe how he sees us: the light of the world, the salt of the earth, a city on a hill. Clearly, he has great things in mind for us. By the royal dignity we received at baptism, we're called to transform our wounded world, which aches for the justice and peace only we can bring. We're in the world not to accept its false wisdom, but to offer it the true Wisdom that comes from God.

*The joy and hope, the grief and anxiety
of all the peoples of this time,
especially those who are poor or in any way
oppressed,
these are the joy and hope, the grief and anxiety
of all the followers of Christ,
for nothing genuinely human
fails to find an echo in our hearts.*

These are the opening words of the great Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*). With these words addressed to all the people of the world, the Council described the situation of the Christian in modern society. Though we are witnesses to the trauma the world inflicts upon itself as it stubbornly seeks happiness on its own terms, we can also see the saving grace God offers to heal the wounds of the world. To the world we offer Good News: freedom from slavery, new life, and all that is good, true, and beautiful. **Matthew 7:24–29**

Reading the Signs of the Times

The world is wounded because it seeks its own wisdom. It seeks to justify violence, revenge, war, torture, injustice, and oppression by appealing to the expedient and the pragmatic. Jesus taught us to evaluate such actions by their fruits. **Matthew 7:15–20** And yet we aren't called to judge the individual, but the harmful acts they do to others. **Matthew 7:1–5** Still, we can't let injustice pass without action. That's why we're baptized.

Just as the world seeks to justify injustice by appealing to its own wisdom, so some Christians seek to justify injustice by twisting Christian teaching to suit their needs. These are those who begin with a worldly opinion and then look for ways to justify what they already believe

*The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.*

PSALM 97:6

IHC

An abbreviation for Jesus: IHC

The Greek letters *iota*, *eta*, and *sigma* are an abbreviation for Jesus. They're also sometimes shown as IHS. These letters frequently appear in sacred art and architecture.

by quoting scripture, appealing to tradition, or selectively citing Church documents.¹

But the Gospel isn't a fallback position to prove what we already want to believe. We must begin with the Gospel and judge all our beliefs

and actions from it. Otherwise we degenerate into an endless spiral of subjective proof-texting that's the stuff of today's shouting-head format of public discourse and bitter bloggers. What we need are not minute declarations of what is right and wrong from Church authorities, but an inner disposition to evaluate what we see in the world by the light of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is our surest guide.

Church Teaching Develops to Meet New Challenges

While the written form of revelation ends with the last book of the Bible, the understanding of revelation is an ongoing process that will continue until Jesus comes again. Times change, new situations arise. And we the Church continue to discern all God has in mind for us along the way.

Before Christ was taken up into heaven he promised we would not be left alone. He promised the Holy Spirit would be with us as our guide. The Holy Spirit animates the Christian community and guides us in deciding what is right and wrong in our Church and in our world. In fact, this is how our Christian tradition was developed and how we continue to meet the new challenges of every generation.

¹ As an example, a blogger who chides others for not accepting every word that emanates from the Vatican embarked upon an unusual quest. Faced with this passage from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Torture, which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred is contrary to respect for the person and for human dignity," the blogger wrote a convoluted argument of some 15,000 words, trying to prove this passage actually permits torture! To say God approves of torture, of course, is blasphemy, no matter how artful your arguments.

The pope with the bishops (especially in a council of the Church) are able to teach infallibly—in other words, without error—on matters of faith (what we believe) and morals (what is right and wrong). We,

as Catholics, must accept such teachings because Jesus promised that the Spirit would always guide the Church.²

Often we encounter teachings in encyclicals³ from the pope or in pastoral letters from our own bishop. Usually, when such documents come out, they're covered by the mainstream media, and almost always the media don't get it. They either misunderstand the documents or they focus on some random quote or footnote that fits in with what the media thinks the Church is about. So if you hear media reports about some new document from the Vatican or from your own bishop, take what you hear with a gigantic grain of salt. If you want to find out what was said, just look up the document's original text on the Web.

Of course, all teachings must find their roots in revelation. Official teaching isn't based on a whim or the personal belief of any individual. If you don't understand why the Church teaches this or that, seek out the roots of the teaching and see if

² We call these teachings "magisterial." Magisterium comes from the Latin word *magister*, or teacher. You might ask about the authority of documents issued by Vatican offices. This is an area of some question. Often such documents are said to be approved by the pope, in which case we can assume they have a lesser weight in magisterial teaching than an encyclical, for example. Note that not all papal teachings are infallible!

³ An encyclical is a letter from the pope, addressed to all the faithful of the Church, to bishops, to a particular nation, or even to the whole world. Generally they have Latin titles and deal with universal concerns, but occasionally they can be very specific, such as the 1937 German-language encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* ("With Burning Anxiety"), written by Pius XI to the German bishops lamenting that country's embrace of Nazism.

that helps you better come to grips with the ideal you are being directed toward.

By virtue of our baptism, we're called to be prophetic witnesses, in every generation, to all Christ taught us by the way we live and love. Together, all believers, who have received the Holy Spirit in the waters of baptism, are guided in the ways of Truth. In fact, together the entire Body of Christ has a supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei* in Latin) that extends from those who hold teaching authority, the bishops, down through all the faithful—yes, even you!

Put more simply, we have a collective sense of the Truth that allows us to remain faithful to God and to God's Church while tradition unfolds over the centuries. For those who think nothing can ever change, think again. Christianity is far from an unchangeable, outmoded set of beliefs, rules, and regulations. Watching the mystery of God unfold in every generation is exciting. We encourage you to be in sync with the communal sense of the faithful as your own understanding of God, faith, and life grows.

As a community, strengthened and sustained by the Spirit, every time we gather to celebrate the mystery of the Eucharist and receive the Body and Blood of Christ we should be nourished and made stronger, and maybe see a little more clearly. God continues to show care and concern for us by enriching us with gifts that draw us closer to him. It's only natural we'd want to know more about the One who loves us so much.

Looking Ahead with Hope

Christianity, especially today, has been the focus of a lot of criticism. Some may be justified, others not. Never let anyone lead you to believe that Christianity isn't relevant to the modern world.

By discerning the signs of the times in light of the Gospel, by paying attention to the *sensus fidei* alive in the Church, and by careful attention to the official teachings of the bishops and the pope, we will always meet the challenges of being "in the world but not of the world." Central to our discernment as Church is the classic Christian maxim, "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity."⁴

⁴ Charity means "love." So why not just say "love" and be consistent with avoiding words that need explanation? In this case, we just wanted to keep the rhyme!



Morality is about right and wrong

Probably when they hear the word *morality*, most people equate it with sexual ethics. But sexuality is only a tiny part of what morality deals with.

Morality in our Christian tradition deals with deciding what's right and wrong. In the United States, it's an easy cop-out to debate sexual ethics and call it morality while we oppress people around the world, give ourselves over to greed, and ignore the needs of the poor in our own society. These are gravely immoral acts many Americans overlook as they zealously pursue anyone whose zipper may have gone awry.

One self-professed Christian opined that he would like to see television shows that dealt with “real” Christian issues, like a woman who strove to avoid sex before marriage. That's not the essence of Christianity! It's true we believe people should refrain from sex outside marriage, but this isn't something uniquely Christian—Jews and Muslims also hold this belief. Even atheistic totalitarian states frown upon extramarital sex. So mere sexual abstinence does not set us apart as Christian.

The fact that we hold in common with other people of faith certain aspects of morality shows that part of our Christian moral tradition is rooted in what we call the “natural law.” These are the laws of God that any person of good will can discern—the immorality of killing, stealing, lying, adultery, greed, prejudice, slavery, genocide, war, or torture, for example—all those truths enshrined in the Commandments that safeguard justice. By carefully following the path of justice, we can be a moral people along with those who follow other religions.

But we Christians set a higher standard for morality. This higher standard is based on the natural law but is infused with the light of the Gospel. For example, the teachings of Jesus do not just tell us not to kill, but not to even wish misfortune on others. We can't take food from others, but in addition we can't ignore the hungry when we ourselves have food.

In addition to Christian morality that sets a higher standard for the natural law, we also have morality that is based on an even higher law given us by Jesus. As an example, while the



The Arabic word *Allah* means “God.” It refers to the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians, not a competing deity. In fact, Jews and Christians who speak Arabic use this word just as Muslims do.

natural law may seem to provide for revenge, we are prohibited from seeking revenge. Where the natural law calls for punishment, we are called to extend mercy. Where the natural law provides for self-defense, we are challenged to turn the other cheek.

While Christians may agree that something is immoral, it may be possible to have legitimate disagreement on how to approach that issue in society. As an example, Christian tradition sees abortion as gravely wrong. From our earliest days as Church, we've believed it to be the taking of human life. But while some hold the best remedy is to make it illegal, other Christians are not so sure. They're unconvinced legal prohibition will end abortion and prefer to deal with the root causes that cause people to see abortion as a solution. While agreeing something is wrong, we can legitimately disagree on how to deal with it.

We often hear people complaining about the immorality of our culture. They're right; our culture is immoral. But it's a far cry from the Christian idea of morality to condemn depictions of extramarital sex in a film while ignoring, or even taking pleasure in, the same film's glorification of vengeance.

We see this maladjusted concept of morality, for example, in vehement public complaints about the film *Saving Private Ryan* in which one of the characters says a four-letter word. Proponents of “morality” successfully campaigned to have that word censored, but to leave in the scenes that show people killing each other in gruesome ways. It's like that episode of *The Sopranos* where Tony discovers his “business associate” Vito is gay and must be murdered because Tony claims to be a “strict Catholic.”

Now that's messed up.



ISLAM

I was watching Fox News Channel and one of the commentators said Islam is a threat to civilization. Is that true?

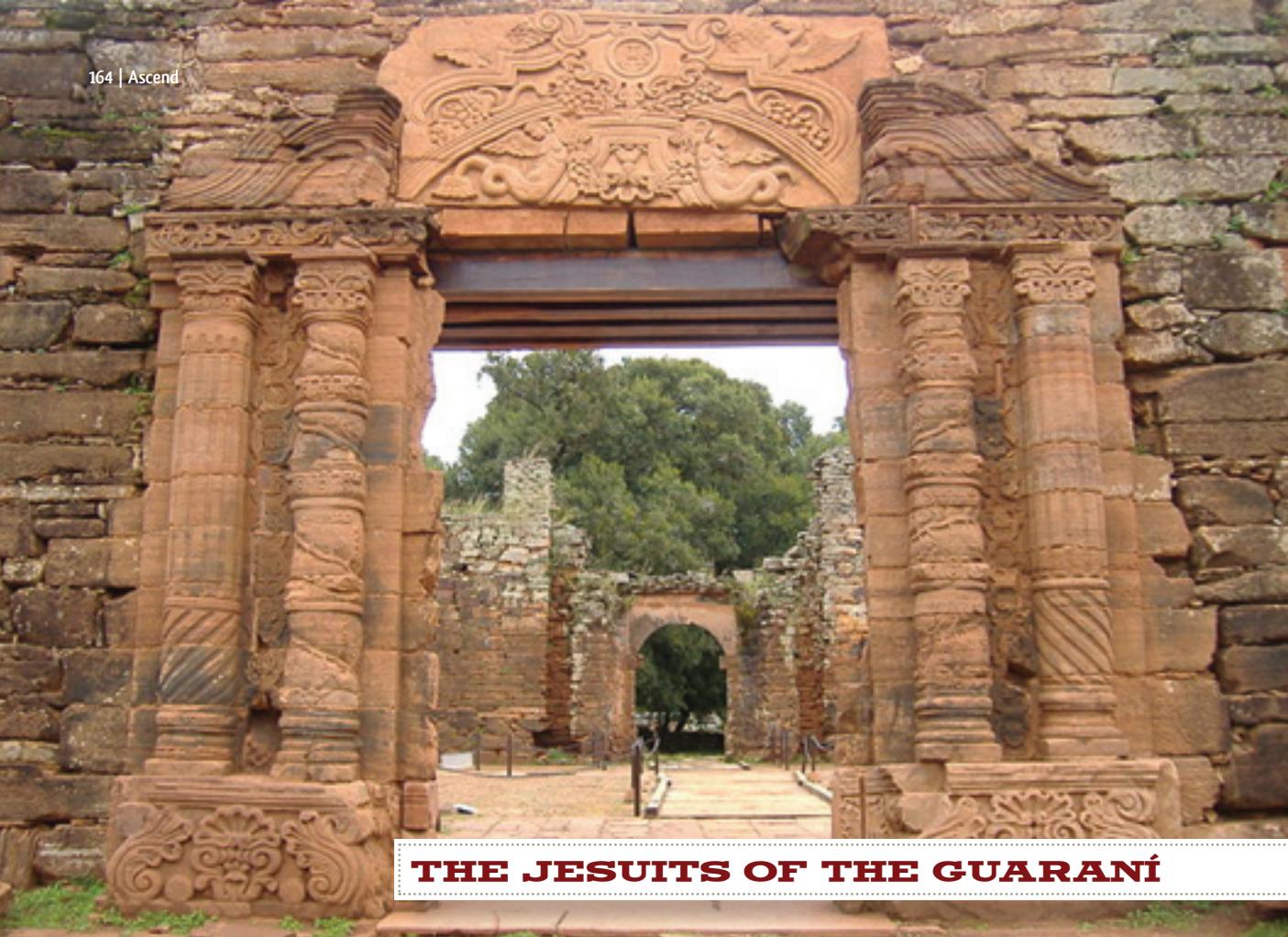
Islam is not a threat to civilization. In fact, many aspects of our civilization—such as our number system—come from Islamic culture. It's true there are Islamic fundamentalists who pose a threat, but there are also fundamentalists of Jewish and Christian flavors who also pose a threat to peace.

The Prophet Muhammad was born into a polytheistic culture. He rejected polytheism and taught the Arab people to worship the one God of the Jews and Christians. This one God is referred to by Muslims with the Arabic word *Allah*. It's the same word that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians use to refer to God. In fact, it's the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians. Every Muslim begins prayer with the opening words of the Qur'an: “In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful.” Muslims believe God is loving and kind.

From the Arabs, Islam spread throughout the world, to the point that today only 15 percent of Muslims are Arabs; most are Asian and African. Of this 15 percent of Muslims, a tiny percentage have embraced fundamentalism. But 95 percent of Muslims are peaceful servants of God, just as only a tiny percentage of Jews and Christians have embraced fundamentalism.

The Second Vatican Council taught that Christians must respect Muslims because they worship the same God; honor the patriarchs, matriarchs, and prophets; and respect the teachings of Jesus, whom they revere as a prophet. They also have a devotion to his mother, Mary. The Council called on Christians to forget the past conflicts between Christians and Muslims and to work together to solve social problems.

It's wrong to accuse all Muslims of being violent, or to suggest they don't worship the same God we do. It's wrong to discriminate against them or to advocate public policy that does. When confronted with social ills, the Christian role is not to seek scapegoats, but rather to humbly reflect upon our own actions that may have contributed to the problem. *Inshallah!*



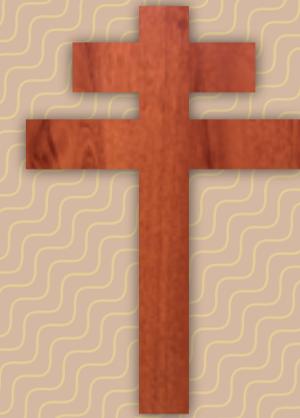
THE JESUITS OF THE GUARANÍ

In the sixteenth century, Jesuits came to an area now part of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil to bring the Good News to the indigenous peoples. Their approach was unusual. They worked with the Guaraní people to create new forms of community governance deep in the jungles, where they could prosper by their own creativity and skill.

For about 150 years, these “Jesuit Republics” thrived in the jungles. The Jesuits helped the Guaraní build towns, grand churches, schools, prosperous farms, and other forms of industry, such as the manufacture of watches and musical instruments that were highly prized in Europe for their quality. The people enacted their own laws, composed musical masterpieces, provided for the poor, and shared all things in common as they learned from the Gospel. The Guaraní became the first people in history to be entirely literate.

Meanwhile, the Jesuits essentially bribed the Spanish government in the form of taxation to protect the people from the slave trade. At their peak in the eighteenth century, the Jesuit Republics consisted of up to 300,000 native Christians in about thirty missions.

Eventually, the Jesuits could no longer protect the people because the slave trade had grown so profitable. When the area became Portuguese territory through a shameful agreement brokered by the pope, the Jesuits were killed or expelled and the Guaraní were sold into slavery by the Portuguese. The dreams of Christian utopia, the society and structures the people created with the Jesuits were reclaimed by the jungles. You can get some idea of the immorality of the eradication of these South American communities by watching the film *The Mission*.



a METROPOLITAN CROSS