

## Advent at the Vatican

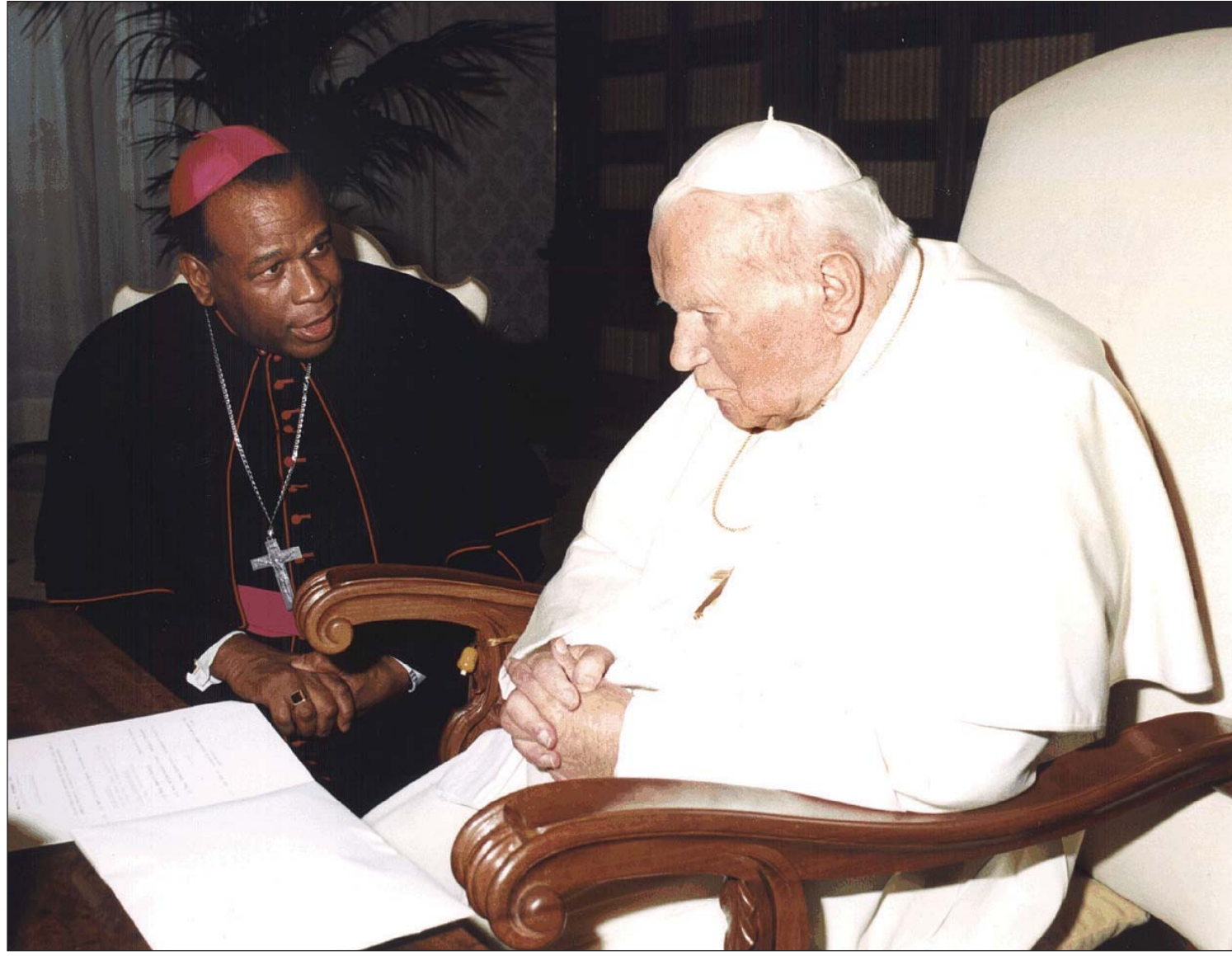
By The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton

I was at the Vatican in early December with the Bishops of the Provinces of New Orleans, Mobile, and Louisville for our *Ad Limina Apostolorum* visit. Every five years all of the Catholic Bishops of the world are required to make this visit "to the threshold of the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul" and pray for the Christian faithful entrusted into our pastoral care by the successor of Peter. Six months prior to the visit I sent hundreds of pages of a detailed report of all the activities of the Diocese of Lake Charles during the past five years. This forms the basis of my conversations with the Cardinals who assist the Pope as Prefects of the various Congregations. In addition to our group audiences I also had a private audience with the Holy Father. In past *Ad Limina* visits I joined the Pope for morning Mass in his private Chapel and for pranzo (lunch). These have been discontinued because of his failing health.

Since I lived in Rome as Scholar in Residence at the North American College the eternal city is familiar to me. Because Rome is steeped with centuries of Christian and pre-Christian history almost every street contains something of interest. However, there is no time for sight-seeing during the *Ad Limina*. The Bishops gathered for Mass at the four Major Basilicas. These historic churches overpowering in their baroque splendor, yet intimate in their side chapels where we gathered. The first celebration is always in the lower church of St. Peter's Basilica built over the ruins of Emperor Constantine's Basilica, which was built over the traditional site of Peter's tomb. Next, we gathered at St. Paul's Outside the Walls, that is outside the walls of the ancient city of Rome, which marks the site of Paul's beheading and burial. St. John Lateran is unique because it, not St. Peter's is the Pope's cathedral as Bishop of Rome. At St. Mary Major, the largest ("Maggiore") church in Rome honoring the mother of Jesus, we were greeted by the familiar face of a brother Bishop, Cardinal Law, who recently became Archbishop of the Basilica.

I was invited to be the celebrant and homilist on the Second Sunday of Advent at beautiful St. Susanna Church, served by the Paulist Fathers for Americans living in Rome, built over the home of Susanna and her martyred family. In my homily I spoke not of the "three wise men" who cannot be found in Scripture (Magi from the east? Yes. Three wise men or kings? No.) I spoke instead of the two wise men and the wiser woman who are our Advent guides to Jesus, the "Star." They are Isaiah, the prophet who calls us to faith, John the Baptist who calls us to hope, and Mary of Nazareth who calls us to love. I was pleased when some of the faithful remarked that the homily reminded them that Advent had absolutely nothing to do with the maddening shopping on the Via Veneto. I was also interviewed on Italian Television (RAI) and Vatican Radio. To my surprise several people from Lake Charles actually heard the broadcast.

Francis Cardinal Arinze, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and I have been friends since his days as Archbishop of Onitsha, Nigeria many years ago. During a visit in his home he shared his joy over the beatification of the Nigerian Trappist priest who baptized him. When the Bishops meet with him he urged us to insist on the faithful celebration of the Catholic liturgy in our dioceses. We should not yield to extremist who reject the genuine liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council or to those who would presume to further reform the liturgy on their own. In our meeting with the Congregation for the Clergy, the Prefect, Dario Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, encouraged the Bishops to be strong in faith in the face of the tragedy of clergy harming young people. He told us to reach out with compassion in every way to the victims and at the same time not to abandon priest found guilty of these terrible offenses. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, observed that in the light of this scandal Bishops and their seminary faculties must redouble their efforts to make sure that seminarians have the emotional, psycho-



Bishop Edward K. Braxton, left, speaks with His Holiness, Pope John Paul II during the Bishop's *Ad Limina Apostolorum* visit to the Vatican in early December.

logical, sexual and social maturity needed to be effective priests. In response to my question about *Dominus Jesus*, the Congregation's document concerning Christianity and world religions, the Cardinal stressed that our irenic dialogue with other faiths must never obscure our belief in Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh.

When the Holy Father addressed the Bishops collectively he focused on the theme of lay involvement in the life of the Church. He reminded the Bishops that, by virtue of their baptism, the Christian Faithful have a right and a duty to contribute to the life of the Church as we face the many challenges of modern largely secular culture. It was a reminder that we are all called to holiness. John Paul, 84, who has difficulty walking and speaking, only read the first paragraph of his address in an effort to conserve his energy.

During my private audience with him, I told the pontiff of the faith hope and love of the good people of my Diocese. I reminded him that we were one of the first dioceses that he erected (1980) and that we would soon be celebrating our 25th anniversary. Known for his love and concern for young people, the Pope was pleased to hear about "Opening Windows" the development program that is remodeling and expanding St. Louis Catholic High. The Pontiff, who throughout his 26-year pontificate has urged Catholics to deepen their personal faith and at the same time enter into genuine dialogue with members of other faiths, commended the Diocese

for hosting an interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Service at Immaculate Conception Cathedral. Members of the Catholics, Protestants, and Jewish and Islamic communities participated in this rite during which they came together to pray each according to his own faith tradition. He asked me to extend his greetings to all the people of Southwest Louisiana. He urged Christians to prepare prayerfully, undistracted by the materialism that surrounds them, for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas.

Every evening I walked alone in the rain-soaked St. Peter's Square praying the rosary never ceasing to be amazed by Michelangelo's massive dome, Maderno's exquisite façade, and Bernini's incomparable colonnades floodlit by night. Though Karl Wojtyla, the 264th Successor of Peter is bent down to mother earth by age and infirmities, the lights of the Papal Apartment were always burning late into the night. The man who wears the Shoes of the Fisherman continues to obey the mandate of Christ to Peter, "strengthen your brothers and sisters in their faith." Meanwhile, around the great obelisk in the center of the piazza that once stood in Nero's circus where Peter was crucified, workers were assembling the wood for the Christmas crèche. This was a stark reminder that Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah whose birth we herald was a failure in men's eyes, going from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross!



Rommel Tolentino

### Tolentino will be ordained to Diaconate

NEW ORLEANS - Rommel Pasion Tolentino will be ordained a deacon on Saturday, Jan. 29, at 10 a.m. at the Cathedral of St. Louis, King of France.

The Most Reverend Alfred C. Hughes, Archbishop of New Orleans, will be the ordaining prelate.

A native of the Philippines, the candidate is the son of Mr. Joselito V. Tolentino and Dr. Erlinda R. Pasion Tolentino of the Philippines. He graduated from San Beda College in Manila in 1987; Atenco de Manila University in Quezon City in 1991 and received a B.S. from the University of Santo Tomas in Manila in 1996. He will complete his theology studies at Notre Dame Seminary in May 2005.

In 2001 he did his parish internship at Immaculate Conception Parish in Jennings under the direction of Rev. Wayne LeBleu. Tolentino completed his Clinical Parish Education at Florida Hospital in Orlando in 2002. He served his deacon internship at Our Lady Help of Christians Parish under the direction of Msgr. James Gaddy.

## A Christmas Reflection

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we begin a new Liturgical year with the Season of Advent, our minds and hearts should be focused on the coming of Christ. The Scripture readings of Advent remind us that we are not simply preparing to commemorate the coming of Christ into the world 2000 years ago we are also preparing at a deeper level for the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. And perhaps at the deepest level the Church is calling each one of us to prepare a place for Christ to be born in the cold stable of our conflict-filled world. As Catholic Christians we all know that the Christmas Festival should not be about shopping days, decorating days, cooking days, or partying days. Nor should it be about "Deck the halls, 'tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la la la la." rather for us it should be about "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." These Advent days of December should not be a time of frantic "busyness" and the buying of costly presents, they should be about spiritual openness to the greatest Christmas present of all, the present of the presence of Jesus Christ.

There is a very close connection between Christmas and Easter but it is easy to

overlook it. Yet the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the origin of many popular "Christmas" symbols. The Christmas tree itself originated in Germany as the "tree of Life" which became the tree of the "life giving cross." Holly was adopted by Christians of England as a Christmas symbol because its thorns and red berries are a reminder of the suffering of Christ. Similarly, the ever-popular tropical red poinsettia became the Christmas flower in Mexico because the green leaves symbolized Christ's youth and the red bloom, His untimely death. The wreath, an ancient Roman and Greek symbol of victory in the amphitheater, came to be used at Christmastime in Italy as a symbol of Christ's victory over death at Easter. All of these connections between Easter and Christmas are right before our eyes. However, most of us are probably unaware of them.

The Christmas scriptures are also filled with suggestions of Easter. When you are prayerfully reading the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke (not found in Mark or John), remember that they were probably written last as a summary of the meaning of Christ's

life and redemptive work. Thus the baby is placed in a manger, a feed box. Why? He is to become our spiritual food. The infant's body is wrapped in cloth and laid in a manger just as the body of crucified Christ is wrapped in cloth and laid in the tomb. The magi came seeking the newborn "king of the Jews." Above the cross Pilate wrote, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The gold, frankincense and myrrh brought by the magi suggest that he is a Divine King who will soon die. Myrrh was used to anoint the dead.

Most pilgrims to Bethlehem are surprised to see that the sight venerated as the birthplace of Jesus is, in fact, a cave and not the wooden "stable" depicted in crèche or manger scenes first created by Saint Francis of Assisi in the 13th century. One reason often given for the stable is to link the wood of the cross to the wood of the manger. All of these connections between Christmas images and the suffering of Jesus teach us that if you want to understand this birth you must understand this death. Without Easter Christmas is meaningless.

As Catholics, our tradition urges us not to rush through

Advent. We are discouraged from announcing our "Merry Christmas" in mid-December, for that is still our time of waiting. Our first "Merry Christmas" is really uttered at the Mass on Christmas Eve, the Christ-mass. Yet in the days after December 25th it is fitting for people of faith to continue saying "Merry Christmas," "Merry Christmas" for days and days. This is why we speak of the twelve days of Christmas.

Did you know that the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was composed by Roman Catholics in England to teach the faith to their children when they were forbidden to practice their religion (1558-1829)? Here are the meanings of the symbols of each "day." (1) The partridge is Christ, who gathers us under His wings. (2) The two turtledoves are the sacrifices that Mary and Joseph offered on the birth of their Son. (3) The three French hens are the gifts of the Magi, as well as the Three Persons of the Trinity. (4) The four calling birds are the four Evangelists. (5) The five golden rings are the first

five books of the Old Testament, the Torah. (6) The six geese are the six days of Divine Creation and our six days of work before we rest on the Lord's Day. (7) The seven swans are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. (8) The eight maids are the eight beatitudes. (9) The nine ladies are the nine fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). (10) The ten lords are the Ten Commandments. (11) The eleven pipers are the eleven apostles who remained faithful to Christ. (12) The twelve drummers are the twelve articles of the Apostles Creed.

It is sad that this song is so popular, even among Catholics, but the true meaning of the lyrics have been all but forgotten. You might wish to save this reflection and share with others the true Christian meaning of the gifts given to us by our own "True Love" who is God. May we all understand that the Life of Jesus Christ which we welcome at Christmas has meaning because it was transformed by an Easter that was Happy indeed!

Be at Peace!

(This page paid for by the Diocese of Lake Charles.)

The next Catholic Calendar will be published on February 11, 2005.