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Letters To the Editor

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LETTERS...

Message from India

Ever since I was appointed a correspondent of the esteemed *Linacre Quarterly*, a few attempts at composing a message from India were made. The first was in 1975 when Mrs. Indira Gandhi's government declared a state of emergency in the country, clamped down censorship on the press and went on to actively encourage compulsions in the implementation of family planning, and sterilization in particular. As a result of those policies, many citizens suffered and many more were threatened when the Government of Maharashtra passed the Bill of Compulsory Sterilization despite the serious objection from the religious minorities, among whom the Christians were prominent. In retrospect, we can take credit for our vociferous objections at that time, and also for our successful attempts at providing indirectly authentic data on the Family Planning programs in India which came to light in an article by Ms. Randy Engel, published in the *Linacre Quarterly*.

The second occasion on which I attempted to record my thoughts was at the time the Indian masses demonstrated to the world their maturity and ability at making democracy work, despite their illiteracy, by totally rejecting Mrs. Gandhi's party and returning to parliament the first-ever non-Congress government whose members had themselves been "victims" of the emergency. Where Mrs. Gandhi was said to be authoritarian, we were offered a democratic way of life and a puritan government. But as time went on, our political leaders feuded in public and justified their behavior as being a concrete demonstration of their democratic ways. A "prohibition"

policy, i.e., abstinence from alcohol, was declared to be a national priority for the entire nation. This was supplemented by the Prime Minister with a personal program of imbibing one's own urine. He used his prime ministerial office to demand a detailed scientific investigation of the procedure by the medical fraternity. This was too curious a situation and certainly did attract many lighthearted criticisms of our Prime Minister, both at home and abroad. We were fortunately saved from his program by the election bell.

The Janata Party of Mr. Morarji Desai, while feuding in public, soon began to break apart into its many constituent factions. Of these, the reactionary group — the Jana Sang — with its ally, the R.S.S., which believed in Hindustan (India) for the Hindus, was the most cohesive force. One of its Parliamentary members introduced for "our protection," if you please, a private member's bill, called the Freedom of Religion Bill. This enactment was intended to prohibit "conversion from one religion to another by the use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for matters incidental thereto." Most of your readers would feel that this bill would be in the democratic tradition, and perfectly justified. Unfortunately, the definitions specified in the proposed legislation were capable of mischievous interpretation in the legal sense, i.e., "force" was said to include a show of force or a threat of injury of any kind, including threat of divine displeasure, or social excommunication." Furthermore, it was noted that an inducement "shall include the offer of any gift or gratification either in cash or in kind, and shall also include the grant of any benefit, either pecuniary or otherwise." By this definition Mother Teresa would be incarcerated for her work, as would many of your friends and colleagues.

Christians, in particular, were not going to be fooled once again. This was so because the definitions which were capable of mischievous interpre-

tation were not the result of a poor knowledge of English on the part of any legislator, but were really a deliberate and sinister campaign, intended to hit the Christians all over India. An almost identical bill had already been passed in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, where the number of Christians and converts to Christianity was significantly greater than anywhere else in India. Incorporation of such an act on the statute book had, indeed, intensified persecution of Christians in that state. Numerous examples of such persecution had been noted, including compulsory registration of converts with subsequent physical assaults and threats to their life and intimidation of their families, prohibition of building churches but not temples, refusal to permit visits by priests and the bishop, provision of assistance only to non-Christians during floods, etc. This piece of legislation was praised by the Prime Minister, Mr. Morarji Desai, on one of his visits to Arunachal Pradesh. Indeed, he went further and publicly suggested that such a measure should be introduced at the national level. For a change, all Christians, up and down the country, united to a man. We sought publicity and support from fellow Christians all over the world. This campaign initiated my third abortive attempt at writing for the *Linacre Quarterly*. Resistance to the Jana Sang-inspired bill increased and within a few months, Mr. Morarji Desai's Government fell, leading to the imposition of a "Caretaker" Government without a public mandate and a subsequent general election.

Many critics summed up the Indian happenings over the last two years as a rejection by the illiterate Indian electorate of governments that indulged in mis-governance (Mrs. Indira Gandhi's program of 1977) followed by one of non-governance by the Janata Party of Mr. Morarji Desai & Co. Yet others remarked that issues involving the minorities such as compulsory sterilization and excessive promotion of contraception on the one hand, and

the "Freedom of Religion Bill" on the other hand, proved to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back in 1977 and 1979 when two governments fell.

We hope that these lessons are not forgotten by our politicians. In both cases, the happenings speak exceedingly highly in favor of the much maligned and uneducated Indian peasant who had really succeeded in demonstrating his sense of democracy. We were sure of this because the vast majority of politicians, of various hues, assured the religious minorities that their constitutional rights which permitted them to live by and propagate their own religious beliefs, would not in future be abridged under any pretext.

This fourth attempt at drafting my Indian message got underway on election day in Bombay which heralded the return of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, her son and party with their overall majority. Mrs. Gandhi was magnanimous in victory. She assured her opponents and the people that vindictiveness would not be her way. All she was interested in, apparently, was national stability, economic security, able planning and an effective government. We sincerely hope Mrs. Gandhi will succeed. We wish her well and pray that God will inspire her. The future — in my next letter, but soon.

— C. J. Vas
Bombay

On Father Burtchaell Article

Dear Dr. Mullooly:

It may be a bit late to make a comment on articles in your February issue, but we teachers sometimes let our journals pile up until after spring semester examinations!

It seems to me that it is not entirely fair of Fr. Burtchaell to construe Prof. Johnson's suggestions on "Selective Treatment of Defective Newborns" as

an attempt to define criteria by which to discover "what their relative value as human might be," or as a proposal that "other humans are valued insofar as they serve needs or wants." Certainly, this reading of Johnson (and of Richard McCormick, on whom Johnson relies) involves a shift of meaning which is far from clearly justifiable on the basis of the writings of those whom Burtchaell criticizes.

Fr. McCormick has made a statement in another context which helps to clarify what is meant by "relational potential" as a criterion of appropriate treatment: "To say that life is a good to be preserved insofar as it contains some potentiality for human experience is not to make life a *bonum utile*, a kind of negotiable thing. . . . It is merely to talk about our duties—

and especially the why of those duties—toward the preservation of a *bonum honestum*, the dying human person" ("Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 38[1977]).

Fr. Burtchaell's critique of Johnson's article seems to me to amount to a "wedge" argument. This sort of argument does have some moral relevance, particularly in matters of public policy, but it should be recognized for what it is. What it is not is a critique of the intrinsic merits of the sort of moral act originally under consideration.

— Lisa Sowle Cahill
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