

Easter reflections



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

We celebrate this week three capital events in the life of Christ: the Last Supper when He instituted the Eucharist, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. When I was growing up a solemn atmosphere descended upon the island when Holy Thursday arrived.

The churches were full in the afternoon, when we attended Mass. There were long lines for Holy Communion. The stores and the bars were closed. Normal radio programs (there was no television) were taken off the air and the stations carried only sacred or classical music.

On Good Friday we first paid a visit to the “*monumentos*” in seven churches. The *monumentos* were small altars set up after Mass on Holy Thursday upon which an ark was placed resembling a sepulcher which contained the second host or wafer consecrated that day to be reserved for the offices of Holy Friday.

After visiting the *monumentos* we went to the procession. In my hometown, Ponce, the procession started in La Cantera, in the northern part of town, and ended up 20 blocks downtown at the cathedral in the city center. Somber crowds lined the sidewalks, whole families dressed in mourning. The full-body images of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the saints, the painful image of Christ upon the cross and of Christ laying inside a glass coffin were carried by the faithful through the streets and finally to the cathedral where they would repose until the following year.

After the procession we went to church to hear the sermon of the “*7 palabras*” or we gathered in our homes to listen to it on the radio. The most passionate and moving preachers were selected for this sermon which is based on the seven utterances of Christ upon the cross: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do; my God, my God, why have you forsaken me; I assure you that tomorrow you will be with me in paradise (to the good thief crucified with him); I am thirsty; Woman, there is your son; son, there is your mother (to his mother, the Virgin Mary, and to his disciple, John the Evangelist); everything has been brought to completion; Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

At midnight Saturday church bells rang all over town, ushering in the Resurrection which took place on Easter Sunday.

Today we commemorate the events that occurred in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago with less solemnity but with the same faith of our fathers. Faith is a gift bestowed to them and to us by God. It allows us to believe in what we

cannot see, feel or touch. But it is not opposed to reason; it complements it. It allows you to perceive a reality that is beyond reason, but not against it.

Faith comes from the spirit, but reason can touch upon the frontiers of the spirit and arrive at faith. This happened to C. S. Lewis, the most brilliant lay expositor on Christianity that I have come upon. Lewis, a professor of literature at Oxford University in England, was an atheist. During World War II he was called upon by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) to provide a series



of messages for the listeners of that station. At that time, the BBC was the voice of hope and of truth that reached the British people, and the peoples in all the nations of Europe threatened or occupied by the brutal onslaught of Hitler’s armies. When Lewis was called upon to provide his messages to this audience, he had converted to Christianity. The messages he delivered were later turned into a book which he titled “*Mere Christianity*.”

This book is worth reading for atheists, agnostics, skeptics and also for believers. In it, Lewis traces the thinking that led to his conversion. Basically, it involves reflections on nature and its laws. Then he goes on to explain brilliantly, with powerful logic but with great

simplicity, the nature, characteristics and beliefs of Christians. His explanations are revealing of our faulty notions on these matters and I am talking now about believers.

In 200 pages he takes up issues such as: is Christianity hard or easy?; morality and psychoanalysis; the Trinity; forgiveness; charity; hope; faith; and so on. This book has been translated into 30 languages and is continuously being reprinted.

I would like to end my column on this Holy Thursday by quoting one of Lewis’ many challenging paragraphs, because today and tomorrow we are being challenged.

“Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society [the church, in irony] to undermine the devil? Why is He not landing in force, invading it? It is that He is not strong enough? Well, Christians think He is going to land in force; we do not know when. But we can guess why He is delaying. He wants to give us the chance of joining His side freely. I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany and then announced he was on our side. God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left?”

“For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last for ever. We must take it or leave it.” ■

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-'76 and 1985-'92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-'67) and Senate president (1969-'72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusinesspr.com. Go to **Sign in** link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.