

# CATHOLIC CALENDAR.

A page devoted to local Catholic interests

September 13, 2002

Vol. 28, No. 13

Lake Charles, La.

Internet Address: <http://lcdioocese.org>

## The Road to Perdition and the Kingdom of Heaven

Tom Hanks' new movie, "Road to Perdition" was not a summer blockbuster like Will Smith's "Men in Black II" or Austin Power's "Goldmember." "Road to Perdition" is long and serious. It has no car chases, no crass humor, no startling special effects and no sex. There are several violent scenes, but the violence in them is muted and, like the violence in a Flannery O'Connor story, it is essential to the narrative. Though it may not make a lot of money, the film is quite remarkable and thought provoking, a majestic visual tone poem that makes one think of films from another era like "High Noon" and "Shane." The theme of the film is directly related to the parables of the "Kingdom of Heaven" about which Jesus speaks so powerfully in the Gospel of Matthew. We heard these parables often on Sundays during the summer.

All of the main characters in "Road to Perdition" are Catholics. They go to Mass and Communion on Sundays. They pray, "Bless us O Lord" before their meals. They have crucifixes and images of the Blessed Mother in their homes. But they are also members of a mob of cold-blooded murderers. In a key scene set in a church basement after Mass and Communion, Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) tells mob boss John Rooney (Paul Newman), "I'm going to kill your son, Connor, because he murdered my wife and son." Rooney replies nonchalantly, "But we're all murderers here! The only thing that is certain is that none of us is going to heaven." They are not going to heaven because they are all on the "road to perdition" (another word for hell). They are literally "lost" in their sinfulness and headed in the opposite direction of the Kingdom of Heaven. The director, Sam Mendes, underscores this with scenes of torrential rain, a potent symbol of the baptismal commitments the protagonists have abandoned and the reality of their "paradise lost."

During the lazy days of summer many people want movies that are light, escapist fare. Some may even want Sunday homilies that are equally superficial. This makes it possible to hear Jesus' many references to the Kingdom of Heaven without ever asking what does He mean. What is He talking about? What is the Kingdom of Heaven? Is the Kingdom of Heaven the Catholic Church? No, it is not. Is it all of the Christian churches working together to spread the gospel? No, it is not. Is it all people of good will who are working for peace and justice in our world, no matter what their religious beliefs may be? No, it is not. What, then, is the Kingdom? Those readers who have studied the gospels closely are aware of a somewhat surprising fact. Though Jesus speaks of the coming Kingdom or the "reign of God" very often, He never says what it is. Instead, He says that the Kingdom is "in your midst," "within you," and "before you." He then gives us a variety of images and metaphors to convey what the Kingdom is *like*, but never *what it is*. It is *like* seeds of wheat that are almost destroyed by the weeds planted by enemies, *like* a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large bush, *like* a small amount of yeast that makes the entire loaf of bread rise, *like* a treasure or a pearl of great value for which one would pay the highest price.

None of these parabolic images tell us what the Kingdom is. They only suggest how valuable it is and its power to grow from something small to something very large. Many scripture scholars and theologians have suggested that from the

context of the entire gospel narrative it is evident that the kingdom is ultimately a mystery. It is the mystery of the powerful work of God, a divine "inbreak" into human history in the life, teachings, deeds, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that will ultimately transform human history and the whole world when Christ comes again in glory at the end of time. When we pray in the "Our Father" "thy Kingdom come," we are acknowledging that the kingdom is essentially God's work and not our own. And while the Church is not itself the Kingdom, the Church and all of her members are called to be a sign of God's coming Kingdom, the first fruits of the Kingdom.

Every Christian, therefore, is called to live a life of faith, hope, and love every day in order to be a credible sign of this Kingdom. It is only by doing this amid the sorrows, joys, frustrations, and dreams of everyday life that we avoid the road to perdition.

Several events in this past year have made us aware of the need for all of us not to assume that we or others are living lives that place our feet on the road to the Kingdom. Indeed, the horrific nature of the events have suggested some may be going in the opposite direction, down the road to perdition.

The first and most shocking of these was the terrible events of one year ago, Sept. 11, when four U.S. airplanes were hijacked and turned into human missiles of destruction, killing over 3,000 people in the inferno of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in a field in Pennsylvania. This unspeakable horror caused an unending nightmare of sorrow for thousands, plunged the nation into shock and led to the war in Afghanistan and an ongoing "war against terrorism." This in turn exacerbated the differences between Islam and Christianity and seemingly intensified the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In the midst of the smoke, fire, devastation, fear and tears, many Americans said that their lives had been changed forever. Now, a year later, we might ask ourselves, have we changed our lives in such a way as to avoid the road to perdition and follow the road to the Kingdom of Heaven.

A second event was the widespread allegations of corruption and fraud at the highest levels of major corporations like Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen that not only caused the stock market to plunge to all-time lows but also shattered the confidence of investors and made those who are arrested and punished for relatively small time street crime wonder out loud about "white collar" criminals walking away with millions. This has reminded us all of the importance of ethical standards in the world of big business (especially Christians in business) if we are to stay on the right road.

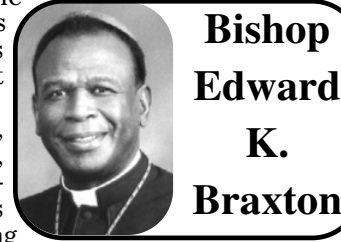
A third event was the rash of news accounts of children being abducted from their homes, abused and murdered. Each account of anxious and then grieving parents was more painful than the one before it. Neighborhoods living in fear and children asking why are these men doing such terrible things. This wanton destruction of the lives of the innocent and the young directly contradicts Christ's words, "Al-

low the little children to come unto me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Perhaps the event that was most immediate to us as Catholics was the allegations, first from the Archdiocese of Boston, and then from dioceses around the country, that perhaps as many as 250 of the nearly 50,000 priests in this country have sexually abused small children and minors. Then came allegations that some priests who were known to have abused children were transferred from parish to parish by their bishops, allowing them to harm yet more innocent young people. Gradually, Catholic people began to realize that they knew, liked and respected some of the offending priests. This forced the realization that these were not always bad priests doing bad things; but in many cases it was good priests doing bad things. It was further revealed that millions of dollars contributed by the faithful for the spread of the gospel might have been spent to compensate the alleged abuse victims. These terrible events and the media coverage of them caused great turmoil in the hearts of Catholics, driving the Church in the United States into the greatest crisis in our history. Exaggerated headlines like, "Can the Catholic Church be saved?" made many people compare the Church to corrupt secular corporations concerned more about image and profits than the welfare of vulnerable children entrusted into the Church's care. Could some members of the Church itself, called to be a tangible manifestation that God's Kingdom is at hand, be leading others on the road to perdition?

Pope John Paul II's summer pastoral visit to America (Toronto, Guatemala and Mexico) brought into our midst one who called himself the "old Pope." His frail, weakened condition was evident in every painful step he took and every hesitant word he uttered. But his heart was full of love for the millions who welcomed him and his words urged us all to stay on the road to the Kingdom. Referring to Sept. 11, he told the participants in World Youth Day, "Last year we saw with dramatic clarity the tragic face of human malice. We saw what happens when hatred, sin and death take command. To believe in Christ means rejecting the lure of sin no matter how attractive it may be." Speaking of the priests who have abused children he said, "Do not let the shame and sorrow caused by the weakness of a few, blind you to the great good done by the majority of priests each day. Stay close to the Church. Stay close to Christ!" As he canonized Mexico's first indigenous saint, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatzain, he reminded the vast throngs of their radical Christian identity. "Mexico, always faithful."

Most of the scenes in "Road to Perdition" are filmed in dark shades of gray and black, evoking Depression-era paintings like the bare, desolate canvases of Edward Hopper. By contrast, the final scene shows Michael Sullivan's son frolicking in the sunshine on a beach. Caught between colliding worlds (perdition and redemption), he has rejected his father's violence and set his feet on the road to heaven, at least heaven on earth. Today is a very good day to ask yourself down what road you are traveling.



**Bishop  
Edward  
K.  
Braxton**



## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times."

That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount.

Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt.

At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full."

Moved with compassion the master of that servant

let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants

who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized one of his fellow servants and started to choke him, demanding,

"Pay back what you owe."

Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him,

"Be patient with me, and I will pay you back."

But he refused.

Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison

until he paid back the debt.

Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened,

they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master

and reported the whole affair.

His master summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant!

I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.

Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant,

as I had pity on you?"

Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers

until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you,

unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

Matthew 18:21-35

## National poll reveals what it means to be poor in the U.S.

WASHINGTON—"The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) released the results of its latest "Poverty Pulse" Survey this one providing a unique glimpse into the attitudes of poor Americans about the state of poverty in this country on September 3, 2002.

Working directly with community-based, self-help organizations across the country that are initiated and led by low-income individuals, CCHD was able to get surveys into the hands of poor people "a group that is traditionally hard to reach through standard mail, phone or online survey methods."

The goal of the survey was to find out how the poor see poverty today and what solutions they feel would help them get out of poverty. The survey results reveal that for many, being poor is as much an emotional hardship as a lack of having material goods.

When asked, "What does it mean to be poor in the United States?" most survey respondents noted not having a home or adequate housing, and not enough money to meet their basic needs. However, many also described poverty in terms of how they feel. They cited being poor in the United States as depressing, degrading, being looked down on, ignored, or feeling hopeless, lonely and powerless.

According to Father Robert Vitillo, Executive Director of CCHD, poverty affects a significant number of people. "Over 34 million Americans live at the poverty level " and that crosses all races, religions and family types," he said. "In fact, one in six children in this country lives below the poverty level. These survey results will help us better understand what it means to be poor in America and identify ways that we as a society can really help," Father Vitillo stated.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) considers the poverty threshold for a family of four

to be \$17,650. Other studies have shown that Americans believe it takes closer to \$35,000 annually to adequately house, clothe and feed a family of four.

This CCHD "Poverty Pulse" survey included 271 individuals who fell under the poverty threshold as defined by HHS, but also included an additional 128 who could be considered low-income (e.g., family of four with less than \$27,340) for a total sample of 399. Surveys were offered in Spanish and English to get a representative view of the population.

The survey revealed that poverty and many of its related outcomes are the foremost concerns of poor Americans. When asked "What do you feel is the biggest problem facing society in the U.S. today?" respondents noted unemployment, discrimination and poverty as their three "top of mind" concerns. In addition, the related issues of lack of education, affordable housing, health care, crime and drug/alcohol addiction were mentioned often as concerns of the poor.

Most respondents (73 percent) cited problems with education as a key cause of poverty. Specific problems mentioned included lack of access to education, or not understanding its importance, as well as problems with the educational system itself. However, lack of a living wage or employment opportunities, unjust social policies, and racial/ethnic discrimination were also cited by many as causes for poverty.

When asked, "What is the best way to help permanently put an end to poverty?" the top three answers were: having more community-based organizations to help the poor directly (38 percent); providing government assistance to the poor (19 percent); and giving money to organizations that help the poor (17 percent).

Respondents were also asked if the events of September 11, 2001 had affected

them and, if so, how. More than three-quarters of the poor Americans surveyed said they had experienced hardship since September 11. In addition to money problems, many lost their jobs or could not find work. Physical and mental health problems, racism and prejudice were mentioned as hardships too. In addition, one in ten had immigration problems and another one in ten had problems with the law.

In a follow-up question, those surveyed were asked if they felt people were more willing to help those living in poverty since September 11. Of the poor responding, only about a quarter said people were more willing to help, versus a third who said they felt people were less willing. Reasons suggested for this by some respondents included funding cuts because of the economy, and monies going to help those directly affected by September 11, rather than to everyone in need.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is one of the largest private funders of self-help programs initiated and led by poor people in the U.S. Established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, CCHD works toward the elimination of poverty and injustice in America. Since its founding, CCHD has supported more than 4,000 programs nationwide that know no racial or religious boundaries " projects that help create jobs, improve neighborhoods and allow people to find a way out of poverty, not just for a day but for a lifetime.

For additional information contact Barbara Stephenson, 202-541-3364, [bstephenson@uscceb.org](mailto:bstephenson@uscceb.org), Michelle Agee, 410-626-0805, [magee@crosbymarketing.com](mailto:magee@crosbymarketing.com)

More information about poverty in America can be found at [www.povertyusa.org](http://www.povertyusa.org) or by calling CCHD at (800) 946-4243.

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