

In swaddling accessibility
By Bishop Paul V. Marshall
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This is Bishop Paul Marshall's December column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first (occasionally, the second) Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 100 columns have been published over the past ten years.

It is the Devil who wears Prada. At least figuratively. It's important at times to remember that.

Each year I find a way to say that Jesus did not ever, even once, *identify with* the poor. He *was* poor. Joseph the carpenter earned less than what it cost to maintain an urban slave. Jesus would point out that he himself had "nowhere to lay his head."

Christians, with that in mind, do not look at the Christmas manger and think of God's identifying with the human condition: they believe that, in Christ, God enters the world and shares our lot.

Jesus' choice to remain materially powerless for all of his life meant that nobody would fear to approach him because they had no power or did not dress right. And those who did wear high fashion felt no competition with him and also approached freely. His clout came from the authority within him.

A Messiah on Medicaid presents good news and a challenge.

The good news is that nobody needs to fear that life's circumstances put them outside of God's concern and acceptance.

Poverty is not a mark of God's disfavor, as anyone who reads the Bible knows. Christian thinkers, most notably Roman Catholic thinkers in the last century, spoke in fact of God's bias in favor of those at the edges of life.

Those of us who are comfortable enough materially can also feel rejected or marginalized – just ask a chronically ill or a newly unemployed person or sit with a grieving person who feels nobody cares. The message of Christmas, that "God is with us," is most compelling when we feel abandoned.

The Christmas challenge to Christians individually and in our organized life is to ask whether we are as accessible as was Jesus to those most in need.

I live in Pennsylvania's "Christmas City," and find it painfully ironic to contemplate how many powerful, name-brand, churches have left the inner city here and in neighboring

towns for sprawling suburban campuses.

They are happy to support charitable work in the city, quite generously at times, but the welcoming, available presence is just gone from the neighborhoods where it is needed most. I know the marketing concerns (and the overwhelming importance of parking) that can motivate abandoning the cities, but do wonder if churches who leave for the wide-open spaces consider conscientiously the vacuum they create.

Even to those churches who have elected to stay where the poor increasingly are, Christmas presents a challenge that brings me back to the title of Meryl Streep's delightful film, *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Swaddling clothes are just rags. My strong personal preference is to show respect for people and for the sacred by dressing up. I have also come to realize in the last decade how the understandable desire that I and many others have to look our best when worshipping God may form a barrier to others' participation. I even have a few horror stories to share of people being made to feel unwelcome.

There may be mission potential in people with my sensitivities democratizing our level of dress-up for religious gatherings, just to make it clear that all are indeed welcome. Are they just as welcome at worship as they are at the church's food pantry or thrift shop?

The first guests at Jesus' birth were the poor – farm hands tending sheep on the night shift. Would they be truly welcome to worship at the manger scene in your church, in mine? How we answer may tell the world what we think is going on at Christmas.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]