

Gay Power confronts Gary Bauer

by Thom Saffold

When one of the Religious Right's heaviest hitters gave a speech in Livonia recently, a large crowd rallied outside to protest his organization's anti-homosexual statements and activities. The peaceful gathering was, in turn, watched over by 75 police and SWAT officers, dressed in riot gear.

About 200 gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people and their supporters rallied at 6 p.m. on October 22 in front of the Burton Manor, where Gary Bauer spoke before a meeting of Livingston County Right to Life. Bauer heads the Family Research Council, one of the most bigoted and virulent anti-gay organizations within right-wing Christianity.

The protesters gathered in memory of Matthew Shepard, the gay 21-year old college student fatally beaten in Wyoming; Shepard died days later on October 12. Signs reading "Good Night Sweet Prince" over Shepard's picture were prominent. Placards proclaiming "Silence = death," "Report hate crimes," "Civil Rights does not equal special treatment," "Queers! Get off your asses!" and "Killing is not a family value. Family Research Council: Stay away from my family" were held by people representing a wide range of ages, classes and sexual orientation. High schoolers in the latest Gothic chic stood easily with middle-aged

people in business attire and with elderly people.

Jeff Montgomery of the Triangle Foundation and leaders of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), the Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project and other support and advocacy groups mourned Shepard and other victims of anti-homosexual bigotry, and called for an end to such bigotry and suffering.

"Given the fact that he was beaten and tortured, then tied to a fence post and left to die," observed one speaker, "Matthew Shepard was crucified that night. Matthew, like so many others, died for our sins."

In chilling counterpoint to the peaceful rally, at least 75 police, most dressed in black riot gear, gas masks slung over their thighs, encircled the gathering. The Livonia Mobile Command Center police van was parked in the Manor's parking lot, along with a black SWAT team van. Police on the roof of the Burton Manor constantly videotaped the rally participants.

Many in the crowd expressed bitterness that police and governmental officials obviously considered the protesters as a potential enemy and threat to public safety. "We're not the people spreading hate speech," complained one rally member; "Gary Bauer is. If they want to intimidate somebody, let 'em stake HIM out." Another asked, "Who in our government felt that a bunch of people, who are gathering peacefully and out of a sense of mourning, are any more a potential danger than a Police Benevolent Association meeting?"

The rally ended with a solemn candle-lighting ritual and singing. The police videotape squad captured the scene as the last candle flickered and the crowd dispersed. ☑

How To Celebrate Christmas

by Thom Saffold

Call me a Bah Humbug, but I detest Christmas more and more each year.

In part it's the commercialization of the season that I can't abide. Any year now, I expect to see store signs announcing "In honor of Christ's birth we are open on Christmas." That would sum up our society's attitude pretty well; the "meaning of Christmas" is money, profits, selling and buying, buying, buying. The malls are so crowded with shoppers they can hardly move. Exhaust fumes are the chief fragrance in the air, and everybody is as bundled up against any sense of what all the fuss is really about as they are against the windchill factor.

In the history of religion, there has never been a holy day more completely exploited and prostituted than Christmas. Every aspect of its religious observance has been high-jacked by our consumer society and used to sell its products. Images of the Nativity, Advent candles, and other religious symbols are used to advertise everything from cars to razor blades to pornography. Sacred carols are used as background music and to shill customers. Almost every network TV program concocts a Christmas storyline, no matter how forced and egregious.

What depresses and angers me most, however, is the way churches have allowed the true meaning of Christmas to be lost. Churches prattle on about the baby born in a Bethlehem manger, collect money and goods as charity, but the main focus is merely to escape for a day the inhumanity of the world by creating a holiday of fuzzy family feelings and once-a-year kindnesses, even if these are inauthentic.

The true Christmas story is deeply political. It is also a call to active subversion and revolution.

The Christmas story is about Palestinian peasants living under political oppression, who were homeless the night their baby was born and had to take refuge in a stable. The story begins with the young mother-to-be uttering a remarkable vision in which "[God] upsets the mighty and throws them down from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly from the dust; [God] feeds the famished with good food and sends the rich away with empty bellies..." It is clear that all this is the mission of her son, Jesus. Mary's boy grows up and says that his objective is "to preach good news to the poor...to proclaim release to those in prison, ...to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

That bit about "the acceptable year of the Lord," by the way, refers to a plan in which every fiftieth year, all debts were to be canceled, wealth redistributed, all lands returned to the original owners, and workers enjoyed a full year off with pay.

Time and again in the stories about Jesus, he identifies himself with the poor and oppressed and condemns the rich and powerful for acting in unjust ways. He proclaimed "the Kingdom of

God," but not as some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-or-end-of-the-world apocalyptic vision. Jesus was dead serious about overthrowing government and systems based on exploitation, greed and violence, and creating a world where everyone would enjoy not just life, but "life in all its abundance based on freedom, justice and shared wealth."

For such subversive statements and activities, Jesus was executed as the political revolutionary he was.

The radically political nature of Jesus' life and teaching has been "spiritualized" into irrelevance by most churches, particularly in the United States, but is very apparent to people in Third World nations looking for justice and hope.

In Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel of Solentiname*, the Sandinista leader recounts a discussion of Militant Mary's vision with women in the fishing village of Solentiname, Nicaragua.

I asked what they thought Herod would have said if he had known that a woman of the people had sung that God had pulled down the mighty and raised up the humble, filled the hungry with good things and left the rich with nothing. Natalia laughed and said, 'He'd say she was crazy.' Rosita: 'That she was a communist.' Laureano: 'The point isn't that they would just SAY the Virgin was a communist. She WAS a communist.'

Jesus once said that anyone that wanted to follow him had to be willing to pick up a cross every day. The cross was the instrument of crucifixion, the punishment reserved by Imperator Rome for people who would dare to criticize and rebel against it. By challenging his followers to risk execution each day as a political revolutionary, Jesus was clearly inviting them to work for justice and against injustice not as a safe hobby behind stained glass windows, but as an active willingness to go to any lengths for the common good.

Instead, so-called Christians have let Jesus' challenge become stale words. The Apostle Paul proclaimed, "The Christ you have to deal with is not a weak person outside you, but a tremendous power inside you." Churches have turned this around, ignoring our part in the world's salvation, and treating Jesus like an impotent deity "out there, somewhere."

Most churches have sat dumbly by as the Republican Right attacks the poor, immigrant affirmative action and civil rights, yet there is a sense of outrage and no action from our people. As poverty rips the spirits of people in our nation and in so many others, Christians muster a few dolorous prayers and collect pittances for charity, but mostly sit in passive complicity. We continue to slaughter the innocents, but most Christians, long inured from the radical message and mission of Christ, find it too inconvenient even to speculate on any responsibility we might have to create peace by ending war.

In a world racked with killing and hatred, despair and nihilism, the angels pray again for "peace on earth and good will among all people." When churches allow Christ to govern them and imbue them with a ravenous thirst for justice, and lose the shackles of sentimentality, Christmas will be worth celebrating and the angelic wish will become a reality. ☑

