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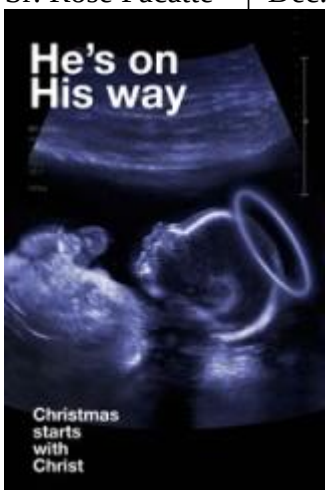
By way of the heart

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Dec. 20, 2010



I saw on Facebook in November that earlier this year a U.K. organization called ChurchAds launched a Christmas billboard and advertising campaign called ?Christmas starts with Christ,? using an image of an ultrasound of a baby in utero with a halo circling the child?s head.

?It is an incredible piece of naivety on their part,? said Terry Sanderson, director of the National Secular Society. ?If they are hoping to stop the secular drift away from Christmas as a Christian festival, they risk doing the opposite. It gives the impression that it was politically motivated, that they are trying to put across some sort of subliminal message. The image is too specifically associated with pro-lifers to be seen in a benign context. They should go back to angels and cribs.?

All I see in the essence of this image is the ultrasound of a baby in the womb, a living child. In the context of Christmas, we know the image represents Jesus, the Word made flesh, who came to redeem us all. Yet Sanderson is also correct -- the image makes a political statement because it signifies the sacredness of life in the womb, a belief that many citizens respect, a belief that divides citizens.

This image is brilliant because it speaks to anyone who takes the time to look. It is at once religious, secular, political, spiritual -- and humorous.

When photos of aborted fetuses appear on Facebook, I delete them. They do not invite me in because someone is shoving them in my face. The tactic is so off-putting. It?s not an effective pedagogy for attracting people to listen. While some people may respond to these kinds of images, I believe that the sight of an ultrasound of a baby soon to be born has a gentling effect on people.

Our pro-life message, from conception to natural death, needs to take people by way of the heart.

In television and film stories that include pregnancy, the first ultrasound is always important. The parents know the baby is alive and coming and that their lives will change. Often the narrative turns on this significant moment. As media stories normalize so many behaviors that challenge our values, I am grateful for those that

support them.

On the eve of Christmas, I think of the 2007 film ?Juno.? Ellen Page plays a teen who gets pregnant and considers an abortion. She is unconvinced by the pro-lifer carrying a sign outside an abortion clinic but is convinced to have her baby when she sees the cold, uninviting waiting room and the receptionist?s everyday attitude toward what Juno knows is the termination of a life. The scene of Juno, her friend and stepmother celebrating with joy the image of the baby in the ultrasound is as heartwarming and life-affirming as a movie can be.

Another film that uses the ultrasound quite well is 2004?s ?Maria Full of Grace.? A young Colombian woman named Maria Alvarez (Catalina Sandino Moreno) becomes a drug mule to help her family survive. She swallows small bags of cocaine before leaving and then expels them once she arrives in New York. The bags burst in some of the girls and they die. At the end of one trip to New York, Maria realizes she is unwell and goes to a clinic. The doctor tells her she is pregnant. When Maria sees the ultrasound, she chooses her baby?s life over carrying drugs, even though this earns money. It is a risky decision because drug lords do not forgive; she disappears into the city and the unknown, her child secure in her womb.

When I first saw this poster, I clicked on it to enlarge it -- and began to smile. The poster would have been even more powerful without any words; a sprig of holly in the corner would have done it.

This poster by ChurchAds is a Christmas greeting pregnant with meaning.

It is totally cool to think of Mary having an ultrasound.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

This week, *NCR* is posting a series of Christmas reflections. Look for these in the coming days:

- By way of the heart [1], by Sr. Rose Pacatte
- Christmas in Beijing [2], by Edmund Chia and Gemma Cruz
- Maryknoll missioner shares stories of 2010 in Bangladesh [3], by Maryknoll Fr. Bob McCahill
- The Christmas Chariot [4] by Bill Zalot
- Sovereign over even the darkest corners [5], by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

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