

Christmas Greetings

Cite Plein, C-142
Gambetta, Oran
Algeria
December 7, 1977

*The Muslim feast
of sacrifice—
(Abraham's sacrifice)*

Dear Friends:

We are already getting a few Christmas cards and have been receiving other letters as well. Thanks to all of you for your continuing interest, friendship and prayers. As you will quickly see, the bulk of the following letter was begun by Carol some time ago. That spontaneous rough draft suffered the side-tracking so common to the best laid plans of mice and men...and missionaries...and Butlers!

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving and I baked pumpkin pies this morning to make the occasion for our family. The pies are really squash pies because we don't have pumpkin here; but disguised in the pie, the squash passes unnoticed in the eating. We won't have turkey, either, because they have to be ordered ahead and cost around \$4.00 a pound. We'll have chicken, which is only about \$2.00 a pound. We usually eat horse meat since it is only \$1.75 a pound without bones (or head or feet on innards as chicken has when weighed here). Beef and lamb usually sell for approximately \$4.00-4.50 a pound.

The day before yesterday was one of the biggest Muslim celebrations of the year. It was the "Festival of Sacrifice" commemorating the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son and God's intervening to supply a sheep. Muslim families who can afford it (and some who can't) sacrifice a sheep. Monday, as I sat grading university English tests by our 5th-story window, I had a ring-side seat for the slaughter. It took place at the edge of the parking lot in front of the apartment building. There must have been at least 20 sheep killed.

It is a festive occasion. At dawn one can feel the aura of excitement--children laughing and running around and waiting expectantly. By 9 a.m. the men and the sheep begin to appear. The sheep have been kept overnight (or even up to a week) on the apartment balconies. The sheep is led (or pulled--or pushed--or all three) to the fatal spot. Then its feet are tied and it is laid on the blacktop. Sometimes a boy will sit on it to hold it still. Children, mostly boys, stand around while its throat is slit. The women and older girls watch from the balconies. When the sheep has finished bleeding to death, its head is cut off and carried to the apartment, usually by one of the boys. There the women already have a small fire going on the balcony. It will not serve to roast the head, however, as might be done on other occasions. It will serve a bit later for roasting liver, kidneys, etc. wrapped in strips of fat. As for the head, it will be salted, spiced and boiled or steamed after the brains have been removed. Head, brains and organs will be eaten the first day. The intestines serve for sausages and the stomach serves to hold other bits of meat prepared as a special dish. Nothing will be wasted.

Back to the headless sheep--it is hung to one of the four small trees by the parking lot.. Some kind of pump is commonly used to blow air between the skin and the flesh and the animal is then skinned in rather short order. Again it's usually a boy who is sent off as carrier, this time with the sheepskin; and one by one these skins begin to appear hanging over balcony railings to dry. In most cases, the remaining carcass is covered with a cloth and left hanging for awhile. Eventually it, too, is carried up to the apartment. By mid-morning, the odor of roasting meat from the first sheep killed could be enjoyed by anyone in the vicinity. The last sheep wasn't entirely dispatched until around 1 p.m. The parking lot was a bloody mess for the rest of the day.

I couldn't help wondering, as I watched, what all this meant to those involved. For one thing, I know it means meat to eat for practically everyone--meat in quantities they see no other time of the year. For a few days, most of the people will enjoy an abundance

of or meat. The rest of the year most have very little of it; they can't afford it. (Few Muslims here eat the cheaper horse meat because, while it isn't forbidden by Islam, it is judged reprehensible by the religious leaders.) For this holiday, however, working class people and ordinary office employees may spend a whole month's salary to have their own sheep. Those who can't buy a sheep for the immediate family will try to join with other relatives to share a sheep, imitating the pattern of one animal sacrifice for the extended family still living together in less urban and modernized settings. Some simply have to settle for buying a small amount of meat for the occasion. Those too poor to buy any at all receive some from neighbors or at the mosque. In fact, part of the religious significance of the occasion is this sharing with the poor. Hence everyone should be able to enjoy some meat on this holiday, and I expect they look forward to their roast mutton much as we look forward to our sumptuous Thanksgiving dinners--except that we'll have equally sumptuous dinners on other occasions throughout the year.

I likewise suppose that the deeper levels of religious significance are lost on about as many for both celebrations. On the other hand, there is a much more general religious consciousness here at a surface level. Islam is more than a religion as we usually use that term. It is also a culture, a way of life. Hence Muslims are very conscious of the fact that they kill the sheep because they are Muslims, even if they never go to the mosque. They likewise know they are performing the sacrifice the same day as those who have gone on pilgrimage to Mecca and as all other Muslims around the world.

I also wonder what it does to children to have one of their most exciting celebrations of the year begin with watching the relatively slow death of an innocent animal--a death inflicted by their own father in many cases. What message does it give them? Our children look forward with the same excitement to Christmas--and getting material gifts for themselves. I wonder what message that gives to our children? In both cases, I fear, if the religious message is not carefully taught, the message that is learned risks being just the opposite of the one intended. Instead of Abraham's faith and a respect for life (God did not want Abraham to kill his son), children may see only the taking of life. Instead of the message of God's giving ~~to~~ himself to the world, children may see only the getting of what they want.

Our Christmas-New Year's prayer for all of you is that the deepest meaning of Christmas may well up in your hearts and overflow into the lives of all about you until all receiving produces spontaneous thanksgiving and sharing and until justice for others becomes as consuming a passion as the defense of our own rights and interests. We do apologize for not getting this message written earlier, but it is a timeless one. After all, the love that came down at Christmas is the same love that encompasses all eternity.

We'd like to write so much more! We are grateful, however, that a great deal has already been written for us. We urgently recommend that you check the following brief, illustrated articles if at all possible and consider them as additional letters from us! They are in United Methodist publications that should be available in every parish.

response, January 1972, beginning on page 4
New World Outlook, September 1973, beginning on page 20
" " " January 1974, " " " 15
" " " February 1974, " " " 28
" " " July-August 1977, " " " 13

Some have asked about John's scoliosis. He continues to wear his Milwaukee brace, perform twice-daily exercises...and to grow, having now crashed the 6-ft. mark. He has returned to Lyon twice (February and August) and the doctor reports significant improvement.

Once again thanks for your cards, letters and continuing concern.

Fraternally yours,

The BUTLERS--Dave, Carol,
Paul (17), John (15), Mark (13)
and Jimmy (approaching 12)