THE BEST AND THE WORST OF TIMES

One of our dilemmas is that our knowledge is about the past, but our decisions are about the future. We learn from the past, but how helpful is history in the midst of the radical change we are experiencing. We have few precedents to guide us through these kaleidoscopic times. So much has happened: two global wars, nuclear fission, population explosion, cybernetics, Freud, Stravinsky, Picasso, Ionesco, moon landings, Telstar, euthanasia, wonder drugs, heart transplants, computers, credit cards, robots, ethnic revolutions, the Beatles, and an assassinated President. These, along with a list of other events from our recent past, tend to convey not only a sense of change, but of loss—the sound of a door shutting to the past.

To say we are caught between a past that is much different from the present, and a future that we know will be immeasurably different from both—is commonplace. We are slowly realizing, however, that one age has ended, but the new one has not yet begun.

Charles Dickens wrote:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Though written in 1859, these lines somewhat prophetically, if not disturbingly, describe the contemporary situation. A large amount of uncertainty exists, especially about the future, and that’s where you and I will spend the rest of our lives.

Those who wrote for this issue of the Review recognize the “best” and the “worst,” the “wisdom” and the “foolishness,” the “hope” and the “despair” of the times. They, however, carry us further by allowing us to view the future through their eyes. Each seems to suggest that we will have a future, but that we must take charge of it today. We are to participate in our future even now, building it with whatever materials we possess, and move into it with hope. Along with hope we are reminded to carry with us honesty, responsibility, humility and love whose potential has yet to be fully appropriated in any society.

For better or for worse the future is pressing upon us. The decisions we must make are not easy ones. By maintaining our trust in God and each other, by cherishing the vision of what we are capable of becoming and to cherish the development of the