

America

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Christmas in America

THE EDITORS • KERRY WEBER • JON M. SWEENEY



**ALSO: IS IMMIGRATION
CLOSER TO REFORM?**

OF MANY THINGS

The hottest Christmas gift of 1969, for many people, wasn't the Slinky, the Nerf Ball or even Avon's cameo soap on a rope; it was "Abbey Road," the last album recorded by The Beatles. Released in the United States the previous October, the album had spent 11 weeks at number one before being displaced by "Let It Be," by The Rolling Stones. By the third week in December, though, Christmas shoppers had once again made "Abbey Road" the top-selling album in America. The album's cover, a photograph of the group at a zebra crossing in London, has become a nearly universally recognized icon of the Fab Four and their era.

I can assure you that "Abbey Road" was not on my mind when I picked the photograph for this week's cover. In fact, it was a couple of days before I even noticed the similarity; I was just looking for something unconventional. You should know that the cover photo is not intentionally evocative of the Beatles' album cover, nor has it been staged in any way. The shepherds and the Magi are actors, part of a live-human nativity scene that was organized outside the U.S. Supreme Court building this month. A Christian group had organized the event to demonstrate that such displays are protected by the First Amendment.

That said, you won't find anything in this issue of *America* about that important yet impossibly tedious constitutional debate. Strangely enough, the contents of this Christmas issue have more in common with "Abbey Road." Like many, Richie Unterberger, the pop music critic and historian, regards "Abbey Road" as one of the greatest albums of all time. The work was actually a miracle of sorts. By 1969 Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr were barely on speaking terms and rarely worked together. At times, they were even recording their musical parts separately. Yet "Abbey Road," says

Unterberger, is the group's "most tightly constructed" work and contains "some of their most intricate melodies, harmonies, and instrumental arrangements."

So a group, one plagued by scandal, internal conflict, divergent personalities, some mutual contempt and even a bit of greed, managed in "one of their most unified efforts" to effect a great artistic triumph. Sound familiar? It should; it could describe the experience of the American church in 2012. In spite of everything—the partisan feuds, the lingering effects of scandal, the crisis of belief—the church got on with her work; the work of evangelizing, the work of healing, the work of justice. Amid all the in-fighting and the acrimony, new hearts were won for Christ, souls were nourished, the hungry were fed, the naked were clothed, the sick were cared for. It was beautiful.

Still, the Lord calls us to more than unified action; he calls us to a union of hearts and minds as well. As our editorial puts it this week, "The one whose birth is celebrated at Christmas makes specific pleas for unity." It is not enough simply to work together, to respect one another; we must forgive; we must love one another. Please don't write the editors of *America* if that last bit strikes you as naïve; take it up with the Lord. He's the one who said it first. He's also the only one who can ultimately make it happen; the unity we seek begins and ends with the one who united himself to us. The unity we seek is unity in truth, the babe in Mary's arms, that tiny, fragile human body in which truth became incarnate.

As everyone knows, The Beatles broke up just a year after "Abbey Road." The church in the United States faces no such fate. Apart from the fact that there is much more hope than there is despair, we have the promise of the Incarnate One: "I will be with you always to the end of the age." Count that as our greatest gift this Christmas.

MATT MALONE, S.J.

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Cover: Actors dressed as shepherds and Wise Men walk past the U.S. Capitol after demonstrating outside the nearby Supreme Court in Washington, Dec. 5, 2012. Reuters/Jason Reed

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Clothing the Naked

The story of the good Samaritan played out recently in New York City, a Bible story familiar to anyone who works with the indigent. A New York City police officer saw a homeless man without shoes on a cold night. He bought him a pair of boots, a simple act of charity that was caught on camera. The police officer became a folk hero while the homeless man disappeared into the night. A week later he was found again, but without shoes. "Those shoes are hidden. They are worth a lot of money," he explained to *The New York Times*. "I could lose my life."

Acts of charity, however well meant, sometimes are not enough to help people in need. This is not a reason to abandon good works this Christmas season, but a reminder that charity is a demanding virtue, one that Christians should seek to practice every day. Charity calls us to establish bonds of solidarity with the needy and to address the causes of their need. Given the large number of homeless men and women, many of them afflicted with mental illness, the call of charity can seem like an impossible obligation. Yet if the journey begins with a personal encounter, it can grow into something deeper, and real change can ensue.

Here is the hard truth: It is not enough for a Christian to give a man a pair of shoes. He must also walk in them.

Fiscal Cliff Notes

As the nation tiptoes an inch or two closer to its much-hyped "fiscal cliff," it is hard to tell how seriously to take much of the performances from the Boehner and Obama camps as the final session of the 112th Congress winds down.

All the fiscal Kabuki theater in Washington may not lead, this year, to the long-sought grand compromise on sustainable federal spending, but it may get the nation to an agreement that could provide the foundation for a longer, presumably more sensible discussion on tax and spending reform and budget priorities in 2013. Then, as a primary signatory in the Circle of Protection, a social services advocacy coalition, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will continue its defense of domestic and international programs that support the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

Another development worth following is the viability of a plan to put the semiannual debt-ceiling follies out of our collective miseries. Periodically, after passing one of its gargantuan budgets, Congress, in a bout of politically expedi-

ent buyer's remorse, attempts to thwart itself by refusing to approve a hike in the national debt ceiling, a fungible limit on borrowing. This is political performance art that merely empowers a small group of deficit dead-enders in Congress while it offers the potential to gravely wound the credibility of the United States and throw global bond markets into turmoil. After Congress has ordered the meal, it cannot refuse to accept the check.

A Rockne Start?

An upset football victory by the University of Notre Dame over Army once led the famed sportswriter Grantland Rice to conjure up an image of the apocalypse to describe Notre Dame's backfield: "Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore their names are Famine, Pestilence, Destruction and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden." Named were Notre Dame's quarterback, right halfback, left halfback and fullback, respectively; and none of the four weighed more than 170 pounds. Nevertheless, they and the legendary coach Knute Rockne led Notre Dame to an undefeated season and a victory over Stanford in the 1925 Rose Bowl to win the national championship.

Dare one wonder if the harbingers of the Last Judgment ride for real this time around? As signs of the apocalypse go, recent weeks have ranked pretty high for Notre Dame fans. Notre Dame's football team is once again undefeated and is ranked No. 1 in the country going into January's Bowl Championship Series national championship game. Notre Dame has won its fair share of national championships in the past, of course (eight in all, or 11, or 13, depending on your point of view and how long you've been tailgating outside the stadium), but it's been 24 years since the Fighting Irish last finished on top; they went undefeated to win the 1988 crown.

That near quarter-century has been marked by periodic bursts of optimism amid a lot of embarrassment and disappointment, both on and off the field.

No more! On Jan. 7, 2013, the Fighting Irish will have a chance to go 13-0 and bring a title home to South Bend. One caveat: Notre Dame's opponent, Alabama, has won more national championships and is a nine- or ten-point favorite to win this year's title game. Which leads one to wonder if there is another biblical figure who might be more apt than the Four Horsemen this time around: David with his slingshot against the mighty Goliath.

A God Who Unites

Christmas celebrates God's overwhelming longing to be united with us. So much did God desire this that he became one of us, "pitching his tent among us," as the Gospel of John puts it (1:14). Yet unity seems a far-off goal not only in our country, but in our church.

Some could even argue that disunity is what God wants. "Do you think I have come to bring peace on earth?" asked Jesus. "No, I tell you, but division" (Lk 12:51). That provocative line seems to indicate that Jesus' message was not one of uniting but dividing. It could be used as an excuse for manifold divisions evident today. Jesus intended divisions, so is it worth working for unity?

If our answer to that last question is no, then we have misunderstood Christ's heartfelt desire for unity, which is expressed several times in the New Testament. In a fine new book, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, the German Scripture scholar Gerhard Lohfink unpacks that complicated utterance. "Jesus has come to unite the people under God's rule, and he has indeed brought many people together in this new condition," writes Father Lohfink. "He has bridged chasms. He has assembled tax collectors and Zealots, sinners and saints, poor and rich at one table. His colorfully mixed band of disciples is a sign of this gathering movement." The inevitable division, the author points out, comes only from opposition to Jesus' message, an opposition that may even break families apart. The time for decision, says Jesus, is now; and he expects division only inasmuch as some will fail to make the decision to join him in his mission. But in the end, it is unity with the Father and with one another that Jesus desires.

Heady stuff for Christmas time. But the theme of unity runs like a bright thread through the Advent and Christmas readings. John the Baptist sets aside his personal goals to unite himself with the one whose coming he has foretold. "He must increase and I must decrease" (Jn 3:30) is not only an expression of the Baptist's humility, but a call for his followers to join together and follow the Messiah.

At the annunciation, God unites in the most intimate way possible with humanity, divinizing our nature and humanizing his divinity. In the wake of the annunciation, Joseph, facing his initial doubts and what must have been fierce social pressure, cleaves to Mary, with whom he has been united by their betrothal. God does not desire Mary and Joseph to separate, but to cling together as one.

The infant Jesus himself is a physical sign of the union

of human and the divine. At his birth, revelation is united with the revealer; the Word is united with the flesh; and a divine desire—the indwelling of God—is united



with a most earthly occurrence—a woman giving birth.

During his years of public ministry, Jesus will gather people together. His work with the disciples is as a group. We are so familiar with the call of the first disciples that we forget that Jesus could just as easily have called only one person, say Peter, to help him with his ministry. But he does not. Jesus calls a group, for a variety of reasons.

First, he might have understood the unique talents that each person brought to the table. The tax collector Matthew brought a different set of gifts than the fisherman Peter or Mary, the woman of Magdala. Then, as now, the church needs everyone's skills, man and woman alike. Second, Jesus most likely grasped the need for human beings to be with one another; faith is not a solitary proposition. Third, Jesus may have recognized that he himself needed people; he craved friendship. And in what would have been an obvious sign, he selects 12 apostles. "What Jesus says now is that he is gathering Israel," writes Father Lohfink, "he is claiming to do precisely what God will do at the end of time: gather, sanctify and unite Israel."

The one whose birth is celebrated at Christmas makes specific pleas for unity during his lifetime, seeking to "gather together" people as, in one of the Bible's tenderest images, "a hen gathers her chicks" (Mt 23:37). "That they all may be one," Jesus says in John's Gospel (17:21), expressing the wishes of his Father, with whom he is united as one.

God the Father desires all to be drawn to him. The Prince of Peace desires an end to discord and violence. And the Spirit desires unity so ardently that at Pentecost he enlivens the disciples with the gift of tongues so that the Gospel will be heard not simply by one group of people but by all.

At the first Christmas, God became radically one with humanity. God continues to inflame the human heart with a deep desire for unity. Who does not wish for this? In our desires we hear echoes of God's longing for the world. The Christmas spirit, then, is more than the giving of gifts or being kind. It is a desire to do the hard work of reconciliation, a willingness to strive for concord, a readiness to cease partisanship and a fervent hope for union with one another, in the name of the one who united his life with our own.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

URBAN VIOLENCE

Chicago Catholics Challenged to Become ‘Lobbyists for Peace’



CHICAGO: Growing up under the gun

More than 200 children and adults gathered on a street corner on Chicago's South Side on Nov. 30 to pray for peace on their streets. Earlier that week, shots rang out at nearby St. Columbanus Church following the funeral of a reputed gang member. One man was killed and another injured in the shooting. Catholic and other Christian pastors organized the prayer service, march and concert because the man whose funeral the mourners were attending was a member of their community and was himself struck down violently.

Eleven more shootings occurred on the evening of Dec. 3 and into the next morning. So far in 2012, homicides in Chicago have risen to 480, a 21 percent increase from 2011's 398 homicides. If the trend continues, this year the city will likely exceed 500 homicides for the first time since 2008. In a metropolitan area

rocked by crime, Chicago-area Catholics are being challenged to respond.

The metro area's streak of violence, however, encompasses far more than the headline-grabbing homicide totals. From armed robberies and home invasions to child abuse and domestic assaults, violence in Chicago touches all races, ethnicities, socioeconomic groups and faiths, affecting all facets of community and family life. Catholics, many local faith leaders contend, should have a leading role in combating the grim realities of urban violence.

Earlier this year, the Rev. Michael Pfleger, pastor of St. Sabina Parish, was named the archdiocesan representative for newly developing anti-violence initiatives. He has consistently urged Chicago-area Catholics to be "lobbyists against violence."

"Among all the great gifts Jesus gave us, he chose to give us the gift of peace," Father Pfleger said. "Our responsibility is to share peace and lift it up."

Last October, in a steady rain, Carl Quebedeaux, C.M.F., marched a group of more than 200 people down the streets of Chicago's Southeast Side. Together, the group—predominantly parishioners from four South Side parishes—prayed for a more peaceful community, lit candles in memory of neighbors who had died as a result of violent acts and reflected on the individual and collective roles they might play in constructing peace.

The traveling group stopped at an intersection dubbed "Death Corner." There Father Quebedeaux, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, blessed the intersection and, borrowing a Native American tradition, offered prayers in four directions. The march then carried on, concluding with a Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, where participants made a

public pledge to create peaceful environments and protect the gift of life.

“It was an effort to join in prayer, to build community and to awaken the courage to resist violence in our communities and our homes,” Father Quebedeaux said. “There’s a tendency to grow numb and say, ‘Violence isn’t my problem,’ but this is something we’re all involved in.”

Father Pfleger, meanwhile, continues pushing for solutions that will curb violence and promote tolerance and respect. He has called for church-led workshops teaching conflict resolution, sponsored a petition calling for the banning of assault weapons and urged his fellow priests to preach about the need for Catholics to fill peacemaking roles.

“There’s an unraveling of society and we need to counteract this,” Father Pfleger said. “Peace has to be created—that’s our job as Catholics and Christians.”

ROMAN MISSAL

New Translation Receives Wide Acceptance

While it may do little to end disagreements among liturgists over recent changes to the Roman Missal, a survey conducted in September, nearly a year after controversial revisions of the English language Mass took effect, found that seven in 10 Catholics agree that the new translation of the Mass “is a good thing” (20 percent agree “strongly”). Nearly a quarter of the Catholics surveyed (23 percent) disagreed, however, and an additional 7 percent “strongly” disagree with the view that the changes were for the better.

Catholics who attend Mass weekly were the most likely to be satisfied with the new translation, according to a report prepared for the Catholic University of America by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Eighty-four percent said that the revised Mass was a “good thing.” Just over 60 percent of self-identified Catholics who rarely or never attend Mass, however, were not positive about the changes. The new survey also found that regular Mass attendance levels remained the same, compared with a similar study conducted in 2011. Both polls estimated that about a quarter of adult Catholics attend Mass weekly or more often. Last year’s survey reported that only one in four adult Catholics were aware of the then-impending changes to the English-language liturgy, which began to be used during Advent 2011. This is part of the reason why this year’s apparent level of general satisfaction is of interest.

“As far as I am aware this is the only ‘pre- and post-’ national data examining Catholic reactions to changes in the liturgy,” noted Mark M. Gray, research associate at CARA and director of CARA Catholic Polls in a posting on CARA’s blog 1964 (nineteen-sixty-four.blogspot.com). CARA found no statistically significant changes in the numbers of Americans who self-identify as Catholic in the last year that might indicate an identifiable exodus from the church that could be related to the changes in the liturgy.

Anthony Ruff, O.S.B., an associate professor of theology at Saint John’s University and School of Theology-

Seminary in Collegeville, Minn., reviewed the findings and said they suggested that “many people get used to ritual language and probably don’t pay real close attention to it.

“Most, not all, people accept the new texts,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean they’re any good; look at how well they accepted the bland texts we



OUT WITH THE OLD: St. Ann's in Fair Lawn, N.J.

used to have.” He added, “Liturgists are glad the transition went well, but they still know mediocre English when they see it, and they’ll continue to call for a better revision with a better consultative process.”

Four in 10 respondents said they had noticed the language of liturgical prayer had changed “to a small extent,” and 23 percent noticed changes to a moderate extent. Only 6 percent said they noticed changes to a great extent. Thirty-one percent said they did not notice any changes. Those who perceived less change were most likely to agree that the new translation is a good thing. Among those who felt the language was greatly changed, a majority disagree that the new translation is a good thing (65 percent). This group, however, made up only a small number of respondents (6 percent).

Protect Those Most at Risk

Representatives of faith-based development networks participating in a U.N. climate change conference in Doha, the capital of Qatar, urged governments to put aside national interests and protect the common good and especially people around the world who are most vulnerable to climate change. Emilie Johann of the international alliance of Catholic development agencies, Cidse, said the arrival of government ministers on Dec. 4 should add some political leadership to the negotiations. “So far, we have neither seen commitments to deeper emission cuts, nor money on the table to support communities which are most affected by increasingly extreme weather,” she said. Government officials should solidify agreements based on the outcomes of last year’s climate summit in Durban, South Africa. This year’s round of global climate talks, organized by the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, is part of preparations for a new global climate deal by 2015.

Typhoon Recovery

The destruction from Typhoon Bopha in portions of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, is worse than feared as rescue workers continued to discover bodies under knee-deep mud, said a Catholic Relief Services official who coordinates the agency’s storm response in early December. “It looks like a tsunami hit. It’s just complete and total destruction. Whole hillsides were washed away in flash floods,” said Joe Curry, the C.R.S. country representative. “The staff there have been through a half dozen typhoons and floods in the Philippines, and they say this is probably the worst,” Curry

NEWS BRIEFS

The U.S. Catholic Church will celebrate National **Vocation Awareness Week** from Jan. 13 through Jan. 19. + Starting on Dec. 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, **Pope Benedict XVI will be tweeting** in eight languages, including Arabic, from eight twitter accounts, including one for English speakers, @Pontifex. + Louisiana’s Gov. Bobby Jindal called it “wrong-headed” and a “travesty,” but a Louisiana judge ruled on Nov. 30 that a **school voucher program** passed by the state legislature last spring is unconstitutional. + The Vatican is offering a “**Pope app**,” which will provide alerts and links to top stories from Vatican news outlets, including live streaming of papal events and video feeds from the Vatican’s six webcams. + The British government on Dec. 3 called the Israeli government’s decision to build **3,000 illegal new homes** on Palestinian land a threat to “the viability of the two-state solution.” + DePaul University in Chicago has joined a consortium of more than 30 higher education institutions and organizations offering **emergency support to Syrian students and scholars** affected by the crisis in their country.



Tweet the Pope!

added. Typhoon Bopha made landfall on the east coast of Mindanao on Dec. 4, lashing the island with 120-mph winds and torrential rains. Curry said that a C.R.S. team reached New Bataan, a city of about 80,000 in the Compostela Valley, on Dec. 6 and found much of the community under mud and without electricity. At press time the death toll was more than 700 and expected to climb higher.

Irish Abortion Fight

An estimated crowd of 8,000 pro-life demonstrators braved bitterly cold weather to hold a candlelight vigil outside the Irish parliament on Dec. 4, calling on the government not to introduce abortion legislation. Speakers from a coalition of pro-life organizations asked Prime Minister Enda Kenny to keep a pledge made before

the 2011 general election not to introduce such legislation. The protest came a week after Kenny promised “swift action” on study group recommendations that the government introduce legislation to provide for abortion in limited circumstances. In practice, abortion is illegal in Ireland; but a 1992 Supreme Court judgment—known as the X case—found that there is a constitutional right to abortion where there is a substantial risk to the life of the mother, including the risk of suicide, up to birth. The issue has been much debated in Ireland following the death of Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year old dentist, on Oct. 28, after she was denied an abortion in an Irish hospital while suffering a miscarriage.

From CNS and other sources.



City Limits

I am a stranger in the city. A few years in Atlanta were the extent of my city-dwelling, and the entire time I always felt a vague sense of claustrophobia at being surrounded by the concrete moat of the I-285 beltway. Living since then on a farm in the rural Midwest, I am little used to the heavy traffic, crowds and sensory stimulation of urban centers.

It was with some trepidation, then, that I traveled recently to New York City to deliver a lecture. To my surprise, I was enthralled. I marveled at the amazing diversity of people and languages. I was dazzled by the city's architecture. I partook of its rich cultural offerings. I felt tangibly the pulse of vibrant energy for which New York is famous.

Experiencing New York made me reexamine my prejudices against urban life. The tide of history is clearly toward cities; the World Health Organization reports that half of the world's people already dwell in urban areas, and by mid-century that figure will be seven in 10. Beyond the lights and glitter, why have cities exerted such a gravitational pull on the human race, and with what costs and benefits?

Cities arose around 12,000 years ago in the Neolithic period. The advent of agriculture created a population boom and freed many from food production to become tradespeople and merchants, who could then build and occupy cities. More recently, the rise of mechanized agriculture and urban-centered industrial manufactur-

ing turned the tide of urban immigration into a torrent.

Beyond mere economics, I believe cities are born of two profound human needs: for the safety and security of human belonging and the equally powerful need to feel that we matter, that we have some significance in the vast cosmos. The story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 seems to indicate this: Underneath the builders' hubris, the more fundamental driver of tower-building and city-making was the fear of being "scattered all over the earth" into insecure aloneness and meaninglessness.

The irony for the inhabitants of Babel is that in the end, Yahweh "scattered them all over the earth" (v. 8) anyway. They brought upon themselves the very thing they built the city to avoid.

The same irony may be at play in modern cities as well. We hope for them to help us "dwell together as one" (Ps 133:1), but many city dwellers contend with alienation, isolation and crime. The high culture and intellectual life of cities are admirable pinnacles of human achievement, yet many urban residents struggle with cynicism and despair (just like rural people, I should note).

I returned from New York just two days before Superstorm Sandy turned it into a diluvian nightmare, sharpening this irony all the more and reminding New Yorkers of their vulnerable city's limits. As in the Babel story, many residents were scattered from their ruined homes and felt abandoned

by the city that was supposed to protect them.

When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, I suspect it was because he understood the goodness and beauty of humankind that the city represented, but he also saw how Jerusalem's inhabitants did not know "what makes for peace" (Lk 19:42). Creating cities has become part and parcel of human culture, but cities are a very

Why have cities exerted such a gravitational pull on the human race?

recent development in our evolutionary history, and we have yet to figure out how to build them in socially and ecologically sustainable ways. If the coming decades will bring both bigger cities and bigger storms, learning "what makes for peace" in the city seems especially crucial.

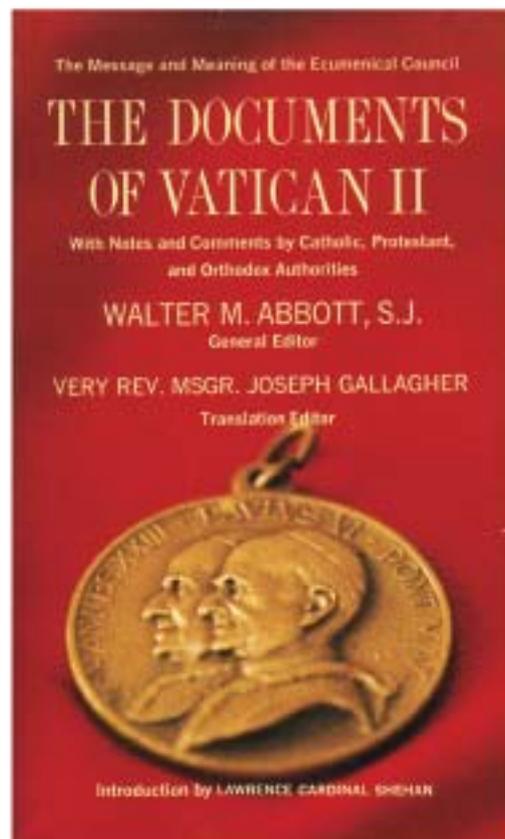
Peace won't come simply by Babel-like efforts to wall off our cities and elevate their real estate against nature's threats. Peaceful cities also depend on healthy partnerships with the surrounding countryside, from which come nature's gifts. City dwellers, please don't just guzzle the energy, food, water and raw materials from rural areas and then send us back a convoy of garbage trucks. We country folks do not live on Nascar and Pabst Blue Ribbon alone, so please use our resources wisely and well, and then give us something of value in return, like compost, telecommuter jobs, easier access to your cultural and intellectual resources and even the occasional visit. With such harmony, we could all thrive. And in times of stormy trouble, we will have your back.

KYLE T. KRAMER is the author of *A Time to Plant: Life Lessons in Work, Prayer, and Dirt* (Sorin Books, 2010).

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LEGAL OR LIMBO? Filling out paperwork for deferred status in Los Angeles

One Step Forward?

‘Deferred Action’ yields cautious hope for undocumented youth.

BY ROBERT McCREANOR

On a Saturday morning in autumn, as rare tornado warnings and sheets of pouring rain spread through New York City, hundreds of families lined up to enter the gymnasium of St. Joan of Arc Parish in the Jackson Heights section of Queens. They filed through a series of workstations fashioned from folding chairs and tables where lawyers and Spanish language interpreters asked them a litany of questions: How did you enter the United States? Were you detained at the U.S.-Mexico border? Have you ever been arrested? Are you enrolled in school? Hardly distracted by their dripping wet clothing and the roar of wind and rain whipping around outside, the participants answered dutifully and produced bundles of papers, including school transcripts, passports and family photos, laid out on tables as proof that they have lived in this country since childhood.

ROBERT McCREANOR is director of legal services for Catholic Migration Services in Sunnyside, N.Y.

The purpose of these interactions was to determine each person's eligibility for relief under an Obama administration program formally known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. If granted deferred action status, a person who entered the United States before the age of 16, either by crossing the border without documents or with a visa that has since expired, and meets certain other basic requirements, would receive a two-year guarantee of reprieve from deportation as well as authorization to work legally in the United States. In other words, for the hundreds of young people patiently but intently working their way through the concourse of this Catholic school gym in Queens, this might be their first step toward the possibility of a normalcy enjoyed by many of their peers but painfully denied to them for as long as they could remember. As I observed their progress through our makeshift legal clinic, however, I wondered uneasily where this path would really lead them.

The Church Responds

On June 15, 2012, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano announced that her agency would carry out administratively what Congress apparently could not accomplish legislatively. The deferred action policy is widely regarded as the most significant development in immigra-

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ON THE WEB
Fred Kammer, S.J., talks about immigration reform.
americamagazine.org/podcast

tion law in the past 25 years. Nearly one million individuals nationally are believed to be eligible for relief.

As news of President Obama's plan for granting a form of immigration relief to undocumented immigrant youth flashed across our Twitter feeds, I was immediately pulled into a frenzy of speculation about the number of potential deferred action applicants and planning for the anticipated flood of phone calls and requests for legal assistance. My staff of fellow attorneys and I opened our calendars and the

diocesan directory, looking for gymnasiums, cafeterias and other large spaces in which to schedule workshops and legal clinics, and I sent an e-mail message to our roster of volunteer attorneys, former interns and friends who might consider

helping us to process what we believed (and slightly feared) would be thousands of deferred action applications.

The geographic boundaries of the Diocese of Brooklyn, encompassing the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, mark the center of the past 50 years of immigration in the northeastern United States. Queens alone is one of the most ethnically diverse urban areas in the nation: 48 percent of its 2.2 million residents are foreign born. Our office banners read "Diocese of Immigrants," and Mass is celebrated in 29 different languages each Sunday. Although larger shares of the estimated 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in this country reside in California and Texas, New York City is believed to be home to more than a half-million individuals who lack legal immigration status.

The community of nonprofit immigration legal services providers to which we belong and which includes more than 200 diocesan immigration programs nationwide was given additional time to prepare for the flood of applicants as we waited for the Department of Homeland Security to release its application guidelines and forms. On Aug. 15 the waiting ended and the floodgates were opened. We are now in full-service provision mode for undocumented immigrant youth, screening for eligibility, preparing applications and assembling evidence to support claims for relief under this new administrative policy.

Finding Temporary Relief

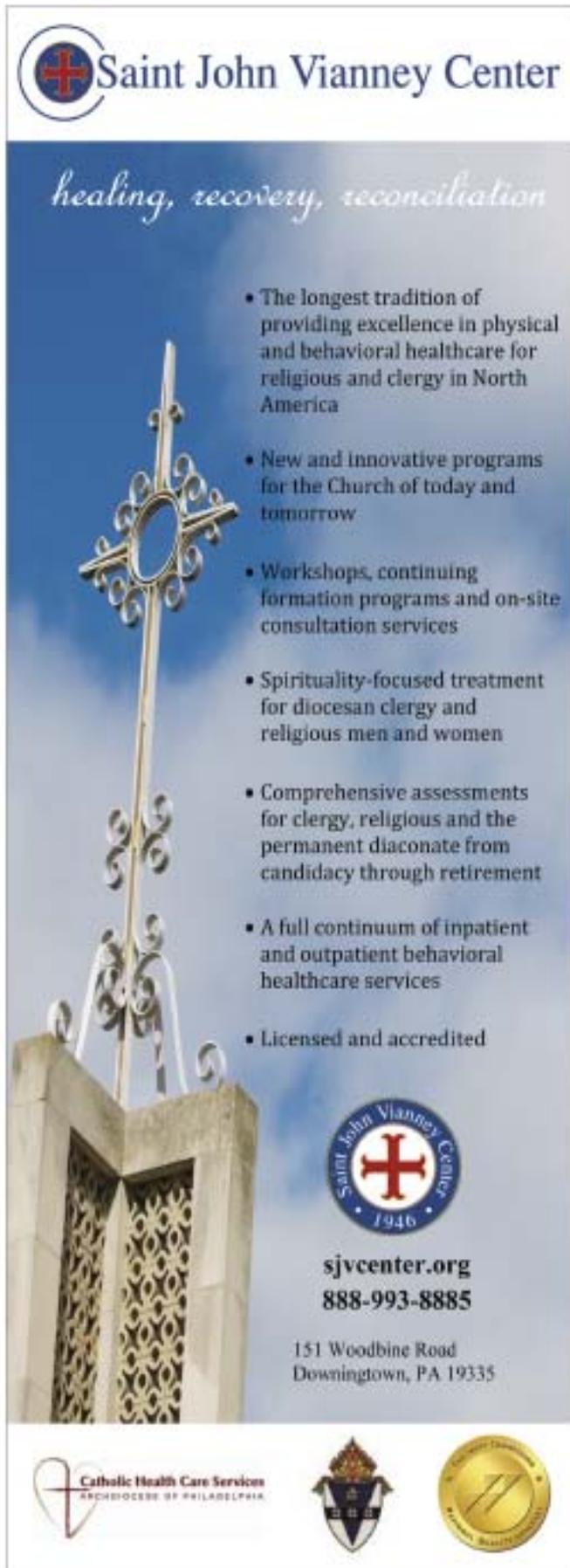
Standing in the gymnasium in Queens as we welcomed and assisted hundreds of applicants, I experienced conflicting emotions. I have conducted scores of similarly structured community-based legal clinics over the past 10 years—some at St. Joan of Arc and others in surrounding neighborhoods, where the concentration of undocumented immigrants is also substantial. Typically, these exercises in lawyering were frustratingly simple as I quickly concluded that one person after another was ineligible for any form of immigration relief. Explaining the sad reality of our broken immigration

system to each person who waited to speak with me in the hopes of finding a path to legalization, I felt drained and useless. Many years of doing this work takes a toll on a public interest lawyer. But now the situation has changed. It is especially meaningful for me to present—at long last—an opportunity in the law to the familiar parishioners who stand in line.

But how much will these young people benefit if their applications are approved? That question weighed on me as I explained the parameters of deferred action to groups of families waiting their turn at the screening station. It has been widely noted that the new policy is not a means of obtaining lawful status or a path to citizenship. The program merely guarantees that an approved applicant will not be subject to removal or deportation for two years and provides for employment authorization. It is a sort of limbo—albeit one that is preferable to their current situation—that could change if the program expires and no further reform of the system occurs. Since the illegal presence in the United States of each applicant becomes known to the government, some fear that applicants may be subjected to deportation proceedings when the program expires.

My sense that this is only a minor and politically precarious improvement upon our miserable immigration policy is heightened by the visual appearance of the applicants listening to me while surrounded by their grandparents, mothers, fathers and siblings. Each of these family portraits causes me to reflect upon the very narrow scope of eligibility for relief. I see the faces of family members excluded from this opportunity. They dream of getting their own papers, but they are not “dreamers” as the term is defined by this policy. Amid the exhilaration of processing these applications, it is sobering to observe those left in the shadows.

I imagine these ambiguous feelings are shared by the many attorneys, immigration counselors and volunteers working long hours to assist in the submission of hundreds of thousands of deferred action applications. In the first few weeks more than 72,000 applications were submitted. Our office continues to assist dozens of eligible youth weekly. In addition to the substantial volume of applicants, what else might indicate that this development is a positive one in the world of immigration law? I hope that the many young immigrant adults who received some sense of protection will be further emboldened as a force for political change. This significant but limited victory for justice may have been prompted by a pressured political calculation, but the many beneficiaries braving the storm and filling the gymnasium at St. Joan of Arc and their peers throughout the country may also persevere through the political tempest of the immigration issue and help generate more executive and legislative actions like this one. 



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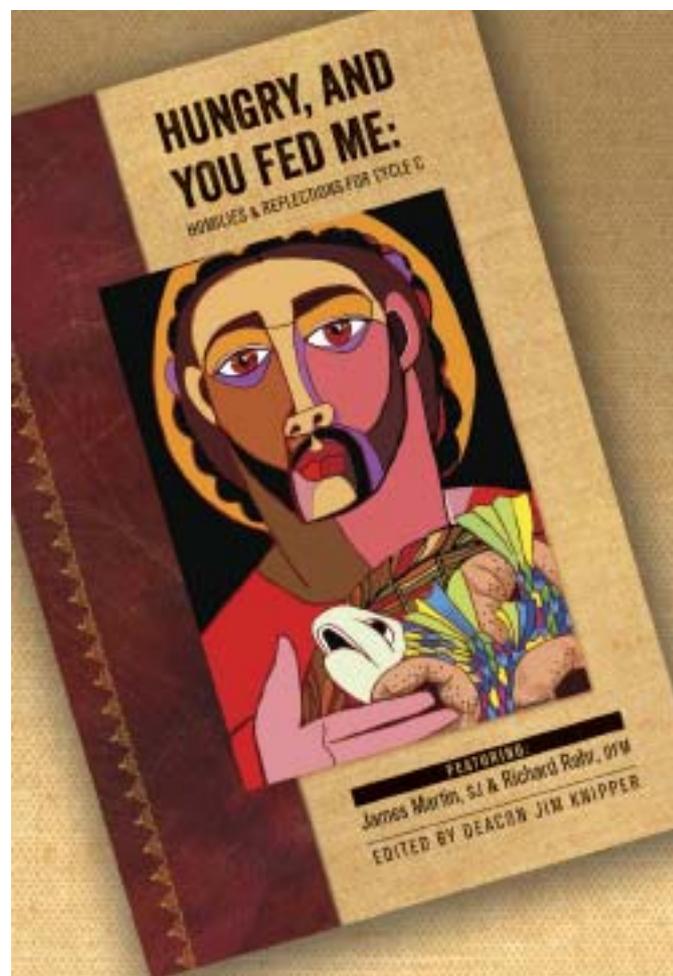
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Carrying On

One family's Christmas tradition

BY KERRY WEBER

More than 25 years ago, I came home from preschool and presented my mother with a cleaned-out baby food jar decorated to look like the face of Santa Claus. The jar contained three red and green starlight mints and bore a lopsided felt hat, vacuous felt eyes and a felt moustache and bow tie, but, inexplicably, no signature beard. It looked more like the old mascot for the Papa Gino's pizza chain than it did Père Noël. Still, my mother proudly placed it on display in our home. Every year since, she has done the same.

Given its age, the creation has held up remarkably well, save for the starlight mints, which have turned a sickly, sticky brown. Yes, the mints are still there. This is partly because we are afraid to open the jar and partly because of: Tradition!

The Weber family takes our traditions seriously, and occasionally to the point of absurdity, especially where Christmas is involved. Consider, for instance, our dedication to watching the 1978 classic "Christmas Eve on Sesame Street" every Christmas Eve. I don't recall which year, exactly, we started watching it, but I also can't recall one when we didn't. The tradition began sometime before "Sesame Street" acquired a kind of retro cool and has continued long after my sib-

lings and I passed the drinking age.

The early viewings involved a version of the film we recorded ourselves with a Beta videotape recorder from a

Cookie Monster's efforts to write a letter to Santa, but instead eating every writing implement he gets his hands on.

Of course, like most films, there are a few flaws. My dad, an engineer, complains when Oscar the Grouch falls through a load-bearing wall that appears to be made of nothing more than a sheet of drywall. As a frequent rider on New York City public transit, I marvel at the width of the suspiciously spacious subway car onto which the Sesame Street residents manage to carry a full-sized Christmas tree without complaint. And we all grin at each other and mumble along with Patty, a friend of Big Bird, as the young actress sniffles through her saddest lines:

"Big Bird's gone." (Spoiler alert: He's on the roof of an apartment building, looking for Santa.) Despite our sympathy, we can't help but be distracted by the fact that Patty's lips barely move when she delivers the news.

Still, for the most part, our family watches the film without irony. So when the characters walk along the sidewalks of "Sesame Street's" New York and onto the subway while singing about Christmas miracles, we Webers join in the song. (Once, on a relatively empty A train, my sister and I tried to recreate our own version of this scene, but it wasn't quite the same without the Muppets or the ability to sing on key.) And when a crowd of



fuzzy PBS channel by way of an antenna. Sometime in the 1990s we broke down and purchased a legitimate copy on VHS. This is the version we currently watch because, once we pull out the old VCR and find the cords and figure out how to hook it up to the TV and rewind the tape, it still works. Like I said: Tradition!

The film's main plotline revolves around Big Bird's efforts to discover how Santa Claus gets down chimneys. Wackiness ensues. But the film's best parts are in the secondary plots and smaller moments: Kermit the Frog interviewing children of the '70s; Bert and Ernie living out their own version of O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi";

KERRY WEBER is an associate editor of *America*.

ART: THE WEBERS' SANTA JAR. PHOTO: JOHN WEBER

“Sesame Street” kids launches into “Keep Christmas With You”—a song about maintaining the spirit of Christmas throughout the year—we join in both the sung lyrics and the accompanying gestures in American Sign Language. The film isn’t religious by any means, but its message of love and of belief in things we can’t quite explain is not lost on a Catholic imagination.

Despite the Weber family endorsement, I seldom come across an individual who is familiar with “Christmas Eve on Sesame Street,” and it rarely pops up on television. Which is why I was so thrilled last year when a friend told me about a showing of the film at a local museum. I immediately marked it on my calendar and began daydreaming of the theater as an enormous version of the Weber family living room (but with the luxury of a clearer, larger screen) filled with people who also have memorized every magical moment.

But, of the eight million people in New York City, only about 50—mostly hipsters and, appropriately, parents with young children—showed up to this Saturday afternoon screening. We settled in, scattered throughout the theater. The collective enthusiasm in the crowd barely matched that of any single member of my family. And when “Keep Christmas With You” blasted through the speakers, I started to sing along in American Sign Language, but no one joined in. This probably should have been less surprising to me than it was.

It wouldn’t be hard to criticize my family’s routine—five full-grown adults watching puppets—as childish. But I see it as a time when we simply come together, let go of the stresses of the season and allow ourselves to be present. We forget about the cynicisms and the blame, our faults and our fears. We aren’t children anymore, but once a year, for just an hour, each of us feels childlike.

In the end I know that as entertaining as the “Sesame Street” gang can be, it’s not the film itself that prompts this change so much as it is the desire to sit down and remember the importance of those things that we believe but cannot see. And in this sense, strange as it may sound, this family movie time echoes an hour we always spend together earlier in the evening, the Christmas Eve Mass—another Weber family favorite.

Sitting in a pew at the cathedral, we are reminded not only of the transformative power of one child, but also of the need to trust in the value of the childlike humility we are all called to embody. It is a time when we are asked, once again, not simply to remember Christ’s love, but to take up our place in the long line of those who have come after him—proclaiming a message of joy, peace and redemption—and to continue every day, in one voice, as one family in Christ, to carry on that tradition. 



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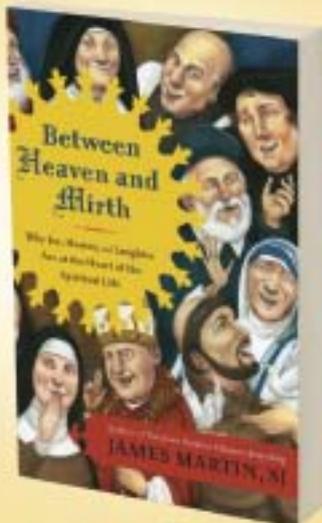
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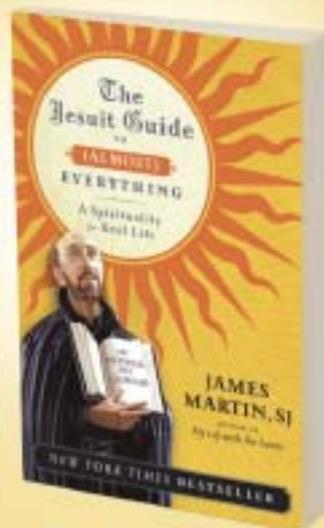
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FILM | JON M. SWEENEY

SIGNS OF 'LIFE'

Wonderful lessons from the Capra masterpiece

We've all had those moments in December when we clicked through the channels and found *It's a Wonderful Life* nearly everywhere. Yet it would be tragic if the past overexposure of Frank Capra's 1946 film fooled us into seeing it as anything less than a masterpiece. What's more, the film offers a profound understanding of the Gospels.

Is George Bailey a saint? Not exactly. He might just be lucky or unlucky or human.

Anxious to leave bucolic Bedford Falls, George (Jimmy Stewart) tells his father, "I want to do something *big*, something *important!*" He doesn't yet see how his father's work fits that goal precisely. Then there's Mr. Potter, as twisted as Eden's serpent, brought to life by the Shakespearean-trained Lionel Barrymore. Good and evil are presented as "opposed but almost equal" forces through these two characters. Potter wants nothing but to see goodness fail.

When George's father dies, Potter makes a motion at the first board meeting to dissolve Peter Bailey's Building & Loan and turn its assets over to the receiver, which is the bank Potter owns. Capra liked to center his dramas on pivotal moments in a character's life, and with an actor like Stewart, he had all he needed. As George rushes out the door, the chairman catches him to say that the board has just appointed George to replace his dad. No way, George says, "I'm leaving." "But, George! They'll vote

with Potter otherwise!" Go to YouTube and watch the moment when Capra zooms in on George's anguished face (35 minutes into the film).

Four years later, George is still running the business with his daffy Uncle Billy, when Harry, his talented kid brother, graduates from college. Harry, it turns out, has just married and his father-in-law has offered him a job. "I never said I'd take it," Harry tells George. "You've been holding the bag here for four years, and I won't let you down." Look again at George's face (at the 37-minute mark). See the change that comes over a determined mouth, how a smile emerges, eyes brighten and the body moves forward almost unintended. Capra has us watching human virtue in action. George urges his brother to take that job in Buffalo.

Back home at a party for Harry and Ruth, George's mother urges him to call on Mary Hatch (Donna Reed), also just home from college. She has a crush on George, but it is only when her beau, Sam Wainwright, calls her from New York that a cloud of tension turns to steam; George and Mary end the scene in a passionate kiss. This is not the last time Sam will prompt George to see himself truly.

George and Mary wed on a gloomy day a few years after the great crash of 1929. As they announce to a cab driver their honeymoon plans, people run to the bank teller windows. The bank has locked its doors. So has the Building & Loan, where Uncle Billy is already drinking himself under the table. At day's end, George and Mary

have given away all they'd saved for a honeymoon, and Mary has arranged for them to spend the night in an abandoned house in Bedford Falls. She has decorated the walls with posters of the places abroad George has longed to see, but never will. If Mary and George are saints, they got that way through marriage.

George and Mary consistently turn negative situations into positive ones. They find their calling in the world, to help people find affordable homes. The Building & Loan does not simply lend money; George advocates for his customers and risks his own family's financial security. We watch them help the local barkeep and his family move away from Potter's Field, which is what the townspeople call Potter's rented shacks. The name is biblical: Judas hanged himself in "potter's field...a burying place for strangers" (Mt 27:3-8).

Potter's Invitation

With Bailey-financed homes poking up all over, a fed-up Potter invites the now 28-year-old George for a chat. His attempt to lure George to the dark side almost works. The old man offers George a job managing his properties for \$20,000 a year (about \$300,000 today), with an opportunity to travel. George looks like a cat spying tuna until he remembers who he is. And who Potter is. For a split second George nearly lets down his guard.

George and Mary have four children. She transforms the old ghost house into a home; George, frustrated by Potter at every turn, returns from work exhausted most days. Then comes World War II. Everyone is off to fight the enemy, something George would dearly want to do, as well. But the deaf ear he acquired as a kid while

saving Harry's life in icy water, keeps him home. And Harry becomes a great war hero, shooting down 15 German planes and receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor. Then comes the long, final day.

It is Christmas Eve when a bank examiner arrives at the office to review the books. Uncle Billy has misplaced the deposit, however, losing every cent the Building & Loan had. Facing scandal and ruin, George stops by the house. Mary has never seen her husband with this look of desperation. She ought to be scared—George has gone to Potter to beg him for the \$8,000 he needs. But Potter, who found the lost deposit, almost chokes on his evil chortling at George's misfortune. When Potter spits out, "You are worth more dead than alive!" George's eyes light up (at 1 hr. 34 min.).

In Capra's next turnkey moment, George contemplates ending his life. Alone at a bar he prays. Until this point, we have not heard George, a secular saint, pray. "Dear Father in heaven...if you're up there...and you can hear me, show me the way." When he hears no response, George drives his car as close to the river as he can in his drunken state, stumbles to the bridge and looks down at the swirling waters. He climbs up on the railing.

This famous scene (at 1:38) reminds me of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, but turned on its head. In Capra's vision, Lazarus gets one more chance, in the form of a man come back from the dead, and it saves him. George's guardian angel, Clarence (Henry Travers), suddenly present, jumps into the river. George's habitual virtue sends him over the side, as he leaps into the waters to help a person in need.

"I'm the answer to your prayer," Clarence tells George as they dry off. "I wish I'd never been born!" George confides. So Clarence nods to heaven—and poof!—the world becomes a place in which George Bailey had



ON THE ROAD TO SALVATION: Henry Travers and James Stewart

never existed.

Guided by Clarence, George sees the effects of his hopelessness, his wish against life. The kingdom of God cannot be found in Bedford Falls without George. In fact, it isn't even Bedford Falls anymore, but Pottersville. A haunting vision of desperation, petty crime and death rears up everywhere. It is like much of what we see in our world, perhaps also because one person has given up. Clarence shows George what the world would be like if George hadn't done what he did at key moments. "Strange, isn't it?" Clarence says. "Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole."

Back From the Dead

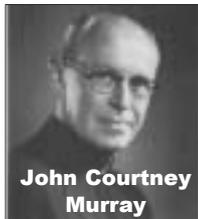
A few more minutes of this and George prays, "I want to live again!" At that George stands where he was before, on the bridge, missing \$8,000 and half-drunk but no longer desperate. Realizing that his life has come back to him, George sprints home, yelling, "Merry Christmas!" to every passerby. His jubilation comes across to others as courage, a willingness to see the hopeful side of a desperate situation. Little do they know: George has just come back from the dead.

Detectives arrive at George's home with a warrant for his arrest. Then Mary bursts in. She's been out looking for George, and in the process telling

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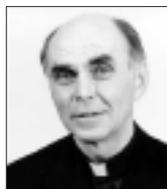
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everyone in town what has happened. "Come downstairs," Mary says; "they're on their way!" Uncle Billy arrives first, carrying a basket of bills people have thrown in upon hearing that George is in trouble. Then everyone in town leaves some money with a smile and a "Merry Christmas, George." Bedford Falls turns out to be George's salvation.

In the Hebrew Bible and in the teachings of Jesus, salvation is not about where you go when you die. To be saved is to be lifted up and set on your feet, stopping the forces that want to catch us by the heels or pull us under.

There is one problem, however, in the generosity of salvation in the film. Ernie the cab driver reads a telegram received from London: "My office instructed to advance you up to \$25,000!" writes Sam Wainwright. Though everyone cheers, the look on George's face suggests something is off.

The uneasiness of Sam's offer has been lost on millions of viewers over the decades. Sam, though a bit goofy, is conniving and selfish. His headlong pursuit of money permeates every key moment of the movie. He made millions betting on the ground floor of plastics and on properties in Florida. Sam is the man that George is not. And when the meek are supposed to inherit the earth, it's Sam who tries to make it possible. Don't believe it. George clearly doesn't. Those people walking through the door of George and Mary's house bring enough to satisfy the couple's every need. That is the message of "It's a Wonderful Life": there is power in community.

At the film's denouement, Harry steps into the living room, someone hands him a glass and he raises a toast: "To my big brother, George. The richest man in town!" Indeed, George is that, and the riches are the sort that the likes of Sam Wainwright will never comprehend.

JON M. SWEENEY is the author of *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death and Salvation (Image, 2012)*.



Un Sogno d'Oro a Natale

Were I a friar of Convento San Marco
In Florence of the Quattrocento
With Fra Angelico and students
Working on some fifty frescos
And every tiny cell a shrine

I would ask for myself
"An Annunciation or Nativity please!"
An image luminous enough to brighten
The darkness of the pre-dawn call
From grand silence to matins

Greeting me from the foot of my cot
The serene figures the muted colors
Catching the early eastern glow
Would make every morning Christmas

JOHN P. McNAMEE

JOHN P. McNAMEE, *Pastor emeritus of Saint Malachy Church in Philadelphia, is the author of five books, including Diary of a City Priest (made into a film) and a book of poems, Derrybeg and Back.*

CHARACTER STUDIES



Not just because it is Christmas, but because we love to encourage reading, we invited some friends to recommend to our readers in very few words a favorite book and author—specifically a book that would help a younger person in high school or college develop his or her own character.

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.
Literary Editor

THE PLUNGE

Giving a book is an occasion to tell a story. I'd give a young person James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* saying that I was assigned it by Mr. Pontrelli, my Saint Peter's College 1957 freshman English teacher. Before

Pontrelli I thought people read books for entertainment. But Pontrelli taught us that literature is not escape but a plunge into our depth. So I'd write on the gift card, "Time to take the post-adolescent plunge with Stephen Dedalus?"

JAMES R. KELLY is a professor emeritus of sociology at Fordham University.

WOLFF BOY

Living in Washington's hill country, Tobias Wolff, in his *This Boy's Life, A Memoir*, grows up in the 1950s with his quirky mother and sadistic stepfather. Wolff survives by acting out and putting on a tough-guy exterior. He escapes his troubled youth through his

talent for writing, which shows on every page of this eloquent memoir.

DIANE SCHARPER is a frequent reviewer for *America* and a poet.

NO RIVAL

I suggest *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin, in conjunction with the great new film "Lincoln," directed by Stephen Spielberg, which is based on it. The book shows, of course, one of the great heroes of American political life at work, but also demonstrates for our politically fractured age how rivals can work together for the common good.

JEFFREY VON ARX, S.J., is president of Fairfield University.

BEFORE TWILIGHT

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a grotesquely horrifying tale of a supernatural evil among Victorian England's unsuspecting people of privilege, creating fitting parallels for our times. The sheer volume of sex, violence, greed, madness and carnage handily challenges any caricature of Victorian prudery.

LAURA CHMIELEWSKI teaches history at State University of New York–Purchase.

ESCAPISM

Unbroken, by Laura Hillenbrand, is the story of a juvenile delinquent who escaped a life of crime by becoming an Olympic gold medalist. Endurance later enabled WWII airman Louis Zamperini to survive 47 days afloat in the Pacific, followed by two years on Execution Island, where a psychopathic guard excelled in tormenting him. He escaped his past and saved his marriage by forgiving his enemy.

CAMILLE D'ARIENZO, R.S.M., is a frequent commentator on New York News Radio WINS.

PRE-EMPTIVE PARENT

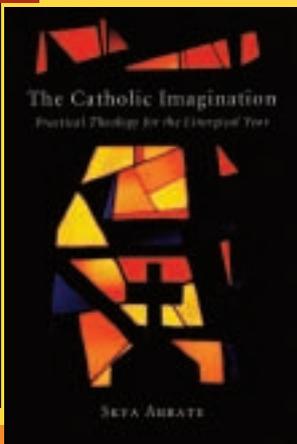
Why ask an ancient to recommend a book for the "young"? Since I can't imagine bridging the gap, I recom-

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mend a book about the gap: Marilynne Robinson's 2005 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead*. John Ames, a rural pastor who has become a father in his old age, is dying. He writes daily reflections for his young child to read later in life, blending family history with poignant justification for his own life and theology.

GEORGE DENNIS O'BRIEN, a philosopher, is the former president of the University of Rochester.

LETTERS CARRIER

Eliza Peabody is the central character of Jane Gardam's *The Queen of the Tambourine*. The story develops through letters Eliza writes to Joan, who may or may not exist. Humorous and poignant, with a conclusion you won't learn here. I predict you will then move to other Gardam novels. There are many.

WILLIAM NEENAN, S.J., is well known at Boston College for his reading lists.

PLAIN JANE

Students find Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* stirring. I think this is because of Jane's honesty, beginning in Chapter 4, when she confronts that pious fraud Brocklehurst and her mean old aunt, who gives way before the force of that honesty with startling timidity, and later refuses to surrender to Rochester (who is married) her independence and integrity.

ROBERT MCCARTHY, S.J., teaches English at Saint Peter's University, Jersey City, N.J.

HEROIC LIVES

I recommend *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, Phillip Hallie's warmly told account of Le Chambon, the Protestant village in Vichy-controlled France that harbored thousands of Jews, saving them from certain death. Stories of the strong crushing the weak abound. Here is a history of goodness filled with everyday heroes who possess an aggressive

conviction of the preciousness of life.

CLAIRE SCHAEFFER-DUFFY lives and works at the Saints Francis and Therese Catholic Worker of Worcester, Mass.

LIFE-CHANGING

My first exposure to the theory of evolution in sophomore biology class triggered my interest in Charles Darwin and compelled me to read his seminal book, *On the Origin of Species*. From his keen observation of unique endemic species on the Galapagos Islands came the theory of evolution by natural selection—the foundation of modern biology.

MARK AITA, S.J., M.D., teaches medical ethics at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pa.

UNENDING WITNESS

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accountability, even for torture. In such perilous times, **Daniel Berrigan, S.J.**'s *Essential Writings* (ed. John Dear) bears witness to a lifetime of discipleship and advocacy for peace.

LUKE HANSEN, S.J., is an associate editor of *America*.

RADICAL CATHOLIC

Dorothy Day: Selected Writings (ed. Robert Ellsberg) is a wonderful entree into the world of the radical journalist who embraced Catholicism even as she challenged the church and "the system." This collection allows the story of Day's life to unfold through her writings. I own many books about Day, but I return to this one again and again to be inspired and held accountable.

JULIE HANLON RUBIO is associate professor of Christian ethics at Saint Louis University.

MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

Ask me to recommend a book and I will instinctively reach back for a classic before pointing to something new. In that spirit, I believe every college-bound reader could do no better than spend a couple of days poring over **Thomas Merton's** autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a bestseller in the years after WWII, when it was published. When he gave up the world to become a Trappist monk, Merton became rich; and he writes about it fervently in ways I don't think any writer could do today.

JON M. SWEENEY is author of *The Pope Who Quit*.

PATIENT TRAVELER

I recommend **Daniel Defoe's** *Robinson Crusoe* not for the adventure but for its silence and solitude. Crusoe is alone. He spends nine years hollowing out a tree trunk to make a canoe—nine years! In our age of distraction, his days and years are a revelation.

EILEEN MARKEY is a freelance writer in *The Bronx, N.Y.*

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COVENANT HEALTH in Lubbock, Tex., is seeking a dynamic leader as VICE PRESIDENT, MISSION INTEGRATION. The Vice President supports and assists the President/C.E.O. in enabling the healing ministry of Jesus to be vital and operational in the region and local health care setting. This provides leadership, direction, consultation and coaching in defining and integrating Catholic and Methodist identity and mission into policies, procedures, programs and growth strategies affecting the character and practice of governance and management of Covenant Health. The Vice President serves as a member of the Executive Management Team and oversees the planning, administration, coordination and evaluation of assigned business units and services (i.e., Mission Services, Community Outreach and Community Benefit, Advocacy and Spiritual Care, including Clinical Pastoral Education program).

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LETTERS

Christian Listening

I was delighted to read your editorial "The Work Ahead" (11/26), on the results of the election. It was the most nonpartisan, nonjudgmental Christian approach to a political scene that I have ever read. I have a hard time dealing with the "opposition," but the following sentence in your editorial really helped: "Only when one holds to the principle that the 'other side' might have something meaningful to say does genuine listening become possible." Thank you for helping me to be more tolerant. *America* serves us well.

MARY RIORDAN, R.S.M.
Gulfport, Miss.

Touché

Is your Jesuitical slip showing? "Of Many Things," by Matt Malone, S.J. (11/26), defends the stance of Joseph McShane, S.J., president of Fordham University, regarding the College Republicans' invitation to Ann Coulter.

Yet *America's* editorial in the issue of Oct. 15, 2007, "Jaw, Jaw, Not 'War, War,'" applauded Columbia University for inviting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, to address its School of International and Public Affairs, as "in the best tradition of university life..."

Surely, Ms. Coulter, no matter how "mean" she might be in communicating her ideas (some of which I find offensive), deserves the same protection extended to Ahmadinejad. It would have been in the best tradition of what a liberal arts university should stand for.

JIM TOLAN
New York, N.Y.

Editor's Note: Mr. Ahmadinejad is the head of government of a sovereign state with which the United States is in ideological and potentially literal conflict. Ms. Coulter is a popular commentator. Different standards and expectations apply. Suffice it to say, *America* does not

categorically oppose providing a public platform for those with whom we disagree. For an example, see the letter above.

Needing Verification?

Re “Great Expectations,” by James Martin, S.J. (11/26): Father Martin’s exploration and analysis of the annunciation story and subsequent visitation carefully avoids consideration of an alternative reason for Mary’s “setting out in haste for a Judean town in the hill country”—namely, that she needed to know whether her cousin was really pregnant; only then would she accede to the angel’s request.

Some years ago, having read an article by the late and greatly missed Sally Cunneen (“The Mary We Never Knew,” *Commonweal*, 12/21/07), I decided to take a second look at an aspect of the story as reported by the Evangelist Luke that had troubled me since I was a late teenager: Mary’s ready acquiescence to a situation that could

have put her in mortal danger. I am aware that this version of events is not quite in keeping with current teaching, but to my mind, it makes a much more believable and human story.

SEÁN O’CONNOR
Wallingford, Conn.

Musical Appreciation

I read John Anderson’s appraisal of Steven Spielberg’s “Lincoln” with enthusiasm (“Abe, Honestly,” 11/26). His praise for the performances of Daniel Day-Lewis and Sally Field echoes my sentiments exactly. But I feel he has unfairly accused Spielberg of relying too heavily on John Williams’s music.

To call this score “intrusive” is, in my opinion, a slam at the very idea of music in film. Certainly, the music in earlier Spielberg films like “Jaws” is frequently quite dramatic, but the subtle use of strings and piano in “Lincoln” does not qualify for the word “intrusive.” Nor does the trumpet theme have the blasting “Gabriel” sound to which Mr. Anderson alludes. Perhaps the theater volume was set higher for Mr. Anderson’s screening than for my two viewings (thus far).

It is unfortunate that many film critics complain about music in films—when it is noticed at all. As I tell the students in my college film-music class, the actors supply the motion in the motion picture, but the composers provide the emotion. Music may sometimes be manipulative, but it often helps to convey the story behind the screen images.

LAURENCE E. MACDONALD
Flint, Mich.

Stupid Human Tricks

The editorial “Changing the Climate” (11/19) sadly overlooks a main cause of a lot of the “trail of destruction and misery” caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy.

Stupid humans have defied nature by building cities below river level (New Orleans) and atop moving

oceanside sand bars (New Jersey). This ludicrous practice is encouraged by money-mad land developers and is made possible by dice-throwing insurers and coddling government agencies that waste “bailout” tax dollars to rebuild such insanity.

If I should crazily erect my home in the caldera of a rumbling volcano or the truck lane of a heavily-traveled superhighway, I should eventually expect my house to be destroyed, while possibly suffering death myself in the course of the destruction.

Let’s not blame the climate for thoughtless human actions in city-building.

WILLIAM F. KLOSTERMAN
Middletown, Ohio

The writer is a retired city engineer and city manager.

‘Reverend’ Restored

The diaconate for women continues to be a fascinating topic. Having been ordained a deacon on my path to priesthood and having served in that capacity, I believe that as an Ecumenical Catholic priest and a woman, my experience holds some insight. Therefore I responded to “Why Not Women?,” by Bishop Emil A. Wcela (10/1), identifying my full name, as required: Rev. Sheila Durkin Dierks.

When my letter was published in the “State of the Question” (10/22), it is interesting that the “Rev.” somehow disappeared from my name, though it does appear before the name of a male deacon and male priest who also had letters published. I wonder what happened at the editing desk at *America*? Is there a “Reverend” on the cutting room floor?

(REV.) SHEILA DURKIN DIERKS
Boulder, Colo.

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Family Business

HOLY FAMILY (C), DEC. 30, 2012

Readings: 1 Sm 1:20–28; Ps 128:1–5; 1 Jn 3:1–2, 21–24; Lk 2:41–52

“I prayed for this child.... Now I give him to the Lord” (1 Sm 1:27–28)

It would not be surprising for many Catholics to hear in sermons this weekend that the Holy Family is a perfect model for our own families. It is rather hard to believe, isn't it? Whose mother was immaculately conceived? Whose son is the Son of God? And whose father would be willing to accept that his pregnant fiancée was still a virgin? For models to work, there have to be some actual parallels. It turns out that there are extraordinary ones.

In our Gospel reading, we find the Holy Family going to the temple to celebrate Passover. They joined other pious Jews who went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as the Lord commanded (Dt 16:6). On the return trip, Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was traveling among their friends and relatives, but to their alarm they could not locate him after the first day. Returning, they found him in the Temple in dialogue with the elders there. Mary admonishes him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” Jesus replies, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (More literally: in the things of my Father.) Mary pondered all this in her heart, just as she did when the shepherds came to the stable (Lk 2:19).

The first reading aligns with this

narrative as it involves Hannah, another mother who made a pilgrimage to the temple. There she dedicated her son, Samuel, to the Lord. Samuel will become the last and greatest judge in Israel. Though not in our reading, Hannah evens offers a hymn of praise to God (2:1–10) that sounds strikingly like Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55).

The first reading clearly parallels the Gospel, but how do we? And in what way can the Holy Family be a model for us? One of the more obvious ways is that they lived a life dedicated to their faith. That the Holy Family, along with their friends, neighbors and relatives, were reported as making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem shows that Jesus grew up in a normal, devout home, where they embraced the duties of their faith. Even Mary and Joseph’s assumption that he was among the members of the caravan suggests the regularity of the event. It was not until the end of the first day of their return trip that they started to be concerned.

More penetrating, we see here the witness of ordinary family virtues, like patience and forgiveness, and an ongoing awareness of the wonder of the presence of grace within and around them. When we take seriously the profound lives around us, including those of our family members, friends and

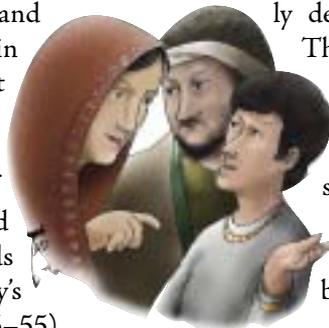
neighbors, we cannot help but ponder God’s mysterious presence and the gifts God brings daily. Our reading ends with Luke telling us that “Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.” Shouldn’t we strive to recognize this dynamic in those we know? And isn’t it a wonder?

Even Jesus’ explanation to his parents that he had to be about the things of his Father, which seems like a rebuke, ought to ring true in our own lives. Like Hannah, we must ultimately dedicate our children to God.

They are ours only in one sense.

In the end, they are God’s, and are indeed children of God.

This is the message of our second reading, from the First Letter of John: “Beloved: See what love the father has bestowed on us that we may be



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Consecrate yourself to God.
- Consecrate your spouse to God.
- Consecrate your children to God.

called children of God. And so we are.” Perhaps this can be our third parallel. By baptism, we really do know God as our very own Father. Of course, dedicating our children to God is not losing them to God. Rather, we find them all the more, as they embrace their deepest truth, their fullest flourishing.

Jesus’ response to his mother should be the response we all make: It is necessary to be about the things of our Father. Only in this wholehearted response do we realize our divine adoption. Together as a family we grow in wisdom and age and grace before God and one another.

PETER FELDMIEIER is the Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo.

Christ Manifest

EPIPHANY (C), JAN. 6, 2013

Readings: Is 60:1–6; Ps 72:1–13; Eph 3:2–6; Mt 2:1–12

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?” (Mt 2:2)

Epiphan^y means “manifestation.” In today’s Scriptures, this can refer to many different things, all interrelated. During this Christmas season, we continue to celebrate the very presence of our God manifested in the Incarnation. Christ is the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), “the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being” (Heb 1:3). What is truly amazing and unique in Christianity is that God has manifested himself in such weakness. God has taken human history as his own, with all its vulnerabilities and weaknesses. One of the more interesting research insights I’ve encountered lately is that of Dr. Brené Brown, whose books and public interviews have inspired so many. Brown has discovered that vulnerability is the very key to courage, love and intimacy. Christians have known this for two millennia. We only need to look at our glorious savior, who came into the world poor and weak and ultimately submitted to suffering and death. This is the cost of love.

Christ himself was manifested by the star, which guided the wise men from the East. Our tradition has seen this as the fulfillment of a prophecy by the diviner Balaam, who announced a messianic figure: “A star shall advance

from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel” (Nm 24:17). Identifying celestial activity as a divine sign would not have been unusual in the ancient world. Many even believed stars were spiritual beings (Jb 38:7). The Jewish tradition understood the Gentile Balaam to be a *magus* (the singular of *magi*), and we can see him anticipating the wise men’s visitation. Our Gospel reading today begins, “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.’” Their gifts to the newborn messiah manifest a great deal. Traditionally, gold signifies his kingship, frankincense his priesthood, and myrrh is an anticipation of his death and burial (Jn 19:39).

The magi themselves manifest the Gentile world’s often unknowing anticipation of the messiah. This is central to the first reading from Isaiah, in which “thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the Lord shines, and over you his glory. Nations shall walk by your light.” God’s salvation is not intended for Israel alone. Rather, Israel will act as “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6), and God will offer salvation to

“all the ends of the earth” (Is 25:22).

The magi manifest something else as well. They shed light on our own lives. How different are we, really, from the magi? Like them we are pilgrims on a journey. Instead of Arabian deserts, we walk through our own deserts in a life with thousands of smiles and thousands of tears. We encounter oases of love and the dry, lifeless sands of disillusionment. Human life is a kind of exile. The First Letter of Peter describes us as “aliens and sojourners” (2:11).

Where is our star? Where do we find our own epiphanies? One of the greatest gifts of St. Ignatius Loyola is that he teaches us how to look closely into our own experience in life. There we find God manifesting himself regularly. When I struggle with sin and spiritual sloth, I recognize the pangs of truth drawing me back. And upon

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Consider where this week you acted with the greatest love.
- Ask Christ to reveal how his Spirit was moving you.
- Thank the Lord.

coming back, I know his overwhelming mercy. Who cannot realize God’s undying forgiveness and not know that the messiah is among us? Just last week, I saw a homeless woman and her beautiful son smile in gratitude for the simple gift of a meal. The child was radiant. Is this not the gift of the face of Christ shining on me? When I sit with a friend and we confide our struggles—vulnerability again—I experience an acceptance that not only reflects God’s favor, but also becomes a sacrament of God’s grace. If we look closely, epiphanies are everywhere.

PETER FELDMIEIER



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This summer, celebrate the Year of Faith in Rome. Join University of Dallas School of Ministry faculty and students for a ten-day pilgrimage in the Eternal City.

Guided tours of historic Roman sites are uniquely integrated with graduate theology courses that can be taken either for credit or personal enrichment. You'll engage in stimulating and illuminating conversation, enhance your world view, create lasting friendships and truly deepen your faith.

Reward yourself with a trip to Rome and relish a lifetime of memories and a renewed sense of joy in being Christian!



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