# America

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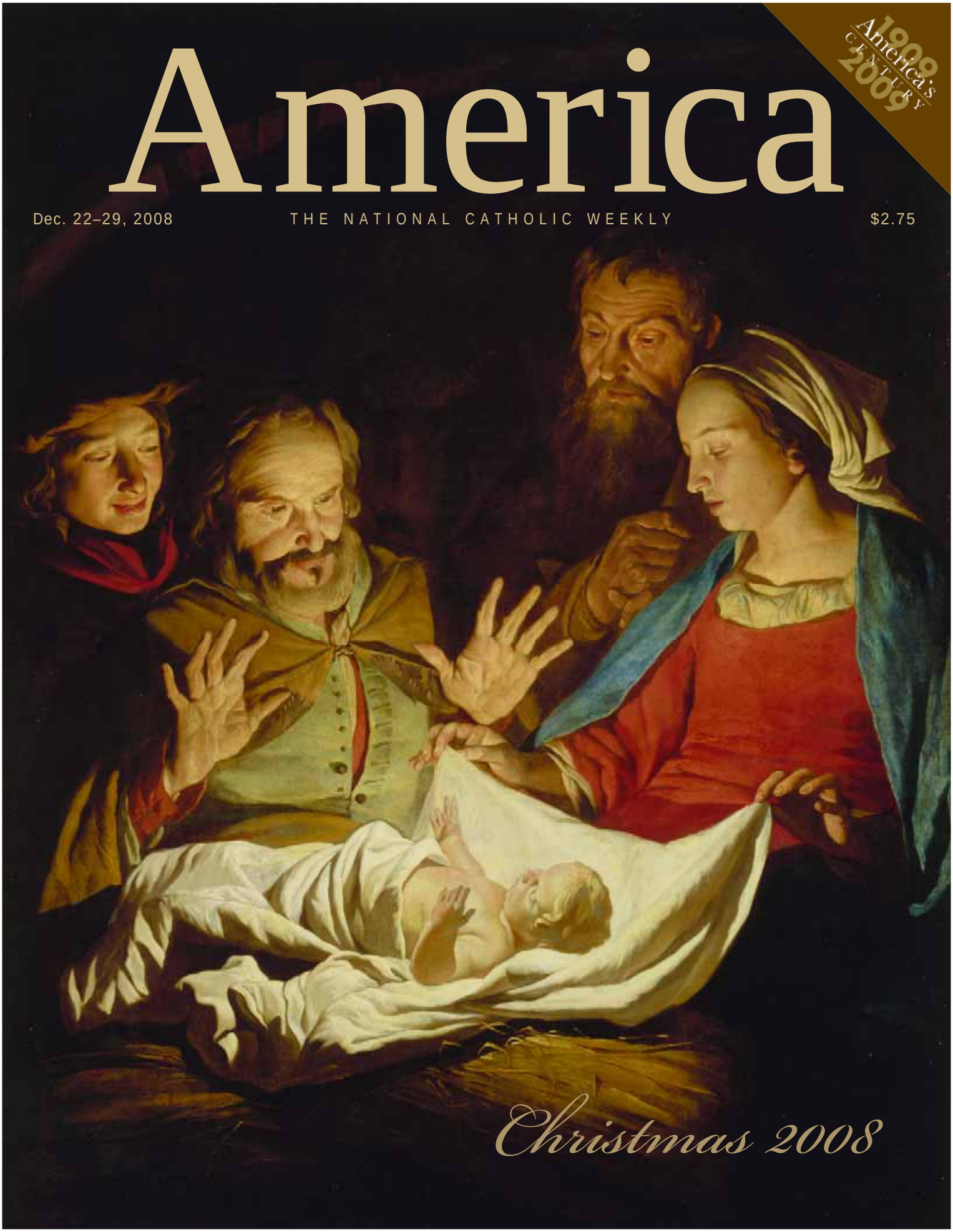

*Christmas 2008*

# Of Many Things

AS I MADE MY WAY to the altar, I had to tread carefully through the pilgrims crowded about on the grotto floor kissing the ground where the newborn Jesus is said to have lain. I set down the chalice, checked the Sacramentary and took a step back. The people had suddenly vanished. Later in the sacristy I asked Joe Donnelly, my good friend and guide, "What happened to the people?" "Oh," Joe said, "the Franciscans take their lunch very seriously." Joe meant the Franciscans had cleared the chapel of pilgrims for a midday break.

I am ashamed to say that is my most vivid memory from my many pilgrim visits to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. On other occasions, I should add, Joe and I, with other pilgrims, enjoyed the Franciscans' midday table at their pilgrim hostels across the Holy Land.

At other times we celebrated Mass in the St. Jerome's chapel, a cave adjacent to the Nativity Grotto. I confess to far greater consolation during those Masses than in the two or three I have celebrated in the central holy site. My feelings, I think, reveal an aesthetic preference in spirituality. For Eastern Christians, the marble floors and walls, the brocade hangings and multicolored oil lamps that decorate the Grotto of the Nativity are the regal tribute due to the King of Kings. For me as a Westerner, however, the rough rock walls of the cave of St. Jerome's chapel evoke the primitive conditions of Jesus' birth.

Experts point out that Eastern pilgrims experience the Holy Land in sacramental terms. Their visits are for them a participation in the divine liturgy of the heavenly Jerusalem. One only has to peek into the Catholicon, the Greek Orthodox cathedral at the center of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, as gold encrusted as the most magnificent throne room, to appreciate how different the Eastern Christian sensibility is from the historical interest of the West.

I find it hard to imagine Eastern Christians trudging down the dusty road from the summit of Mount Tabor to the plain below or taking a meditative sail on the Sea of Galilee. For them it is celebrating liturgy in the holy places that puts them in touch with the divine mysteries. Western pilgrims, by contrast, tend to visit the holy places with a desire to touch the living history of the Holy Land. Like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius Loyola, they seek to identify with the experience of Jesus by experiencing for themselves the places where he lived.

The terrain of Israel and Palestine is pockmarked with caves. In Nazareth, one can see what a first-century Palestinian village built from caves might have been like. Outside the Basilica of the Annunciation, an opening in the floor of the baptistry allows one to look down on the excavation of a first-century street. Just up the hill, beneath the Church of Saint Joseph, pilgrims can visit a cave-home with its cisterns and rock-hewn olive and wine presses.

It was not in Nazareth, but near Bethlehem at Shepherds' Fields, that I learned to appreciate what taking shelter in a cave might have been like for the Holy Family. There, in a rather deep cave, a friar explained how shepherds would move their flocks to the back of the cave, build a fire at the mouth where the smoke could escape, and then, nestled in between, find warmth. Suddenly, all those Christmas images of caves, livestock, shepherd boys and herdsmen surrounding the Holy Family came alive. They were not just part of a fanciful artistic tradition. Instead, the rustic images put us in touch with the historical condition of the Holy Family.

I cannot recommend enthusiastically enough taking a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and reading for yourself the "Fifth Gospel" found in the land itself. You might even see a young Arab mother sitting side-saddle on a donkey led by an old man dressed in a dusty gown and kaffiyeh, as I once did in southern Jordan. But if this Christmas you cannot travel there, when you set up your crèche or pray before the Infant in the crib, like St. Francis, who himself had been a pilgrim and who began the custom of the Christmas crèche, know that the figures do indeed put you in touch with the history of Jesus. What matters most, however, is whether the history draws us to share in Christ's identification with the poor and afflicted.

***Drew Christiansen, S.J.***


# America

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## Articles




This week @ America Connects

From the archives, the story behind "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," and why the manger at Bethlehem was the first Catholic school. Plus Christmas video reflections from the editors. All at americamagazine.org.

# Restoring the Balance

Just when President-elect Obama thought the news could not be more grim, he awoke on Dec. 2 to the public report that Iran is on course to have a nuclear weapon before the end of his first year as president. Most intelligence analysts had been saying through much of 2008 that a nuclear-armed Iran was years, not months, away. Yet an unprecedented coalition of respected think tanks, including a rare partnership between the Brookings Institute and the Council on Foreign Relations, concluded that the United States faces this and several other serious and immediate threats to its strategic position in the Middle East.

The report's authors said that any settlement with Iran would require "a comprehensive diplomatic initiative" involving "direct and unconditional talks" with Tehran. Neo-conservatives in the Bush administration, who are, thankfully, enduring the last twitches of their political death throes, have chalked the report up to liberal naïveté. What is truly naïve, however, is the idea that the United States should continue to pursue a 7-year-old strategy that has not only failed to stop the Iranians from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, but has not even slowed them down.

The report rightly concludes that a new diplomatic strategy is not only necessary, but also the only practical option. Though the challenges seem to grow more daunting by the day, Mr. Obama should keep his campaign promise to pursue diplomacy anew and not allow the foreign policy old guard to deter him.

# A Dark Christmas

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is a red-letter day for American retailers hoping for black (that is, profitable) balance sheets. But this year Black Friday turned deadly. In Valley Stream, N.Y., a 34-year-old part-time employee was trampled to death when the doors opened at a Wal-Mart store, where customers had waited in line for hours, desperate to take advantage of some holiday bargains. Customers stampeded over (and around) his lifeless body as an emergency medical team tried to save Jdimytai Damour's life. That same day two men were shot and killed at a Toys "R" Us in Palm Desert, Calif.

What accounts for this? First are the absurd marketing tools that stores use to whip customers into a near frenzy before Christmas. Corralling people into lines for stores that open as early as 4 a.m. for discount shopping is now common. The gimmick draws dangerously huge numbers of tired shoppers into cramped spaces. These corporate decisions, designed to maximize profits, pay little attention to the dangers inherent in luring people into crowded venues. Second, a lazy media hypes these events by reporting on Black Friday sales around-the-clock in the days before Thanksgiving. Finally, what can only be labeled a total lack of respect for human life is evident, when dozens of people first injure a man and then ignore his desperate cries for help.

These factors combined to make this Black Friday a truly dark day. Christmas is about the gift of life. It should not be about taking life to buy gifts.

# What to Do With Bad Gifts

Is it us, or does it seem that Christmas gifts are increasingly becoming just items to turn in for cash or store credit? In difficult economic times, the temptation only grows. But here at **America** we want to suggest four other things you might do this year with gifts you don't like.

1) It is the season for giving, so give. Donate your unwanted gifts of clothing to an organization that will pass them on to someone who needs them. Go to http://locator.goodwill.org or the Yellow Pages to find the Goodwill nearest you; or have a party where everyone comes wearing the gifts they can't stand, and at the end of the night box them up for a local shelter or the St. Vincent de Paul Society. You could also donate unwanted clothing to your local high school or community theater company. They will put you in their programs and love you forever.

Think similarly about other unwanted gifts. Libraries love books. Sick kids love electronics.

2) You could also pay it forward—give your fashion faux pas to someone you know who will look good in it. Or start a "common closet" in your home where you leave stuff that others can take when they come over. You may find your friends visiting more often.

3) If you really must return something, give half of the money you receive to someone who needs the money more than you. Like your niece, or the guy from work or the lady down the hall. Or a favorite not-for-profit, always-in-need-of-donations weekly magazine.

4) Last of all, when it comes to gifts of clothing, you could try wearing it. That's right, put it on. Who are you, Michael Kors? Maybe it actually looks good on you. Everyone's probably tired of your same old turtleneck and sweatpants combo. Take the hint.

## Editorial

# He Dwells Among Us

ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA'S classic text, *The Spiritual Exercises*, leads a person by a series of imaginative meditations through the life of Christ. And Ignatius asks the retreatant to begin before the earthly life of Jesus even began.

In one of the loveliest of his meditations, St. Ignatius asks us to imagine the Holy Trinity in heaven. Looking down, they gaze upon all of humanity and see men and women greatly diverse in dress and behavior: "some white and others black, some at peace and others at war, some weeping and others laughing, some healthy and others sick, some being born and others dying...."

In their compassion, they decide that the second person of the Trinity should become human. "And thus when the fullness of time had come, they send the Angel Gabriel to Our Lady," writes Ignatius. Christmas marks the time when God, out of compassion, became human, or, as the Gospel of John has it, "pitched his tent among us."

Today the Holy Trinity watches over a world that would be virtually unrecognizable to the men and women in first-century Palestine. Just in the past decade, technological advances have enabled millions, at least in the West, to enjoy better health, increased educational opportunities and other unforeseen advantages. The place of women and minorities continues to improve in our country: the presence of two women and an African-American man in the November presidential election contests is one sign of progress in this regard.

But the Holy Trinity also sees a world surprisingly similar to that of first-century Palestine, a world with "some weeping." Jesus was born into a violent time. Today terrorism, its complex roots maddeningly confusing, frightens millions, from India to Indianapolis. Likewise, the poor in Jesus' day were, as today, powerless, marginalized and disenfranchised. Even St. Joseph was not exempt from financial woes. Like Palestinian peasant farmers, as the Rev. John Meier, a noted Scripture scholar, points out, he led a "precarious existence, sometimes at subsistence level." How similar this is to our world this Christmas, when the poor are still marginalized and millions of middle-class Americans fear for their future in the wake of the frightening collapse of the financial markets.

Into such a place came Jesus: a world riven with differences between rich and poor, facing the threat of violence and, like that world, hoping for salvation. To enter this world, Jesus was born into the Holy Family, each of whose members offers a distinctive lesson for believers during Christmas—especially for those facing hard times, financial or otherwise.

Again we turn to Joseph, who is often relegated to second-class status in the Nativity scenes. A "righteous" man, as the Gospel of Matthew has it, Joseph shoulders the confusing task God has given him. Not only is he asked to accept the strange message from an angel about the miraculous circumstances of his wife's pregnancy; he is also charged, later, to guard his family in their perilous trip to Egypt. This would have been a particularly hard road for a Jewish family—Egypt lies in the wrong direction. Joseph trustingly accepts God's upending of his expectations.

Mary's great yes to God offers not only a model for women, but for any disciple. Indeed, Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel offers a model of discipleship for those under duress. When God invites Mary to accept a strange future, she initially hesitates and, like any believer, voices her honest emotions. "How can this be?" she asks in the Gospel of Luke. In reply, the angel points to the example of her cousin, Elizabeth, in essence saying, "Look what God has already done." How often this happens in our own lives. When doubtful, we are invited to look backward, to see God's hand more clearly and magnify our trust. But even after Mary's *Fiat*, her story provides a lesson. "Then the angel left her." Then comes the part that we know well: faith.

**MARY'S SON CAME,** as one hymn has it, "not as a monarch, but a child." The Word of God chose to dwell among us in that most fragile of human states—as a newborn. When the Magi arrived, they may have wondered, "This little child is the king?" Entering into perilous situations and accepting the need to be protected, to be cared for and to be nurtured by others is another lesson that God offers us at Christmas. "The secret of life," said Blessed John XXIII, "is to let oneself be carried to God."

The Holy Trinity chose "in the fullness of time" to enter into the complicated world of first-century Palestine. Christ, in his Spirit and in the church, continues to dwell in our lives. Christians are also called to insert themselves into what is becoming a more complicated world. For ways to do this, we need look no farther than the crèche, to the example of the Holy Family.

**Special Commentary**

# Science, Technology and the Human Future

*The Vatican addresses scientific control of human nature.*

IN HIS DYSTOPIAN NOVEL, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), the late C. S. Lewis embodied his fears for humanity's fate in the hands of an unprincipled science in the N.I.C.E. (National Institute for Coordinated Experiments) and its nominal leader, "The Head," the decapitated head of an executed French scientist, that served as the spokesman for evil spirits (eldila). As in his famous essay "The Abolition of Man," Lewis's concern was for the loss of genuine humanity to unscrupulous scientific invention, which in the novel consists in the suppression of natural human affections.

### Science Outpaces Morality

For many years, I thought that Lewis was a better theologian of the moral life than he was a moralist because of his curmudgeonly opposition to modernity and his fear of science. He may have lacked the subtlety in moral matters required of a moral theologian or the penetrating insight of a spiritual director, though *The Screwtape Letters* showed him astute about the varieties of evil; but his grasp of the dangers inherent in the technological manipulation of human life has proved prophetic. Louise Brown, the first child conceived by in vitro fertilization, is now 30 years old. Among the affluent a market has grown up in double and sometimes triple, side-by-side baby carriages to convey the twins and triplets born to older parents through in vitro technology. Animal cloning, surrogate motherhood, even male pregnancy are realities. Stem cell research is advancing quickly, and experimental therapies using products of stem-cell generation are already being tested. In a vexing development, the British government this year approved experimental development of human-animal hybrids. Human beings are threatened with becoming the instruments of utility and desire.

Scientific advances take place almost faster than law and ethics can keep up. And in some cases, like embryonic stem cell research, popular and special-interest agitation seems to be willfully antinomian, attempting to violate moral norms out of sheer defiance, even though adult stem cells already provide a proven and reliable source of biological material for research and therapy. Even more than at the dawn of genetic revolution a generation ago, serious discussion is needed among scientists, ethicists, theologians and lawyers. Innovations like bioethics centers, institutional review boards and the President's Council on Bioethics have failed to hold back the flood of ethically problematic biotechnologies and produce serious public examination of evolving technologies. A pragmatic attitude—"What we can do we must do"—has captured the media, the public and elites, especially in the field of law.

### *Dignitatis Personae*

Into this morally anarchic environment comes a new instruction on bioethical issues affecting the beginnings of life from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitatis Personae* (*The Dignity of a Person*, released Dec. 12). Addressed to "the Catholic faithful and to all who seek the truth," it will most profitably be studied by physicians, biologists (especially embryologists), geneticists, philosophical ethicists and moral theologians because of the technical scientific problems it addresses and the dry philosophical language it employs. But its significance for addressing the watershed we are crossing in the scientific control of human nature should not be underestimated.

The instruction reminds readers that the Catholic tradition favors science and supports endeavors that improve the human condition. It shares the evaluation that "science [is] an invaluable service to the integral good of the life and dignity of every human being." It encourages the participation of Catholics in scientific research and the progress of biomedicine, expressing special hope that the benefits of research will be shared with the afflicted in

**DREW CHRISTIANSEN, S.J.,** is editor in chief of **America.**

poor regions of the world. While the document is primarily concerned with problematic innovations in biomedicine, it commends the contribution of contemporary science in advancing knowledge of the beginning stages of life. Furthermore, it regards new developments as "positive and worthy of support when they serve to overcome or correct pathologies and succeed in re-establishing the normal functioning of human procreation." Its criticism and condemnation falls on those developments that "involve the destruction of human beings" and on techniques that "contradict the dignity of the person" or are employed contrary "to the integral good of man."

### The Argument

The twin piers of the instruction's argument are familiar from the moral teaching of Pope John Paul II and the congregation's previous instruction, *Donum Vitae* (1988): (1) "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception," and (2) "The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family," and so responsible procreation must be "the fruit of marriage." The text is strong, and sometimes eloquent, in expounding its insistence upon respect for the human person in every stage of its development and in whatever natural condition (of ability or disability). It reminds the reader, however, that the role of the magisterium in declaring its moral judgments is not to intervene in medical science, but rather to call "everyone to ethical and social responsibility for their actions."

The first chapter of the instruction lays out the suppositions about human life and procreation taken from "anthropology," i.e., the philosophy of human nature, ethics and theology. The following section addresses issues related to conception, in vitro fertilization and allied techniques; and a third takes up genetic engineering, commenting on gene therapy, stem cell research and hybridization. It is not possible here to list all the issues reviewed in the instruction or to summarize all its turns of argument. What I present are some highlights of greater public and pastoral interest. Those interested in reading the full document can find it online at www.americamagazine.org.

### Selected Topics

The instruction's treatment of in vitro fertilization reapplies the teaching of *Donum Vitae* and elaborates it with regard to recent medical developments. Briefly put, conception must take place as a result of the conjugal act, so only techniques that aid sexual intercourse and its fertility are licit. The document encourages adoption for infertile couples and research to prevent sterility, and it deplores the destruction of embryos that takes place as a matter of course during in vitro fertilization. Furthermore, it regards the freezing of embryos in connection with in vitro fertilization as weakening respect for the human person. Finally, it explicitly rejects intracytoplasmic sperm injection (I.C.S.I.) as a technical intervention by a third party in what ought to be a fully interpersonal act between spouses.

With respect to genetic engineering, the instruction approves of strictly therapeutic interventions to bring an individual to normal functioning, so-called "somatic cell gene therapy," but it prudently judges so-called "germ-line cell therapies" aimed at correcting an abnormality not only in the patient but also in his or her offspring as morally impermissible for the present, because the risks are considerable and the technique not fully controllable. The congregation opposes nontherapeutic or eugenic uses of genetic engineering to improve the gene pool through the selection or elimination of inherited traits. These, it says, favor the preferences of some over the will of others and, as the example of Nazism has shown, are notoriously liable to ideological taint.

Rejecting the use of embryonic stem cells, it recognizes as licit the use of stem cells taken from adults, from umbilical cords and from fetuses who have died of natural causes. Clinical use of stem cells from these sources is morally permissible; and "research initiatives involving the use of adult stem cells, since they do not present ethical problems" are encouraged. Human cloning is rejected because it does not proceed from sexual union and because it violates the dignity of the unique individual person. Therapeutic cloning, moreover, is regarded as especially heinous in that creating "embryos with the intention of destroying them, even with the intention of helping the sick, is completely incompatible with human dignity." It would make one human being a means to the end of health and life for another.

### Reaching Postmodern Minds

The instruction's subject matter is technical. It offers a sustained and serious treatment of vital problems. Just as the sciences have their own languages, so moral theology needs technical terminology and patterns of argument. The problems the congregation addresses are pressing; but the obstacles to communication are great. The language of natural law has limited power today to turn back the tide of technological transgression we face. Pastorally, the church needs to find an improved rhetoric to engage the postmodern mind, and in its apologetics it must experiment with varied genres of persuasion to affect the fluid imaginations of the Digital Age. Who will be the C. S. Lewis for our day, defending human nature and celebrating the Christian vision of life for the 21st century?

## Jerusalem Benedictines Plan New Center

An artist's rendition of the Beit Benedict Peace Academy.

Perched atop Jerusalem's Mount Zion, just outside the walls of the Old City, the Benedictine Dormition Abbey (the mother abbey of Weston Priory in Vermont) has long been a place of informal encounters among all residents of the city. Through its concert series held monthly in the basilica, the Benedictine monks have brought adherents of various traditions and many tourists to their monastery to be inspired by the beauty of the music and the monastery. They also have quietly hosted other ecumenical meetings, peace dialogues and interreligious gatherings over the years. But following the outbreak of the second intifada, the monks sensed an urgent need for a more formalized format for peace encounters as a response to the suffering in the Holy Land, said Johannes Oravecz, a Benedictine priest who is a monk at the abbey and director of the new Beit Benedict Peace Academy, as the abbey announced plans for the new institute. With the increasing level of violence and the ever-growing impasse in Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, the monks felt an urgent need to do more. So in 2003, at the height of the intifada, when they presented their annual peace award to two young peacemakers—one Israeli and one Palestinian—the monks realized that they were in a unique position to create a peace academy at a site where both Israelis and Palestinians felt safe and were comfortable to meet.

## Polish Archbishop Denounces Anti-Semitism

A Polish archbishop said the Catholic Church must not accept anti-Semitism within its ranks, calling it "irrational behavior." Archbishop Jozef Zycinski of Lublin spoke to Catholic News Service during a conference in Jerusalem on Nov. 30-Dec. 1 that focused on the relationships among the Polish Catholic Church, Jews and Israel. "In the case of Lublin...we emphasize that [the Jews] were present in our life, in cultural solidarity. It is part of our cultural heritage," he said. Some anti-Semitic incidents show a "generational problem" and a problem of "social frustration" more than a cultural phenomenon, he said. He cited as an example the issue of Radio Maryja's Tadeusz Rydzyk, a Redemptorist priest who has been accused of making anti-Semitic remarks and insulting the Polish president. Even the younger generation of Redemptorist priests are skeptical of Radio Maryja's message, said Archbishop Zycinski, noting that the ideas predate the Second Vatican Council and that the followers are a minute percentage of the population.

## Thousands Attend Funeral of Mumbai Victim

Some 10,000 people attended the funeral of Jordon Fernandes, a 21-year-old Catholic who worked as a waiter at the Oberoi Hotel, one of two luxury hotels terrorists targeted in the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai. Fernandes was among the more than 170 people who died as terrorists sprayed bullets from assault rifles and exploded grenades at 11 locations in the city, India's commercial capital, in late November. About 30 priests and 60 nuns joined mourners at his funeral on Nov. 29 at the Vasai Diocese's Church of the Mother of God, about 30 miles north of Mumbai. "God gave me a son and God has taken him away," Fernandes's mother, Collette, 50, told UCA News Dec. 1. "We have forgiven the terrorists. But my son was too young to die like this."

Fernandes had a degree in hotel management, and Nov. 30 was to be his last day working at the hotel before taking up a new job as an assistant steward in a hotel in Australia.

## Pope Requests More Aid for Christians in Holy Land

Pope Benedict XVI asked the knights and dames of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem to continue praying and working to help Christians in the Holy Land, who are "burdened by an uncertain and dangerous climate." The pope met Dec. 5 with 125 leaders of the chivalric organization, which is dedicated to supporting the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and to responding to the needs of Catholics in the Holy Land.

Cardinal John P. Foley, grand master of the order, told Pope Benedict that in the last eight years the 23,000 knights and dames had donated almost $50 million to the Catholic Church and its institutions in the Holy Land. "The major part of these schools and institutions serve not only Catholics from the Latin Patriarchate, but all Christians and, in reality, the entire population—Christians, Muslims and Jews," the cardinal said.

## Alexy II, Head of Russian Orthodox Church, Dies

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev makes the sign of the cross at the coffin of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral Dec. 9.

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow, died Dec. 5 at his home outside the Russian capital. He was 79. Although the cause of his death was not immediately made public, he had suffered from a heart condition and had been ill for some time. Patriarch Alexy led the world's largest Orthodox church since 1990. As primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, the patriarch was the spiritual leader of more than 110 million church members in Russia, the former Soviet republics and the diaspora. He led the church through the difficult transition from the end of Soviet repression to an era of religious freedom and sought to revitalize traditional religious values in a society that was still grappling with the aftereffects of totalitarianism and the impact of newfound freedoms. Pope Benedict XVI praised the patriarch's efforts "for the rebirth of the church after the severe ideological oppression which led to the martyrdom of so many witnesses to the Christian faith."

## Ugandan Archbishop Criticizes Military

Otii Celcius, a seminary student, helps build the mud brick wall of a new latrine in Awer camp for internally displaced persons near Gulu, Uganda, in 2004. The seminarians perform community service in the camps.

Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu, Uganda, said that using the military to pursue the rebel leader Joseph Kony after he failed to sign a peace agreement with the Ugandan government is not a good solution. Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, which has engaged the Ugandan government in war in northern Uganda since 1986, was supposed to sign the peace agreement on Nov. 29 in southern Sudan but failed to appear. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni had warned earlier that Kony's failure to sign the agreement would result in his being hunted by Ugandan, Sudanese and Congolese forces. In an interview with Catholic News Service on Dec. 2, Archbishop Odama, returning from Sudan, said Kony needs another chance. "The road to violence in engaging rebel Kony in war will lead us to more loss of lives of innocent people living around him [in Sudan] and all people who are in the vicinity where [his] people are dwelling," said Archbishop Odama, whose archdiocese is in northern Uganda.

## California Bishops Urge Tolerance in Dispute

San Francisco's archbishop has appealed to people on both sides of the same-sex marriage issue to be tolerant of each other, to "disagree without being disagreeable" and not presume to know "the real motives" behind people's viewpoints. "We need to stop hurling names like 'bigot' and 'pervert' at each other. And we need to stop it now," Archbishop George H. Niederauer said Dec. 1 in an open letter. California voters on Nov. 4 passed a ballot initiative called Proposition 8, which is a state constitutional amendment to define marriage as only "valid and recognized" if between a man and a woman. Since Election Day there have been vigorous protests against the outcome in California and around the country by gay rights supporters. Some of the demonstrations have targeted churches and in particular Mormon temples, because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a major funder of a campaign supporting the measure. The Catholic Church and other denominations also supported it. In a message to homosexual Catholics in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony said the recent vote in California defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman "does not diminish in any way [your] importance" nor "lessen your personal dignity and value as full members of the body of Christ."

## Catholic Charities USA Named Top Provider

Catholic Charities USA is the country's top voluntary provider of social services, according to Charity Navigator's *Holiday Giving Guide 2008*. The Catholic agency, based in Alexandria, Va., also finished second overall in The NonProfit Times's "Top 100" list of the country's largest charities and 11th in the most recent Philanthropy 400 ranking by The Chronicle of Philanthropy. The Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, welcomed the recognition.

From CNS and other sources. CNS photos.

# A Tiny Baby, A Quiver of Hope

## 'We are called to let God's love become incarnate in our own lives.'

TWO GREETING CARDS have been occupying my thoughts. Both were sent to celebrate the birth of a new child, my first granddaughter. Both have a great deal to reveal about God, as well as about their senders.

The first comes from a dear Jesuit friend now in his mid-80s. He writes directly to the newborn, addressing her by name and expressing an understanding of God's ways that completely overturns the usual notions that surround the coming of a new baby. He begins by welcoming her, and saying how glad we are that she has come to join us "down here." He notes that she has arrived four weeks ahead of schedule, and adds that he is delighted; this reveals that she is eager to be here and ready to make an early start on whatever it is she has come to do for us.

What a difference! To regard a newborn child not just as a helpless tiny person, dependent on us for everything, cute and cuddly but, after all, "just a baby." But rather to revere this newcomer for who she truly is—"a spiritual being on a human journey," whose life has some unique gift to bring to the whole human family. I feel the goose bumps rising on my skin as I realize the impact of what this wise friend has written.

The second card is addressed to me. It tells me that "this baby has some terrific footsteps to follow." It brings tears to my eyes, to go with the goose bumps. I had never thought of it like this. Will these footsteps—my footsteps—really help to lead this little one in the direction of life in all its fullness? It turns any sentimental baby-gawking into a call to accept a new and daunting responsibility—to walk a path that helps to lead another in ways of love, justice and integrity.

In one sense, this tiny baby leads us, helpless though she is, because she is the future. In another sense she follows where we lead, and our own experience and convictions will help to guide her steps. She leads. She follows. Both cards speak a profound truth. Each life, including yours and mine, is a space for God's dream to unfold in a unique way. Helpless though we may feel and, like my granddaughter, very premature, this does not alter the staggering truth that we are here for a purpose, a purpose that was known to God before we were conceived. Even before our universe flared forth from its first beginnings, the core of our being was held in God's heart. The discovery of that purpose starts when the midwife places us in our mother's arms, and it continues as we search out God's ways through the tangle of our daily lives. It is a purpose that only God-with-us can fulfill.

Very soon we will be celebrating the arrival of another baby. Every year this season calls us to contemplate what was really going on in that manger in a remote town in the Middle East, and to reflect on the reverberations of that birth all down the intervening centuries. We think of a little family, struggling, surely, with the momentous events that have overtaken them and turned their lives upside-down. Every baby does that, but this one does it on a grand scale. We watch as the ancient tale unfolds, as they trek to Bethlehem to do what needs to be done to comply with administrative authority. We crouch in the corner of the stable and let ourselves be present to the most intimate of moments, as the new parents hold their child, perhaps already intuiting that in fact he is the one who is holding them.

When I reflect on these things, I am reminded of an interesting difference in the words that describe the event of going into labor and giving birth in the English and German languages respectively. In Britain we speak of a woman's "confinement." The event is focused on what is happening to the mother; she is confined to bed, she is going through a painful and sometimes risky process. The term has slightly negative connotations. In German the equivalent word is *Entbindung*, which means unfolding, unbinding, releasing, liberating. This expresses a very different view of the process, focused on the new life that is emerging.

We are the body of Christ today. We are called to let God's love become incarnate in our own lives and situations. We are asked to give birth to something of God's dream for creation, in the details of our own daily lives. How do we feel about our response? Is it a "confinement," putting our religious life in a box and keeping it safely contained in practices that we can control? Or are we willing to risk whatever might happen if we truly invite God's love and power to unfold in our lived experience? Most parents rapidly discover that though the baby books may give them detailed instructions on how to proceed, the new baby does not follow any rules. We can expect to be surprised over and over by how the reality of this newborn child of Bethlehem unfolds in our lives. Will we keep him tightly swaddled in our own ideas of how he should be handled and how far he should be allowed to move and act, or dare we "unbind" him and set him free to transform our lives and our world?

This Christmas, in spite of economic gloom, a quiver of fresh hope really is palpable in our world. May this Child, whom we follow, give us the grace to become people whose own footsteps lead in the direction of peace, hope and new beginnings; and may we have the courage to set him free to surprise and challenge us around every turn of the coming year.

***Margaret Silf***

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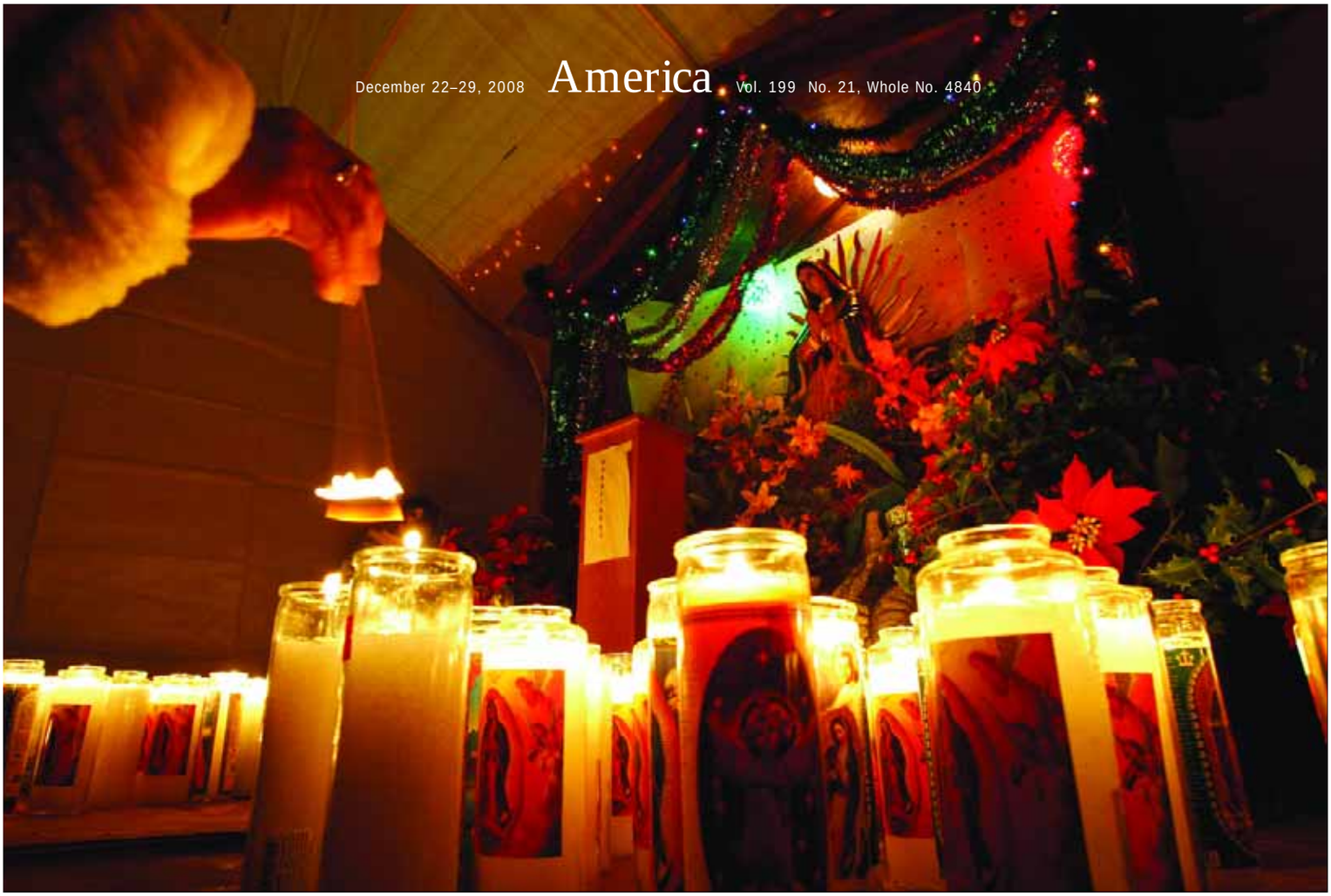

A Nativity encounter in the Deep South

# Candles of Faith

– BY NANCY NEEDHAM –

THERE WE WERE, two inexperienced yet very determined lay missionaries, driving down a narrow highway in rural Alabama with someone we barely knew to a place that appeared as the smallest of locations on the well-used map we kept under the seat. Nonetheless, our guide was quite adamant about the urgent need for us to see *this place* and meet *these people*. We submitted to her entreaties and set out on a journey unlike any other.

Our guide, Angelica, was a not-so-very-young divorced mother of two. A Mexican immigrant herself, she was among other things a self-appointed social service emissary for hundreds of disenfranchised Hispanic immigrants who live in remote, rural areas of southern Alabama. Over the course of several months, she had waged a determined

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campaign of visits to Catholic churches to petition prayers and aid to meet the needs of immigrants less fortunate than she. In the end, help did not come in the way she expected, nor in a way we might have anticipated.

Our journey actually began a few days prior to meeting Angelica. We had received a phone call from some faithful friends in a nearby Georgia town who wanted to donate used beds and clothing to our ministry. The challenge was, as always, transportation. On several occasions in the past, these friends had formed a convoy of vans and trucks to bring us donations. This time, though, they asked us to come and pick up the offerings so we could meet the donors and their families. Grateful for all the aid God sent, we set off.

In the midst of loading up the donations, we received a phone message that someone had a slightly used baby bed to contribute. Since we had learned early in our missionary experience never to say no to a donation, we humbly accepted the bed without knowing how or for whom we would use it. On the way home, we marveled at the goodness of so many people to two missionary neophytes, and the amazing way everything they had donated fit perfectly inside our little truck.

Two days after returning from this journey of generosity and providence, we met Angelica for the first time at a Sunday Mass. She told us about an urgent need to help a Guatemalan family and their newborn son. "There is something very special about these people," she declared earnestly. "Please come as soon as possible. I will guide you."

PHOTO: CNS/JOSE LUIS MAGANA

## A Hidden Grotto

With the blessing of our pastor, we agreed to go; and we set off early the next morning. The route to this place was a long, winding road, an old two-lane highway that curved and climbed around the hills of southern Alabama without rhyme or reason. Through sparsely settled, nameless towns and old, abandoned whistle-stops, we made our way through what seemed another time and place to meet these people.

The place was on the outskirts of a very small town in an old, abandoned schoolhouse. Its two wings of classrooms had been converted into tiny one-window apartments. Our first glimpse was blocked by three large Dumpsters. With their lids carelessly thrown open, they were overflowing with trash and surrounded by scattered empty bottles, crushed cans and torn papers.

As we peered over the Dumpsters, we spotted two ominous-looking buildings that fit the description we had been given of an old school converted into apartment buildings. These apartments were the opposite of elegant. Their decoration was peeling paint and broken windows. We had reached our destination.

First, we had to determine how to approach the building, because at the edge of the road there was a steep drop-off to a treacherous clay ravine. It was disfigured by deep holes and uneven tire ruts created by years of uncontrolled erosion and countless cars driving over wet, slippery clay. Slowly and cautiously, we inched our way off the asphalt one tire at a time, thankful for four-wheel drive.

Vigilant for unfamiliar perils, we disembarked from the safety of our truck, saying a brief prayer for protection to St. Michael as we tiptoed through the litter to enter the first building on our left through a shadowy tunnel of dust and doors. It was as if we had entered another world. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we were attracted to the source of a strange noise, like that of an oversized cricket. There, outside the third door on our right, was a small wooden cage-like box. Approaching it with more curiosity than caution, we discovered it held hostage a scrawny golden-brown chicken. A proud hen, she had just deposited two brown speckled eggs in the center of her cage. We chuckled at our surprise encounter, the hen clucked blissfully at her accomplishment, and we continued cautiously down the hall of doors.

> This was not a typical laundry room.

This time we followed a new sound past a dozen firmly closed, well-used doors. It was a rhythmic drumming: *ka-thunk*, *ka-thunk*, *ka-thunk*, *ka-thunk*. The somewhat familiar cadence led us to the end of the hall where half a dozen washers and dryers in use churned and clanked. Yet this was not a typical laundry room.

In the midst of a tangled weave of strings of multicolored, blinking Christmas lights, a large poster of Our Lady of Guadalupe smiled at us. It was the centerpiece of this humble, homemade grotto. Under the Virgin's feet was the warm glow of about 50 candles in tall glass jars, haphazardly arranged on a rickety wooden table. The jars wore labels with the faces of many different saints offering their intercessory prayers, including St. Jude, Our Lady of Guadalupe, St. Michael and the Guardian Angels. Each candle burned at a different level, giving undeniable testimony that many faithful pilgrims routinely placed their petitions on this makeshift altar. Before we left this remarkable sight, we prayed a Hail Mary in hope that the Mother of God would hear and answer the ardent prayers of these pilgrim people. "Ka-thunk, amen," the dryers confidently concluded our prayers.

## A New Nativity

Retracing our steps past the contented hen, we negotiated the opening between the two buildings and entered the second hall. It too was dark, with a dozen doors filling each

wall. There were no chickens here. On the contrary, a delicious aroma of spicy food filled the air. We saw a familiar glow at the end of the hallway: another grotto to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

We could not help but recall the Virgin's message in her miraculous appearance to St. Juan Diego on Mount Tepeyac in Mexico City: "Tell the bishop to build a church in this place." Here, in the midst of a small, quiet Southern town with no Catholic church, we had found the perpetual burning of lamps in a different kind of parish, a place where the humblest of all people made known their hopes through faith in the intercession of the Mother of God. We wondered, "Just who are these people our guide brought us to meet, and how did they get such faith?"

There was insufficient time to ponder the question, because Angelica motioned for us to follow her to the smudged, handprint-stained door of apartment 7C. We knocked, loudly declaring a sweet "Buenos dias" to the occupants, hoping they would not be afraid to open to us. "Soy Angelica con las hermanas de la iglesia Católica," our guide declared through the door. "It's Angelica. I've come with the ladies from the Catholic church."

A murmur of voices in a Mayan dialect followed her announcement and slowly, cautiously, the door opened to us. "Pásense." "Come in." Angelica entered first, greeting three tiny women with long, flowing black hair with a kiss on the cheek and shaking the hands of their husbands as they wiped the sleep from their eyes. They had recently finished working all night at a nearby factory. Behind the women five very young children hid in fear, holding bottles of juice in one hand and gripping their mothers' dresses with the other. Angelica introduced us to each person in turn.

After greeting the adults and offering candy and smiles to the children, we were escorted to a tiny bedroom. We entered the darkened room holding our breath in anticipation. We could hardly believe our eyes. It was as if we had been transported through time and space to Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. There, on the cement floor, a mother humbly lay with her newborn baby boy. Instead of a manger, they were sleeping on a flattened cardboard box. There were no blankets or swaddling clothes for the child of this holy family.

We did not breathe for what seemed like a full minute as we took in the sight. I could not help wondering which of the candles in the makeshift grottos had been lit by this mother. As we caught our breath, we whispered a quiet greeting to the mother so as not to wake the baby and asked if she would like to have a bed for her son. When she nodded affirmatively, we excused ourselves, saying we had one outside in our truck—the very bed that had been donated to us only a few days earlier. Happily, we also had blankets, food, toys, mattresses and rosaries enough for everyone liv-

ing in this humble apartment.

These people were indeed special. Living between two makeshift grottos to Our Lady of Guadalupe, they found their prayers heard and answered by God. But God was not finished with them. Not only did they receive a few comfort items, but within three years of the birth of this child, missionary priests were sent to the area and began to offer the Mass in Spanish in a makeshift church, which continues there today.

### Spiritual Network

How did this encounter make a difference in our lives? First, we actually saw God move step by step through various agents to answer a mother's and father's prayers for the needs of their newborn child. Angelica, our friends in Georgia, two women and a truck—all these formed a spiritual network for God to use in a special way.

We also witnessed a unique place of prayer: not a beautiful cathedral on a hill in a grand city, but two humble wooden altars covered with candles in laundry rooms. Furthermore, we can testify that the intercessor for those prayers was none other than the Mother of God herself, Our Lady of Guadalupe; so we cannot doubt the merits of her mantle of support.

Our encounter with these people put us face-to-face with the poor and their prayers. They had journeyed to Alabama because the economy of their homeland had no room for them. Like the shepherds, we had the privilege of going to "Bethlehem" to see what had taken place. There we saw the baby sleeping on the cardboard "manger" and delivered a real bed to him. God had visited his people.

In his book, *Let God's Light Shine Forth*, Robert Moynihan quotes one of the writings of Pope Benedict XVI: "God speaks quietly. But he gives us all kinds of signs. In retrospect, especially, we can see that he has given us a little nudge through a friend, through a book, or through what we see as a failure—even through accidents. Life is actually full of these silent indications. If I remain alert, then slowly…I begin to feel how God is guiding me."

We are invited to widen our lives, our ways of thinking, our prayers and our beliefs to include the possibility that God may wish to use us as a part of the network of faith to answer prayer. It starts, of course, with just a mustard seed of faith that God answers prayer: we must ask. God uses all of us as instruments, so just say yes. Believe. If not for yourself, believe for others, especially when you encounter the flames from their candles of faith. A

From 1929, the story behind "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," at americamagazine.org/pages.

# How to Save Catholic Schools

*Facing a crisis with confidence*

BY DONALD W. WUERL


PHOTO: CNS/KAREN WITW

ONE COLD, WET JANUARY DAY I visited one of the inner-city Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Washington. As I met with the students gathered in that all-purpose room that seems to be a part of every parochial elementary school, serving as the gym, lunchroom and even makeshift chapel, I asked, "Why did we come to school today? What brings us to school on a day like this?" Hands shot up. With great pride, a fourth grader who was directly in front of me replied, "I come to this school so that I can get an education and get a life!" In a nutshell, he gave the reason why we work so hard to sustain our Catholic schools, especially in the inner city. The schools offer their students a future.

## An Endangered Species

The effectiveness of Catholic schools in the United States is well known. As many public schools face challenges, Catholic schools are seen as beacons of hope, especially for lower-income children in urban areas. In fact, the National Catholic Educational Association reports that 97 percent of Catholic high school graduates go on to college. Catholic schools work; they succeed in educating children.

But in many areas these schools are becoming an endangered species. At a White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools in April, President George W. Bush noted that nationwide, inner-city faith-based schools are "facing a crisis." Nearly 1,200 of these schools closed between 2000 and 2008, displacing over 400,000 students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Why has this happened? One cause is obvious: demographic changes. The population has moved from older northeastern cities to the southwest, from city to suburbs or beyond. The District of Columbia, for example, has lost approximately 30 percent of its population since 1950, including 10 percent between 2000 and 2005. That means fewer children to attend city schools.

Another major issue is finances, particularly in urban centers and poor rural communities. Many families cannot financially support the schools. Neither can the local parish, which has been the traditional model for Catholic elementary schools, especially as costs increase of instructional materials, new technology and maintenance on aging buildings.

Today, most Catholic schools are no longer staffed by members of religious orders. A study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute points out that in 1967, 58 percent of the teachers in urban Catholic schools were nuns, priests or brothers. Today they comprise barely 4 percent. Lay teachers make up 96 percent of all Catholic school teachers.

In light of these challenges and the realization that we need to take clear and decisive action to ensure the viability of our Catholic schools, I called for an archdiocesan-wide convocation on Catholic education last year, and invited pastors, principals and members of parish councils, finance councils and other advisory groups to discuss together the future of our Catholic schools. This conversation was important because Catholic education—the passing on of the faith—is the responsibility of all Catholics, not just parents or the parish with an on-site school. Out of that convocation came a commitment to develop a comprehensive strategy to strengthen our schools, focusing on four key areas: academic excellence, Catholic identity, affordability and geographic accessibility (so that as many Catholic students as possible are within a reasonable distance of a Catholic school).

## Setting Financial Goals

Affordability is critical. In our inner-city schools, many students live with the realities of urban poverty. And in rural St. Mary's County, Md., a Chesapeake Bay waterman may earn as little as $17,000 per year. We have worked very hard to use resources wisely and to keep our schools affordable. For some families, it is still too much. Yet tuition covers

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only 70 percent of the cost of education on average.

Traditionally, Catholic schools have been financed by tuition payments, parish and archdiocesan subsidies and local fundraisers. Some high schools also receive subsidies from their sponsoring religious community. These continue to be important sources of support for our schools, but we need to think differently if we are to meet the financial challenge of providing Catholic education into the future. This includes seeking new sources of funding to provide better service to families with significant financial need. Over the past few years, tuition aid endowments have been established in Washington through a capital campaign. We have sought new donors—Catholic and non-Catholic. We also are rethinking how funds are used.

Historically, an education fund financed through an assessment on all parishes has been used for late-year operating subsidies to a small number of needy schools. While helping cover the financial gap of an under-enrolled school, the practice did nothing to fill a school's seats. So this year, the archdiocese piloted a new tuition-aid program. Initially, nine schools were given a portion of their usual subsidy early to use as partial tuition aid to attract and to retain students who otherwise could not attend. The goal was to help families, increase enrollment and increase tuition yield.

**Above: Linda Hartzell, a teacher, poses with eighth-graders Kahreemah Parker, Verishia Coaxum and Gemina Lopez in front of a mural the students helped create for the lobby of Gesu School in Philadelphia.**

The early results were so promising we quickly expanded the program. By the opening of the school year, approximately $900,000 given to 33 schools resulted in over 530 new or retained students and over $1.8 million in tuition payments from families.

With these new initiatives, available tuition aid more than doubled to $2 million; the actual need, however, is $18 million. Clearly, the church cannot meet the need on its own. Partnerships—with private scholarship groups and between families and governments—are critical for achieving educational equality for families. Considering the contribution of Catholic schools to the broader community, it makes sense. Last year, Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Washington saved local governments close to $385 million in tax expenditures for public schools.

## New Strategies

Eleven years ago Cardinal James Hickey, then archbishop of Washington, was urged to close 12 inner-city Catholic schools. Instead, under his direction a consortium was founded with central oversight of eight schools and a mandate to strengthen academics, raise money and manage many administrative tasks so that principals and teachers could focus on students and academic needs.

The archdiocese and donors invested more than $68 million in these schools over 11 years. The consortium model proved to be an effective tool to sustain Catholic schools in the heart of the city, ensure their academic quality and provide faith-based and value-centered formation.

We learned, however, that even a successful model has limitations. The original consortium eventually expanded to 14 schools between 2002 and 2005 in an effort to keep other financially distressed schools from closing. Two schools consolidated; but by spring 2007, it was clear that the stress of the rapid expansion, combined with declining enrollments in many schools, had overwhelmed the consortium financially. The archdiocese covered a deficit of $7 million this past year alone.

After studies and consultations with advisory groups and 1,300 people at 12 parishes, approval eventually was given to continue five schools as Catholic, one under parish oversight and four as the Consortium of Catholic Academies. The others were converted to values-based charter schools as an alternative to closing. This reorganization allows us to sustain a continued presence of Catholic schools throughout the city—there are 21 in Washington, D.C., today,

including 12 parish elementary schools—and ensure that schools serving lower income neighborhoods have access to needed financial and administrative resources. The archdiocese will provide $1 million to the consortium this year, and donors another $2 million.

The consortium is one of several innovative partnerships. Holy Redeemer School, not far from the U.S. Capitol, is a Magnificat School. This unique five-year partnership between the school, the archdiocese and the University of Notre Dame brings professional development, technical assistance and other support to get this inner-city school back on its feet.

Last year, the archdiocese opened Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School in partnership with the Salesians of Don Bosco and with support from the business community and the national Cristo Rey Network. Very low-income students get a Catholic college preparatory education through a creative work-study program. They "job share" at corporate offices, gaining valuable work experience and covering a large portion of their tuition.

The archdiocese also has established several regional elementary schools in outer suburbs, with costs and responsibilities shared by several parishes.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh, where I served as bishop for 18 years, in an effort to keep open as many Catholic schools as possible, had been giving a number of inner-city schools huge and unsustainable subsidies for years. By 1988, the diocese was approaching insolvency and had to take dramatic steps.

Out of this crisis came the Extra Mile Education Foundation. Business and foundation leaders across the community—Protestant, Jewish, Orthodox and Catholic—rallied to establish a foundation that would raise funds from a cross-section of foundations, corporations, businesses and individuals to support what now includes six urban schools, serving a student body that is predominantly African-American, economically disadvantaged and non-Catholic. Approximately 1,000 children a year receive a quality education. None have to repeat ninth grade, and close to 100 percent go on to graduate from high school.

### Partnerships Make the Difference

The Extra Mile Foundation and the Consortium of Catholic Academies are two of many models nationwide that demonstrate that it is not only possible to engage the wider civic and business communities in the work of saving Catholic schools that serve the needy, but that it can be done well.

When we look to the wider community for partnerships, we do so with an awareness that more and more of our neighbors recognize the unique gift that Catholic education is to the community. This is even more obvious as we serve more non-Catholics. Our students graduate with a formation in self-discipline, personal integrity and moral values that come out of the faith-based environment of the school. These schools merit the support of the entire community.

Simple justice requires that parents benefit from the monies that we all pay in taxes for the education of all children. Parents have every right to expect that they can choose a school that meets the needs of their children and that the money they have paid for education will follow their child. Without funding, parents have no real school choice.

The Catholic Church cannot be expected—out of the free-will offerings of the faithful and other donors—to continue to provide such a wide-serving system of successful schools all by itself.

In the District of Columbia, a promising federal pilot program, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, is helping bring educational equality to low-income families. Federal grants provide a limited number of families with tuition and some fees up to $7,500. For those at our archdiocesan schools, the program typically pays $4,500 for tuition. The difference between the grant and the real cost of education is paid by the archdiocese and the Catholic schools. While studies show high parent satisfaction and academic progress—the 2008 valedictorian at Archbishop Carroll High School was an Opportunity Scholarship recipient—the program, unfortunately, will end at the conclusion of this school year unless Congress reauthorizes it.

Another example of partnerships working well can be seen in Pennsylvania. In 2001, the legislature authorized a business tax credit to support scholarships for lower- and middle-income students to attend non-public schools, and professional development for teachers in public and non-public schools. In the first six years, businesses donated $360 million for scholarships, benefiting nearly 160,000 students and funding thousands of public education initiatives.

An effort is underway in Maryland for a similar partnership involving government, businesses, families and schools, called Boast (Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers).

Partnerships like these—with school families, parishes, local dioceses, the business and donor community and public entities—are critical to the success of our schools. With them, the future of Catholic schools and the students they serve looks bright. It is time to think differently about how we sustain Catholic schools so generations of children can benefit from the firm foundation and great education they provide. All you have to do is look at the happy faces of the children in our schools. Our kids know that our schools work. A

From the archives, the manger at Bethlehem as the first Catholic school, at americamagazine.org/pages.

# The Voice of Chartres

*Malcolm Miller illumines the Gothic jewel.*

BY LEO J. O'DONOVAN

"WHATEVER Chartres may be now," wrote Henry Adams, "when young it was a smile.... To us it is a child's fancy, a toy-house to please the Queen of Heaven—to please her so much she would be happy in it—to charm her till she smiled." The cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres is the crown of Gothic art and architecture. More than five decades ago, Mary's smile beguiled Malcolm Miller, a native of Britain. Ever since, he has made his home in her sight and guided pilgrims, students and tourists through the treasures of her home. A distinguished interpreter of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption of Chartres, Mr. Miller is a chevalier of the Ordre National de Mérite and chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Among the guidebooks he has written, Chartres Cathedral (1985, 1996) is perhaps the best known. When I visited Chartres last summer, Mr. Miller agreed to this interview for America.

***You have delighted visitors to the cathedral for decades. When did you first think of what you do here as a vocation?***

I remember that moment: the afternoon of July 19, 1968. After nearly seven months in an English hospital and six operations, I took a train from Paris back to Chartres; I saw the cathedral and wept. I knew that this is where I should spend the rest of my life.

My attachment to Chartres, however, had begun 12 years earlier. For a degree in French from Durham University, I was required to spend an academic year in France teaching English in a high school and writing a mini-thesis. I wrote about Chartres Cathedral. After graduating, I took teaching appointments in Pau, Marseille, Toulon and Paris, but returned to Chartres each Easter and summer vacation to be a guide at the cathedral. My former students and their families then became my friends. One was the son of the state-employed architect responsible for the cathedral, which, like most other French cathedrals, has been state-owned since the French Revolution. He and the

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clergy authorized me as a guide in 1958, but I had no idea then that it would become my life's work.

***Could you sketch the history of the cathedral's development?***
The present early 13th-century cathedral stands on a Roman site. Chronicles mention the destruction of a Chartres Cathedral by Hunald, Duke of Aquitaine, in 743, but this was not likely the first Chartres cathedral. The second recorded Chartres Cathedral is known to have been dedicated to the Virgin Mary, because a text mentions that Charlemagne's father, Pippin the Short, King of the Western Franks, sent gifts to the "Church of Our Lady at Chartres." (Paris Cathedral at that time was dedicated to St. Stephen.) Vikings pillaged and burned the city and its cathedral in 858, and a new cathedral was built quickly. Probably for its dedication (again to Mary) in 876, Charles the Bald presented a famous relic, the Sancta Camisia, supposedly worn by Mary when she gave birth to Jesus. Later, as the cult of the Virgin Mary developed in the Western church, the relic turned Chartres Cathedral into one of the great pilgrimage shrines of Europe, and Mary became "Queen of All the Saints."

One of the people responsible for the cult of the Virgin was St. Fulbert, who came to Chartres around 990 to teach in the cathedral school, one of the most illustrious in Europe. In 1006 Fulbert was enthroned as bishop of Chartres. After a fire in 1020, he commissioned the construction of a much larger Romanesque edifice to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims. When Fulbert's building was severely damaged in another fire in 1194, only the crypts, the two mid-12th-century western towers (with the steeple of the one to the south), and the Royal Portal survived. This determined both the width and length of the present Gothic cathedral, in that the only possible expansions were upward and the addition of a transept. The extra height was made possible with flying buttresses, which enabled the master masons to open the walls to let in more light and to be filled with stained-glass windows.

Donations for rebuilding came from kings and queens in France, Spain and England; a duke of Brittany paid for a rose window, and other windows have the heraldry of aristocratic families, such as Montfort, Beaumont, Courtenay and Clément. Craftsmen and the merchant brotherhoods financed another 42 windows. The finest masons, sculptors, carpenters, smiths and stained-glass window makers were brought to the site.

Today Chartres Cathedral is the best preserved of Europe's Gothic cathedrals, with most of its original stained glass and sculpture still intact.

***How are the architecture, statuary and windows of the cathedral interrelated?***

When lecturing on Chartres Cathedral, I liken it to a modern public library, except that its texts are written in the stained glass and sculpture of the 12th and 13th centuries. Printing had not yet been invented; paper did not exist in Europe. Most of the population could not read or write, but people knew how to "read" a window. The lives of the saints were well known, and the educated could understand the more complex symbolic interpretations of the biblical texts.

Another comparison is that Chartres Cathedral is a great book we can still read in the 21st century. Its architecture is the metaphorical binding; its text is that of linear, eschatological time from the creation to the Day of Judgment, with God incarnate, Jesus, in the middle of time (as redeemer) and at the end of time (as judge). In medieval times the Old Testament was considered a prefiguration of the New. Saint Augustine wrote: "The Old Testament is the

New Testament veiled. The New Testament is the Old Testament unveiled."

***There are said to be 176 images of Mary in the cathedral. Can you discuss the range of styles represented?***
The number comes from a book written in 1926 by Canon Yves Delaporte, the diocesan archivist. Mary is omnipresent because of the relic and because Chartres Cathedral is dedicated to her Assumption.

Mary is represented as a child with her parents, Anne and Joachim, in both the 12th- and 13th-century stained glass and sculpture, and in the 16th-century Renaissance choir screen. As Theotokos (God-bearer), Mary is the instrument of the Incarnation and is represented in the nativity scenes as well as in the Jesse Tree window. Her death (dormition) and assumption are narrated in both 13th-century glass and sculpture. Mary is also sculpted on the central tympanum of both the north porch, crowned by her Son as Queen of Heaven, and the south porch, as the principal intercessor for humanity on the Day of Judgment.

As elsewhere in medieval iconography, Mary is represented as the Seat of Wisdom, the Throne of Solomon and Notre-Dame de la Belle Verrière (Our Lady of the Beautiful Window)—in stained glass, in the crypt and in a wooden carving.

***Do the student pilgrimages that began with the French poet Charles Péguy (1873-1914) continue today?***
Yes, the student pilgrimage still exists, although the number of pilgrims has decreased. But the number of tourists has increased dramatically since I began guiding in 1958.

***Have aspects of the church grown more important for you over the years?***
Especially exciting for me is the restoration of both the sculpture and the stained glass. Traces of medieval paint can now be seen on the sculpture of the north porch. The cleaning of the south porch sculpture, using laser equipment, will begin in 2009.

Restoration of the stained glass began in 1974, and all the lower windows now sparkle. Work has begun (cleaning, releading, double glazing) on the clerestory windows in the choir, and the difference is amazing.

Medieval texts speak of cathedrals as an earthly symbol of God's city, the Heavenly Jerusalem, its walls "garnished with all manner of precious stones" (Rv 21:19). A

Page 19. Detail from the life of our Lord: Joseph leading a white mule carrying Mary and child. Stained glass, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Chartres, France.

Page 20. Detail from the life of our Lord: the city of Sotinen in Egypt, to which the Holy Family is welcomed by the governor and his retinue. Stained glass, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Chartres, France.

Page 21. Detail from the life of our Lord: the massacre of the Innocents. Stained glass, Cathedral of Notre Dame, Chartres, France.

All photographs courtesy of Sonia Halliday Photographs.

# Happy Holy Day, Everybody

*Fourth in a series for Advent and Christmas*

BY DAVID O'BRIEN

We Christians love Christmas, and the greeting "Merry Christmas" brings a warm glow to the darkest and coldest time of the year. Religiously diverse Americans, however, need a new holy day so we can say to one another, "Happy Holidays," and mean it. This year especially, amid multiple threats of terrorism and in the face of daunting economic and environmental challenges, global solidarity should be on everyone's agenda. We could use a day that would call us together and give us a taste of what it is like to be one human family. The feast of Christmas, of God become one with all of us, celebrates that promise. It should inspire us to find a new holiday that will embrace everyone, everywhere.

Consider Epiphany, Jan. 6. It centers on a great story with something for everyone, including sacramental symbols that invite meditation, repentance and renewal. In the West, Epiphany is an almost forgotten Christian holy day ready for 21st-century, prime-time renewal.

Think about it. Epiphany concerns three astrologers ("wise men" and "kings" are descriptions added later), quintessential sign-seekers like those still with us in the morning newspaper. What's more current than searchers, alert to signs of the sacred? Across the globe, from southern California to burgeoning cities in China, there are people displaced from their traditional cultures and neighborhoods; many are exiles or refugees; and some are filled with aspirations for a better future. All of us search the skies and our own experience for signs of the sacred. As sign-seekers, those astrologers are like us.

What happened when they asked King Herod, wrapped in his sacred authority, for help in finding "a new king"? He tried to manipulate their faith and use their hope to protect his power. Later, filled with anxiety about a new king, Herod played it safe and killed all the babies, the Holy Innocents. By that time, of course, the infant king whom the

astrologers had found was off in Egypt, a refugee himself.

Here is the amazing part: the astrologers are looking for a king; and, having met Herod, they know something about kings. Yet when they reach Bethlehem and find a baby in an animal's manger, they do not hesitate. "Overwhelmed with joy," Matthew tells us, they "prostrated themselves and did him homage." The star had brought them to a poor, unknown family's baby, yet they had no doubt that he was the king for whom they searched. Shepherds, with the help of angels, knew it too. But most people, wrapped up in religion (then and now) never figured out what the astrologers knew.

Christians deserve some credit for taking up the baby, and later his cross, and sometimes—not often—living according to his message. But Epiphany was an early warning sign about religions that turn signs into boundaries. Epiphany may mean that this baby is not just for Christians, but for everybody. That need not mean everyone has to become a Christian. After all, with the help of an angel, the astrologers "returned home by another route." The story gives no hint that they should become Jews or anything else. We can expect that having followed the star and paid homage to the baby, they were the better for it. They might have hoped to find themselves united in peace with everyone. Maybe this could be a shared prayer for our new universal holy day.

Since our earth and our human family face many dangers, we need holy days that can unite rather than divide us. Epiphany asks us to keep an eye out for signs of the sacred and to look in unexpected places, like islands of peace in the midst of poverty and powerlessness.

Epiphany hints at an option, God's option, for babies: for that baby in the crib, for the babies slaughtered by Herod, and for all those babies who die because adults with power and responsibility do not notice or do not care. It calls for new commitments like protecting the life of infants, after they are born as well as before. Maybe the baby option can cut across the pro-choice and pro-life divisions in our consciences as well as our politics. Could a baby draw such compassion and commitment from the great religions? After all, from newborns to grown-ups we are "one family."

So let's end silly arguments about whether to say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays," and say both. And when Epiphany comes, may it be our first worldwide, interfaith day of celebration of human dignity and solidarity. In Rome and Jerusalem, at Jewish and Muslim holy sites, Buddhist and Hindu shrines, wherever people gather to celebrate the New Year, let's say "Happy Holidays" and mean it.

ART BY JULIE LONNEMAN

**DAVID O'BRIEN** is emeritus professor of history and Loyola Professor at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass.

# Hope Springs Eternal

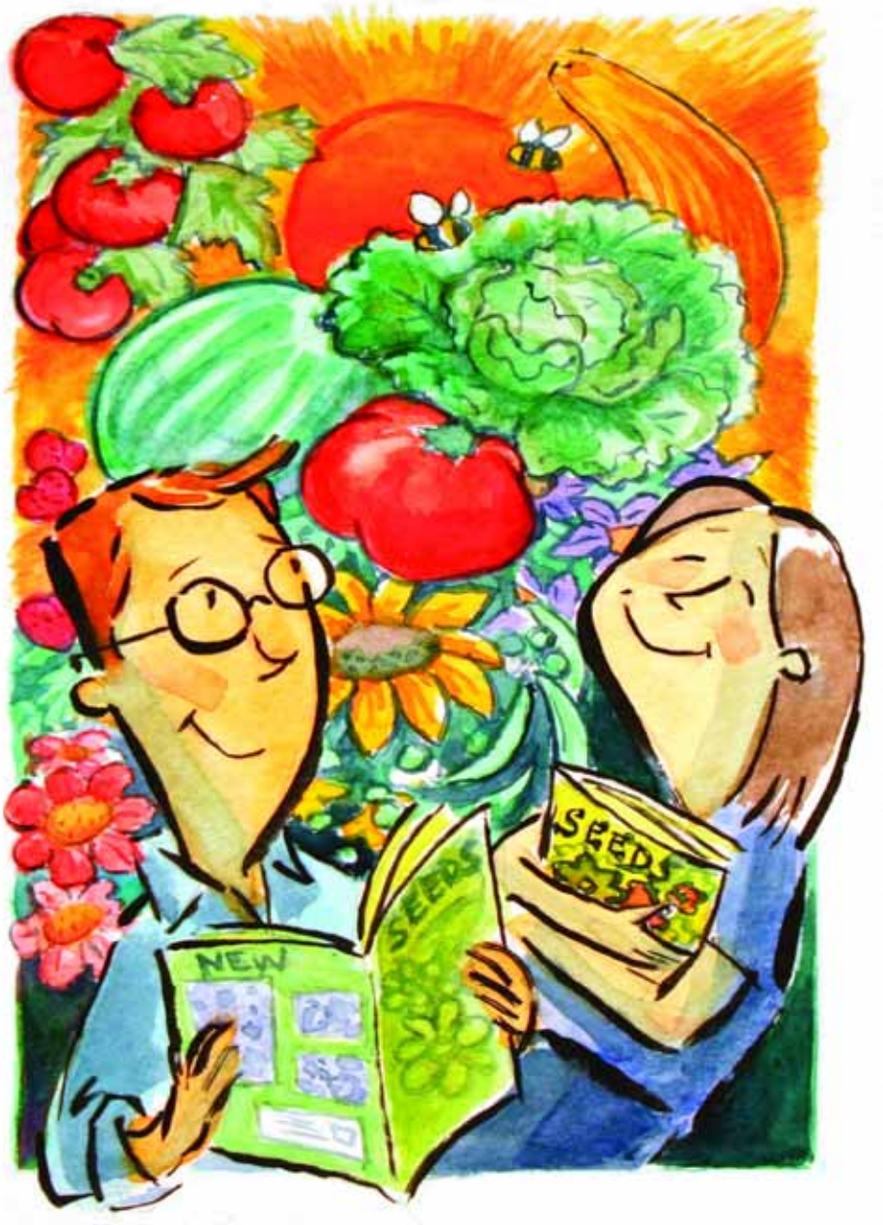
## Nurturing new growth from life's soil

BY KYLE T. KRAMER

EVERY YEAR, in the dark and cold of winter, my family and I begin with magnificent intentions for the gardens of our little market farm in southern Indiana. And every year we go through the same ritual. My wife and I pore over a stack of seed catalogs and sort through the ones we already have in storage. We make a plan and then populate our basement with flat after flat of various plantings. I tinker with our rusty yellow Ford tractor, ancient Troy-Bilt cultivating tiller and other equipment, coaxing it all to run for yet another season. When the weather finally permits, we perform a marathon of frantic soil preparation: pulling up the tomato cages we meant to remove last fall but left in the garden all winter, burning off weeds and spreading more manure and compost, then hooking up a chisel plow and rotovator to prepare the garden beds.

Each year, things begin with hope and promise: freshly tilled, bare soil teeming with earthworms, seeds and seedlings in the ground and ready to grow—all of us ready to do battle with any weed or pest that might come along.

Anyone who gardens probably knows where this is heading. Imagine the scene a few months later. Heavy spring rains have washed out one planting, maybe two. The peas did not come up except in a few pathetic patches. We have already consigned the carrots to weeds, and we are fighting a losing battle with several other crops. Some we just give up on and till back into the ground. Some we forget or neglect to harvest regularly, and we end up with zucchinis and yellow squash that more resemble footballs than food. The lettuce has bolted in the heat; the broccoli and cabbage have become a feast for looper worms. Most of the potatoes have rotted in the ground. The beans (those we can find among the weeds) are tough and overripe.




ART BY DAN SALAMIDA

For all but the most obsessive of gardeners, every season is in some ways an exercise in humiliation. Every year I am somehow shocked to discover anew that in spite of my best efforts—or, as often, because of my lack of effort—the gardens do not turn out as well as I had hoped. That is not to say that we get no produce; we usually have more than we can possibly eat, sell or give away. But weather, weeds,

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pests large and small and disease often claim so much that our labor always ends up being vastly disproportionate to the reward it yields.

### The Messiness of Life

Gardeners are not alone in suffering such disillusionment. If we take an honest look at our private and civic lives, we are soon sobered by the wreckage, waste and dead ends that characterize so much of our activity, and also by how quickly and easily the good that we do can be undone. A marriage of decades runs aground on the shoals of a midlife crisis or an affair; years of careful statecraft and diplomacy are nullified by a corrupt government or an explosion of civil strife; a house is built lovingly by hand, only to be lost to fire or flood; a corporate consultant's sage advice is unheeded, to the company's peril; an unimaginable amount of energy and human capital is squandered needlessly by our economy. Life often seems to be a series of horrible risks and a messy exercise in inefficiency.

And yet we keep at it. We remarry, rebuild and replant; we suffer through endless meetings and mountains of paper to get the bill passed into law or the plan put into motion; we struggle interminably to get the line of poetry just right. Why? Where does it come from, our foolish willingness to believe that this will be the year we time our plantings perfectly, that the rain will come in the right amount at the right time, that we will stay on top of weeds and pests, that our fridge and fry pan and root cellar, and those of our customers, will overflow with bounty?

On a fundamental level, I think it is simply hard-wired obstinacy. From eons of struggle in a difficult and dangerous world, human beings have evolved with a genetic inheritance that makes us amazingly resilient creatures. We are built to slog through; and even under terribly adverse conditions, whether injured or depressed or despairing, most of us find a way to keep going. Sometimes by sheer momentum, sometimes limping or crawling rather than walking or running, we move forward nonetheless, despite the risks and untidiness of our circumstances. In other words, *solvitur ambulando*: "It is solved by walking."

### Motion and Meaning

Simple obstinacy, however, is not the full-

ness of humanity. We are creatures made not just for mere motion but also for meaning, which to my mind comes from hope. And we need not just the thin and flimsy brand of hope that is simple optimism, but a strong and tenacious hope that is wedded to obstinacy: a hope that can raise its head above the turbulent water of our everyday lives and enable us to see and swim stubbornly toward a vision on the far shore. In many ways, as the poet Wendell Berry once reminded me in a kind but steely tone, this sort of hope is a discipline: it is something you choose and practice and cultivate every day through concrete actions. I agree, but I also believe that hope has deeper and stronger roots than willpower. At its core, hope is a gift.

Where our ability to hope comes from is a mystery beyond solving. Perhaps we hope because we are created in the image of God, the author of all hope. Perhaps it is because we are creatures of earth and tied to its cyclical patterns of death and rebirth. Perhaps it is neither of these, but I would like to think it is both.

### The Necessity of Hope

As a determined gardener, what I do know about hope is that however much a mystery it may be, hope is ultimately not just a gift but also a necessity. To be fully human and fully alive, we have to hope, even (or especially) when hope might well seem like folly, even when the seeds we sow fall among thorns or on thin and rocky soil. When we begin to lose a vision that things could be better than they are, we begin to lose our grasp on life itself. And life, like our weedy and riotous gardens, is messy, inefficient, painful, unproductive, diseased and pest-ridden, but also bursting with promise and reward, full of various cultivated and unexpected joys. Our lives do not unfold in neat, ordered rows, and the yield of our lives is perhaps not what we would have expected or wished for. Inevitably, the tares grow up with the wheat. But as I turn again year after year to the soil, with an obstinate if ridiculous hope of a good season, it helps to remember that the Divine Gardener is infinitely more patient in tending the wild stubbornness of my own heart. Grace always allows another beginning, and grace sustains the hope that this time, things will be better. A

# No Scrooge He

## The Christianity of Charles Dickens

BY MICHAEL TIMKO

ALTHOUGH HE WANTED to be popular and become wealthy through his writing, Charles Dickens, the author of *A Christmas Carol*, always had really only one goal as a novelist: He wanted his novels to be "parables," stories that would emphasize the teachings of Christ.

The one aspect of his life that best reveals Dickens's deep Christian faith is his fiction. He believed firmly that he had a responsibility as an artist to make clear to his readers how to lead a moral life; and he wanted to show, through his novels, that Christianity was important to their own beliefs and actions. A note he wrote to his friend the Rev. D. Macrae expressed exactly how he felt:

> With a deep sense of my great responsibility always upon me when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of moral goodness. All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving. Over and over again, I claim them in express words as disciples of the Founder of our religion.

**MICHAEL TIMKO,** who taught Victorian literature at the City University of New York until his retirement, is co-editor of Dickens Studies Annual.

### A Tale of Conversion

Arguably the most beloved novelist of all time, Dickens is best known for *A Christmas Carol*. In his tale of Scrooge's "conversion" from selfishness to selflessness, Dickens succeeded in calling attention to what are regarded as common Christian themes, centering on redemption and charity. What makes Scrooge such a wonderful character, in spite of his reputation as greedy and uncaring, is that he is really a Dickensian Everyman; he is the representation of all human beings who are seeking to find the secret of what makes life meaningful. Scrooge asks the same questions all human beings ask: How does one find salvation?

Dickens's own view of Scrooge's "redemption" becomes evident at the end of the novel. Unlike the unredeemed Scrooge of the beginning of the story, described as a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner," the redeemed Scrooge is a changed person:

> He went to church and walked about the streets, and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows; and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed that any walk—that anything—could give him so much happiness.

The redeemed Scrooge is now fully aware of the true meaning of the Christmas season: remembering the birth of Christ and unselfishly helping others. Our final view of Scrooge reinforces the sentiment that all things are possible at this magical time of year. "It was always said of him," Dickens tells us, "that he knew how to keep Christmas well.... May that truly be said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless us, every one!" With the conversion of Scrooge, Dickens illustrates that his readers, too, can also be converted from a harsh, complacent, selfish worldview to one in which love, hope and charity are possible.

### The Centrality of Faith

Readers may wonder about Dickens's own religious beliefs and his own religious faith. He was born into an Anglican home—his parents were actually nominal Anglicans, who did not attend services regularly. He was baptized in the Anglican Church and was nominally a member all his life except for a brief period in the l840s when he joined and attended Unitarian chapels. We know for certain from his letters, speeches and novels that he hated dogma and any kind of doctrinal beliefs.

In his novels, correspondence and speeches Dickens avoids making direct statements about his own personal religious beliefs; for him, Christianity meant something positive rather than negative, something that emphasized morality and love. In his writings and speeches he portrays the life of Jesus as the best example one could have for leading a truly religious life. He was so adamant in this belief that in his will he left instructions to his children "to guide themselves by the teachings of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there."

Robert C. Hanna has recently written two books about Dickens's Christian teachings.

The first, *The Dickens Family Gospel*, focuses on the ways that Dickens, as a

"Christian parent and teacher," attempted to give his own children a sound religious education, one based chiefly on the New Testament. Dickens himself wrote to one of his own children: "I most strongly and affectionately impress upon you the priceless value of the New Testament, and the study of that Book as the one unfailing guide in life." The famous novelist also wrote many prayers for his children. Hanna cites one: "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ taught to His disciples and to us, and what we should remember every day of our lives, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our mind, and with all our soul, and with all our strength; to love our neighbors as ourselves, to do unto other people as we would have them do unto us, and to be charitable and gentle to all. There is no other commandment, our Lord Jesus Christ said, greater than these."

In his second book, *The Dickens Christian Reader*, Hanna again shows the novelist's firm Christian convictions based on both the Old and New Testaments. Most readers will know the passage from Deuteronomy (15:7) on which *A Christmas Carol* rests, but there are many other passages in the Bible that are reflected in Dickens's novels. In *David Copperfield*, for instance, the forgiveness of Steerforth, Emily's seducer, by Mr. Peggotty, Emily's uncle, illustrates clearly the words of Mt 7:1 ("Judge not, that you be not judged.") and Mt 18:21-22 ("How often must I forgive him? Seven times?" "No," Jesus replied, "not seven times, I say, but seventy times seven times.") More familiar, perhaps, is the allusion to Jn 15:13 ("There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends") in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Sydney Carton goes to the guillotine in place of Charles Darnay.


PHOTO: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

These Christian themes are scattered throughout all of Dickens's novels, but they are perhaps most prominent in *The Life of Our Lord*, a book that Dickens called an "easy version" of the Gospels. This work, written in 1846 for reading aloud to his children, was not published until 1934. (Dickens's own title was *The Children's New Testament*.) More than any other of his writings, it reflects the spirit of what he called "real Christianity," by which he meant the Christian virtues of trust, kindness and forgiveness. It illustrates clearly his view of Jesus Christ and his views of Christian commitment.

*The Life of Our Lord* illustrates precisely what Dickens wanted his children to believe in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. First, Dickens depicts Jesus as kind and loving. He tells his children that he is anxious that they know something about the history of Jesus Christ because, he tells them, no one ever lived "who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in anyway ill or miserable, as he was." He describes Jesus as a child who will grow up to be "so good that God will love him as his own son; and he will teach men to love one another, and not to quarrel with one another."

Another section of the *Life* treats the miracles of Christ. Jesus performed miracles here on earth, and these miracles were done because, Dickens tells his children, "God had given Jesus Christ the power to do such wonders; and he did them that people might know he was not a common man, and might believe what he taught them, and also believe that God had sent him." Throughout the book Dickens emphasizes those qualities we associate with a loving God: kindness, charity, forgiveness and mercy. At the end of the book he summarizes these Christian virtues:

> Remember!—it is christianity [sic] TO DO GOOD always—even to those who do evil to us. It is christianity to love our neighbour as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts.

Throughout this work, then, Dickens reinforces his values and ideas: the belief in a loving God, not a God of stern judgment; the rejection of theological controversy; the acceptance of an inclusive rather than an exclusive religion; and the emphasis on doing good works.

### Loving Others

*Our Mutual Friend*, Charles Dickens's last completed novel, treats his favorite themes: class, education and mercenary attitudes. In this novel Dickens condemns mercenary marriages and class prejudice and emphasizes the value of education. He depicts the positive characteristics of his own Christian beliefs in *Bleak House*, demonstrating through the character of Esther Summerson the way that a selfless life, one based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, can help others. At the end of the novel Esther, now married to a doctor, muses on her life:

> We are not rich in the bank, but we have always prospered, and we have quite enough.... I never lie down at night, but I know that in the course of the day he has alleviated pain, and soothed some fellow-creature in a time of need. I know that from the beds of those who were past recovery, thanks have often, often gone up, in the last hour, for his patient ministration. Is this not to be rich?

For the Christian Dickens, it is clear that Esther provides, as one critic has put it, "a moral lens on characters and events and shows us how to live with Christian responsibility in an imperfect world."

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens illustrates the words of Mt 6:1-4 by having Pip anonymously help his friend Herbert Pockets. "I begged Wemmick," Pip says, "to understand that my help must always be rendered without Herbert's knowledge or suspicion." Clearly this echoes Matthew: "Be on guard against performing religious acts for people to see.... Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

Often overlooked by readers is Dickens's firm resolve to show the way to what can be called a Christian life, one that emphasizes love, humility and values. His novels are not simply potboilers, as many critics and teachers judge. Through the actions and thoughts of his characters, the writer sought to bring the relevance of Christianity into quotidian life. It is clear that Dickens wrote his novels with the goal not merely to entertain and to enrich himself, although he accomplished both goals. His chief aim, as I noted at the beginning, was to promote individual "salvation" and bring about social reform. His "religious" views, while perhaps not strictly sectarian, were meant not so much to undermine orthodox belief as to demonstrate that a "practical" and humanitarian Christianity that reflected the life of Christ could solve personal and social problems. A

# Yes…

## Was Jesus God?

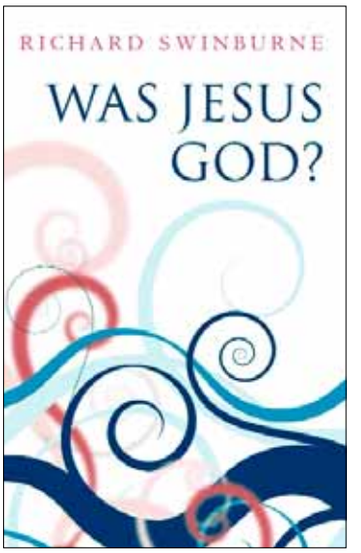
By Richard Swinburne
*Oxford Univ. Press. 192p $24.95*
*ISBN 9780199203116*

Richard Swinburne is a British philosopher who has specialized in defending theism and Christian truth claims. Appealing to common human experience, biblical writings and the church's tradition, Swinburne argues that it is more likely that God exists than that he does not, more likely than not that God is triune, more likely than not that the Second Person became incarnate, more likely than not that his teaching is true, since it corresponds to what we would expect from God Incarnate, more likely than not that he intended to found a church, more likely than not that he was raised from the dead. In short, it is more likely than not that all the articles of the Creed are true. The only article that might not be so probable, on the basis of scriptural texts, is the virginal conception of Jesus. Nevertheless,

> given that there is a significant prior possibility of the existence of God, and that the historical evidence about the life and Resurrection of Jesus which was God's signature on his teaching (and that of the Apostolic Church) is as strong as I represented it, any other doctrine taught by the Church (over many centuries over the whole Church as central doctrine) will be made much more probable by the very fact of its being taught by the Church.

And this includes the virginal conception.

Swinburne is keenly intent upon showing the reasonableness of Christian belief. Like a number of his other writings, *Was Jesus God?* is an exercise in apologetics. It is intriguing to watch him work his way here through biblical texts, harmonizing them, resolving discrepancies and arguing the case that Jesus is God. Although Jesus "proclaimed his divinity more openly after his Resurrection," Swinburne argues, he made implicit claims during his life. Jesus could never have openly claimed to be God during his ministry. Swinburne quotes from the work *Jesus the Jew*, by the Jewish Scripture scholar Geza Vermes: "It is no exaggeration to contend that the identification of a contemporary historical figure with God would have been inconceivable to a first-century A.D. Palestinian Jew." A little earlier in the book, Swinburne writes that "in his human thinking God Incarnate was not always conscious of his own divinity, but he would clearly need to be conscious of it some of the time in order to show his followers that he believed himself to be divine." And why this need? Because Jesus wanted to give his followers "good reason to believe that God had identified with their suffering."




That God identifies with victims is central to the Gospel story, but it is really Easter—God's raising the crucified one—that brings the mystery of the Incarnation into full view. I do not follow the logic of Swinburne's point that Jesus did not directly claim to be God during his earthly life in order to avoid being misunderstood, and yet he could do so without misunderstanding after the resurrection. The problem for the disciples, it seems to me, was not about Jesus' identity but about the meaning of being raised from the dead: "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (Mk 9:32). Moreover, if personal identification with God was inconceivable to a devout Jew of Jesus' time, wouldn't it have been inconceivable for Jesus as well? And does it make sense to speak of Jesus' being conscious of his divinity "some of the time"? I do not believe we will ever really know what consciousness of divinity might have meant. We do know, however, that Jesus spoke of himself as "one who serves" (Lk 22:27).

Miracles, Swinburne states, are violations of the laws of nature, and the resurrection (upon which Christian faith hinges) was such a violation—thus a miracle by definition. But surely there has to be a more effective way to approach the miracle stories in the Gospels than in terms of God violating the laws that God himself set in place. To call something a miracle is to interpret an event through the eyes of faith. After all, many people see without perceiving and hear without understanding, as Matthew and Isaiah remind us. Still, I wonder whether it is appropriate to refer to the raising of Jesus from the dead as a miracle. Miracles are meant to be seen, and no one was present at the tomb on Easter morning. Besides, even if some of the disciples had stationed themselves nearby, they would not have observed anything out of the ordinary. Resurrection was not resuscitation; it was not an empirically observable event. The empty tomb was an ambiguous sign; an angel was required to interpret it. We presume that the resurrection occurred on the first day of the week because that was the day when the first Easter apparitions reportedly took place. But apparitions are not usually classified as miracles.

Perhaps the resurrection, like the act of creation itself, was not an event human beings were intended to observe. Only when we contemplate the world through the eyes of faith can we perceive it as having been fashioned by God, that is, as the work of "creation." The same thing could be said about Jesus' resurrection. "Resurrection," we might say, is how the disciples interpreted their experience of Jesus after his death. Jesus could be seen by his disciples and not by those who killed him because his adversaries were

## The Reviewers

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people who literally could not recognize the work of God in the world.

Swinburne is attempting to do an apologetics "from below" but with an a priori understanding of Jesus as God. I do not think that the early followers of Jesus came to believe in his divinity as a matter of deduction, however, but on the basis of their experience of the risen Lord. Swinburne seems to press the resurrection appearances themselves too far as historical evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead. Might it be that the entire Gospel, including the Easter narratives, gives evidence of a different sort, namely, the religious experience of the early church? In other words, the major evidence we have of the truthfulness of the Gospels is the religious experience of the communities that composed them. I agree with Swinburne that it is highly improbable that those communities were intent upon deception, and I would draw three conclusions from their writings. First, that the Gospel writers had a life-giving relationship with Jesus risen. Second, that there is an intelligibility about their experience that makes it possible to give a reasoned defense for the hope that we have (1 Pt 3:15). And third, the only way to verify the claims made by the Evangelists is to get inside their narratives and encounter the risen Jesus, as the Evangelists themselves did, by putting Jesus' teaching and example into practice.

***William Reiser***

# Back in the Old Country

## An Irish Country Christmas

By Patrick Taylor
*Forge Books. 496p $24.95*
*ISBN 9780765320704*

At one point in James Joyce's classic story "The Dead," Miss O'Callaghan comments, "I think Christmas is never really Christmas unless we have the snow on the ground."

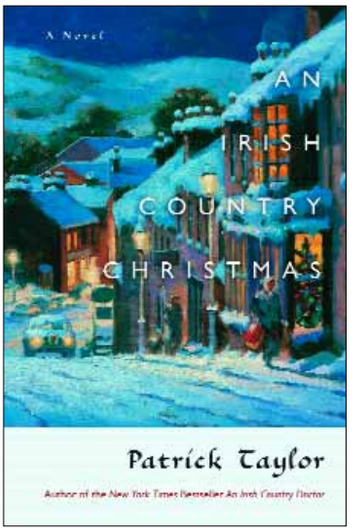
"The Dead" may indeed be set during the Morkan sisters' famous annual holiday celebration, but it is no "Irish Christmas story," at least as that phrase has come to be understood in publishing circles.

In recent decades, such acclaimed writers as John B. Keane, William Trevor and John McGahern have seen their works collected in volumes of "Irish Christmas" stories. These are generally not works about mortality, paralysis and the fleeting nature of earthly love (as Joyce's story was), but instead about the idiosyncrasies of Irish (often village) life at a heartwarming time of the year.

Patrick Taylor's third "Irish country" novel fits neatly into the non-Joycean category of colorful Irish Christmas tales. So neatly, in fact, that the popular Irish memoirist Alice Taylor (no relation, beyond the thematic) released a nostalgic book of the same name about a decade ago.

Born and raised in County Down, Patrick Taylor worked as a rural doctor before writing the best-seller *An Irish Country Doctor*, set in the fictitious village of Ballybucklebo. The titular main character was the reliably gruff yet irrepressibly soft-hearted Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly, who has taken the skilled yet timid young physician Barry Laverty under his wings.

We caught up with the duo again in Taylor's follow-up *An Irish Country Village*.




In both books, Laverty, O'Reilly and a handful of likeable locals fall ill, recover, gossip and scheme, such as when they prevent a loathsome politician from closing down a beloved pub.

Along the way, the taciturn Fingal bares his romantic wounds, while Barry overcomes local skeptics, then falls in love with an independent-minded woman, with whom he must maintain a long-distance relationship after she heads to school in England.

Taylor's vivid recreation of village life is certainly part of his wide appeal. The language and customs he depicts are charming, though his characters are never simply odd or exotic creatures. Equally fascinating (as Taylor notes in an Afterword) is that, while this may be Northern Ireland in the 1960s, little is said and even less is seen of political or religious conflict.

In Ballybucklebo "there was no sectarian strife," Taylor writes in *An Irish Country Christmas*, later adding that both "the Protestant and Catholic groups would come together for important functions like the upcoming annual Christmas party." Ballybucklebo is "different from impersonal Belfast. Here people knew each other, were ready to help out, and didn't throw older folks on the scrap heap."

If Taylor's Northern Ireland is fantastically idyllic, it is also hard to resist. Of course, readers should not come to these books expecting much in the way of political or psychological complexity. For a moment, in the new novel, Barry is tempted by another woman. And yet, though the book weighs in at nearly 500 pages, Taylor sets the situation straight with ruthless efficiency. Similarly, when a new doctor sets up shop in Ballybucklebo, we immediately know what we are meant to feel about him. The reader's affection for Dr. O'Reilly, Dr. Laverty and their tart-tongued but loveable maid, Kinky, is never meant to be questioned. *An Irish Country Christmas* culminates in the Christmas party, where yet another scheme has been hatched to help a needy mother and where Barry just might receive a wondrous Christmas surprise.

At a time when Irish fiction is moving with almost reckless abandon into the post-political 21st century, dabbling in the avant-garde, the gothic and other challenging genres, Patrick Taylor is unapologetically nostalgic. His sharp eye for the details of Irish village life has proven to be a hit with those who share this sentiment. If, indeed, there is a hunger among readers for such material, then *An Irish Country Christmas* is quite a holiday feast.

***Tom Deignan***

The editors reflect on Advent and Christmas, at americamagazine.org/video.

# Classifieds

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**ANNE RICE** on YouTube at www.youtube.com/AnneRiceDotCom and www.youtube.com/AnneRice site. E-mail: anneobrienrice@mac.com; www.annerice.com.

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# Letters

### Father and Sir

In your issue on "The Chaplain Controversy" (11/17), Deacon Tom Cornell and John J. McLain, S.J., agree that soldiers need priests. I agree too. I am a veteran of this current war, and was honorably discharged almost two years ago from the Navy as a conscientious objector. While on deployment, I had to battle with the moral dilemma in which I found myself. Fortunately, there were priests who were of some help. But as an enlisted soldier, I found it nearly impossible to talk with my chaplain as a representative of Christ and the church ("Father") rather than as someone who had military authority over me ("Sir"). I suspect that there are scores of soldiers who will not come forward because they do not feel free to open up their consciences to someone who is of equal rank to their commanding officer.

Assuming the necessity of working within the existing chaplaincy, I suggest a new ministry in which non-chaplain priests and counselors are also made available to our military personnel. Soldiers, especially those who are struggling with participation in war and other issues like suicide, should have equal access to counselors who are unimpeded by their actual or perceived threat of military allegiance or rank. This means that civilian counselors and priests should be allowed the same availability to the troops without having to pledge allegiance to the military hierarchy. In this way, we might move toward a future when "Father" will no longer be compromised by "Sir."

*Daniel Baker*
*Catholic Peace Fellowship*
*South Bend, Ind.*

### From the Trenches

I appreciated the varied views and insightful observations in your recent articles on military chaplaincy in the issue of Nov. 17. As a soldier currently deployed in Iraq, I can relate to the concerns about the true role of a chaplain. Is it to serve the soldiers and others in need, or is it to help the military accomplish the mission? As a military physician, I deal with this same question every day. The oath I took upon becoming a physician often conflicts with the Army medical motto, "Preserve the Fighting Strength."

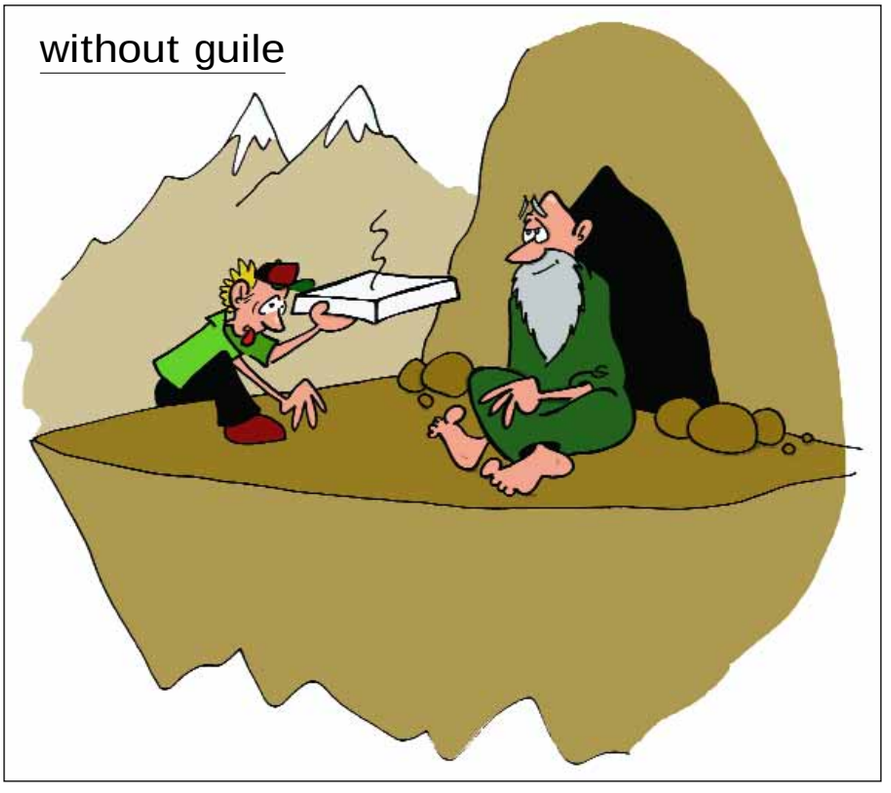
*Eric Schneider, D.O.*
*Baghdad, Iraq*

### Ministry and Credibility

I read with interest Deacon Tom Cornell's article on military chaplaincy ("The Chaplain's Dilemma," 11/17). I think that soldiers are better served by ministers who are not affiliated with the military, but I do not agree that the chaplaincy should be outside the military organization. A chaplain is part of a unit, trains with that unit and goes to the field with that unit. A chaplain serves both as a staff officer, advising the commander pertaining to religious issues, and as a spiritual leader, serving the soldiers and families of military personnel.

Only a unit chaplain who faces the same challenges and sacrifices as his or her unit can provide word and sacrament while also retaining credibility with all ranks within that unit.

*(Rev.) George Harris*
*Farmington, Conn.*




CARTOON BY DAVE LONDON

### On the One Hand…

The commentary on Senator Joseph Biden (Current Comment, 12/8) does all Catholic Democrats a huge favor by identifying Biden's sense of how he must act as a national politician. We who believe in and try to follow a pro-life ethic are working to change the minds of those who are not in conformity with the church's teaching, and we are all praying that our leaders coming into office might bring a true sense of renewal and belief in the dignity of human life in all its forms. Thank you for providing some fresh air on this matter.

*Donald J. Ehrenreich*
*Williamsville, N.Y.*

### On the Other…

Re your analysis of Senator Joseph Biden's faith commitment (Current Comment, 12/8): You have no idea how much damage you do to the real Catholic Church by your support of cafeteria Catholics like Joseph Biden. Please change your name to "America:

# Letters

The National Catholic Weakly."

*Jerry McFadden*
*Deptford, N.J.*

### No Easy Task

Thank you to Drew Christiansen, S.J., for his insightful analysis on the Middle East (Of Many Things, 12/1). I recently returned from a delegation of Catholic Relief Services diocesan partners to the West Bank, where we observed the work of C.R.S. and their local partners there. The situation is exceedingly complex, but there is much human suffering that people of good will on both sides feel compelled to alleviate. It does appear that more could be gained if the United States were to adopt a true "servant leadership" role, stepping back and facilitating rather than stepping in and dictating. Given its past propensities, this will be no easy task.

*(Deacon) Joseph R. Symkowick*
*Sacramento, Calif.*

### A New Image

It would be wonderful if our political leaders would read the article by Drew Christiansen, S.J., on American foreign policy in the Middle East (Of Many Things, 12/1). Americans who have never lived in other countries cannot imagine the negative image people have of the United States still wanting to be the sole superpower in the world. I lived for 49 years in Brazil and can vouch for the persistence of that negative image.

Globalization demands our participation in working out all the world's problems, but not as the one and only superpower. Let's be more humble. We need to be a presence like a priest at a wedding: one among many equal witnesses.

*Gerald Oberle, C.Ss.R.*
*Newark, N.J.*

### Revisiting History

Thank you for the interesting and insightful article on Pius XII and the Holocaust by Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J. ("A Pope in Wartime," 12/15). With regard to the 1933 concordat between the Holy See and Nazi Germany, it might bear mentioning that concordats were not needed with countries that respected the rights of the church, but precisely with those that did not. It makes sense that Pope Pius would want a concordat with Germany, so that the church would have a basis for international protest of the expected Nazi violations of the church's rights, which in fact occurred almost immediately.

*J. Michael Parker*
*San Antonio, Tex.*

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## The Word

# Holy Families

**Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (B), Dec. 28, 2008**

Readings: Sir 3:2-6, 12-14; Ps 128:1-2, 3, 4-5; Col 3:12-21; Lk 2:22-40

*"Over all these put on love" (Col 3:14)*


ART BY TAD DUNNE

DURING THE HOLIDAY season much attention is placed on romanticizing the family. Christmas movies and advertisements portray happy reunions and joyous family gatherings. In reality, however, many families experience pain and loss that is all the more acute during the holidays. Perhaps a loved one has died during the past year. A family member may be fighting in a distant war. Old hurts may keep some from wanting to be with family. A failed marriage may have split apart parents, who struggle with how to share their love and time equitably with their children. Most families do not match the Norman Rockwell picture of everyone living happily as one. Today's readings may sound at first like an idealized portrait of family life, but a closer look reveals a very realistic understanding of what it takes to create a harmonious home.

The first reading and the responsorial psalm present a theology of retribution, which is typical of wisdom literature. If you do good, says the Book of Sirach, then good things happen to you; if you do evil, then evil befalls you. Thus Ben Sira advises that if you treat your parents well, especially by caring for them in their old age, you can expect the rewards of riches, children, a long life and answered prayers.

The Gospel, however, proves that this theology does not work. Those who do good and who try to follow God's ways in everything often experience great pain and suffering. Mary and Joseph are completely devoted to God and follow all the prescriptions of the Law, yet, as Simeon prophesies, they struggle like all faithful people to understand God's ways. At the annunciation Mary says yes, even as she questions "How can this be?" (Lk 1:34). What God asks of her puts her in very difficult circumstances. Other people in Nazareth know that she and Joseph formally belong to each other but have not begun to live together. What kinds of things will they think and say about her when her blessed child is born too soon? Contemplation, faithfulness and trust are three essential virtues that Mary exemplifies for weathering difficult times that challenge harmonious family life.

To these virtues Paul adds seven more: "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another." One could take each of these in turn, one for each day of the week, praying for an increase in each as a gift from God. To this add forgiveness, a gift we are able to extend to others when we know how much God has forgiven us. Then cap it off with love, which is like the overcoat that one dons over all the others. In the Bible, love is not concerned with feelings, but with deeds. Love is treating others as covenanted members of God's people and desiring good for them, just as God does.

The worldview reflected in both Sirach and the Letter to the Colossians is patriarchal. For Ben Sira, the father is the authority figure in the home, and his authority passes to his adult son, to whom the text is addressed. In the second reading, Paul's instruction to wives to be subordinate to their husbands and children to their parents reflects a patriarchal household code that had been in use since at least the time of Aristotle. It is important to recognize the time-bound nature of these patriarchal structures of authority and obedience. In today's ideal family both mother and father exercise authority and responsibility in a mutually loving and respectful way, where no one is dominant over another. When egalitarian relationships exist also in our faith communities, both our family of faith and our family of origin become havens of peace and thankfulness.

### Praying With Scripture

- How has your trust in God and forgiveness of one another helped your family through difficult times?
- Nearly 13 percent of America's senior citizens suffer some form of abuse: verbal, financial or physical. How do the words of Ben Sira about care for elderly parents help us respond?
- Pray for an end to structures that support relations of domination and for an increase in mutual love and respect among all people.

**BARBARA E. REID, O.P.,** is a professor of New Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Ill.

# All Are Welcome

**Epiphany of the Lord (B), Jan. 4, 2009**

Is 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13; Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6; Mt 2:1-12

*"They all gather and come to you" (Is 60:4)*

FOR THOSE WHO LIVE in the Northern Hemisphere, today's celebration of divine light, glory and shining radiance comes in the darkest time of the year. Isaiah exults in

God's brilliance, which bursts forth for the returning exiles as Jerusalem rises up in splendor once again. The prophet envisions thick clouds covering all the other peoples. They are drawn to Israel like a moth to a flame. Jerusalem will light the way not only for its own inhabitants; it now provides a welcome refuge for all others. All people from near and far come to the holy city, bearing their priceless gifts: riches from the sea, caravans of camels bulging with treasures, gold, frankincense and wealth beyond measure.

The Gospel tells of the fulfillment of this prophecy with a vivid story. The exotic visitors from the East, who come with their priceless gifts for the newborn Christ, signal the welcome of all peoples in God's embrace. The gift of the Christ is to all, Jew and Gentile alike, as the author of the Letter to the Ephesians also insists. This author, who writes in Paul's name, continues to assert, as did Paul, that God's grace, made known first to the Jews, is now revealed to all. Moreover, there is no distinction between those who were the first stewards of this mystery and those who now enter into it. "The Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." There is no special privilege for those who arrived first.

The week of Jan. 4 has been designated by the U.S. bishops as National Migration Week. The readings today are well suited to help us reflect on the kind of welcome we provide to the 12 million undocumented immigrants who live and work in the United States and the 14 million refugees worldwide. Those who are settled face similar challenges in welcoming outsiders as did the early church, which struggled to accept Gentiles into the faith community. Like the foreign Magi, these newcomers bear gifts of immeasurable value for the whole community. ***Barbara E. Reid***

## Praying With Scripture

- What gifts do immigrants bring to settled communities?
- What gifts do those who are settled offer to immigrants?
- Pray for the grace to let go of any sense of entitlement that regards a newcomer as less than "co-heir" and "co-partner."